Chapter Five

The Seer-Story Teller of Africa: Ben Okri and the Enchantment of Spirituality

“Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart bigger” (SOE 46). This simple statement made by one of his characters speaks volumes of Ben Okri’s contentions as an African Story-teller. African storytellers are re-organizers of the accepted reality, dreamers of alternate histories who disturb the deceitful sleep of the world. The challenge, the creativity and the joy of story-telling lies in disturbing something of the complete order of things waking them in to the risks of discoveries. Stories enrich the dreams of the world and dreams create history. Stories have the power to make a point or raise an issue, to delight, to enchant, to touch and to motivate.

Many people do not realize the extent to which stories influence our behaviour and even shape our culture. Fables, parables and stories about one’s national, cultural or family history profoundly influence one’s values as well as attitudes about oneself and others. In fact, the very act of living is all about acting out the multiple stories of our life, defining who we are to the world and to ourselves.
The traditional story-tellers of ancient cultures have more profound roles—of spiritual teachers, exemplars and healers—to perform, and they draw directly on the conscious creative power of the Divine and transmit it through the words they speak and sing. This is not the same as merely “being creative” or “feeling inspired” and involves considerable spiritual training. They have always been innovative, as they have been imitative. Story-tellers routinely rely on tradition, working within two realms, the world of the immediately perceptible and the world of imagination. The latter is the link to the past, a grandly mythicized past; the journey to its essence is essayed by generations of estimable artists. The genius of the story-teller is to be discovered in his ability to work within the tradition—the imitative part of his art—as he simultaneously gives his audience new insights into ancient images by using them to give new meaning to the contemporary world which comprises the innovative part of his art.

The role of the artist or the writer is, in Africa, a mere extension of that of the story-teller. Socially committed, innovative, spiritual healers of the mind, whose faculty of imagination takes flight from the inexhaustible well of the stories of the tradition, these artists practice their art primarily with a
didactic aim—to explain or represent through images, the essential nature of society to its own members. The purpose of art is to express universal belief and not the individuality of the artist. Okri imbibes this in the true spirit and is ready to do away with all artistic pretentions and self-referentiality. He is every inch a story-teller who relishes the very act of narrating long epic plots.

Some of the experiments being carried out in African fiction like that of Okri owe little to European or Latin American examples, but achieve their queer effects by returning to the African traditional sources. Because, whatever be their obsession with form, African novelists are still deeply committed to the simple act of telling a story. Secondly, and more importantly, African authors have an inexhaustible treasure house of stories to retell. For them, the tradition is not a lost origin but a living reality, a source of vital and urgent attempts to forge an ethical and political vision that would serve as an African critique of, and mode of resisting neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. In the fiction of these new-generation writers, the vision and values of an animist culture is effectively re-transmitted in the ongoing struggles against new forms of subjugation.
The general view of tribal or animist cultures has been as being too primitive or as trapped in a state of infancy out of which they need to grow through imbibing the "scientific" propositions of the western religions. The writers of the new generation, instead of going for a head-on confrontation with the western political and religious assumptions of supremacy, persistently engage with the realities of power as story-tellers or dreamers who harbor political and social visions that go beyond a given reality and maintain a certain oppositional idealism to resist the dominant idealism of the west.

The thoughtless and wholesale adoption of western preoccupations and theoretical assumptions that have no relevance for the peculiar African situation will obliterate these radical changes introduced by the writers. On the contrary, it can only stifle their personality and limit the scope of their fiction. The driving force behind this return to the oral traditions, one can feel, is certainly to ensure the individuality of the African culture rather than treat it as a satellite of the European cultural experience. The most effective way of "talking back" is through asserting ones individuality and cultural heritage beyond any doubt. Ben Okri stands apart from the rest of the bunch in that
The story-telling tradition is evident in Okri in the form of the multitude of stories, fables, riddles and proverbs that figure in his fiction. The poetic quality of his language, the long incantatory utterances which form part of the labyrinthine narratives, the repetitive mode of his writings, the ample use of myths that are recognized and comprehended by the common public—all point to the strong influence of orality. The exploration of the liminal spaces between the real and the mythical is yet another oral convention. The "journey" motif which reappears every now and then in Okri is a favourite technique also with Tutuola, Fagunwa and Soyinka who have made extensive use of the oral tradition. Yet another unmistakable story-telling technique in Okri is the presence of "we" that is both personal and collective.

