Chapter 5

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary* questions: “How is freedom gained?” And he answers it himself: “It is taken: never given. To be free, you must assume your right to freedom.” (396) What Rushdie is hinting at is that first the war for freedom must be waged and only then can it be won. The African writers are thus waging a war against all that hinders their way to freedom because we know that the freedoms of the West are rightly vaunted but the East rightly feels excluded from full possession of these liberties: racial, sexual, religious, political or economic.

While Ben Okri’s works have undergone a remarkable transformation in the aspects of choice of literary tropes and devices, there remains a common thread that gives coherence to almost everything he has written and that is the idea of freedom. We can trace the birth of this idea back to the moment when child Okri witnessed his nation caught up in the throes of a Civil War, the Biafran War, and his child’s mind found it difficult to register the reason for such a mindless violence where people earlier known to each other were ready to kill for nothing more than a tribal pride. He knew then that something was desperately missing but did not know what that thing was. This became clear to him later when Okri, as a young lad, experienced at first-hand the suffering of the poor in the face of the cynical indifference of government when he accompanied his father, a lawyer, in his daily dealings. His works of fiction deal, in elaborate metaphors, with the issues of war and destruction, the selfishness of the nation’s leaders and the government, the quest of an individual for his identity and freedom, and captures the economic and social chaos in Nigeria. And then he draws the attention of his audience towards the rise of the decadent bourgeoisie, the comprador class and the wealthy elites who have engaged themselves in the practices initiated in the first place by the colonizer itself and thus carry on the legacy of their own perpetrators paralysing the process of freedom. He knows that the nation needs to make sense of its situation and make renewed efforts towards freedom. This freedom would be gained only after his people realise the meaning of the political independence that they had gained way back in 1960 but have failed to realise.

135
In the Introduction to my thesis and the subsequent chapters I have discussed the theme of freedom in the selected works of Ben Okri at various levels: that of the individual, the artist, and the nation. Here we come across the African reality as affected, in the beginning, by the great struggle between the two mutually opposed forces: an imperialist tradition on one hand, and a tradition of resistance on the other. And now, this imperialist tradition has been maintained by the African neo-colonial bourgeoisie with their economic and political dependence which is reflected in what Ngugi calls ‘its culture of apermanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots, barbed wire, a gowned clergy and judiciary; their ideas spread by a corpus of state intellectuals, the academic and journalistic laureates of the neo-colonial establishment’ (Decolonizing 2). The resistance tradition is carried by the working people, that is, the peasantry and the proletariat aided by patriotic intellectuals and other progressive elements of the society. It is reflected in their defence of the roots of national cultures and of their democratic struggle. Thus for a defender of the fighting cultures of African people, imperialism is not a theoretical concept, a slogan, but a reality, a monopolistic capital that has affected them in the past and continues to affect their lives in the present thwarting their quest for freedom.

Imperialism has been total as it has given birth to economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of Africa. The oppressed and the exploited, who Fanon calls “the wretched of the earth”, maintain their defiance through their struggle for freedom. Against this collective defiance, imperialism unleashes a cultural onslaught and the effect is annihilation of a people’s belief in their names, in their language, in their heritage of struggle, in their environment, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as worthless, as “one wasteland of non-achievement” (Decolonizing 3). Thus they move to distance themselves from their ‘wasteland’. It makes them want to identify with that which is not their own. They want to identify with the ‘Other’: the other people’s culture, their languages, their complexion; everything that removes them from the ‘self’ and lulls them on to a path of decadence that results in despair, despondency and disillusionment. Thus, their search for freedom becomes elusive and results in the onset of a crisis of identity. In the first chapter “The Freedom of the
Individual” I have discussed how this crisis forces an individual to re-evaluate his situation and make efforts towards a will-to-identity.

Ben Okri through his works presents to us his world which is affected by the physical and ideological coercion enforced on the native during colonization, and how this has damagingly penetrated and marred the psyche of his people even decades after political independence has been achieved. He points out to the manner in which it still holds control over the African sensibility. He effectively questions the dominant structures that try to re-enforce the stereotyping of the ‘other’ as fundamentally inferior and submissive by willing these characters, like Lao in In Arcadia, Omovo in Dangerous, or the unnamed protagonist of Astonishing, towards a will-to-identity and hence a will-to-freedom. Then these people wielding the sword of resistance against this hegemonic intrusion and domination confront this threat to their quest with a higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle. They tend to wield even more firmly the weapons of struggle contained in their cultures and the fight for freedom comes to the level where people rise above the individual and start to move towards cultural nationalism. Thus they make use of art to resist against any domination that keeps them distanced from their freedom. All these factors that tend to hinder their progress are outlined and then dealt with in art. Thus an artist plays a very significant role in the struggle for freedom. My second chapter “The Freedom of the Artist” discusses the ways in which an artist wages his war of freedom and how Okri deals with the subject in his works.

