

DEATH AS A METAPHOR IN BEN OKRI'S *INFINITE RICHES*

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Abstract

*This paper examines death as a metaphor in Ben Okri's *Infinite Riches*. The narrated events start from Okri's award-winning novel, *The Famished Road*, and *Infinite Riches* concludes it. Death dominates the text, and the study identifies the meanings and kinds of death and then confirms it as a significant carrier of meanings. A close reading of the novel shows the intricate linkage between human stories and experiences, and national narratives. Okri uses death(s) of individual(s) to interrogate the postcolonial African nation. The study uses postcolonial theory as its theoretical framework, and this helps to establish the novel's response to questioning the Western hegemony of death. The text conceptualises death in Africa as a link between the living and the dead. The conceptual metaphor Okri uses here questions the earlier Western meaning of death as an end of existence, and life beginning of it. Okri uses this metaphorical style to present the positive image of the African worldview and way of life.*

Keywords: *Death, Metaphor, Postcolonial, Africa, Ben Okri*

Introduction

Infinite Riches, having been in circulation since 1998, and owing to numerous praises of the author's style of writing, which is said to have succeeded in elaborately communicating a complex view of Africa, the novel's particular artistic elements have not received exhaustive critical attention. In essence, death, which is unarguably one of the recurrent motifs in the text, has not been studied in-depth. Scholars through the ages have endeavoured to grapple with the concept of death; what it refers to, and its significance. The study of death has been approached or viewed through different modes. This paper, therefore, examines death as a metaphor in Okri's *Infinite Riches*(1998). That is, the study focuses on the narrative style that portrays the different meanings and kinds of death in the novel and what these images have on the formulation and final understanding of the postcolonial African nation. Postcolonialism appropriates the discourse of colonisation in different ways. It deals with the issues of political and cultural independence of former colonies and their people, the issue of crisis of identity and its myths among the colonised, social and linguistic alienations, and the question of language in general. It also rejects the notion of grand narratives and offers radically decentred subjects. The writer selected in this study has conspicuously demonstrated this in his writing. In addition to different aspects of language abrogation and appropriation, postcolonial writings also appropriate distinctive use of allegory and magic realism as stylistic strategies. It means that Postcolonial African writers have the tendency to use their creative modes to express or reflect postcolonial realities in their nations, and Okri is

not an exception. He has used his creative prowess to expand the African worldview. His style of writing has generated a lot of arguments among critics and scholars; this study seems to add to this by using death as a metaphor in Ben Okri's *Infinite Riches* (1998).

However, to have a robust and vivid clarification of the contention of this paper, it will be of great importance to review and discuss the synopsis of the text. Mamudu, C.O (2001) posits that;

Infinite Riches has striking intertextual similarities with *The Famished Road*. Like the latter, Okri employs the same characters, style, setting, and similar incidents in *Infinite Riches*. It is a novel that matches the standard of *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. Sherida Morley of the BBC Radio accordingly describes him as “one of our greatest living writers” and *Infinite Riches* as “a wonderful book”(p.80).

Mamudu (2001) goes further to say that “*Infinite Riches* is arguably a sequel to, or a continuation of, *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. The novel is, accordingly, presented as volume three of *The Famished Road* cycle. It borders on the same themes, concerns and viewpoint(s) of the earlier novels”(p.88).

The novel is indeed the last book of Okri's trilogy that begins with *The Famished Road*. It continues the story of Azaro, the abiku child, who sees into the spirit world. Also, the struggle between the political parties-the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor- over who takes the mantle of power once the colonialists have granted the colony its independence continues unabated. This underscores the nefarious activities of the political elite; the brutality of the people by both police and the thugs of the political parties; the discrimination of the people by people and parties, and the humongous corruption of political parvenus against the beggary lives of the people. In this story, set at the point of independence of no particular African country, Okri shows that the current political gimmicks, shenanigans, thuggery, and corruption began at the second birth of the new continent. It is that part of the umbilical cord that remained in the belly of the continent, whose decay had sprung forth foul, greed-laden, and disreputable leaders. This is also the time that the media became the grand-illusionists for government into reality, or, into fantasy, fiction into reality, at will.

