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## Method in Madness: A Study of Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom* as a Journey from Hopelessness to Hope

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of the article is to find patterns and co-relations among the tales in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom* (2009) which apparently strikes the reader as a collection of unrelated tales some of which is like Absurd Drama and the rest are short stories told in the Magic Realist vein. The first half of the tales presents some people for whom existence has become an absurdity as they are trapped in the basic concerns of life such as desire, hope, love etc., but are incapable to think and act beyond. The second half of the tales presents diverse people achieving wonderful feats by acting unconventionally. The present article attempts to find connecting links among the two halves as well as among all the tales in order to locate Okri's purpose of writing the book – to suggest ways to fight moral and psychological collapse in a world devoid of moral and spiritual certainties.

**Keywords:** Absurd Drama, Stoku, Journey, Magic Realism, Optimism, Freedom

Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom* (2009) is a curious piece of literature. Described alternatively by the reviewers as a collection of short stories, a loose collection of folk tales, as a novel while part of it has been identified by Okri himself as 'stokus'- 'an amalgam of short story and haiku' which incline 'towards a flash of moment, insight, vision or paradox'. Broadly the book can be divided into two sections – the absurd drama-like 'The Comic Destiny' and the thirteen stokus. The first and longest section 'The Comic Destiny' reads like absurd drama in the guise of prose tales that look and feel like poetry. The thirteen 'stokus' narrate—somewhere in-between dream, magic and reality—different tales of extraordinary activities of ordinary people in unusual circumstances. Read casually, the book would impress us as disparate tales put arbitrarily in the one book. But a critical reading reveals the underlying pattern of threads that connect the individual tales within each section as well as all the tales of the book. Actually, the book presents a journey from meaningless and hopeless existence to meaningful and optimistic existence that can be accomplished through will and commitment in a world in which all certainties are no longer valid. In fact, it is the aesthetic experience of the tales and connection between the two sections which are important to understand the meaning of the book, if it has any.

## I

'The Comic Destiny' is like putting *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* together in the form of prose tales to evoke an ambience of Absurd Drama. The section introduces, in four books, a number of characters who gradually meet each other at different small clearings in a forest which is a kind of symbolic void. From the brief authorial description and the pared down conversation, it becomes manifest that the characters are people who have lost their symbiotic relation with nature and society. In their unhinged state they are in a journey in search for some symbol of mooring like a room or a destination, futile though the attempt may be. The book opens with Old Man, Old Woman and their servant Pinprop upon whom Old Man and Old Woman are much dependent but whom they torture at their will. Like Lucky who carries the baggage for Pozzo and dances and thinks for him, Pinprop carries a table and two chairs, occasionally dances a step or two and bears the brunt of his masters' rage. They are going to a destination without knowing where or what it is. Occasionally, in dream-like state, Old Man and Old Woman ramble out without listening to each other their monologue of skeletons and signs on trees. In Book Two, a Man happens to stumble upon the sleeping three while running away from asylum. Taking the gesturally-responsive Pinprop as dumb, the Man plunges into the narrative of running for long while being chased and the murder of one inmate by another for inconvenient sneezing which ultimately turned out to be committed by him. Book Three introduces a young man and a young woman whose conversation reveals the illusion of the romantic concept of marriage and love. Appearing in the midst of forest with muted birds' calls, baby's crying and the sign 'Eden to Let' on a tree, they evoke the reminiscences of Adam and Eve only to underscore the un-idyllic nature of their existence. In their married relationship the most important part is arguing and fighting with each other because they find satisfaction in that. They come to the consensus that 'We stayed together precisely because we did not really love each other (page-49). For them they had a baby— real or imagined—who was very special to the young woman and she hated having it and it was nice to have the load off from her belly. This caustic satire on love and marriage pervades their talk and action. The young man describes love as 'A great feeling. When you see the one you love you sort of tremble, your throat feels dry, your hands become clumsy, you...all that.' The young woman's response is: 'I think you are trying to describe a seizure.' But despite all his rhetoric the young man moved further away from the young woman when she asked her to come close for touch:

'Look, stop behaving like a baby. Come  
Closer to me. We haven't touched one another  
for a long time. Come on, come closer to me.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I am.'