But the single most important factor that emphatically asserts, Okri's identity as an African artist is the fact that all his materials have been drawn from African sources. Unlike the mythmaking practiced by the doyens of magic realist writing, like Rushdie and Marquez, Ben Okri's artistic explorations centre on existing popular African myths. In his hands, these myths undergo
artistic mutation; they are impregnated with allegorical significance and without any conscious effort made to serve as profound metaphors for the issues that the author wants to subject to his artistic exploration.

His greatest achievement is perhaps the dexterity with which he makes the myth of the *abiku* and its metaphysical dilemma a perfect metaphor for the crisis in African history. No other myth could so meaningfully capture the painful amphibious nature of a continent struggling to shake off the vestiges of colonial onslaught, taking occasional births of fresh democratic experiments only to die at the hands of selfish political monsters. Just like the *abiku*, caught between the double realities of the spirit-world and the material world, Okri’s Africa has to reconcile and redefine its identity in relation to the contesting ideologies of an ancient world-view and the scientific propositions of modernization. The struggle to contain the multiple levels of reality and the pain in always being misunderstood and misinterpreted is as much the predicament of the black continent as it is of a spirit-child. The spirit-child which makes the difficult choice of staying back has to pay dearly for the decision. The very struggle for keeping oneself alive, way out of the ferocious spirit-monsters ready to pounce upon, is terrible enough. The
myth of the hungry road is yet another of the apt artistic analogies that Okri employs. In the impoverished ghettos of Africa, life is an extremely difficult business. The struggle for survival often involves dangerous confrontations with the forces of this world and the other world. The trajectory of life holds in store many traps and for an average African. Besides, hunger is perhaps the most commonly experienced phenomenon of Africa. Even the road is famished, not to speak of the beings that traverse it. The myth of famished road exemplifies a principle of the African world-view that Okri has hinted at all along. The forces of nature and even the material phenomena on the earth have life and existence and are powerful enough to alter the destiny of man should they be trifled with. The potent forces that manipulate the world of the man include a wide spectrum of beings like the dead souls and the spirits. They all along with man are manifestations of a universal all-permeating life-force their life, mobility and power being decided only by the degree and the kind of force they are invested with.

The world of Okri’s novels is inhabited by spiritual forces belonging to all the categories of the anthropocentric ontology, characteristic of African religions namely, God, spirits, man, animals and plants and finally inanimate objects. Unlike
Christianity and most of other religions of the world which view man as a passive recipient of the divine ordinance, the African belief systems envisage man as an active participant in a web of forces that operate in a democratic manner. All the beings, except the God Himself, are dependent on one another. The supreme Deity is just and merciful and makes His presence felt through natural phenomena. Beneath him in the ontological scale are the divinities or the spirits. The spirit-world consists of demi-gods, the spirits and the living-dead who maintain close ties with world of the living. Spirits, especially the immediately dead, constantly interact with the living world and sometimes get themselves involved in the actions of this world. This spirit-involvement, either through the agency of magic or sorcery or through manifestations like that of the spirit-child, confuses people and takes them through hallucinatory realms. The mysterious and nightmarish occurrences in some of the novels of Okri spring from such spirit involvement necessitated by the presence of an abiku, the central figure in the biggest of his fictional ventures.

The cyclic movement of time is yet another peculiarity that sets African thought systems apart from the rest of the world. It is believed that phenomena repeat themselves striving for
perfection which is unattainable. The spirit-child is the perfect epitome of this process of repetitive births and deaths. The past is highly significant as the factor that shapes the events of the present. The sudden shifts in narration and the repetitive mode of action and characters in Okri’s fiction are accounted for by the cyclic conception of time and the theory of repetition of events and phenomena. Broadly, Okri’s *abiku* novels exemplify certain foundational concepts of the African religions like the conception of a death as a continuation of life, belief in the existence of spirits and the dead, belief in the power of magic and sorcery and the multiple layers of existence.