The story started when Azaro's father, Black Tyger, was arrested for a death he knew nothing about. “Who can be certain where the end begins? said Dad, shortly before he was arrested for the murder of the carpenter (Okri, 1998,p.5). His wife embarked on a demonstration to first look for where he had been kept and then seek his release. Together with seven other women folks of her kind, they moved from one police station to the other, setting prisoners free, until they found him in a near- moribund state and got him released. Through this medium, Okri discusses how the educated elites of Africa ride on the back of the struggles and death of ordinary people, mostly the unskilled and uneducated, by associating with them on the peripheries of their struggle, after which they betray them and appropriate for themselves their victory. When the eight women embarked on their quest to release Black Tyger, they were met by a group of educated women who, afraid of the blows and blood that result from such heated demonstrations, sought to replace the incendiary march with an organised, sanitised one, which was incapable of penetrating the administration's thick skin. More so, after rejecting this proposal and achieving victory, they- the educated women- found a way of appropriating the credit for themselves by conniving with their allies in the media

and getting pictures splashed in all newspapers. This behaviour became the new class system after the attainment of independence in most African nations, where those who struggled for independence were mostly different from those who assumed the reins of power. This is the platform upon which the paper intends to explicate death as a metaphor in the selected text. However, the paper is structured as follows: meaning of death, death and its kinds: a metaphor, metaphor and African worldview, and conclusion of major findings. The theoretical framework that would be used in the analysis of this paper is postcolonial literary theory. According to Jean-Pierre Durix, in Oko (2010), “literature is anchored on a particular moment, and the writer is often conditioned by his environment”(p.3-4). Equally, Ogude, S. E (1991) believes that “...there is a sense in which every literary work is a response to a definite historical and socio-political condition” (p.29). Other scholars like Joanna Maciulewicz (2017), Ayo Kehinde (2004), and Oko Eze (2010, 2020), also share the same view. Therefore, this study is anchored in postcolonial literary theory.

Meaning of Death

This study focuses essentially on the metaphorical meaning of death in literary works, particularly fiction. Death and literature enjoy a close relationship. Death is a secret, mysterious event, and no doubt a painful reality in the life of an individual. Its mystery makes it impossible for one to know how it feels, what it entails, what it truly means, and what response to accord to it, for all closeness one can get to it is by watching others die. Therefore, literature has become a springboard for man to treat his fear with meaningful assumptions. Skelton (2016) reiterates that there are basically three ways to view death in literature. These ways range from the author’s explication of personal experiences on death; the use of literature to structure our thoughts on death; and the use of death as a literary device, which is the main burden of this paper. It should be reiterated that literature has become a platform for people to have an encounter with the experience of death by allowing them to put their feelings and imaginations on death to writing. Hakola and Kivisto, in Kosgei (2017), reiterate that “apart from watching others die, writing has opened avenues into an understanding of this phenomenon” (p.2).

More so, death can be seen as a theme in literature, and writing of this nature revolves around two things. The first is the actual inexistence of an individual, which can be viewed as physical death. Popa and Hanganu(1979) also see death as “a transition to another mode of being, or as something that puts an end to the nothingness of life, as a necessity that is total and irreversible”(p.33). The other is the emotional pain that is left on the part of the bereaved, which can be seen as emotional death. This could be seen as the effect of losing a loved one.

This paper does not basically portray death as a theme, but rather as a style. In most cases, (2017) attests that “death as a style is used as a commentary on the state of events in a society generally to ridicule play-ups of systems in the society in question” (p. 9). This occurs when the concept of death in literature takes more than thematic preoccupation, and becomes stylistic. In most cases, writers use such tropes as this to criticise evil in the society (ies) they write from, or about. Using this mode to portray death, it communicates deeper meaning that many would not take seriously if it had been stated vividly. As a symbol, therefore, death gains a metaphorical status, which this paper seeks to analyse. This study takes death as a metaphor in the selected novel.

Death and Its kinds: A Metaphor

As a style, death ceases to refer only to physical nonexistence, but takes into consideration other kinds and portraits that are characteristic of death. Some of these forms include physical, spiritual, psychological, emotional, and moral death, respectively. When these forms of death appear in a work of art, they call for analysis into what they stand for in the society in question, as these forms of death mean different things in different contexts. The paper will not be overburdened by explicating the forms of death mentioned above; physical and psychological deaths are used as springboards to the analysis of the selected novel. In the novel, these forms of death are parts of the narrative. These deaths are used to interrogate a certain aspect of the society. In essence, the deaths have been used metaphorically. Death is analysed as a metaphor in the study, particularly as representative of the African nation.

David Punter (2007) defines metaphor as the act by which “one thing stands in for another”(p.2). In metaphors, two things that have no direct relationship are equated to each other, so that characteristics of one object, which is the source, are transferred onto another, which is the target. Metaphor, in essence, consists of comparing two unequal things that would ordinarily have no uniform ground of understanding. In the selected text, metaphor is used extensively; the death, killing, and dying of characters are equated to the havoc of a dying African nation. Characters themselves are symbols of the African nation, as most characters in the novel are going through different socio-economic and political struggles. In the end, most characters are presented as living in fear, haunted, horrified, and dying. That the characters in the novel are representatives of the African nation is no mistake or coincidence.