'That would be so wonderful.'

'Come on, then.'

The young man smiled, and moved further away from her.

(53; all references are to the Rider Publication)

There is a dichotomy between their words and act. This is what happens in absurd drama. Martin Eslin's observation is worth quoting here:

The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts the words spoken by the characters. (26)

The circumstances of different group of characters are not unrelated. In fact, Okri has linked them through certain common motifs and concerns such search for room, signs on trees, skeleton, boredom, apathy, silence, reversal of logic, failure of communication, gap between will and action, confusion between dream and reality, sleep and sleeplessness etc. Until Book Four of 'The Comic Destiny', all the characters are entangled in their own woven net and in the 'Beyond' section Okri has shown the path to escape all these and to gain liberation through act of transcendence. House is a motif representing freedom and peace which remain a distant hope. The Characters' search for room/house keeps them occupied without doing nothing but talking which substitutes action for them. The young couple converse:

'Shall we go and look for a room?'  
'I don't think we will find one. But  
trying might give us something to do.' (65)

Even their purpose of finding a room is starkly incompatible with each other:

'A place to learn how to dream again.'  
'A place to learn how to forget.'  
...  
'It has to be full of magic and love and  
lovely lights.'  
'Any old dustbin is fine for me.'  
'I'll settle for the sky.'  
'I'll settle for a piece of bread.' (65-66)

The young couple's search for room connects them to the Man and the search reaches its culmination in Book Four which opens with Old Man, Old Woman and Pinprop sitting in front of a white building in a clearing in the forest. On the door of the house was the legend: 'Eden. Closed for restoration.' After a while the young couple, now chained at the ankles, stumble upon the clearing and then the Man, now extremely exhausted, dejected and gasping for water due to running away from the chase, wandered into the clearing. He sees the legend 'Room to Let' and goes frenzy:

'Liars. Cheats. Thieves. Deceivers, he  
cried out suddenly. 'This is not a house. This

isn't what I've been looking for. There's no room in there. It's bloody prison, a bird cage, a trap. Sniff, sniff. I'm not going in there.' (90)

He bitterly realizes how illusory his search for house is:

'...The asylum is as good a place as any. Who knows, may be this whole planet is an asylum, a penal realm. A place for hard cases.' (90)

Then the Man runs into the forest toward the sound of the chasing siren 'as if in surrender to a new freedom, a new destiny.' When they saw the building, and young woman thinks it to be an anthill but the young man identifies it as a junk-heap. They debated over it until they declare their hatred for each other. After the departure of the Man and the young couple, Pinprop having seen the building, went into a sort of rapture of laughter and dance and describes the building as 'A most wonderful concept-room' but a little later thinks 'Or it may be a prison'. This is celebration of illusion in a postmodernist fashion. However, a New Man and a New Woman, both naked came out from the blue door of the white building and after sighing and stretching as one went to opposite direction and looked serenely at the world before them. This might suggest that the house is a symbolic Eden deserted by Adam and Eve.

Most characters of 'The Comic Destiny' experience profound boredom which makes them apathetic to others. They cannot make meaningful communication with each other and often their behavior is the reversal of logic. Thus, when Pinprop speaks after listening to the Man's story of his smashing an inmate's head with a hammer – which for the Man is a 'funny' story and which makes him laugh for long – his take on boredom becomes manifest:

'Well, I was talking to you.'  
 'Oh. What about?'  
 Flustered, the Man said:  
 'About my life, my job, my wife and all that.'  
 'You mean boredom, of course.'  
 'Yes, boredom.'  
 'A profound subject boredom is.'  
 'Very much so.'

