Chapter 4

The Freedom of the Nation

The enemy of the African ... is not colonialism insofar as it exerts itself within the strict limits of his nation, but it is the forms of colonialism, it is the manifestations of colonialism, whatever be the flag under which it asserts itself.

Frantz Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution*

The word ‘nation’ has been used to signify different things at different times. It has been derived from the Latin word ‘natio’ or ‘natus’ which means birth, origin, race, domicile or condition of belonging. It signifies a tribe or social group based on real or fancied community of blood or it may represent a culturally homogenous group bound together by ties of history, culture and common ancestry. The idea of the nation is so firmly etched in our general imagination that it is hard to believe how recent its invention has been. Bhabha writes:

Nations . . . are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven. Neither in Egypt nor in China were there citizens as such. Classical antiquity had republics, municipal kingdoms, confederations of local republics and empires, yet it can hardly be said to have had nations in our understanding of the term. (*Nation and Narration* 9)

In 1882, the French Orientalist Ernest Renan in his lecture entitled ‘What is a nation?’ traced the emergence of the nation-state to the breaking-up of the classic and medieval empires, locating its cultural provenance in a specifically European political and social environment. (*Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* 149)

Thus the link between nation and the imperialist expansion is much older. It is widely agreed that the nation-state is a modern Western construction. The emergence of the nation-state and the imperialist-capitalist economies of Europe are inseparable.
The gradual ascendancy of the nation-state was a function of colonialism. In the beginning European monarchs sponsored adventurist projects, which were further propelled thereafter by the bourgeoisie’s greater need for markets and resources. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, this adventurist streak is strikingly demonstrated by Marlow’s passion for maps and how he would envision the voyages that he himself would go on. Marlow says:

> ... I would look for hours at South America or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, when I grow up I will go there. (45)

The Europeans also dominated their colonies by condemning them for their inherent ‘darkness’. And so these regions were considered impenetrable, though they could be accessed by navigable oceans. Their exoticism fired the colonisers for further exploration and discovery of these ‘blank spaces’ and ultimately the colonial expansion. Ben Okri’s anonymous narrator refers to these ‘blank spaces’ when he says that “he searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful astonishment that he didn’t exist” (*Astonishing* 1). Bill Ashcroft writes in “Place” that “the blank spaces are there because Europe isn’t, these places represent the absence of modernity, of civilisation, an absence that must be filled by exploration, mapping and naming” (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 131).

In *Yellow Sun*, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie voices a similar thought when its narrator Ugwu tells what his master Odenigbo says: “This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours. There is no top or bottom, you see” (10). The way Odenigbo emphasises on ‘our world’ and then goes on to refer to ‘the people who drew this map’ which are Europeans and how they ‘put their land on top’ points towards the way Africa was a ‘hollow space’ for the Europeans where they easily placed themselves as if nothing else existed there. But the African consciousness knows that ‘there is no top or bottom.’ Everyone has its own place, an equal space to be but it is only by force, by ‘mapping’ them that the ‘top or bottom’ are constructed.
Ashcroft writes:

There is firstly the authority of the European observer, but more interesting to him, there is a hierarchy of spaces, accessible by a process of ‘contrapuntal’ reading ‘by which the metropolitan centre and, gradually, the metropolitan economy are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control’ without which prosperity at ‘home’ would not be possible. *(Post-Colonial Transformation 147)*

Thus the rapid development of long-distance trading ventures in the Renaissance because of the European expansions in the New World generated further demands for manufacture. The raw materials for this expansion were supplied by the new economies of the colonized world which fuelled the Industrial Revolution of Europe. With this the colonized space became a reservoir of raw materials and labour and a market for manufactured goods. The economic control of the colonies maximized their representation and exploitation by the dominance of this new trading class. This acted to consolidate the interests of this class which demanded new social formations that could represent the interests of the new trading classes whose wealth, derived from the trade with the distant colonies, and challenged the power of the old feudal aristocracies. Thus, as Benedict Anderson says in his *Imagined Communities*, there arose a need for a new national narrative. He writes: “the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm”. He further says that at this juncture in history the nations dreamt of being free and “the gage and emblem of this freedom [was] the sovereign state” *(Post-Colonial Reader 125)*

The criticism of Third World nationalism in Western academia has led to a renewed interest in such concepts as ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ in the literary circle. In such circles, third world nationalism is viewed as primitive, backward looking, narcissistic and antiquated, and they base these views on the grounds that they foment violence, encourage divisive politics and advance totalitarian systems of thought.

Aijaz Ahmad says:

Whether or not a nationalism will produce a progressive cultural practice depends, to put it in Gramscian terms, upon the political
character of the power bloc which takes hold of it and utilises it, as a material force, in the process of constituting its own hegemony.

(“Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness” 571)

These theorists define nation in terms of specific social, economic and political innovations. The nation is thus largely the creation of a distinctly modernizing, industrial and capitalist west, a function of markets, education and communication in the ways that no amount of ideological invention or political manipulation could alone account for it.

But the main objection to such theories is that they are based on the concept of nation as it is thought in the west. In the west, ‘nation’ assumes the homogeneity of the people. It is based upon such conditions as common language, cultural and racial homogeneity. Some of the western theorists look upon nation as a synchronic entity with no diachronic element to back it up. Such formulations may hold true for the nations of the west which were outcomes of internal breakdown of the older landed classes and extinction of agricultural society, but these formulations fail to account for the multicultural nature of erstwhile colonial societies like Nigeria, where the longings and aspirations of the diverse section of these peoples might not always be nation-oriented. The western nations were comprised of people of distinct social, political, cultural and linguistic origin, who united as a political entity for pursuit of a common goal.

In the present times, the term ‘nation’ has become synonymous with nation-state, a politically organised unit within a given territory. It is difficult to have a clear-cut definition of the nation because of competing discourses that continue to compound confusion. It is however, as most historians feel, a creation of ideology which is liable to reinvention and engineering and therefore not an unchanging social entity. Since nations are not natural entities and mere social constructions, they are considered to be profoundly unstable formations, always likely to collapse back into sub-divisions of clan, tribe, language or religious group. Today, it has been variously defined as either a geographical territory, a construct, or as Edward Said maintains, an ‘imaginative geography’ (55). One of the widely accepted definitions of the nation is Benedict Anderson’s metaphor of ‘imagined communities’. This dimension to the
idea of nation makes it more flexible and allows more space for divergent views. It makes it an extremely contentious site, on which ideas of self-determination and freedom, of identity and unity collide with the ideas of suppression and force, of domination and exclusion.

This chapter of my thesis itself is predicated on such a possibility of an alternative discourse of nation. Rather than a fixed product, when we see the idea of nation as a continuous process of making or becoming, defining the freedom of the nation becomes a problematic.

As Frederic Jameson has said, “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . national allegories”, which Aijaz Ahmad in “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness” has even contended as Diana Brydon quotes Ahmad:

... one is doubly surprised at Jameson’s absolute insistence upon difference and the relation of otherness between the first world and the third, and his equally insistent idea that the “experience” of the “third world” could be contained and communicated within a single narrative form. . . . And, by assimilating the enormous heterogeneities and productivities of our life into a single Hegelian metaphor of the master/slave relation, this theory reduces us to an ideal-type and demands from us that we narrate ourselves through a form commensurate with that ideal type. . . . It is in this sense above all, that the category of “third-world literature” which is the site of this operation, with the “national allegory” as its metatext as well as the mark of its constitution and difference, is, to my mind, epistemologically an impossible category” (Postcolonialism 573-74)

I agree with Jameson as far as he insists that the national experience is central to the cognitive formation of an intellectual but I differ, as Aijaz Ahmad, from Jameson in that it is specific to only the third-world intelligentsia. I would argue that this ‘experience’ in narratives, for sure, takes the form of an allegory but then such allegories can be found even within the postmodern narratives of the first world and not just the third world. Jameson himself has quite contradicted his own stance as he said, ‘... the telling of the experience of the individual story and the individual...’
experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” and this ‘collectivity’ is what forms a people on any part of the globe. Thus here my chapter would deal mainly with the concept of freedom of the African nation in regard to its ‘experience’ by the many characters portrayed by Okri in his writings and by Okri himself as a part of his people. And it is equally essential that we should also see how the ‘freedom of nation’ is perceived in the rest of the world and how it affects our own perception.