In Okri, a synthesis is discernible, in which characteristics of the oral culture are absorbed, assimilated, extended and even re-organized within an alien cultural mode. One major aspect of this interplay of the oral and literary traditions is the phenomenon of the story-within-the story. Okri is fully aware of the uses of such embedded stories folk tales, proverbs or riddles as communal forms that transcend the narrow limits of pure aestheticism and entertainment to encompass broad social and ethical purposes. They also bring something to the total meaning of the novel, some insight to clarify the action, to sharpen
characterization, to elaborate themes and to enrich the setting and environment of action.

Okri develops the oral tradition in a philosophical sense, by developing its resources for understanding the world we live in. The oral elements like continuity, formlessness, and overlapping levels—are unmistakable in him. Okri is from the Urhobo tribe and his interest in Yoruba mythology must be due to two reasons—one, the fact that the Yoruba myths are the most popular and fantastic and two, that these myths have been successfully used by Soyinka. Soyinka, Tutuola and others draw on traditional legends and folktales as a source of thematic material. This kind of material is extremely difficult to use because it needs to be modified to the contemporary reader and his situation.

Okri’s style interweaves with great dexterity an ever-shifting pattern—a sharply etched realism, a dream-like narration with elements of fantasy and carefully selected material from myths and fairytales. More than anything else, this style draws its strength and beauty from the storytelling traditions of Africa and is most magnificently manifest in the abiku novels. The profoundly poetic utterances, the incantatory narration and the penchant for details are all unmistakably sure signs of an oral
tradition which lend life and blood to Okri's style. The several stories narrated are interwoven into the narrative like a massively orchestrated symphony. These stories require an open heart and a serene mood to be understood. Profound philosophies and immutable truths behind the natural phenomena become subjects for these stories. Human qualities are attributed to inanimate things—the demonic smile of the yellow sun, the living black rock—and strange transformations occur which defy logic. True to the story telling tradition, the narratives have digressions in the form of dreams, fables, riddles, etc., but the continuity is never lost. There are no loose ends in the story. Events in the previous chapter are being continued in the following ones. Some characters like the International Photographer of *The Famished Road* disappear altogether in a novel. Nevertheless, they reappear, sometimes in the next book. The threads are never lost and invariably all of Okri's novels display neat division of events into sections, subdivided into books and again into a number of chapters within each book. Sometimes the chapters have curious titles like "Draw a deep breath for a new song" or "When I cried out the pain eased" (IR) which provides interesting clues about the events to be depicted in them. Since time has a cyclic motion, each section ends with an anticipation of the beginning
of a new cycle even though the terrible and mysterious things that happen remain much the same.

There is a growing critical consensus that has sought to position Ben Okri’s work as a continuation of Nigerian Literary Tradition, with Tutuola and his literary precursor Fagunwa at the beginning whose affiliation stretches forward through the writings of Wole Soyinka. Amos Tutuola remains one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of modern Nigerian literature to receive international recognition and critical acclaim. His writings are being recognized as a unique early example of a hybridized interface between Nigeria’s pre-colonial oral folklore and literary modes of discourse.

The seminal influence Tutuola’s work has had on Okri’s literary development particularly on his abiku trilogy and the discovery that his style—controversially called African magical realism—has inklings of Tutuola and Fagunwa has placed Okri in the true line of these pioneers.

Both Okri and Tutuola share a common resource in the form of a Yoruba Narrative discourse which incorporates aspects of their traditional metaphysical belief system and its syncretic blend of elements from the real, the esoteric and the supernatural. Traces of this indigenous cultural resource base
are evident in both the writers that they regularly employ episodic narrative structures and mythic landscapes populated with animist deities, supernatural beings and ghosts of the ancestors. Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) features “a half-bodied body or spirit” (Tutuola 37) which has mysteriously gestated in the thumb of the Drinkard’s wife. This grotesque child is a Yoruba *abiku* like Okri’s Azaro, a wilful spirit-child who masquerades as a human baby, only to repeatedly die and be reborn, causing grief and mischief among the living.

