

Impact Of War And Violence In Ben Okri's Short Story "Laughter Beneath The Bridge"

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Abstract

After the world warnd, British colonial rule weakened throughout the world due to the mounting pressure for independence from colonized territories. However, the legacy of colonialism left a lasting impact and impression on former colonies and their citizens; politically, psychologically, economically and socially too. In this process of decolonization war and independence left a very big impact on the individuals' psychology. Many of the men, who returned back from the war suffered serious injuries and trauma. This research paper aims to explore the impact of war, violence and independence on the psyche of male protagonists, which resulted in the form of fear, frustration and fractured self, as Okri's literature deals directly/indirectly with these issues, also endeavors to reflect the trauma and horror experienced by the protagonist of the story entitled "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" in a post-colonial Nigerian word.

Keywords

Post-colonial, War, Trauma, Independence, Violence.

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Ben Okri, through his literature, reflects on the disillusionment and horror that Nigeria suffered following decolonization. It is embedded with a sense of despair and frustration at both the state of its nation and the leaders who replace former colonial oppressors.

Ben Okri's short story collection *Incidents at the Shrine* contains the short story "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" which directly depicts the time of civil war and the grotesque baseness of the war situation that decelerated the independence of the nation. To reveal the concrete and abstract aspect of wartime existence in Nigeria in relation to the trajectory of the story 'Laughter Beneath the Bridge' contained in *Incidents at the Shrine*, it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of the Biafran war and its alarms. Nigeria plunged into a bloody and long civil war between 1967-1970. About two million people including Igbos perished in this war, lost their lives and got erased from history and so too was their country. On 15 January, 1970 Biafra delegation surrendered in Lagos and its patriots were disenchanted. The heart of the nation bore permanent scars as thousands of Igbos were massacred. The nation was governed by the military for the period of 1979-83 after independence. Thus, writers of Nigeria gave expression to the social and political life of its people by depicting the war in terms of intrigue and betrayal, murder, rape and violence in their creations.

Biafran Civil War has provided many writers with a rich seam of material. The psycho-drama of war and blood conflict witnessed by Ben Okri as a child left its indelible impact on his consciousness. Okri lived the terror, and absurdity of military and civil violence in Nigeria, when he was only ten years old. Thus, the Biafran war had a fundamental influence on Okri's opus and literary imagination. Caroline Jowett in 'Writers of Passage' quotes Okri: "those people who were killed left such a huge impression on me. In a way that's the core of almost everything I do and think about; the mysteries of life, justice" (28).

Sarah Abdullah in "The Young Shall Grow" observes:

His war experience very much shaped his consciousness as a writer as they exposed many of the coercive political structures that were operative at the time and sensitized him to the issue of ethnic violence in a conflict-ridden society (1).

Okri's mother being a half 'Igbo' is a survivor of the conundrum of internecine warfare. He lost relatives and friends. In an interview with Julia Rix, Okri explains: "My mother was half Igbo [from the south-east of Nigeria] while my father was Urhobo from the Delta region, so the war was a family thing. We spent a lot of time hiding Mum- and I nearly got killed, I'm still stunned by what people are

able to do to their neighbors” (The Guardian 2010, June 2, n.p.). Civil War, thus gave Okri a complex understanding of the feelings and nature of humans. Okri affirms that the war brought out the most hideous instincts in human nature. His works are the true embodiment of political tyranny, social injustice and ethnic factionalism. Maurice O’Conner in *The Writings of Ben Okri: Transcending the Local and the National* writes:

[...] the original idea in Okri’s work- what Nakobov defines as the ‘throb’- is the encounter of innocence with the scene of civil war violence. His narrative is 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 violence (52).

“Laughter Beneath the Bridge”: a curtailment of freedom alludes to the demise of Igboland in the Nigerian Civil War, ‘also known as the Biafran war’. Okri’s prize-winning story explores the impact of war, civil strife and violence on a nameless young boy (protagonist) and his Igbo mother. The protagonist (first person narrative) shares his experience as the story begins in an evacuated boarding school where three abandoned children (including the protagonist) are anxiously waiting for their family members to come and save them. His opening gambit presents the Civil War milieu and its impact on the children left behind to forge the survival:

Those were LONG days as we lay pressed to the prickly grass waiting for the bombs to fall. The civil war broke out before mid-term and the boarding schools emptied fast. Teachers disappeared Three of us were left behind.... We were silent most of the time... Sirens and fire engines made it seem like there was an insane feast going on somewhere in the country. In town we saw a man set upon by a mob: they beat him up in a riot of vengeance, they broke sticks and bottles on his head. So much blood came from him (*Incidents at the Shrine*, 1-3).