As a nation Nigeria is different from other nations because of the conditions that went into its making. The nations of Asia and Africa that emerged after the end of European colonization are highly arbitrary creations. Their borders part like from like just as often as they embrace the unlike under a single stating system, thus defying all western formulations that define a nation. Since homogeneity does not exist in these countries, judging them according to western parameters would also not be satisfactory because the common thing that we see with the western theorists of nation is that they do not try to see the complexities that the colonized countries face as they negotiate with colonially imposed boundaries and indigenous past. Though there have been varied and complex attempts at imagining the African nations in literary narratives but neither do they conform to the definition of a nation in the western sense of the term, as one set of people deriving their origin from one source, nor do they fall under the category of the modern view of the nation, as a people accepting a common ethos or willing to live under one government – unified in political sense. Thus when it comes to the freedom of these nations, we do not just need to take into account the external factors like the advent of colonizers and its aftermaths but also the internal factors like tribal wars that threaten it.

The idea of ‘nation’ has been one of the strongest foci for resistance to imperial control in colonial societies. The concept of a shared community, which Anderson calls an ‘imagined community’, enables postcolonial societies to invent a self-image through which they could act to liberate themselves from imperialist oppression. Nationalism is what Fanon calls “the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (The Wretched 148). But this is only a resultant of the presence of the external threat that leads to the birth
of the idea of a nation, because the feeling of nationalism had other dangers to encounter which Fanon has termed ‘the pitfalls of national consciousness’, of its becoming an ‘empty shell’, a mockery of what it should have been. The dangers of a national bourgeoisie using nationalism to maintain its own power demonstrates one of the principal threats of nationalism, as it works toward taking over the hegemonic control of the imperial power, thus replicating the conditions that it rises up to combat. As Bill Ashcroft writes, “Nations merely take over the role of empire and reinstate the centrality of imperial power in the already created colonial elites” (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 178). The nation itself being a problematic category further problematises the claim of its people to national liberation.

Theorizing national liberation discourse has been particularly strong in the African context. The postcolonial societies have never been able to construct simple concepts of nation, such as based on linguistic commonality or racial or religious homogeneity. Perhaps no other continent has been so clearly fragmented by colonial boundaries as Africa. The state boundaries have cut through the territories of ethnic groups and these boundaries have led to institutionalization of ethnic tension and communal violence. Faced with the sense of place and placelessness due to the settler colony cultures, they have become examples of the constructedness of nations. At the heart of such a nation lies an ambivalent attitude towards their own identity, poised as they are between the centre from which they seek to differentiate themselves and the indigenous people who serve to remind them of their own problematic occupation of the country.

Bill Ashcroft writes:

> Indigenous communities are divided, renamed and reconstituted, caught within geographical areas which have no relation to their social make-up, traditions or needs. These geographical areas came to be known as nations, and arbitrary though they may be, they became crucial in post-colonial perceptions of personal identity. (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 176)

> Thus it is impossible to study the freedom of the nation without looking at it in a wider postcolonial perspective.
In an interview with Alistair Niven, Chinua Achebe himself suggested that the torch of Nigerian literature was currently being passed from his generation to a new, younger generation of African writers and then specifically mentioned the name of Ben Okri. Okri has been one of the most prolific writers who have contributed significantly towards forwarding African writing. A member of the Urhobo people, born in Minna, Nigeria, he is now a permanent resident of London. Thus, when it comes to exploring the portrayal of freedom of the Nigerian nation, the first and foremost of the problematic that we encounter is his self confessed status of being a Nigerian-Londoner. Keeping in view that Okri belongs to the generation of diasporic African writers, we would also look into his sincerity in representing Nigeria in his works and also finding out how far he fits into the category of a Nigerian national, which would of course not be a questioning of the nation itself.

If we talk of an exile, the word “home” is that space where the affections centre. “Home” can also be the place where one finds refuge, a space where one finds satisfaction of being, but then the notion of “home” as native land or nation does not work. So before I start using the word I want to outline that I take the former position and thus for me the words “home” or “homeland” are synonymous with “nation” or “native land”.

Ashcroft asks: “What does ‘home’ mean in the disrupted world of colonial space?” And he answers that for the diasporic person or the immigrant, ‘home’ is deeply embedded in memories. He further says:

This sense of home rests deeply in a sense of ‘imagined community’ which now has nothing to do with nation, but with a shared sense of loss. . . . This imagined community of seekers defines home by its absence, by its situation as the focus of desire. This may be intensely so for the diasporic subject. But the mythical and elusive nature of home is possibly that which embeds it so strongly in the imagination. The power of home to ground the psyche can be matched by the equally disruptive sense of its absence, by the sense of an ancestral place which by its very elusiveness creates an unwelcome yearning.

(Post-Colonial Transformation 197-98)
According to Kenneth Parker, Okri is an African writer who epitomizes the categorization of a “Third World Cosmopolitan”, a phrase coined by the white American critic Timothy Brennan to describe those writers he claims Western reviewers choose as the interpreters and authentic public voices of the Third World. She blames that for Okri “the establishment of homeland is unlikely precisely because of the role of the new rulers, the “stars of the new curfew”, the new oppressors” (“Home is Where the Heart . . . Lies” 73).

I disagree with Parker because though one might be moved for a moment to doubt Okri’s sincerity due to his voluntary shifting of space from Africa to Europe but in the whole corpus of his writings one can clearly see that he nowhere loses the hope of the possibility of a post independence community that serves as homeland. Okri does talk of the mismanaged independence and deleterious factors affecting the formation of a peaceful nation but does not forego the dream of the Africa that is to be.

Okri belongs to a generation of Nigerian children who were initiated into the euphoria of national independence that soon transformed into despair for its people. He was born a year before Nigeria’s independence. On 1 October 1960, Nigeria attained its independence from the United Kingdom to become a nation state under a federal constitution, but with a northern dominated parliament. A year later, in 1961, the Okri family moved to London where they resided for four years when his father won a scholarship to read for the bar examinations at the Inner Temple. The country became a republic in October 1963. On returning to Nigeria in July 1965, Okri’s father continued his practice as a lawyer. He championed the causes of many underprivileged Lagosians. Through his father, Okri had his first contact with the hardships and injustices of post-independent Nigeria and it left a profound mark on his consciousness. It has ever since served as a raw material for his imaginative process. In “On Edge of Time Future”, Okri writes: “I remember the history well/ The soldiers and politicians emerged/ with briefcases and guns” (An African Elegy 48). In 1966, civilian administration in Nigeria came to an abrupt end with two successive military coups d’état. On 15th January the federal Prime Minister Sir Abukakar Tafawa Balewa was assassinated by a cabal of junior army officers. On 29th July the
military governor Major-General Johnson Agniyi-Ironsi was also murdered in a second coup to be replaced by Lieutenant-General Yakuba Gowon.