Okri explores how issues like violence, corruption, assassination, and disillusionment are presented through pauperised and disparaged characters like Azaro’s family, among others in the novel. More so, analysing the different kinds and features of death in the novel further opens an understanding that is not limited to human experience, as it makes it possible to conceptualise the general socio-political realities of the African nation. Physical death is taken to mean biological death. Many scholars have come up with different definitions of physical death, as noted by Kosgei. This form of death expresses a time when one ceases to exist corporally. It also means to permanently disappear; to lose components of life, or “when the body expires, and there is cessation of all function”(18). Physical death is a natural occurrence that must happen to all living beings, rendering them biologically mute. There are notable examples of physical deaths in the novel, and these deaths are blended into the narrative. The events of the novel started with the arrest of Black Tyger for a death he knew nothing of, that is, the death of the Carpenter. The death of the Carpenter is one of such deaths that pervade the world of the novel. This scene is captured thus;

‘Who can be certain where the end begins?’ said Dad, shortly before he was arrested for the murder of the carpenter. ‘Time is growing,’ he added. ‘And our suffering is growing too. When will our suffering bear fruit? One great thought can alter the future of the world (Okri,1998.p.5).

Okri blends this to show how people are killed in postcolonial African nations by the political elites, and attributes the killing to innocent citizens. The story presents Africa as itself dying, something that happened earlier than any physical deaths. The death of the Carpenter, as presented in the novel, is caused by violence during political rallies and reflects innumerable deaths that have happened in postcolonial Africa's history. The Carpenter's death is described most clearly in the text, with the reader moving side by side with the narrative voice. This is unlike all other deaths that are reported in the novel. This presents the African nation as a postcolony. Mbembe(1992) affirms that in a postcolony, "living is no longer subject to morals, and individuals are forced to devise whatever means that are available to them for living. Survival becomes paramount, and people have to adapt so that they may live" (p.4). It also sheds more light on the question asked by Black Tyger, that is, "when will our suffering bear fruit" (Okri, 1998.p.5). This accounts for the action of Black Tyger, among others in the novel.

As has been reiterated, there are legions of physical death in the novel. It is hard to ignore the place of physical death in the story as it arguably forms the platform upon which the narrative rests, generating other kinds of death. As stated earlier, the features of death present in the novel are somewhat related. Viewing from a psychoanalytic platform, many of the physical deaths discussed earlier have, in a way, affected either the victims or the executioners psychologically. In the text, these psychological disturbances affect characters by way of dreams, haunting, or even fear that deter them from time to time. The excerpt below actually captures it thus:

Then, as if he had woken into sleep, Dad brushed past me, muttering something about seeing things for the first time. He went out of the room. For a moment I was confused. Then I went out after him. It was very strange, and the thought scared me, but it seemed as if Dad simply stepped out of our door, and out of reality. I went back to the room and waited for him. While I waited, it occurred to me that Dad had been talking from his sleep. I had entered another of his dreams (Okri, 1998, p.9).

Most characters in the novel have spent an entire lifetime dreaming from a past that they realise is always ahead of them, so that even when they sleep, the voices that ring in their heads are frustrating enough. More so, the effect of physical death is the manifestation of all other forms of death mentioned in this paper. Having considered some forms of death as they relate to this study, it is pertinent at this juncture to turn our lens on how Okri uses death in the novel to project the African worldview.

Death and the African Worldview

Scholars and critics alike are of the view that writers worldwide adopt different modes of communicating social meaning. The modes enable them to articulate and represent individual and group identities, ideologies, prejudices, emotions, attitudes, and social relations. In the novel under consideration, Okri adopts death as a tool for sharing the socio-political situation in his country, Nigeria, and Africa in general. However, Okri uses death to project the African ideologies and identities. It is unarguable in this paper that there are different meanings of death. Okri uses death(s) of individual(s) to question the postcolonial African nation. Postcolonial discourse helps to establish the novel's response to questioning the Western hegemony. The text conceptualises

death in Africa as a link between the living and the dead. This contrasts the Western meaning of death as an end of existence, and life as the beginning of it. It is also what Kamalu (2017) shares in one of his articles; he captures it thus:

...Okri's fiction on abiku, the three participants occupy three different spaces/levels of existence: Ade exists in the ethereal space; Dad/Mum occupies the terrestrial space; while Azaro floats between the two spaces, thereby representing a conflation of the ethereal and terrestrial spaces. Thus, there is a conversation between (i) the spirit (the dead, represented by Ade); (ii) the half-spirit-half human (represented by Azaro; and (iii) the human (represented by Dad/Mum), with the middle character (Azaro) mediating the conversation. Temporally, Ade represents the past; Dad/Mum the present; while Azaro represents the interspace between the past and the present that enhances the continuum of existence (Kamalu, 2017.p.47).

