

Ideology and the Pursuit of Desire in Ben Okri's *Starbook*

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ABSTRACT

Ideology to the common man is a perspective of interpretation. A group's ideology is the basis of their self-image which incorporates their identity, actions, norms and values, as well as their relationship with other groups. Ideologies are expressed and reproduced in the social practices of their members, and more practically acquired and perpetuated through discourse. These have also been depicted in fictional works such as Okri's *Starbook*. Okri's *Starbook* has been widely and variously read. Some critics have read it as an allegory of the slave trade in Africa, and others as a portrayal of Okri's perception of reality. But this paper takes a different perspective. It seeks meaning and interpretation from the language of the text and not outside it. The analysis of ideology in a literary text is a study on language, since it is within language that meaning is mobilised. This paper examines ideology and the pursuit of desire by picking on characters whose dispositions and desires are oriented towards the satisfaction of underlying wants and needs. It searches for meaning and interpretation from what the text says at the underside of discourse, hence, it adopts the Poststructuralist critical approach. Jurgen Habermas's linguistic theory is appropriate for the analysis and interpretation of actions in the text because this paper seeks to verify whether the actions of characters in the book are motivated by the pursuit of desire.

Key words: Ideology, Pursuit of Desire, *Starbook*, Ben Okri, Poststructuralist, Jurgen Habermas

INTRODUCTION

Ben Okri is a renowned Nigerian fiction writer who has made his mark in the literary scene. His fifth novel, *The Famished Road*, published before *Starbook* earned him The Booker Prize award in literature and, like *The Famished Road*, *Starbook* is described as a profound work of literature. Many critical works have been written on Okri's *Starbook* but most of these readings have not been able to account for the texts without recourse to meanings and influences that are external to the text. Anca-Ioana Maier, in a study entitled "Ben Okri: Between Reality and Fantasy" conceives of characters as real. She says: 'Okri creates outer spaces such as the forest, the spirit world, the road that make up the characters' palpable reality. Their slightest change alters the character's perception of the world and, consequently, their identity' (30). Ikenna Kamalu expresses similar sentiments with Maier in his 'Metaphor and the Rhetorics of Postcolonial Politics in Ben Okri's Fiction' where he examines what he considers as 'Ben Okri's use of metaphor to frame the relationships between groups in his society'. He perceives Okri's fiction as 'revealing the asymmetry in the distribution of socio-political power in the system' which he outlines as the uneasy juxtaposition of values and groups such as 'the colonizer versus the colonized; the rich versus the poor; the white versus the black; the politicians versus the inhabitants;

the modern versus the ancient' (1). He sees one group trying to impose its ideology on the other while the dominated group tries to resist or contend the ideological hegemony of the dominant group.

However, this paper differs from the above perspective of interpretation by adopting the poststructuralist stance of Jurgen Habermas. Jurgen Habermas is a language philosopher in the tradition of pragmatics and hermeneutics. Hence, his linguistic theories are germane in the interpretation of this literary work. He believes that meaning stems from interpretation, and, in line with Paul Ricoeur's kind of hermeneutics, this author recognizes the objective meaning of the text as a requirement addressed to the reader, such that what has to be interpreted in a text is what the text says. 'That is the kind of world that it opens up or discloses' (*Conflict of Interpretation*: 93).

Habermas's theory of language use recognizes the rational potential of communicative understanding between participants in a speech act. He locates rationality in the structure of interpersonal linguistic communication because he thinks that communication is the core of any action. Hence, he makes a distinction between communicative and strategic action. In communicative action, speakers adopt a practical stance oriented towards reaching understanding. While in strategic action, actors are not so much interested

in mutual understanding as in achieving the individual goals they each bring to the situation. Similarly, Habermas stresses the connection between linguistic communication and ego emphasizing that 'communicative action is the medium of socialization' (131). He establishes the connection between subjectivity and inter-subjectivity by showing that a subject's intentions are socially, that is, inter-subjectively structured. Writing on 'Intentions, Conventions and Linguistic Interaction' in his work entitled *On The Pragmatics of Social Interaction*, Habermas points out that 'dispositions and desires are oriented towards situations of want satisfaction; as feelings and moods perceive objects in the light of our wants' (116). Desires and wants, he maintains, presuppose the evaluation of desirable and undesirable states of affairs, whereas emotions and moods have a dispositional element. Habermas makes the connection between dispositions and emotions clear, since he conceives of both as interpretations of underlying wants and needs. Need interpretations involve both feelings and desires. For desires are interpreted indirectly on the one hand by means of action preferences or ends, and on the other hand by means of affectively loaded categories and situations.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud, writing in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* points out that the causes of human behaviour are to be sought in intra-psychic factors which include repressed traumatic childhood experiences, unconscious processes and motivations. He introduces the ego function of unconscious repression as a mechanism of linguistic pathogenesis. The repression of conflicts that are not consciously resolved, that is, not on the basis of consensual action leaves traces that take the form of communicative disturbances. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to ascertain whether the actions of the characters in Okri's *Starbook* is motivated by the pursuit of desire.