Although close affinities between Tutuola’s and Okri’s literary landscapes are evident, the difference between the two writers go beyond the fact that Tutuola was writing at a time when Nigeria was still a British colony and Okri writes from the decidedly contemporary perspective of a Nigerian living in the Diaspora. Whereas Okri is a literary sophisticate who produces post colonial texts which are ironic, complex and poetic, Tutuola, in contrast had scant knowledge of the world of letters and his writings, therefore, tend to be blithely unaffected by literary conventions giving the impression that his texts are closer to being transcriptions of the improvised performance of a traditional Yoruba oral story teller.
His imperfect command of the English language is revitalized by the oral features of his mother tongue Yoruba that the final result bears strong marks of musicality. Refrains, capital letters and parentheses to produce an imaginary audience’s response and the excessive use of riddles and parables lend his novels the peculiar quality of "orality". Tutuola’s lavish employment of metamorphosis is also drawn from the oral tradition, heavily borrowed upon by Okri and his contemporaries.

Tutuola’s work has had tremendous influence on Okri. Critic Denise Coussy points to a famous scene in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* in which the hero and his wife dance to the tune of the drum and song incessantly for five days without eating or stopping once. A similar scene of contagious sneezing in *The Famished Road* has strong parallels:

Then I began sneezing. Dad hit me on the head. Another of the women took up the sneezing. Dad joined in soon we were all infected with uncontrollable sneezing. We sneezed for such a long time and with such intensity that it seemed we would lose our heads altogether. We were all contorted in paroxysms, when the wind, roaming, the bar, took our sneezing away. (TFR 298-99)
One cannot help being struck by the similarity of the situations—the dancing and the sneezing are beyond the control of the protagonists—and of the literary techniques such as the use of repetitions and of hyperbole. Ben Okri’s fiction is replete with apparitions of many headed spirits, half animal and half human beings and encounters with them.

But the influence of earlier writers upon Okri can actually be traced back to Fagunwa, the Yoruba classical novelist who borrows copiously from Yoruba folk tales in weaving the plots of creation of all his novels as exemplified by *A Forest of a Thousand Demons* (1938). The novel contains the picaresque tales of a Yoruba hunter who encounters magic monsters, spirits and gods. Fagunwa was a pioneer in the sense that he was the first to make a new and significant literature out of the Yoruba language, to have given the oral tradition an extended literary form. The oral tradition offered him a distinct personal statement in artistic terms upon the issues of human life. The true achievement of Fagunwa lies in the way in which he was able to fill out the restricted outline of a folk tale and to give it the dimensions of a developed narrative form which retains essences of its allegorical and symbolic quality. But he considered himself primarily as a traditional story teller, being
acutely conscious of his audience like a true oral performer, and designed his works—their rhetoric, tonal balance, word play, repetition—as performance rather than as texts meant to be read. Fagunwa’s narrative techniques, like that of Okri, flow directly out of the oral traditions but he strives and succeeds in getting beyond the limitations of the traditions.

The greatest writer to have influenced Okri is none other than the most acclaimed writer of the continent, Wole Soyinka. Like Okri, Soyinka had returned to Nigeria from Paris with grandiose ideas about actively participating in the process of nation building. Soyinka’s revolutionary zeal and his uncompromising attitude towards the neo-colonial masters of African find an equally ardent follower in Okri. The main shift in Okri is that while Soyinka’s vision is more political and his conception of artist as social reformer is more individualistic, Okri is keen on a moral reawakening and a change of outlook. Unlike Soyinka, Okri makes his art a spiritual exercise of his faculties out of which clear visions and dreams about the future of the nation will emerge. But he emulates Soyinka’s narrative strategy of using indigenous elements for poetic strength and beauty. Soyinka fashioned a secular aesthetic fusing Yoruba mythology and Greek elements into a distinctively African notion
of tragedy. He freely makes use of a variety of western and African idioms and move between them effortlessly without ever becoming conscious of a cultural boundary. He uses Ogun, the deity as an archetype—a self which aspires to speak and act in defence of a whole culture or tradition—in an attempt at artistic self invention to forge a “representative self”.