The above viewpoint by Kamalu aptly sheds more light on the contention of this paper. Likewise in *Songs of Enchantment*, there is also a dialogue involving Azaro, Ade, and Dad. The beginning of the dialogue is between Ade and Azaro, but Dad later joins in the dialogue thinking that Azaro is conversing with him. This is the scene where Azaro affirms that Ade would come into the room and sit beside him with a sweet smile on his face. The excerpt below captures the dialogue between Azaro, Ade, and Dad:

Your father is right. About what? I asked. What? Dad asked. Everything is alive, Ade continued. Some things can make a stone cry. Like what? What? Dad asked again. Many things, Ade ventured. A dry wind, a dying bird, the death of a nation, the birth of a witch, the laughter of angels, the songs of the devil, the dreams of a toad, the piss of a goat, the serenity of a tyrant, the destruction of a people's history,...the dream of the dead (Okri,1993.p. 262). (Emphasis mine).

This dialogue actually shows that human beings and spirits can have a conversation. It captures the interpenetration of regions that are found in African cosmology (Kamalu, 2017). Instead of this, it has been affirmed that Africa has different levels of existence. The death of an individual can be seen as a platform for the dead to continue the journey to other regions of the cosmos. In *Infinite Riches*, the deaths of some characters are significant and metaphoric. Their deaths serve as a medium to interrogate the African worldview and the postcolonial disillusionment in Africa. In order to have robust discussions in this segment, occasionally, reference shall be made to earlier works in Okri's trilogy. This is because events and deaths of some characters in these novels, more importantly, *Infinite Riches*, can actually aid our deconstruction of the postcolonial African experience. For instance, in *Songs of Enchantment (1993)*, the Carpenter, Ade's father, is killed by the thugs of Madame Koto, but his corpse is not buried. "The eagle vanished and a fountain of blood, thin and clear, burst from a vein in Ade's father's neck as one of the men stabbed him in the throat"(p.212). Oko (2020) equally affirms that "these lines share similar features with some of the political incidents in Nigeria" (p.4). He goes further to say that Ade's father agitates for the killing of his son, Ade, and he is equally murdered by thugs of Madame Koto. The deaths of Ade and his father are all metaphors for the failed leadership in Nigeria, nay Africa. The death of Ade is like one of the founding fathers of the Nigerian nation who fought for the unity and stability of

the country but was cut short by death (Oko, 2020.p.3). There are also some events in *The Famished Road* that liken Nigeria as “near death state”. Azaro in this scene captures it thus:

He saw our people drawing in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. He saw the rich of our country; he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible they were, **how blind to our future**, how greedy they became (Okri, 1991,p. 492, my emphasis).

This underscores that Nigeria (Africa) has leaders who do not seek her stability; rather, they are interested in self-aggrandisement. They keep on acquiring wealth which they cannot use after all. “... how blind to our future”(p. 4), which depicts the near death of the nation and its epileptic status in policy formulations and implementations.

As reiterated above, Okri uses death in this text to counter the Western hegemonic view of death. In Africa, it is a journey and equally a means of livelihood, not necessarily an end to one's existence. It is a pathway or medium with which we communicate with our ancestors, who operate in different cosmos. Madame Koto has been seen by many critics as an embodiment of the neo-colonial masters. She is an enchantress of the ghetto. Her negative propensity is displayed in the way she oppresses the poor, especially Dad and Azaro in the narrative. Her death in the novel was welcomed by the people of the ghetto, especially Azaro's family. The deaths in the earlier novels have been attributed to her handiwork. It is aptly captured by Oko(2010) that “Madame Koto constitutes one of the impediments to the smooth growth of a promising community. Ade, Azaro's spirit-child friend, attempts to eliminate Madame Koto, who represents political tyranny, oppression, and domination” (p.5). This actually supports the view and contention of this paper that considers death as a metaphor. Her death was a welcome development among the people of the ghetto. When Madame Koto died, the people were not surprised by her death. The narrator (Azaro) makes it clear that nobody in the ghetto cried for her, apart from the blind old man. Even the people were banished from the night four days after her death. Azaro captures it thus: “On the fourth day after Madame Koto's death, we were banished from the night. The hypocritical wailing of the blind old man mystified us. But nothing astounded us as the rewriting of lives by the power of the era”(Okri,1998.p.344).