*We promise every law-abiding citizen the freedom from all forms of oppression, freedom from general inefficiency, and freedom to live and strive in every field of human endeavour. We promise that you will no more be ashamed to say that you are a Nigerian.* (Yellow Sun 124)

Thus Adichie quotes the speech on the radio but the promises remained unfulfilled. The masses divided into tribal factions, drawing themselves against each other that ultimately resulted in the Civil War.

Through his works Okri brought forth the social mayhem and disarray in Nigeria which was a result of numerous encounters among the culturally and linguistically distinct communities that were striving for an identity after having achieved political independence from the European colonial forces.

In 1967, Lieutenant-Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu announced the secession of the three easternmost states as the autonomic republic of Biafra. Adichie further quotes from Ojukwu’s speech which was aired on the radio when the secession was announced.

> Fellow countrymen and women, you the people of Eastern Nigeria:
> Conscious of the supreme authority of Almighty God over all mankind;
> of your duty over posterity; aware that you can no longer be protected in your lives and in your property by any government based outside Eastern Nigeria; determined to dissolve all political and other ties between you and the former Republic of Nigeria; having mandated me to proclaim on your behalf and in your name that eastern Nigeria be a sovereign independent Republic, now therefore I do hereby solemnly proclaim that the territory and region known as and called Eastern Nigeria, together with her continental shelf and territorial waters, shall henceforth be an independent sovereign state of the name and title of The Republic of Biafra. (Yellow Sun 161-62)

Though Biafra was made to surrender and its patriots were disenchanted, about two million people had perished in this war. The pogroms had resulted in the massacre of thousands of Igbos. Thus the heart of the nation bore permanent scars and its writers gave expression to the social and political life of its people. Following independence, the nation was governed by the military except for the period of 1979 – 1983, the Second Republic, when Shehu Usman Aliju Shegari was elected the President. On 31 December 1983, he was overthrown by a coup and Major-General Mohammed Butari formed a draconian Supreme Military Council, suppressing all military rights. It was only in 1999 that the first constitution was adopted and a democratic civilian government was elected under President Olusegun Obasanjo.

The civil war is depicted in Nigerian novels in terms of betrayal and intrigue, rape, murder and violence. The writers affirm that the war brought out the most hideous instincts in human nature. Their works are a criticism of the social injustices, political tyranny, and ethnic factionalism that continually proved to be threats to the freedom and integrity of the nation.

Okri’s desire to write was shaped by his experiencing the civil war as a young child. He experienced it when he was aged between seven and ten. He lost relatives and friends. He saw people get killed and people going into hiding. He noticed neighbours betraying one another out of fear for their own lives and saw others who risked their own lives to save their rebel friends. It made him question everything – love, friendship, loyalty, trust, courage – and gave him a complex understanding of the feelings and nature of humans. Felicia Moh writes that the observation of those dying during the civil war left indelible marks in his memory which haunted him. (An Introduction 3)

Biafra has provided many Nigerian writers with a rich seam of material from which they have developed diverse narratives. Okri, in many of his novels and short stories, portrays Nigeria as the neo-colonial space that has inherited the legacies of an imperial past and has already suffered the consequences of the Biafran war. The author witnessed the psycho-drama of that bloody conflict and lived the terror and absurdity of civil and military violence in Nigeria at close quarters. Thus he employs a motif of witness to narrate this violence and through the delineation of his characters
he also explores the archetypal leitmotif of disillusionment as a result of the war. Maurice O’Connor writes:

The original idea in Okri’s work – what Nabokov defines as the ‘throb’ – is the encounter of innocence with the scene of Civil War violence. His narratives are driven by the compulsion to revisit those scenes in an attempt to make sense of the devastating absurdity of what, in the narrative of nation, can be defined as fratricidal war. (The Writings 52)

Both Incidents and Stars have stories that deal directly with the time of civil war and the grotesque baseness of the war situation that decelerated the freedom of the nation. In “In the Shadow of War,” in the collection Stars the young child Omovo witnesses the murder of a local woman, who is suspected to be a spy, by the soldiers during the nightmarish times of civil war. This “strange woman” with “a black veil over her head” is seen by Omovo for seven days as she passes by his house” (3). Out of a childish curiosity, he follows her out. Omovo had heard other children saying that she had no shadow and that her feet never touched the ground. By such an ironic use of fantasy, Okri highlights the illogicality and purposelessness of the existence of his people. As he follows her, he finds that this woman takes food to “children with kwashiorkor stomachs” and “women wearing rags” (7). At an earlier occasion, Omovo had been told by a soldier: “She is a spy. She helps our enemies” (6) and Omovo was also given ten kobo to provide them with her whereabouts if he sees her. The soldiers, who were following her trail, kill her mindlessly when she refuses to give out details of the people she had carried food for. As Omovo sees this mindless violence imposed upon the innocent woman, he faints and when he regains consciousness, he finds those same soldiers in his home, drinking beer with his own father. At this, “overcome with delirium, [he] began to tell his father what he had seen. But his father, smiling apologetically at the soldiers . . . carried him off to bed” (9). Thus Okri brings to us the complicity of the older generation with the atrocities of war.

In “Laughter Beneath the Bridge,” in Incidents at the Shrine which is based directly on the ravages of Biafran war, there are numerous instances where Okri tries to prove that the laughter of its characters is a mirthless humour indicative of the
bizarre reaction of people who are on the verge of insanity due to the intense upheaval in the nation. The soldiers laugh as they beat up people at check points. They search for members of the rebel tribe and kill them brutally. They rape women. Okri’s protagonist is a boy who lurks at the edge of reaching puberty. The awakening of sexuality is coupled with the horrors of war to produce irreconcilable contradiction of narrative attitude towards a surrounding that provides a horrific spectacle of piled up corpses. The ten year old boy dreams of sexual discovery while the air is thick with the smell of corpses beneath the bridge. “I went to her [Monica] and held her round the waist and she didn’t do anything. I could smell her armpit, a new smell to me. [...] Then something shifted in my eyes. The things on the water suddenly looked different, transformed. [...] The stream was full of corpses that had swollen, huge massive bodies with enormous eyes and bloated cheeks” (17-18). Monica’s ‘twisted laughter’ arises from the horror of what they see and the haplessness of her situation as she tells her friend of her brother Ugo’s body in that rush of corpses under the bridge. The hideousness of this spectacle brings them down with fever.

Thus Okri has directly engaged with the issue of the effects of civil war as he translates the violence of civil war into his narrative and assures the dizzying horror of the war as witnessed through the eyes of a child. He also integrates into his narratives as to how the childhood consciousness resisted registering the terrors of the Nigerian Civil war. The narrator says: “The taste of madness . . . the laughter of war: that is perhaps why I remember it as a beautiful time” (Incidents 9). This young protagonist while journeying from his boarding school to his home partakes of the horrors of the war. He watches in fascination as two soldiers rape a fair-complexioned woman in full view of other passengers and soldiers. His innocence is vandalised as the scene sparks off his memory of his childhood sweetheart named Monica. When the soldiers ask him to speak something in his mother-tongue, he is too dazed by the rape and consequent memory of Monica to remember even a single word. He narrowly escapes death from the soldiers as they make to separate the child from his mother insisting that they have no blood-relationship. What Okri shows is the depravity of the war situation. The child is dragged into a conflict which he does not understand and not even his tender age can make him escape suffering. The irony of the whole situation comes to the fore when the child bursts out laughing when otherwise he should fear death.
Monica puts up a futile resistance against this madness of war, only to realise it later, which is too late, that it is useless. She is incensed with soldiers for killing her brother Ugo. She tells the narrator that she wants to be a soldier and to carry a gun and shoot at soldiers who were killing the people mercilessly and also avenge her brother’s death. As the children organise a mock masquerade performance, she appears as the dancing Egungun in defiance of the soldiers. When the soldiers tear off her mask and ask her to speak her language, she mumbles in the rebel tongue. She is taken away by the soldiers to be raped and killed later. Okri represents the helplessness of a war situation and the way it brings out the monster within the human. Laughter here depicts the eccentric humour that celebrates death and destruction.