Okri’s abiku fulfils the role of a representative self delivering authentic viewpoints of “this world” and the “other world” and Okri dexterously makes use of this device by placing the personality of the abiku in a politically charged background—an Africa on the eve of Independence with elections, political rallies, cheap tricks employed by newly established parties and the unholy nexus between politicians and sorcerers thriving in a insecure world. Apart from the myth of the abiku, Okri acknowledges that he has borrowed the metaphor of the road from Soyinka’s poem “Death in the Dawn”. Okri might have been influenced also by his play The Road which features a treacherous road playing tricks upon its travellers. But he insists that their treatment differs considerably. Okri’s road is hungry and vulnerable and it is dangerous to travel on it. It is as much the trajectory of an individual’s life as it is the road to the destiny of a nation, full of traps.
Yet another novelist who exercised considerable influence on Okri is the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah whose experiments steered away from the dominant social realist novel. The early works of Armah subject the crisis of neocolonialism and the resultant alienation, the disillusionment caused by the failure of revolutionary ideologies and the need to recover traditional values in a more or less realistic mode. In his later novels, he brings in radical changes and fuses the values of the realist novel with those of an oral novel to give a rare strength and effect.

In Armah’s later novels, the narrator carries out the role of a traditional artist and hence the narrative voice shows enchanting, mesmerizing qualities. The narrator addresses his imaginary audience, reassures it and quite often intrudes with meta-narrative comments, calling for a pause or more swiftness, or ends with a digression and so on. Okri emulates this in *In Arcadia* “I hope I’m getting on your nerves. I hope I’m infuriating you so much that you want to throw this book and pick up one more suited to your sheep-like complacency. . . . You can get off and bugger off if you don’t want to continue (*In Arcadia* 21). The language is also replete with refrains and repetitions and is aesthetically incantatory. The temporal structure of Armah’s books also goes against the prescriptions of a realist novel it
embraces an infinite span, from the myths of origin to an infinite, unreckonable future.

While examining the peculiar ways in which Okri apprehends the new African reality it is apparent that a majority of studies done on the topic brand him as a magic realist in the lines of Marquez and Rushdie. Ben Okri's name is mostly heard in connection with magical realism and there is no wonder that the writer is looked upon as a successful practitioner of the most fashionable mode of writing of the new era. His protestations and claims to realism are taken for granted even though these days more critical attention is being paid to the radical ways in which magic realism is adapted to the African reality.

The basic difference between Okri and the likes of Marquez and Rushdie is that while Marquez invents potent myths to serve as metaphors for the volatile history of his continent and Rushdie parodies history and creates a meta-fiction for making scathing political statements, Okri makes a fresh reading of mythical pearls that he picks up from the mighty ocean of African stories. The magical and the fantastic in Okri are perfectly natural going by the beliefs and cultural assumptions of Africa. His stories have characters and situations that are familiar to every African kid. There is no conscious myth-making or deliberate extension of the
boundaries of realism for the sake of making an impression upon the mind of the reader.

The frequent shifts between the real and the magical world, the nightmarish occurrences in terror-laden landscapes, the conception of time as cyclic repeating the political violence and insecurity and the element of the carnivalesque are characteristic of magical realism. The horrid visions that haunt the inhabitants of Azaro’s ghetto break all the rules and laws governing the real world. However, instead of bracketing it off as magical writing, Okri impels the readers to view it as the author’s compliance with the reality of the other world which is as much a felt “reality” for an average African. The cultural view points and indigenous beliefs that give life and blood to such fiction are grievously overlooked by the totalizing theoretical assumptions that happen to be another kind of cultural hegemony.