Rushdie asks another important question: “What is freedom of expression?” and he further says, “Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist. Without the challenge, even to satirize all orthodoxies . . . it ceases to exist. Language and imagination cannot be imprisoned, or art will die, and with it, a little of what makes us human” (Imaginary 396). And we know that his question and his argument as its reply is a vital part of the freedom of the artist. Rushdie here is talking against censorship that haunts the artists in the Third World. He is talking about the freedom to re-structure or re-figure the literary devices to speak against the hegemonic control and the tyrannies of the Others and their very own.

Okri narrates the Nigerian nation through the use of myths and symbols, highlighting the pitfalls in the nation’s way to freedom and dwells upon the role of the
artist in the struggle of this freedom. Okri’s protagonist in *Dangerous* uses his painting to recreate the social landscape that is Nigeria, just as his mentor Dr. Okocha who finally gathers courage to depict the realities of his existence in his art towards the end of the narrative. Omovo describes the city with its dirty, stinking gutters, its ritual murders in parks and the violence as a place of degeneration and desolation for the common man. The artist is haunted by the power caucus as his art reflects social realities. His one painting is stolen and another confiscated by the government, and this is the only instance in his fictional works where he clearly refers to censorship. I believe that this lack of reference to a significant phenomenon such as censorship, which makes it difficult for the artist to exercise his freedom of expression, in Okri’s works might have resulted from his lack of personal experience in the same. He has stayed out of his country, a self-confessed Nigerian-Londoner, he has not come across such situations, result of which is evident in his works. But I would argue that it is the experience of such situations and not the understanding which is lacking because we can see that in his non-fictional works like *A Way* and *A Time* he has written emphatically on the issue.

Another issue which is discussed is Okri’s status as a diasporic writer. There has been made a critical appreciation of his hyphenated identity and his sincerity in discussing the freedom of the artist. According to me, this double-consciousness empowers and affords an intellectual confidence in Okri that he looks beyond the authority of the West to detect its inherent flaws and gives real agency to the subjects living at the edges of capital or within neo-colonial spaces where basic human rights are not guaranteed by the state. Maurice O’Connor in *The Writings* has argued, “In case of the majority of modern African states, the empowerment we speak about in relation to hybridity refers to a limited urban section of the society” (147). Thus according to him, hybridity as a model of empowerment in the African context is contingent to material realities. I believe that though one cannot question the importance of wealth in this increased mobility within space but at the same time one cannot even doubt the role of the intellectual’s sensibility to delve into a deeper understanding of the experiences of his people and himself as an indivisible part of them. Okri rightly takes cognizance of and relates to his people, portraying it in his art, that is, his writings and thus exercises his freedom as an artist.
A way in which Okri exercises his own freedom as an artist is his use of orature, literary tropes like magic realism and fantasy, and by producing an amalgamation of Western and African mode of writing. Okri’s use of fantasy highlights the fragmentation of life in Nigeria. Ato Quayson writes in Strategic Transformations that Okri’s works respond to the crisis in Nigeria by “fracturing the form of realism and abolishing the neutrality of setting” (160). He further says that Okri’s settings are invested with an esoteric and other-worldly potential which is not subordinated to realist codes of representation. Thus Okri goes on to exercise his freedom as an artist in his reliance on the way the mythopoeic potential of indigenous resources generate a sense of an organic link between the individual and the community. Such an organic relationship between the self and the community makes the hero a metonymic representation of his community. His idea of the freedom of the artist is clear in the way he uses his space as an artist to carry the potential of Yoruba mythology by re-writing its form to accommodate a national sense of culture, and the Yoruba resources are appropriated by a non-Yoruba. This discursively eclectic and hybrid paradigm can be related to the yearning for freedom resulting from the individual’s sense of will-to-identity at the conjuncture of the traumas of post-colonialism. The varying appropriations and thematizations of the cultural tradition are metonymic of wider national realities.