Even in some of the stories of Tales of Freedom, Okri talks about the war and the destruction it wreaked on his people leaving them with no other feeling but helplessness. In “Wild Bells” the narrator, who is seemingly a university professor, talks about the aftermath of war. He becomes a teacher to “the children of war” and he describes them as “all orphans and all lost” (155). Since he knows that the war has affected the children psychologically as well, so rather than making them learn anything, he tries to make them paint. And to his surprise, the children paint freely for many hours, “absorbed and lost in colour, fleeing from grief into a world of mysterious shapes, of bulls, of birds, hybrid creatures, and patterns in which are concealed indeterminate beings” (155). The reason that he is unable to get them interested in subjects like maths, history or geography but only arts suggests the deeper implications of the violence that the children witnessed during the war and how the images in art could bring out their repressed feelings like fear, anger and grief. When his acquaintances from other universities visit him to see what the children of war had been doing, they are astounded at “the paintings, in rich ochre, in reds and yellows, of enormous wild bulls” (155-56). The wildness of the bulls signifies the ferocity and terror generated by the two sides fighting the war: the Nigerians and the Biafrans, where they stood against each other with their heads lowered and horns pointed, ready to kill each other. The irony is that, where on one hand, these university intellectuals have a dinner together and in the end sing to celebrate the art by these children, there, on the other hand, “outside, children search
for their mothers in bombed houses and cratered tower blocks” (156), and in the night these children “sleep on the rubble of their bombed-out homes, waiting for their parents to return from the dead” (157). In this collection itself, “The War Healer” is the story of a man who had been a photographer in a war-torn region but overcome by frustration at being powerless to stop the fighting, he converted himself into “a sort of healer and burier of the dead” (187). He is so affected by the war that when he has to get married, he chooses a holy day “when he hoped there would be no fighting; a day holy to both sides” (188). But the war begins and he leaves his wedding ceremony to help the dying. His wife too joins him in his work. His black suit and his wife’s white wedding dress turn all bloody and get darkened with gore and mud spewed up from all the shelling. The story ends on a note that haunts the reader long after. The narrator says:

In a world where no one listens, where no one seems to care, where hatred is greater than love, where hearts are hardened by vengeance and pride, where violence is preferable to peace, what else is there for him to do but heal the wounded, and bury the dead, in a war that could go on forever? (190)

Dangerous is impregnated with a sense of doom where the postcolonial subject is inevitably tied to its environment. We have Omovo and his friends – Dele, Keke and Okoro. They all portray “a betrayed generation, a generation of burdens,” as Keke says: “We will be the inheritors of bad faith and cost of all the waste and the corruption. We have to sort out the mess our parents made of the country, the opportunities we missed, the oil boom that they pocketed. The old guard have to go, they have to die, before we can be born. . . . We have to be ninjas to survive and then we have to make our contribution to fulfil the destiny of Africa” (394). Through Keke, who is a journalist, we come to know of the state of affairs where people fear as much the police as they are afraid of the rotten political system of the nation. On one occasion he tells Omovo that his editor yawns at the same old news.

Every day we have news about scandals in government circles, massive embezzlements, our docks crammed with tons of uncleared cement, government housing projects where the houses haven’t been
Thus he expresses his deep chagrin over the unhealthy state of Nigerian social and political life. Dele wants to leave the country to seek permanent residence in the States which he accomplishes by the end of the narrative. Okoro, on the other hand, had fought in the civil war first as a boy cub attached to an officer and later as a soldier in the main army. “He had survived three bombings, without the help of bunkers. . . . he saw three of his friends killed by booby traps” (131-2). The war had scarred Okoro’s consciousness so much so that he himself says: “It’s a terrible life. Everything is a struggle. There is no rest. I feel like an old man. I feel tired” (133). He further says: “Our society is a battlefield. Poverty, corruption and hunger are the bullets. Bad governments are the bombs. And we still have soldiers ruling over us” (134). By the end of the narrative when Keme and Omovo meet after Omovo meets his father in the prison, Keme tells him of Okoro’s frustration at being in the hospital. “He said he had fought for a year, hadn’t been wounded, and now when there was supposed to be peace a military lorry comes and knocks him over just like that. He said strange things” (392).

This grotesqueness of surroundings is transformed into the artistic intentions of Omovo which became his strategy of survival-through-escapism, his way out of the postcolonial impasse. Omovo’s painting ‘Drift’ is a manifestation of both the disillusionment and nausea of the postcolonial society and how it evokes a state of isolation and hypersensitivity in the consciousness of its people. It extends out to the discourse of national imagining and mirrors the development of the nation with those elements that thwart its growth. The narrative also brings to the fore the ambiguities of national cohesion and this is exemplified in the scene where Omovo and his journalist friend Keme stumble upon the dead body of a brutally murdered girl in the Ikoyi Park. This image of the mutilated girl becomes a metonymic representation of the fragmentation of the Nigerian nation. The characters try to comprehend this mutilation and how it affects them as participants within the vision of nation. The Biafran War, an exemplar of the inter-ethnic violence tearing the nation from within and proving the freedom of the nation in political terms to be only farcical, is etched
in the African psyche. Its vivid picture comes to us through Omovo when the ghost of the war comes to haunt him after he comes across the dead body the young girl who had been killed ritually in the Ikoyi Park. He had previously recounted this incident to Dr. Okocha.

There was a curfew then, and I had gone walking through the streets of Ughelli. They had warned us not to go far from home. . . . I was a child and war did not make sense to me. I thought that war was only a game that children played. On the main road, near the police station, I saw the corpse of a dead man . . . an Igbo man. . . . The dead man was staring at me, fixing me. . . . I dreamt about the dead man’s eyes for two weeks. . . . I can’t remember exactly how they look, and I will never paint them, but those eyes will never leave me. (120-21)

What Omovo witnesses as a child corresponds to what Okri himself had witnessed during the civil war. Later while he was staying at the town of B-, he remembered another incident from his experience of the civil war. He clearly recollects how an Igbo youth hiding under the protection of a prostitute was found and killed by the soldiers and how the prostitute who had also probably been ravished by the soldiers emptied her purse over the dead body of her lover and then dragged the body for three miles to give it a burial. Omovo remembers how the boys his own age struggled in the morning to retrieve the money. At this juncture, coming to his present situation, he thinks:

That is my generation. Scavenging for blood money. Corruption money. Scavenging for the money of the dead. The money of corruption. Curse money. Scavenging our futures, our history. A generation of guilt, and blindness, and infernal responsibility. (358)

When Omovo is alone with Ifeyiwa, he tells her about what he and Kerne had witnessed at Ikoyi Park and how he felt. “Something happened inside me. It was something beyond fear. I don’t know what it was” (164). The phantom of this incident starts affecting his consciousness and begins to bear heavily down on his subconscious mind. “He caught a glimpse of Ifeyiwa, half-enclosed in darkness. For a moment he saw the dead girl’s face in Ifeyiwa’s features” (165). The link between the
mutilated girl and Ifeyiwa is significant in that her own death becomes an example of how the legacies of colonialism arrest national cohesion. When Ifeyiwa runs away from her husband’s home to return to her native village where her mother lived, she is shot dead on the road leading to her village by a gunman of the rival village. The split in the nation harming its integrity comes clear through when Ifeyiwa thinks of ethnic factionalism and rivalry in her own village when one day she comes across an item about communal wars in the newspaper. “The two villages were about a mile from one another. The stream that flowed past both villages connected them in many ways. In the past they had intermarried. Then a boundary dispute grew and acquired serious dimensions. . . . Histories were dredged up. One village called the other the descendents of slaves” (108). It points towards the existence of a grave inter-communal rift that threatens the freedom of the nation from within. Ifeyiwa also later in the narrative explains that the boundary disputes stemmed from the times before independence when white rule privileged one village over another. “Many many years ago the white people gave the other village our land and after Independence we went to court and won the case. But they wouldn’t accept. So we are now fighting” (258). Omovo muses about “how the ancestors of these white people had created the problem a hundred years before” (330). When Ifeyiwa dies, at one of the meetings, an elder of the village says: “We are killing ourselves over a problem which the white man caused in the first place. Let this innocent girl’s death be the final sacrifice. Let us solve this problem in our own way” (348). However, this step towards communal harmony does not go very far as the “peace lasted till other things came along and fuelled the old hatred which had never been examined, never exorcised” (348).