Being a true representative of the new-age writers, Ben Okri keeps his art open to possibilities offered by the new currents in writing. He does not turn away from carrying out new experiments to give a freshness and novelty to the age old oral narrative techniques and the imported western genre of novel. Okri has been grouped among modernist, postmodernist and post
colonialist writers. The fragmentariness of narrative, intertextuality, mixing of genres and cultures, shifts in temporal order, mixing of myth and reality and the inclusion of stories and anecdotes are the postmodernist elements in Okri. The repeated use of literary motifs and the legitimization of supernatural elements—outside the purview of realist fiction—are also essentially post modern. The period of his writing and the anti-colonial sentiments expressed through it make Okri a post-colonial writer. Okri has distanced himself from the revolutionary stand of “talking back” and even though the problems of loss of identity and erosion to self esteem as a result of the colonialist invasion are raised in almost all his novels, his approach to colonialism is radically different in that he views it as not the only reason for the plight of Africa. He holds his countrymen equally responsible—their thirst for money and power and their total disregard for all kinds of principles and scruples have driven them into abysses of corruption and immorality. Even though the dichotomy between the black and the white is less important, Okri places the colonized subject at the centre of most of his fiction. His novels are all stories of survival edging on the dangerous zone between life and death. Yet another feature of postcolonial in Okri’s novels is the conception of history as
"manufactured" and distorted. The need to expose the fabricated lies and to express the truth about the silenced is resonant in his writing. His practice of colonizing the imperial language and the accepted cannons of writing is also pointed out as postcolonial.

Ben Okri's writing yields to analysis in terms of the theories postulated by some postcolonial critics. Of them, special mention must be made of Homi Bhabha whose concept of liminality is relevant in Okri to a great extent. He considered the notion of the binary oppositions of the colonizer and the colonized inadequate to explain the majority of identifications in terms of race, class and gender. The liminal spaces in between the dominant and the subordinate cultures open up the possibility of a cultural hybridity without the hierarchy that accompanies the colonized-colonizer equation. The presence of the spirits and the mysterious phenomena that inhabit the mythical spaces between the real world and the land of the dead points to certain liminality. The dark forest stands for such a liminal zone between the land of the living and the spirit realm. There are also characters that traverse the realm of liminality, between life and death passing days and weeks on end in a state of delirium or suspended life. Okri explores the interstitial
spaces between fixed designations of identity. Mikhail Bakthin's concept of multi-voicedness or polyphony can also be applied to Okri's narratives to some extent. But the inherent problem with such analyses lies in the fact that no single theory can fully account for the fragmentariness and ever shifting time frame or the inclusion of the supernatural, satisfactorily.

The fragmentariness of the narrative has its roots in the fragmented soul of the *abiku*, strung in to many lives spanning perhaps centuries. The narrative style springs from an African literary heritage already celebrated by story tellers like Fagunwa, Tutuola and Soyinka. They have made the road between humans and spirits, the monsters and the forest, the canon of mythology by which modern man can find meaning to his life. It is a physical road, as well as a spiritual and psychic way to other levels of consciousness abundantly acknowledged as part of the Yoruba cosmology.

In short, Ben Okri's place among the modern writers of fiction in Nigeria, is that of a pioneer who has formulated an African Aesthetics—daring in its total disregard for universal notion. It is often taken for granted that there exists a universal standard which transcends race and nationality, a standard which can be fair and objective when applied to any work of art
irrespective of colour or cultural backgrounds. Such a universally accepted yardstick in judgement presupposes the existence of what qualifies as universal character, universal imagery, universal language and so forth. Unfortunately this theory can easily degenerate into abstract formulas as false as it is nebulous, because it is based on sensibilities that cannot be shared by everyone. It practically slams its door against all non-Western sensibilities, experience, beliefs and attitudes. It is in this context that the formulation of an African Aesthetics becomes relevant. It is a creative interrogation of the African experience, a reassertion and revival of the cultural values, identify and dignity of Africans. The aim of the practitioners of this new stream of writing is certainly to glorify the ancestral achievements and beauty of Africa through usages, images, references and symbols that are taken from African traditional life. But they differ from all their predecessors in being more daring, flouting all the restraints that conventions impose. Highly experimental in matter and manner, the new writers are refreshingly new in their reappropriation of an elite genre to suit the African surroundings. In their hands the local and the particular becomes universal and there is an unmistakable stamp of authenticity. The didactic strain and revolutionary zeal in
earlier writers is absent but the truth telling practiced by these youngsters is no less powerful, its source of power being a new form of poetics, a narrative style the texture and matter of which are essentially traditional.