PURSUIT OF DESIRE IN *STARBOOK*

In *Starbook*, the prince's mysterious encounter with the maiden from the tribe of artists is motivated by the pursuit of desire. His desire for God to give him answers to the numerous questions that initiation awakens in him takes him through a solitary meditation in the forest, where he encounters the maiden from the tribe of artists. He sees his encounter with the maiden as a sign and not ordinary. He learns by intuition that 'there was something about her that was rare, special, hidden, waiting' (8). It is because of his desire to seize this hidden meaning that he poses three questions to her and her responses which read:

Prince: Answer these three questions then you can live.
 Maiden: I am ready.
 Prince: First, where does the river end?
 Maiden: In the wisdom of God.
 Prince: Second, where does all our suffering end?
 Maiden: In the happiness that lies beyond all things.
 Prince: And finally, what are we all seeking?
 Maiden: The kingdom which we are in already, which we have got, and which is our home."
 Prince: Come back here same time tomorrow. Come alone. (10-11)

The maiden's answers astonish as well as enlighten the Prince who expresses a desire to see her again the next day, and, with an emphasis that she comes alone. He already feels a bonding with the maiden because of their shared understanding of the existence of a divinity which they mutually seek. The three questions that the Prince poses to the Maiden and her responses to them are oriented towards reaching understanding immanent in communicative rationality. There is a consensus between the two that their desire for happiness comes from a divinity called God who pervades all, and communicates with human beings. At the inauguration of the story, what confronts the reader is an explication of the power of this being. It reads:

There is an ancient saying in the village that my mother used to tell me. They say that it is not who you are that makes the world respect you, but what power it is that stands behind you. It is not you that the world sees, but that power. (1)

Such a conception of a powerful being who operates in humans empowering them to communicate with spirits and animals gives a clearer picture of the activity of the Prince, the Maiden, and the Magic-Master in the tribe of artists, who seem to command supernatural powers. This notion of a powerful being who is all-knowing pervades the entire action of *Starbook*. This is expressed in the master artist's inclination to teaching his daughter, the maiden, the ways of the tribe of artists. The ideology and desire of the tribe of artists are enunciated in this dialogue between father and daughter:

'We of our tribe create out of dreams but we make in broad daylight. Our works have more meaning and more truth than we realize at the time, but it is not meaning or truth that we seek'.

'What do we seek?'

We seek to serve that which directs us to create. Hence we are somewhat indifferent to what we create, since it serves a purpose higher than we understand. The person who creates is not important, only what they create, what they make. Those who are the best servants of the higher powers have more servants to help them do the work. That is why some have the power of ten while others have only their own power, which is, in the long run the power of nothing, of dust, of oblivion. Through our works must shine not the power of the person, but the power of the power. True fame should belong to the power which guides us in the dark. (115)

The tribe of artists draws their inspiration from dreams mediated by a power. The dreams which are translated into works of art in the day, also have powers to meet the needs of the tribe. Those who serve this being the most have more powers bestowed on them by this powerful being. Their creative power is, therefore, commensurate with their service and allegiance to this being that is to be reckoned with.

Hence, the Maiden and the prince part with the understanding of meeting the next day. But their planned meeting is aborted by the interference of an adversary, the Mamba, who is intoxicated by a powerful desire to win the hand of the Maiden in marriage. The Mamba believes that his union

with the maiden will enable him to gain the power he sees in her. The narrative reads:

There grew in him, suddenly, overnight, out of his brooding, an inextinguishable desire to command, to crush, to compel, to be powerful, to dominate, to overcome all obstacles to his will. He brooded often on power and on the domination of the tribes. Something in him wanted to rule the world.... But first, he knew he had to win the hand of the maiden, and overcome her innocent power over him... It is impossible to say when the notion came upon him that the maiden was the key to his destiny. She had grown so powerful in his mind that he could never conquer anything or anyone else. She became ... the magic formation that stood between him and greatness. (176)

The Mamba's crave for power and domination reduces him to a pathological state. He sees the Maiden as an indispensable force to his greatness, therefore, he is prepared to go to any length to win the maiden. We learn that he does two peculiar things which he deems necessary for the actualisation of his desire.