By the end of the narrative, in an attempt to comprehend the confusion of his own environment, Omovo objectifies the memory of the murdered girl in his painting to which he first gives the title ‘The Beautiful Ones’ and later changes it to ‘Related Losses’. Through his art, he also relates to the image of a fractured Nigeria.

He painted a slightly unreal parkland. . . . A night sky, faintly lit by an absent moon. . . . Through the screen of trees he painted the Atlantic Ocean. . . . Landing on the beach were strange green ships enclosed in mist. Around the ships were the forms of invaders. . . . In the
foreground of the painting was a tree withered like a biblical fig. Near the tree was the most central figure, the corpse of the girl. (386)

When Omovo has troubles with the girl’s face, he wipes out her features and realises “that the work could only ever remain unfinished, beyond completion, and that the girl would have to exist without a face” (387). After seven years, he makes significant changes to this painting.

He got rid of the ships, the invaders, the turbulent Atlantic. He erased the predatory birds in the sky. . . . He made the trees denser, and allowed the girl’s body more dominance. He made a phantom figure brood above her, the figure of an ancestor or of the unborn. . . . He made her mutilation obscenely beautiful, as if she were giving birth to a monstrous mythic force; a messy, almost messianic birth from a flowering wound. (387-8)

Thus, Omovo’s art projects the past, present and future of the nation indicating that colonial ontology itself was never whole and thus never held full control over the colonised, both during the past defined by the colonial rule and in the present postcolonial era, thus endorsing a vision of the future of the nation away from the limited rationality and thus transcending the pessimism of the postcolonial impasse towards an insistence of the freedom of the nation. A similar idea is subscribed to in Starbook that I would discuss later in this chapter.

V.S.Naipaul in his novel A Bend, which is set in an unnamed African country, argues that the tribal uprisings led to nothing except for the feeble and weak people being destroyed. In the narrator’s voice he says that though the newspapers applauded these revolutions as the bringer of dawn of a new age but there was nothing new about them. In fact the independence that the African nations enjoyed were false and the revolutions that its people were engaged in were also false.

At independence the people of our region had gone mad with anger and fear – all the accumulated anger of the colonial period, and every kind of reawakened tribal fear. . . . they had refused to be ruled by the new government in the capital. It was an instinctive uprising, without
leaders or a manifesto. If the movement had been more reasoned, had been less a movement of simple rejection, the people of our region might have seen that the town at the bend in the river was theirs, the capital of any state they might set up. (72 emphasis mine)

Thus the freedom for Africa is ever-elusive because it can not manage its internal affairs. He says that the ‘tribal fear’ was ‘reawakened’ indicating that the tribal wars had ravaged the lives of Africans even in pre-colonial times and when they got freed from the colonial rule they could not handle that freedom.

Though the issue raised by Naipaul is exactly what even Okri says about a mishandled independence but Naipaul looks at Africa from a vantage point far above and establishes the country as bloody, lawless, threatening, and a place of aimless violence and ‘unspeakable rites’ (86). Thus Naipaul’s Africa is the “Africa [that] has no future” (Interview by Elizabeth Hardwick: 36). At this comment of Naipaul, Chinua Achebe has said, “This modern Conrad who is partly native himself, does not beat about the bush” (Hopes 28).

Okri’s Africa, which is of course not without its shortcomings, is the one which “can redream this world and make the dream real . . . and can change the world, make it better, sweeter” (Famished 298).

Dangerous is a reworking of Okri’s earlier novel The Landscapes and the critic Maurice O’Connor states that in this earlier work Okri has clearly named the place Badagry. In Dangerous Okri writes the town of B– as “a place ravaged by history, a place for transit of slaves, a place of old feuds, dead kingdoms, of strife and internecine wars” (361). O’Connor writes:

Badagry was centre of operations in West Africa for transportation of slaves to Europe, South America and the Caribbean from the 1500s onwards and during the period of American Independence alone 550,000 Africans were exported from this port. Currently, there is an active process of a recuperation of the historical memory of Badagry’s role in the slave trade and Okri’s choice of Badagry as the culmination of Omovo’s initiation is no doubt significant. (The Writings 43-4)
Later in his moment of illumination or what Okri has clearly called Omovo’s experience of the Emersonian ‘moment’, he realises that “I came here to escape and I find our past waiting for me on these shores” (Dangerous 362). Omovo’s own experience as he stared out of the window of his room, bordering beyond the real, to the magical world, forms part of the mythopoetic structure in the West African folk tales and connects to the pre-colonial past as he thinks “himself wandering down a corridor” and later realises that “he was lost.” As this ‘dream-reality’ furthered, “he felt restless and incomplete. He felt he had cheated himself of something. The years passed. He wandered through strange towns down whose streets slaves were dragged screaming, towns with old seaports . . . . He passed cities of ancient rocks, where sacrificial victims sang before they accompanied kings to their deep ancestral caves” (Dangerous 352). It is Omovo’s journey through Africa’s silenced history.

As O’Connor states:

By situating the moment when slaves are being shipped off to the New World alongside the images of sacrificial victims who sing to the ancestral grave, the narrative is deconstructing received notions of European civility as juxtaposed with African savagery; one of the cornerstones of colonial discourse employed to sanction territorial conquest and attempts to annihilate indigenous culture. (The Writings 45)

When Omovo wakes up from this voyage into Africa’s past, the chief comes to visit him, who himself is a voice from the distant African past. “He had the face of ancient masks, wrinkled, ravaged with age, stamped with power” (Dangerous 354). In the night Omovo listened to “the sounds of the town” and felt “the secret awakening of countless sensations.” The town of B– presents a vivid picture of the life before the onslaught of colonization. “He listened to the wind and sea, to human voices that seemed to have minimal undertones of tension, to the children playing hide and seek, to the elders playing ayo and telling stories, to mothers settling quarrels” (355). The dialogic address that Okri projects through Omovo’s consciousness during his moment of enlightenment, which as stated earlier has been determined as ‘THE MOMENT’, is significant to the narrative. Okri acknowledges the effects of
colonialism that brought slavery and affected the nation but at the same time he prefers to place the responsibility for a better future on transcending the colonial times after learning the lessons from that experience.