Old Man and Old Woman often ramble alternately—without listening to each other—their monologues of skeleton and signs on trees which may be the expression of their unconscious trauma. They spoke as if 'they were in a dream or in a trance, or a ritual' and as if 'they were sleepwalkers in an obscure theatre of the mind'. This sense of collapse of distinction between reality and dream, rationality and irrationality pervades the entire 'The Comic Destiny' though there is a sense of revival towards its end. It is a grim world the characters fail to act as

they intend to, reminding one of the malaise of human predicament depicted in Eliot's *The Waste Land*; it's a world where romantic tropes like home, love, baby etc. are evoked only to stress the illusion of their efficacy. The young couple's talk on their baby's crying is worth quoting:

'I can hear a baby crying'  
 'That's strange. I can't hear anything.'  
 'Can't you hear a baby crying?'  
 'No'  
 'That's a shame.'  
 'Why?'  
 'It sounds like our baby.'  
 'Our baby? What a sweet sound it  
 must be.'  
 'Actually, it isn't. It's an irritating sound'  
 'I wish I could hear it,' said the young man.  
 'So do I.' (64)

But Okri has not written the book only to present the hopelessness of people caught in the enigma of their existence, but to show the path of regeneration and recuperation and perhaps attain a kind of 'freedom' from the bondage of the kind of life shown in *The Comic Destiny*; and he does so through narratives that have symbolic overtones. '*The Comic Destiny*' ends with this revival of hope when in the chapter entitled 'Beyond' the new couple named New Man and New Woman symbolizing Adam and Eve speak – in language of biblical reverberations – of returning not only to nature and its resources like light, water, air but also to natural human attributes like friendship, fellowship, love, courage, wisdom etc.

## II

The same note of optimism is evident in the following thirteen 'stokus' by means of which, as the author has stated, 'worlds unknown can come into being in a lighting flash from the darkness of the mind'. Jay Parini in his review of the book (Published on *The Guardian*, 24 April, 2009) has observed that "In fact, most of these tales hover anxiously between "magic" and "realism", with the former winning out in every instance." This is quite expected from the writer of *The Famished Road* in which the barrier of reality and magic is dissolved in the tale of Azaro, the spirit child. The 'stokus' have that dreamy and magical feel, but unlike the generic characters of the previous section, present recognizable people and capture unique moments in their lives, leading them to some sort of liberation. Lucy Daniel's review of the book (published on *The Telegraph*, 30 April, 2009) has identified the key aspects of the 'stokus': "Okri also seeks to apply various myths to an apocalyptic vision of modern world, with nods to *The Waste Land*. In unspecified locations, wars, famine and disease rage; Tiresias-like he wonders through a ruined city and discovers "a community stoned to death in their sleep." It's a daring enterprise that tries

to meld austere modernism and magic realism. Where it begins describing war-torn places and the aftermath of trauma, Okri's language drifts into a dreamland of deliberate timelessness, the aura of "ancient ritual" that shades into vagueness and imprecision."

In 'Belonging' the unnamed narrator, while going to meet his last living relation who resided at one Margaret House, accidentally intrudes into a nearby flat and is mistaken as an expected-to-come in-law by the owner who, despite the narrator's attempt to correct his error, continues to treat him as his in-law. Very quickly the narrator begins to enjoy being someone else in spite of his premonition of impending ignominy as in the core of his heart he wanted to belong to a family. However, after his public unmasking and humiliation after the arrival of the real in-law, he comes in front of Margaret House which turns out to be a virtual hell with wretched people milling around in aimless circles. He was about to enter the house but, being warned by the owner of the flat, changes his direction and goes towards the crowd, then out to street, and then towards a life of his own. Symbolically, the narrator, cut off from society, was heading towards hell but ultimately evades it by mixing with the crowd. So liberation is not in isolation, but being in the midst of the full flow of life.

'The Mysterious Anxiety of Them and Us' presents a group of invitees to a feast in which the narrator and his wife ate in the midst of great anxiety with some invitees while many stood behind silently as if posing imaginary threat to the narrator. This tale suggests how self-concerned people are and how they can be divided on slightest issues. In 'The Clock' a duelist, who is an acquaintance of the narrator, gets transfixed and gradually mad after seeing a clock with luminous dial in the midriff of his opponent and never recovered from the obsession of the clock. The narrator had his lesson of not fixing his mind on anything or anyone. There is a sort of freedom in this. 'Courage and positive attitude as antidote to racism is shown in 'The Racial Colorist' in which the narrator, after his futile attempt to reconcile a racial colourist and another man, is chased by a white bespectacled youth across fields. But suddenly the narrator realizes that there is no point in running away but to face the challenge is important. So he turns back and finds the youth very timid.