Okri is a pioneer in founding a new poetics with a distinct flavour of language, flow of phrase, accent and rhythm in prose, use of indigenous symbols, endeavouring to reflect the special characteristics and imperatives of African culture. It is surprisingly similar in essence to an Indian poetics that Bharata discusses in his *Natyasastra*. It is a theory that envisages art as the sublime assimilation of various elements into a single composite cultural experience. In the Indian context, Art does not imitate nature and the Aristotelian theory of mimesis has little relevance here. The artist, being a seer, looks into the nature of Reality, the *Swarupa*, which makes a work *that* and nothing else. Truth is what the artist views, “percept of the concept” (Bharatamuni, 547). Valmiki is said to have “seen” in a flash the entire story of Ramayana before his mind’s eye, hence the epic satisfies the ideal of *pasyanthivak* (the seen world). If the writer does not have the vision to perceive Reality and the *pasyanthivak* to articulate that experience it is not the fault of the poetics. For the art to become sublime, the artist must be
endowed with these two pre-requisites—the prophetic vision to perceive the truth and the essential knowledge of the world to drape that truth in. Ben Okri’s conception of the artist as a visionary is resonant with this theory.

According to Natyasatra, the context of a work of art is the whole matrix of a culture, its mental states, its idiosyncrasies, its superstitions. The artist is preoccupied with the concerns of the larger community. If he can redress human suffering and wipe tear from every eye his vocation is considered fruitful. It is unbecoming of the artist to appear as an object of pity. Literature has such a lofty function and the poet is considered as a shaper of thought and sensibility. The poet is a responsible member of the society, who by his dhyana (meditation), abhyasa (practice) and lokasangraha (concern for the people) has earned a high status for himself.

The role of the reader should also be mentioned in this context. Okri is not willing to talk about his craft. He blatantly refuses to offer pointers to his readers. His contention is that books will speak for themselves. Besides, writers are not qualified to guide the readers as reading like writing, is a creative act. The reader applies something of himself into reading the book and his rewards in doing so are directly
proportional to his erudition, effort and self absorption in reading. Hence, Okri feels that there cannot be a single theory or technique about a book. Whatever yields from its reading is what the book really is. The process of reading engages the mental faculties of the reader in a creative manner and generates a sublime pleasure which brings about the desired change in his mindset.

A state of mind, says Bharata, finds its objective correlative in the hands of a poet, which when experienced by the reader, results in a perfect fusion of emotions, generating rasa. The work it has been agreed, engages the different layers of the reader’s total being not through statement (vachyartha) but obliqueness (vyangyartha) in a dialogue (hridayasamvada), according to the level of his equipment—acharya, pandita, bhaktha, samanyajana and alpabuddhijana (Bharata). The reading is complete only with close reading and constant return to it akhandacharvana until it culminates in total absorption. Okri’s views concerning the participation of the reader and the importance of re-reading are significant:

... words are very mysterious ... very abstract ... you invent the book that you are reading with the help of the writer ... there are two ways in which
our imagination works . . . one is when you are reading it, what you imagine, what you see, what you have to make out with your mind. The second is what happens to you after the reading . . . . I have taken great pain over the years in concentrating my art in the “afterwards”. (http://www.myspace.com).

The lofty and sublime position of the artist as envisaged in the Indian Poetics is central to Okri’s writing. He draws all his artist protagonists to majestic proportions and they are endowed with rare intuitions and prophetic visions. Social commitment, moral zeal and a perpetual pursuit of truth are that which make them different from their fellow characters. Okri himself is conscious of the redeeming power of his vocation and the responsibilities and commitment of being a writer. His novels are disturbingly stark in their depiction of the darker side of African life—the civil war, the corrupt politicians, the mafia and the unholy nexus between the politicians, the thugs and the secret societies. He makes Lagos a miniature of African where survival should constantly be under threat where suffering is the other name of life. It is not surprising that none of his characters lead a life of luxury and practically no character is made to suffer only on account of an emotional strife or an instance of
incompatibility with other characters. The petty and mean details of life do not interest the writer. Nor is he a chronicler of the selfish exploits of affluent men and women. The pure bliss in being alive, the suffering that purges the life, the infinite possibilities in dreams and the power of the dreams to change the world are some of the significant propositions that Okri would like to make through his fiction.