[He] felt the burden of desperate prayers uttered, unheard – the prayers of slaves – the betrayal of ancestors – the treachery of leaders – the lies and corruption of the old generation . . . they rape our past, we rape our future – we never learn our lessons . . . they scrambled for our continent and now we scramble for the oil-burst of independence . . . our history hasn’t hurt us enough or the betrayals would stop . . . for we have become a people of dream-eaters, worshipping at the shrines of corruption. (361-62)

Okri refuses to conceptualise African subjectivity solely on the terms of its negative relationship with colonialism, which comes clear in his urge to lift his people from “tribal madness” and as he tells his people that they could “utter psychic decisions and set forces into motion that could change [their] lives forever,” his almost messianic overtones are affirmed as he says that “in vision begins action – in action begins our destiny” (362).

In Starbook, at one level, Okri tells the delicate story of a black prince and a maiden who fall in love with each other and are both tested by trials in a mythical land where art and initiation are supremely important. But on the other level, one can see very well that this land alludes to and opens up the reality of the African world. Okri makes the first reference to Africa where he talks about the king and how the king had reached the transcendental realm “that shone above the African sands” (65). Another reference comes along when the maiden, belonging to he tribe of artists, had taken to wandering off alone and in her mind she sometimes hears a voice talking to her. Once she hears the voice asking her to tell a story and she says, “I will tell you the story of a girl by the river in Africa” (159), and this girl is none other than herself. Alluding to the impending colonization and slavery, Okri writes, “She would feel without feeling her ankles in chains, an intolerable agony from the wrists.” He further writes that she would see herself “standing naked in an alien marketplace being sold like a goat, and would sense the heat of the whip, would glimpse white faces and silk”
The evanescent dreams of the maiden flash across us the reality of Africa and the pain and suffering its people went through during colonial rule. The maiden’s dream about the golden heron stands metaphorically for the history of African nation. In this dream this heron is descended upon by “beautiful white birds” and these birds tear off the feathers and wings of the heron and leave it dying. When Okri says that these white birds had fallen on the nest of the heron and that they had carried many of its children, “many died on the seas and many others were borne off and scattered about the world in horrible conditions and they did not know one another any more,” Okri is referring to the incursion of the colonisers and the onset of slavery. He writes of how colonisation imposes a feeling of displacement in those who are moved away to the far-off lands by physically alienating large populations of colonised people through forced migration or slavery. When Okri says, “The children of the heron that were not carried away were not the same any more, they became sick too, and spent most of their time fighting one another, and dying” (129), he points out to the tribal conflicts and the bloodshed they caused.

Later Okri alludes to his own dream when the world would realise the kinship with Africa, that they “woke up to the realisation that they were all descended from the same bird in heaven and were all related to the dying heron and they realised that if the heron was dying, they were dying too” (130). Okri seconds the idea of a universal kinship and affinity with the others in “O, Ye Who Invest in Futures” when he says:

Africa is our conscience. There can be no true progress for humanity till the sufferings of our brother and sister continents are overcome, till people everywhere live reasonably good lives. Free from vile diseases, undernourishment, illiteracy and tyranny. (A Time 59)

Further in the maiden’s dream, the white birds realise “the horror of what their ancestors had done” (133). Even the children of the dying heron learn of their roots, of their dying ancestor, the heron, and all these scattered tribes begin their journey back to their original home. At this the heron “experience an amazing regeneration” and “she became at last what she could never have been without these tragic events” (133). When Okri mentions regeneration, he talks about his dream of the African
nation rising up from its debris and “make a miraculous recovery” (133). Okri yearns for the freedom of the nation from all the factors that prove detrimental in realising the true meaning of freedom.

The cultic activities, intrigues of politicians and their hunger for power have been written about with such alacrity in Starbook so that it brings forth how all this jeopardised the freedom of the nation. When Okri refers to the Elders who formed the council of the King and says that “they were the controllers and manipulators of fame and reputation” (62), and the way they were looking forward to reducing the powers of the prince when he ascended the throne as the King, he substantiates that the history of pre-colonial Africa was not without any political intrigues, that there were people who fought with their own, plotted against them to come to power. Okri also hints upon the presence of slavery before the advent of coloniser. He talks of men and women captured in war and when the prince asks them that why are they called slaves, they answer, “It means we are nothing. We have no freedom. We do whatever you tell us to do. You can kill us whenever you want. Our people don’t know where we are. We are here by force. We don’t want to be here. We want to be in our villages, with our own families, and our own people” (16). Okri also refers to the acts of witchcraft and dark cultic activities as “the evils in the kingdom” (50). Thus, Okri does not, like Ngugi and Adichie, suggest nativism as a means of gaining or realising the true freedom. For him, like Fanon, learning from the past and overcoming the trauma experienced during the colonial period, is what would help his people achieve freedom. This is what would lead to the regeneration of the nation.

As we look at the Abiku trilogy, we find an absence of the colonising figure as related to violence. Okri redirects his dialectic away from the mutual antagonism of the coloniser and the colonised, and places it within the African arena. The ghetto community in these novels is actively involved in the demands for self-determination, while they are suffering the realities of post-independence Nigeria. In Infinite Riches, Madame Koto dreams that she is giving birth to a nation, “an unruly nation, bursting with diversity.” It is a place abounding in immense human potential, but “the nation was composed not of one people but of several mapped and bound in one artificial entity by Empire builders” (201-02).
Maurice O’Connor quotes from Ayittey’s work *Africa Betrayed*:

True freedom never came to much of Africa after independence. Despite the rhetoric and vituperations against colonialism, very little changed in the years following independence. For many countries independence meant only a change in the color of the administrators from white to black. The new leaders began to act in the same manner as the colonialists. In fact in many places they were worse than the colonialists. *(The Writings 83)*

As Frantz Fanon said in “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness”, the independence attained from the colonial rule is not an “all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people” but only an “empty shell”, a “crude and fragile travesty” of what this hard-earned independence should actually have been. He explains how the nation should have stood united and integrated to rebuild what was decimated by the colonialists and instead “the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state. These are the cracks in the edifice which show the process of retrogression, that is so harmful and prejudicial to national effort and national unity” (148). Most of this weakness in the national consciousness is blamed upon the mutilation of the colonized people by the colonial regime but Fanon quite blatantly states: “It is also the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mold that its mind is set in” (149). He further says that there is a difference in the general outlook of people towards their leaders in the developed nation and the underdeveloped nation. In the well developed countries the country’s leadership draws its strength from the economic power of the bourgeoisie whereas, on the other hand, in an underdeveloped country, the leader stands for his moral strength which would shelter its weak and impoverished bourgeoisie. The people, thus, invest all their innocent hopes in this leader that they have seen speaking against and contesting with the colonial power. They spontaneously trust this patriot.

Before independence, the leader generally embodies the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty, and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete
form the needs of the people in what touches bread, land, and restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers impatient for their returns which constitutes the national bourgeoisie. *(Post-Colonial Reader 122)*

Thus the leader betrays the hopes of his people and works towards his own development in terms of financial gain rather than working for his nation. The much needed economic freedom to sustain the newly acquired independence from the colonial rule is thwarted and the goal to achieve an over-all freedom remains a dream.