After several days, sadly, only the protagonist’s mother arrives. But she was unable to rescue them all as she was an Igbo and wasn’t willing to risk their lives:

She looked at us for a long time and she didn’t recognize me. Fear makes people so stiff.... ‘Can’t take your friends,’ mother said,.... ‘I’m not a wicked person to leave behind children who are stranded,’.... ‘but how will I rest in my grave if the soldiers we met hold them, because of me?’... ‘Can you manage?’ Mother asked them. They nodded. She looked at them for a long time and then cried (3).

The backdrop of this dramatic scene is more chillingly symbolic when the protagonist describes vultures circling the school campus, people searching for those of rebel tribe, “religious maniacs” (1) Screaming the ‘end of the world’, and mob

looting the chapel. Mum leaves with the protagonist, leaving both of them behind. The bitter satire of their alternative and inevitable fate is patent. They start their journey towards home in a dilapidated lorry, involving further trauma at checkpoints. There were soldiers everywhere in battle-dress and camouflage helmets. That was a long journey with thousands of checkpoints. The road seemed to have no end. The soldiers laugh as they beat up people at checkpoints, and search for members of the rebel tribe to be killed brutally. The child protagonist narrates the terror and horrific scene when they were caught at a checkpoint:

The soldiers shouted that we should all jump down... they took us aside into the bush one by one, to be questioned. Occasionally I heard one of the women burst into crying. I heard the butt of a gun crash on someone's head.... the soldiers asked the mother where she came from in the country... they shouted to the mother to recite the paternoster in the language of the place she claimed to come from.... Then they turned to me and asked me to recite the Hail Mary(5-7).

In the lorry, they waited for the others to prove they were not of the enemy. Mum told him that they shoot people who can't speak their language. Sometimes, they were made to leave without those who couldn't prove they were not of a rebel tribe. The rest of the journey was not peaceful either. He observes the horror of war and violence while journeying from his boarding school to his home. He tries to "think of Monika" (4). Thoughts of his friend Monica occupied his mind while returning home. "Starving and bored"(6) he again thinks of Monica, and "saw one of Monica's mask in the stars" (6). When he reached home, his friends performed the Egungun ritual as an interlude to homecoming. Mum tells him about Monica:

The family is scattered in the forest. They killed her brother.

'which one?

'Ugo'

I felt sick.

.... Sometimes she comes back to the house to eat and then she disappears for several days.

...the way she is behaving they will kill her before the war is over(11).

The protagonist wished to go to find her but wasn't allowed to go for, as there was a curfew, so he couldn't find her. When he returned, Monika was at home "her eyes hard". "Where have you been that no one can find you?" (13). He asked. She took him to the Egungun masquerade. Monika puts up a futile resistance against the madness of war, but later realizes that it is useless. She is infuriated with soldiers for killing her brother Ugo: " 'you know they killed Ugo ?' this is where they dumped

his body. It's floated away now. This is where I have been. All day I sit here and think." (17). She tells the narrator that she wants to avenge her brother's death. She wants to be a soldier, and to carry a gun and shoot all the soldiers who were mercilessly killing innocent people. Deeply troubled Monica takes him beneath the bridge:

'Look. Look. That's where Ugo was. I measured the place with this tree.'

Then something shifted in my eyes. The things on the water suddenly looked different, transformed.... The stream was full of corpses that had swollen,.... Then she started to laugh. I had never heard that sort of twisted laughter before.... When we got home we both come down with fever(17-18).

Monica appeared as a dancing Egungun (Yoruba costumed figure) in defiance of the soldiers as the children organize a mask masquerade performance. But their group clashed with another Egungun group and the situation got worst:

Then one of the soldiers stepped forward, tore the mask off the Egungun's face and slapped Monica so hard that I felt the sound... 'Speak your language!' the soldiers shouted as her thighs quivered. 'Speak your language!' he screamed, as she urinated down her thighs and shivered in her own puddle. She wailed. Then she jabbered. In her language. There was terrible silence....(21).

The soldiers dragged Monica towards the bridge and onto the back of a jeep as she was of a rebel tribe. The ritual ultimately brings the innocents, in a fatal dance, into the hands of power and violence. The narrator could never see Monica again. He laments his helplessness and contemplates the war situation and the way it brings out the monster within the human. Laughter here depicts the eccentric humor that celebrates destruction and death. He witnessed what no child should see. He is directly engaged with the issue of the effects of civil war. His childhood consciousness couldn't resist registering the terror, violence and dizzying horror of the Nigerian Civil War. Thus, the protagonist is tormented by his experiences.

Okri, in "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" tries to prove that the laughter of its characters is a mirthless humor that indicates the bizarre reaction of people who are on the verge of insanity due to the intense upheaval in the Nigeria. Okri describes how the effect of violence and war induce psychological and physical harm to children and adults in the long term. How it disrupts the development of the economic and social fabric of any nation and destroys men, families and communities.

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