In the excerpt above, Azaro uses it to capture the mood and attitude of the people of the ghetto. It can also be said that Okri uses this to reiterate the change and end of the oppression in Africa. The people in the ghetto did not believe how things in their lives had changed after the death of Madame Koto. “We began to distrust things. When the blind old man wept about the untimely death of Madam Koto, we merely took him for a dream that we could not agree upon”(Okri,1998.p.348). This shows that her death was unbelievable among the people of the ghetto because of her evil propensity on them.

In this novel too, Okri(1998) made us understand that death is cultural. In the African worldview, death is seen as people's way of life. “He was thinking: ‘People's experience of death is cultural’; ...” (p.360). In this narrative, people have experienced the deaths of different people, and these deaths have become an aspect of their lives. It seems in the narrative that Africa is a place where

human lives are not valued, and Okri uses it to portray failed leadership, nepotism, and disillusionment in Africa. As a result of poverty and penury, people use the death and burial of an individual as a means of livelihood. This excerpt captures this view;

[T]he highest paid mourners in the land had been assembled. They took over the blind old man's weeping. They wept and wailed and threw themselves dramatically on the ground at crucial moments. When they wailed for a while, hurled themselves to large quantities of fried guinea fowl, stewed rice, bake plantain and beer. They ate and drank voraciously (Okri,1998.p.362).

This has been vividly corroborated by Kehinde (2004) thus;

The postcolonial African writers portray the ordeals of the ordinary citizens of their societies who wallow in abject poverty and tattered penury.... They depict their continent as a society characterised by misery, squalor, oppression, diseases and overcrowding (p.97).

This is what Okri has aptly used his imaginative prowess to depict in the above excerpt.

However, death can also be likened to an interface between the living and the dead. It is a platform with which the living use to connect with their ancestors or the dead. During burial, people use the occasion to connect with their loved ones who have departed long ago. Okri uses the death of some characters in the novel to shed more light on the African worldview concerning death. In this paper, it is believed that death is not an end but a continuation of life because there are different regions of the cosmos. One leaves a particular region of the cosmos to continue his existence. Some events in the novel attest to this;

We heard that several funerals were taking place for Madame Koto simultaneously in different parts of the country. There were funerals in deep creeks, in remote villages, on hilltops, and in the original home of the great black rock. The biggest funerals took place in her secret palace (Okri, 1998, p.352).

Okri uses the event above to show that there are different regions of the cosmos. As stated earlier in this paper, death is a means to connect the living and the dead. This is clearly elaborated by the event that happened during the burial of the enchantress of the people (Madame Koto), and Okri captures it thus:

[T]hen began the round of entreaties. Addressing the regally seated Madame Koto, the women and the cultists prayed to her to pass messages on to their ancestors, and to intercede for them in the world of spirits. Childless women prayed to be pregnant. Men whose businesses weren't doing well asked for success.... They addressed all their claims and their problems, their fears, to Madame Koto, whom they saw as their advocate in the powerful realm of the dead (Okri,1998.p.373).

Okri affirms from the above excerpt that there are different realms in the universe, and one of such is "the realm of the dead"(Okri,1998.373). The author uses this event of the burial of Madame Koto to reveal and expound on the chain of communication that exists between the living and the

dead. He also stated vividly that “Madame Koto listened to their supplications with the solemn air of her impassive greatness. She absorbed all their concerns into her death”(Okri,1998.p.373). This shows that Madame Koto, though dead, was still listening to their requests. What is presented therefore in this novel is a communication that exceeds the natural form of interpersonal communication that exists in the Western worldview. It confirms that in Africa, there is a thin line between the living and dead, and this, among others in the novel, captures the African worldview.

Conclusion

This paper has critically considered and examined death as a metaphor in Ben Okri’s *Infinite Riches*(1998). It is revealed in the study that death dominates the text, and the paper identifies the kinds and meanings of death and then confirms them as significant carriers of meanings. The deaths of Ade and the Carpenter, as alluded to in this paper, are symbolic and metaphoric. It portrays how people are killed daily in African society without anybody interrogating the causes of these deaths. It has been affirmed that Okri, through his narrative, is interested in common people in the society. Madame Koto is a metaphor for the heartless, greedy, and cruel ruler of the nation. She can further be seen as the woe and disillusionment of independence; and her death marks the end of oppression and tyranny in our society. It shows that death is inevitable; that is, no matter how high or low that you are placed in society, it will be your lot one day. It is also observed in this study that death is conceptualised as a link between the living and the dead. Therefore, Okri uses this metaphorical style to portray the positive image of the African worldview and way of life.

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