In “In the City of Red Dust” from *Stars* we come across the megalomaniac military governor who celebrates his fiftieth birthday with pomp and show. There are aerial manoeuvres by the military aircrafts which had thundered making the practice dives during the afternoon. People are excited as it was rumoured that “the celebrations being planned would make this one the most memorable for years to come” (38). And indeed, it is made memorable by the absurdity of the whole situation which is heightened by the way the public funds are squandered away. The people are showered with confetti and paper that “bore a stamped portrait of the governor, a soldier who had reputedly saved the city during a siege in the war” (48). After the celebrations, “as they dispersed over the field, each to their different hungry homes, they carried the rags and paper strips with them as mementoes of the year when the governor turned fifty” (56). He makes fun of the rulers who amidst the squalor and hunger of the ruled are using their political offices for personal aggrandisement. He decries the insensitivity of the nation’s leaders to the sufferings of the poor. One plane even crashed on the thatch houses of the ghetto while somersaulting but the only concern of the soldiers who go into this vicinity is to remove the plane and bury their companion. They are not bothered about the people who are killed or the survivors who are rendered homeless. Okri presents a satirical portrait of the leader who “had acres of richly-kept marijuana farms” (39) and who was once a boxer. He says: “If the governor’s stance was that of a boxer, then his opponent was the chaos he had created in order to rule” (55). The governor is a major shareholder in the bank. He also owns a chain of supermarkets registered in the name of a non-existent son. What the governor is interested in is how to acquire wealth and how to secure his
embezzlements. As a pathetic contrast to this, Okri paints a vivid picture of the conditions in which the poor masses live, where “the water pipes of the compound had never been repaired since they burst two weeks after their installation two weeks ago” (49). There is no decent job provided by the government for the likes of Emokhai in the city, such that he and his friend Marjomi are compelled to indulge in petty thefts, in pool betting and in selling their blood to feed themselves. His girlfriend Dede is raped by the soldiers and is forced to slit her own throat with a razor after the soldiers descend on her again. The watchman of Governor’s marijuana farms tells Emokhai: “My son, we are living in wicked times. I have lived out my life. Now I just dream” (77).

We come across a similar situation of innocent masses being deceived by their leaders in Okri’s short story “Stars of the New Curfew” in the collection of the same name. Arthur, the hero, is left with no choice but to earn his living by selling dubious locally made medicines. He is the representative of the Nigerian youths whose future is not planned for by the Government. The story begins: “There were no jobs for people of my qualification and as my parents had died during the war I had no one to sponsor my further education. So I did a correspondence course in salesmanship” (Stars 83). In this he also refers to the manner the civil war had affected the lives of the Nigerian people. Arthur sells these medicines at various markets and on the overcrowded molue buses that carry people all over Lagos. In the beginning he feels guilty of persuading people to buy medicines whose efficacy he himself doubted but he gets serious about his business when he gets thrown out of his room on being unable to pay the rent and he has to spend six weeks sleeping under the Iddo Bridge with goats. Hardship hardens his conscience. The buyers of his medicines are poor. It is a satire on the health care system of the country where only rich can afford treatment in decent hospitals. The poor have no choice but to patronise such hucksters whose medicines multiplied the ailments they were supposed to cure. A woman buys medicine for ringworms but they only multiplied. “The woman didn’t shout at me or curse me. Her eyes held a helpless expression. The children, scratching their necks, looked at me with sad eyes as if they expected me to perform a miracle. It was their expectancy which really terrified me.” (88) Arthur starts having nightmares. But his boss assures him that “he was interested only in bringing health to the battered people
Thus we have the class of people impatient for their own profits that only works against the freedom of the nation. There is a vivid criticism of this class given through the words of 'the Rastafarian' that the hero comes across while selling his POWER-DRUG on one of the molue buses. He “criticised African leaders who ignored the sufferings of their own people. He said that our Heads of States had illegally enriched themselves and their supporters while the people died for lack of basic amenities” (105). This whole situation produces nightmares for the hero and to evade it he runs off to the town of W. where he had his secondary education. “It was a town with a history of slave-trading.” (111) Okri quite mockingly gives an account of the town which had night-clubs where youth dressed in the latest fashions imported from America and everyone spoke with “a curious transatlantic accent” (111). His former classmates, Odeh and Assi have assumed position of leadership. They are the sons of two influential and warring families. The absurdity of it all reaches the pinnacle during a contest after which the richer of the two would be announced. They ostentatiously exhibit their wealth before the hungry and credulous people. In a display of wealth they rain money on people. “The coins rained on us as if it were our punishment for being below.” (138) The people fought in attempts to collect enough money only to realise later that “they had been fighting for joke currencies” (140). The masses are made victims of a crude joke. We shall encounter this subject matter of the rulers playing cruel jokes on the ruled again in the Famished. When the town turns into a warring land, he runs back to the city and starts selling the same medicines. He observes: “Like most of our leaders, he [his boss] creates a problem, then creates another problem to deal with the first one – on and on, endlessly fertile, always creatively spiralling to greater chaos” (143). The leadership of the nation is portrayed as inefficient in addressing and solving the nation’s problems, and here Okri talks of youth facing unemployment. He says, “I felt up to my neck with our powerful people, our politicians, our governors, who had their cults as a way of maintaining and spreading their influence. I was tired of those who create our realities, and who encircle themselves with dread” (127). The story ends with the lines: “My own nightmares had ceased, but I had begun to see our lives as a bit of a nightmare. I think I prefer my former condition” (144). Thus we see the individual who is disillusioned because his dreams of a free nation have turned sour. Even after gaining independence from the colonial rule, all that they have is an existence
fabricated by the ruling classes and their lives are tales of sadness and dejection. It seems the metalyptic presence of war lords, political corruption, tribal greed, the State’s squandering of Nigeria’s oil reserves etc. demand a sacrifice from the weakest people of its nation. This is presented metaphorically in ‘In the City of Red Dust’ where Emokhai’s shirt is dyed red by the rain, symbolising that purification otherwise affiliated to water is now effected through blood which belongs to the new generations (Ben Okri 62). It is also depicted through the images of Emokhai and his friend selling blood to save them from starvation.

Okri highlights the complexity of African subjectivity that has to suffer the consequences of the discourses of colonialism while attempting to survive in a neocolonial present hijacked by African leaders and dictators. The Abiku trilogy represents this multi-layered reality of West Africa. It is the story of a community caught within the interstices of colonialism and post colonialism, transforming the novel into an imaginary space where the monoculturalism and empiricism of the western culture is deconstructed. In the narrative, though Okri is talking of the pre-independent Nigeria, like Fanon, he lays the burden of an ever-elusive freedom not on the coloniser but on the native leader and its own bourgeoisie, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In Infinite Riches, Okri introduces a colonial governor on the verge of retirement who is engaged in writing his memoirs.

The Governor-General, in his rewriting of our history, deprived us of language, of poetry, of stories, of architecture, of civil laws, of social organization, of art, science, mathematics, sculpture, abstract conception, and philosophy, he deprived us of history, of civilisation and unintentionally, of humanity too. Unwittingly, he effaced us from creation. And then, somewhat startled at where his rigorous logic had led him, he performed the dexterous feat of investing us with life the moment his ancestors set eyes on us as we slept through the great roll of historical time. (111)

Okri presents how the leaders scratch out the continent’s complicated past. He highlights how the Governor represents the colonial order and views history of his
nation invariably supporting the once-prevalent imperialist myth that the African communities had no literature and philosophy. Robert Fraser writes:

The oldest Nigerian civilisation known to archaeologists is the Iron Age Nok culture of the Benue plateau, thought to date back to 800 BCE, making it almost contemporaneous with the Greek poet Sappho. From that time on, occupation of the Sahelian and forest zones has been continuous. [...] In fact, at least from the time of the Arab incursions into the north around 1000 CE, literature flourished there, though the principal means of cultural transmission, especially in the south, remained word of mouth. (Ben Okri 4-5)

Fraser further refers to Mungo Park’s Travels in Africa and says that the Scottish explorer Mungo Park found Koranic schools throughout the Sahelian region during his two visits to the place in the early nineteenth century. He even presented a New Testament in Arabic to a local chief in exchange for supplies (5). In fact in Adichie’s Yellow Sun when Odenigbo talks to Ugwu about what he would be taught at the school, he says, “They will teach you that a white man called Mungo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish.” He adds, “Our people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park’s grandfather was born.” Ensuring the truth of his people and their history, he recommends, “But in your exam, write that it was Mungo Park” (11). This instance highlights the manner in which country’s system is under the colonial influence, so much so, that the education system introduced by the West negates a fact of their history and the Nigerians have no choice but to go along with it. This is justified by Odenigbo when he says: “Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don’t have tools to understand exploitation?” (11) Later while explaining to Olanna of why his mother did not like her or why his mother was scared of the idea of an educated woman living with her son, he says: “The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world” (101).