He began to formulate a vague act of malice to compensate for his blinding, his humiliation. He couldn't get the other spying out of his mind; and whenever he thought of that form, the fabulous horned animal also came to mind, and refused to leave. A great rage swelled in him like a river in spate. He let it swell, and waited for the rage to subside. And when it did, he knew exactly what he should do, not only to win a bride, but also to begin his commanding steps towards power. (185)

First, he put it about that the maiden was having illicit relations with a horned animal near the river And the second thing the Mamba did was to inform the maiden's parents that an outsider, a mysterious and dangerous figure, was spying on their daughter and could ruin her chances of a good marriage. (186-87)

The slender creature he sees spying upon the Maiden is the Prince. Agitated by this insight, the Mamba maps out a plan of action, an intention advanced towards an end. He conceives and executes these strategic actions oriented towards success as part of the means he deems right to pursue his desire. But these actions, motivated by desire demand pathological explanations. Rather than woo the maiden, he resorts to blackmail. He believes that this would earn him a special place in the affections of the maiden's parents. But his actions incur their wrath instead. Consequent upon this, the Maiden is whisked off to an unknown destination by her parents to undergo an unplanned initiation. This is a ploy to rescue her from assaults from the Mamba. The unplanned journey disrupts the arranged meeting with the prince.

Also worthy of note is the prince's emancipatory interest in the oppressed and the downtrodden in the kingdom. His desire to liberate the women and the slaves in the kingdom from the domination and unnecessary control by the elders brings him in open confrontations with the latter. His pursuits are for the happiness and egalitarianism of all. His desire is to change the status quo and end all

forms of evil in the kingdom. Moreover, as the future king 'he wanted to know if there were better ways of living, of governing, of improving the life of his people'. (348) But the elders feel threatened by his pursuit and then worry that his new desire for knowledge would render them irrelevant.

But the interest of the prince is to free the women who are treated like slaves. The enormity of the work they do shocks him as 'he gazed about him in utter surprise that everyone thought the lives of women so normal, especially the women themselves, who seemed to make light of what seemed to him so intolerable' (27). The attitude of the slaves and the women to their plight shocks the prince the most. The women in the kingdom believe that their sufferings are unavoidable, while the slaves think that their rebellion will meet with severe punishment. Their disposition finds description in Eagleton's assertions that:

Oppressed groups in society may rationalize just as thoroughly as their rulers. They may perceive that their conditions leave a lot to be desired, but rationalize these facts on the grounds that they deserve to suffer, or that everyone else does too, or that it is somehow inevitable, or that the alternative might be a good deal worse. (52)

The attitude to the slaves and the women to their plight helps to legitimate their domination. In consonance with Eagleton's view cited above, Thomas Wartenberg asserts that 'any system of oppression draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who accept their image and get paralysed by a sense of helplessness' (50). This scenario aptly describes the experience of the women and the slaves in the kingdom.

CONCLUSION

From an examination of Okri's *Starbook* undertaken above, it was possible to identify the ideology which gives meaning to the motivations, interest and desires of the characters. The prince driven by his desire to receive answers to his problems undertakes a solitary quest for an all knowing divinity called God, who he believes has the answers. His encounter with the maiden from the tribe of artists strengthens his belief and ideology that their desires for happiness come from the same God. This shared understanding acts as a bond between them.

On the other hand, the Mamba's desire for power drives him to take actions that are strategically oriented to success rather than a desire for mutual understanding between him and the maiden. This fails to yield the desired end, and culminates in his downfall.

However, some of the characters are seen to suffer subjugation occasioned by an ideology as is the case with the women in the kingdom. Some others are able to enforce a change driven by another ideology. This we find in the maiden's parents and the prince. It is evident, therefore, that Jurgen Habermas's linguistic theory has aptly accounted for the analysis of the paper: 'Ideology and the pursuit of desire in Okri's *Starbook*'.

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