Music, books, art and magic are the medium through which men can overcome their trapped existence. 'Music for a Ruined City' depicts the devastated state of a bombarded city in which mourning and racism go side by side. The narrator was freed from the illusion that rules are equal for all. Then surprisingly, from one intact concert hall, a group of musicians strike up solemn classical strain which enchants the unknown listeners and cleanses the space of suffering, promising a 'wiser future rising from the rubble'. 'The Unseen Kingdom' presents a kingdom of happiness, peacefulness and freedom into which the books of a book fair in southern France transports the narrator into a kingdom of pure bliss. The fair is organized by a great lady who remains absolutely unaffected by a scandal concerning a prestigious festival prize. It is a fair in which books ward off evil from the place and 'breath out a timeless peace and eternal youth into the festival. Art as a liberating space is the theme of 'Wild Bulls' in which a group of war-orphaned children paint wonderful pictures of bulls, birds, hybrid creatures etc. Art has given

them a sort of freedom to escape from their grief caused by war. 'The Legendary sedgewick' is about a black cricketer who mastered the magical skill of 'golfing cricket' in such a way that other legendary cricketer Jackson looked ordinary before him. Here magic is the means through which incredible feat could be accomplished defying the rigour of logic.

Okri's belief that positive thinking and willful commitment to do good are the means through which the world can be made a better place to live has found expression in 'The Golden Inferno' and 'The War Healer'. In 'The Golden Inferno' a house, symbolizing a country, was infected with a severe plague caused by a dead cow and several dead bodies submerged in a stagnant gutter in front of the house. All people of the were dying one by one until one day a women braved to descend into the gutter wearing borrowed boots and despite the intolerable stink, searched the rotting bodies. Gradually, others joined her and they cleaned the gutter, making the symbolic hell once again a place for children to play.

The last 'stoku' entitled 'Message' directly addresses the reader as 'you' and considers human life as an epic journey – both physical and spiritual – for arriving at the court, deliver the message and be free. But the hardship and toil of the journey along the path of simplicity, vigilance and optimism make one divested of the message when one reaches the destination, making one 'light.' In other words, commitment without attachment is way towards freedom. The arrival to the proper destination is a kind of symbolic death or may be rebirth in a new kingdom in which the reward of the journey is inner liberation and the lightness of being. Now all one have to do is to live in perfect happiness and peerless freedom in this mysterious kingdom.

### III

Okri's earlier novels like *The Famished Road*(1991)and *Dangerous Love*(1996) are set respectively in an unnamed African city and in Lagos, the most populous city in Nigeria and while the former centers on a spirit-child caught between the worlds of the living and the dead in the midst of grim and terrible realities everywhere, the later takes us deep into the political and moral quagmire of Nigeria as its people tried to come to terms with the recent Biafra war in Nigeria. But the setting of *Tales of Freedom* is mostly symbolic as is the subject-matter of it. The purpose of the book is not to depict, what is often grandly called the 'universal human predicament', but to reach beyond our everyday perception in order to stimulate us for purposeful living. The mix of magic and reality in the tales indicates that heroic action in the un-heroic world cannot be done by realistic thinking, but by choosing an offbeat approach to life. The different tales present different take on the perceptions of freedom in ordinary lives though they are linked by Okri's prescriptions that returning to simplicity, innocence, faith and willful action are means to restore freedom of spirit. The willful action is also the action of transcendence. The conditions of Old Man, Old Woman, Pinprop, the Man, the young man and the young woman can be overcome by the activities of people like the woman who descended into the gutter or the war healer who devoted his life to the unrewarded job of treating the

wounded in the war and burying the dead or the orphaned children whom grief has unhinged into genius. The final message of the book – the reader as a weary traveler on a journey to a magical kingdom – is also the journey of the book itself. *Tales of Freedom* transports the readers into this kingdom of untold rapture where sticking to simplicity and positivity is the key to survival. The message is simple, but worth emulating.

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