The third chapter of my thesis “The Freedom of the Nation” deals with the way in which Okri interrogates the notion of the freedom of the nation by projecting a vision of his nation as a wasteland of belied hopes, of dreams turned sour. He rebels against the concept of nation that is based on the narrow concept of ethnicity or tribalism. 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 the reconstruction of such structures and to prevent them from turning monolithic so as to become more fit to safeguard the freedom of the nation, and at the same time also offer important correctives to the excesses of the more naive forms of nativist regression. We see that his characters suffer at the hands of their own leaders and the governing officials. Omovo in Dangerous loses his job because of the nepotism of his supervisor. The lack of direction, ensuing hopelessness and disillusionment become the bounty of the common man. The young people like
Umeh and Okur want to leave their country. Okri tries to draw the attention of his audience to all that has kept the Nigerian nation in a stranglehold and he thus encourages and instils in the hearts of his people a longing for freedom which will deliver them from all their woes.

In addition to the freedoms that I have discussed Okri very emphatically also puts forth the idea of, what I may call, ‘the freedom of the human spirit.’ It is a freedom which does not have varied definitions according to the different worlds that the individuals inhabit. He yearns for this freedom that can be defined universally; the idea of freedom that rises above everything else and the human himself becomes the macrocosm and, at the same time, the microcosm of his own being. This idea of a human who would define his own freedom is very much like what Leonard Peikoff writes about the character Howard Roark in the Afterword of The Fountainhead.

... The man as man should be. The self-sufficient, self-confident, the end of ends, the reason unto himself, the joy of living personified. Above all – the man who lives for himself, as living for oneself should be understood. And who triumphs completely. A man who is what he should be. (696)

Peikoff says that Ayn Rand herself wrote about this work, “It has to be a triumphant epic of man’s spirit, a hymn glorifying a man’s “I”” (696), emphasising how a human must see himself to define his freedom because, as I understand, when a man foregrounds his “I”, he views himself as much as an entity separate and free from any affiliation what-so-ever to the outside world as he sees himself in relation to the others. This idea becomes very clear in Starbook where the Maiden’s father creates his last sculpture.

The sculpture was beautiful indeed, and its beauty was mysterious... Suddenly the young wanted to die in its presence; and the old, dying, wanted it to be the last thing they saw before they passed away...

... It was the figure of a being, a man or woman or god or goddess or dream; and the figure stood with both of its arms stretched...
out unnaturally wide, embracing the whole universe, all suffering, all joy, the beginning, the end, life, death, and beyond . . . (389)

It feels like a sculpture created in the image of the ultimate dream of any man, a salvation, the supreme freedom, the quintessential hope that every human lives with. The essence of this sculpture is very similar to the Stoddard Temple created by Roark in *The Fountainhead*.

The temple was to be a small building of gray limestone. Its lines were horizontal, not the lines reaching to heaven, but the lines of earth. It seemed to spread over the ground like arms outstretched at shoulder-height, palms down, in great, silent acceptance. It did not cling to the soil and it did not crouch under the sky. It seemed to lift the earth, and its few vertical shafts pulled the sky down. It was scaled to human height in such a manner that it did not dwarf man, but stood as a setting that made his figure the absolute, the gauge of perfection by which all dimensions were to be judged. When a man entered this temple, he would feel space moulded around him, for him, as if it had not waited for his entrance, to be completed. It was a joyous place, with the joy of exaltation that must be quiet. It was a place where one would come to feel sinless and strong, to find the peace of spirit never granted save by one’s own glory. (334)

Okri writes in *Starbook* that we must not worry ourselves with passing sufferings, fashions, ideas, notions, conceits, disasters, or failures. All are nothing but illusions. He says: “Sometimes our minds are our worst enemies. Do not hold preferences too strongly. Be guided by that clear voice within. . . . Do not cling to any fixed ideas of who or what you are . . . Being a prince is nothing compared to a man or woman who has discovered that deep down in them there are gods” (352). What Okri refers to is transcendence, which Rushdie has defined as “that flight of the human spirit outside the confines of its material, physical existence which all of us, secular or religious, experience at least on a few occasions” (*Imaginary* 421). Thus Okri talks of the soaring quality of freedom where a human can experience a sense of
being more than oneself, of being in some way joined to the whole of life. For Okri the freedom of the human spirit is a visionary or a mystical experience. And with this the very connotations of the notion of ‘freedom’ change and to put it rightly I would use Okri’s words:

Freedom is the beginning of the greatest possibilities of the human genius. It is not the goal. (*A Way* 132)