Okri's works fulfill the writer's sense of social responsibility without ever compromising their power and poetic beauty in the least. The introduction of the novel into a region in which an oral tradition is still integral to the functioning culture and exists side by side with a growing literate tradition means that the language of the novel may be modified by the language of the oral tradition. Whereas the function of language in the conventional European novel would be largely referential and transformative, Ben Okri's language illustrates the quality, range and variety of indebtedness of his art to the oral tradition. What is most striking is the deliberate manner in which Okri worlds the different rhetorical devices into a sustained and singularly successful medium. The repetition of single words, phrases and images is a predominant feature of the traditional narrative, especially the folk tale with its scope for dramatic pauses and supporting
gestures. The hyperbolic elaborations of nightmarish experiences and the poetic quality and rhythm of language also belong essentially to the oral traditions.

Okri’s prose has been criticized for monotony. Owing to the repeated use of the same device—a kind of heightened realism has given room for a certain monotony. “I flew into a world of violence, of famine, of pullulating hunger, with beggars swarming the city centre, with maggots devouring the inhabitants, with flies eating the eyeballs of the children” (SOE 89). These hallucinations often appear too constrained, especially when the author tries to transcend ordinary experiences. But the fact remains that Okri manages to give wings to his imagination even while depicting the material conditions of the poor. His language is necessarily condensed to make its impact by putting together words that conjure up a powerful association or a gripping image. Okri’s use of language in fantastic or magical situations is exciting. To the uninitiated, it might be verbal trickery, but to the initiated, the magical situation is an extension of the possibilities of language, accommodating the deeper levels of human experience. There is no need for a suspension of disbelief; there is a natural descent through common images, words and actions, into the deeper areas of the
subconscious in which the consciously impossible becomes possible. The African and the modern English elements are dexterously assimilated—Okri reinforces normal English grammatical and syntactical forms with traditionally derived images, symbols and idioms. Torn between faith and despair, wonder and awe, joy and fear, myth and reality, dream and action, past and present, Okri creates a hallucinatory world where the enchanted descriptions of an unreal kingdom go along with angry indictments of earthly realities.

He does not vouch for political action or offer a ready recipe for revolution. Okri’s thrust is on a moral awakening closely on the heels of an African reassurance. He believes in surrendering one’s consciousness to the magical depths and mysteries of the African way. “The way of compassion and fire and serenity; The way of freedom and power and imaginative life; The way that keeps the mind open to the existences beyond our earthly sphere, that keeps the spirit pure and primed to all the rich possibilities of living . . .” (SOE 159).

Okri’s vision pervades every line that he writes. It is a spiritualized vision so peculiarly optimistic that there is not a shadow of cynicism or irony. The imaginative generosity and peculiar purity of the writing continually touches the heart of the
reader. The holistic conception of the universe, the unique harmonious existence of man, beast, spirit and object is one pristine feature of his vision. Okri is a great humanist of all times. His philosophy is a curious fusion of animism and humanism. The wondrous possibilities of life spring in the squalid alleys of lagosian ghettoes. The wind and the sunlight and the forest have undiscovered secrets and mysteries to tell. The poorest among the residents of a third world ghetto have the entire cosmos at their disposal.

Okri’s status as a pioneer combined with the themes of his fiction and the techniques he employs in their exploration have made him a unique figure in contemporary Nigerian literature. Critics have lauded Okri’s writings for capturing the Nigerian world-view. His inclusion of African myth and folk-lore and his emphasis on spirituality and mysticism and his relentless focus on the socio-economic landscape of post-independence and post-civil-war Nigeria and its impingement on the lives and circumstances of individuals caught in this historical cauldron place him solidly among the greatest of Nigerian novelists of all times.