In Infinite, Okri introduces an alternative social commentator, an old woman living in the forest, to his colonial governor, reaffirming the presence of a rich orature
of the nation. This woman weaves “tapestry of stories” (105). Her stories depict the history of the nation. Everything appears in her fanciful designs: Azaro, his Mum and Dad, Madame Koto, the military governor. The woman’s cloth expounds a vibrant but a slightly sinister narrative that encloses past, present and future. At night she sleeps beneath it, “her presence was a mood of a thousand stories” (106). This woman practises a craft that Okri identifies with the making and the unmaking of the nations in his “The Joys of Storytelling III” in A Way. He writes: “Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings” (112). Thus Okri quite vehemently links the nation to its stories.

One of the most profound choices of the Abiku Trilogy is Okri’s choice of narrator. Azaro is a spirit child who populates both the realm of the living and the dead, and it is through his consciousness that the narrative structure is organised. Azaro’s characterisation, as discussed earlier in the chapter “The Freedom of the Artist”, is framed within the abiku motif which is a widely accepted belief in southern Nigeria. It refers to the phenomenon of a child who is caught up in the unending cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The abiku child promises his/her fellow companions to return to the bliss of the spirit world. So the abiku possesses the traces of a willed and premature death right from his birth. In his poem “Political Abiku” also Okri compares the cyclical nature of the spirit child to the troubled Nigerian nation that does not hold together. He writes: “The birth-pains had returned/ And another bloody parturition wracked our demented nation” (An African Elegy 73). This choice of an abiku narrator, as dictated by West African belief system, has a radical effect on how narrative structure disperses the knowledge and perceptions of environment. Azaro is a restless, continuous wanderer. While wandering all through the novel he keeps reporting to us the changes in the colonized land, of how people change and become one like the colonizers, but he does it unknowingly with the purity and ignorance of a child. In his criticism of Okri’s trilogy, Maurice O’Connor affirms that this radicalising of narrative, viewed from a historiographic perspective of cultural imperialism, spans a period framed within three distinct phases that defines Nigerian freedom. Firstly, the nineteenth century civilising missions explicitly involved in the
brutality of colonisation; secondly, the decolonisation of African societies; and thirdly, the post-independence struggle towards autochthonous forms of expression. (The Writings 73)

... Azaro, as a narrator, represents the multi-layered consciousness. A similar device is used by Salman Rushdie in Midnight’s Children when Saleem inaugurates the ‘Midnight’s Children Conference’ through his telepathic consciousness. From one single locus, the reader gains access to a national telepathic network that unites all those children born at the midnight and at the juncture of India’s independence. In a scene, Azaro is depicted wandering down his street observing the crude realities of his surroundings and he says, “I was frightened by the feeling that there was no escape from the hard things of this world” (161). He arrives at the market place searching for his Mum and he begins to see her everywhere. “I saw her writhing in the basins of eels.” (162) Thus he relates to the larger consciousness that becomes a part of his personal experience when the marketplace starts getting transformed. He sees a woman being harassed and humiliated by political thugs in the market place. They turn over her stall and evict her from her pitch. She exclaims: “This Independence has brought only trouble” (169). Azaro witnesses the scene and only realises later that the woman is his Mum. Okri’s narrative disrupts into the foreseen events of Nigeria’s postcolonial tragedy which have momentarily crossed over into and become a part of the colonial space in the form of violence at the market place. Thus the text, while being situated within a pre-independence context, makes a cross-over into a postcolonial time, and we can detect how Okri parodies the methods of accessing power and governance within the post-independence state.

Madame Koto’s bar functions as a microcosm of the nation where her rise to power is constantly related to vulgarity and a clear harnessing of sexuality. In the beginning, Madame Koto is an unknown stranger. She gets recognition after she beats up a man in her bar. After this she improves financially and gains political power also. At this time she becomes grotesquely obese, this is also symbolic of her meanness. She becomes so fat that her back doors expanded to accommodate her excessive weight. She begins to sell beer instead of palm-wine. Her bar acquires a supply of electric light. She eventually also buys a car. She employs prostitutes to work in her
bar. Okri depicts a nation of contrasts through his characters. On one hand, there is Madame Koto who enjoys profuse wealth and power and on the other hand we have Azaro’s Mum and Dad typifying the majority, the common Nigerian who is standing on the verge of starvation and death. As Madame Koto gains recognition and power through her money, she aligns herself with the Party of the Rich symbolising the state of affairs in Nigeria, of how money and politics go hand in hand. According to Azaro, Madame Koto began to resemble “a great old chief from ancient times, a reincarnation of splendour and power and clannish might” (374). She is depicted as an incarnation of the King of the Road. “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.” (3) The road becomes a symbol of Nigerian nation. The King of the Road is the archetypal predator that has such an insatiable appetite that he preys on everything and everyone for self-preservation. Thus the road is famished. The unjust rulers like Madame Koto are the predators who oppress their own people. Another reason that the road is famished is because “we have no desire to change things” (451). The nation is in a state of stagnation because the ruled have no desire to change things. Long periods of African colonisation by the white colonisers have left its peoples with such an oppressed mentality that it prevents all possibility of any positive remedial action. The Road is a symbolic rendering of the nation’s recurrent cycle of risings and fallings, of hopes and betrayals that have retarded the hopes of a nation struggling to be free in every aspect. Another myth is built into the narrative, of that of the Prophet of the people in Masks who has a dream of building a road that will lead to heaven. Where these people depict the nationalists, heaven stands for the ever-elusive freedom of the nation because just as the road nears completion, a crisis erupts leading to the destruction of the already built part of the road. There is an expectation that another generation would be able to build it. But each time people fall into the same error “because they have the great curse of forgetfulness. They are deaf to the things they need to know most.” (330)

In _A Dance of the Forests_ Soyinka posits that the nation’s history is predictably repeated. Each generation is aware of the preceding generation. As each new generation of leaders comes up, they promise to cleanse the country of corruption and wipe off inefficiency and lead the nation towards peace and prosperity but they
end up resurrecting the past, the violence and deprivation of the vicious times when their predecessors ruled thwarting all dreams of the nation’s progress and freedom. This idea comes out explicitly in Songs, where Okri writes:

He [Dad] swore that there are dead corpses in the consciousness of all peoples, all histories and all individuals, dead things needed to be acknowledged and buried, dead habits, dead ways of seeing, dead ways of living, things that weigh down and drag us towards death and prevent us from growing, choking out the sunlight. (289)

Okri interrogates the notion of the freedom of the nation by projecting a vision of a nation as wasteland of belied hopes, of dreams turned sour. Rebelling against the concept of nation that is based on the narrow concept of ethnicity, he develops the idea of nation whose freedom depends on the transcendence of parochial boundaries of ethnic purity and gender difference. He points towards a need for reconstruction of such structures preventing them from turning monolithic so as to be more fit to safeguard the freedom of the nation, offering important correctives to the excesses of the more naive forms of nativist regression. In “Redreaming the World” Okri writes:

It is time to listen to . . . the silences of strangled nations, to the passionate dreams of difficult artists, and to the age-old warnings that have always lurked in the oral fables of storytellers and shamans. (A Way 132)