

## Introduction

### Revisiting Consciousness in Okri and Govender

#### **Rosemary Gray and Sope Maithufi**

The designated theme for this issue of the international *Journal of Literary Studies (JLS)* is “Revisiting Consciousness in Okri and Govender”. Guest edited by Professor Rosemary Gray and Dr Sope Maithufi, it features a prism consisting of four articles devoted to an exploration of selected novels by the celebrated Nigerian-born Londoner, Ben Okri (OBE), the base of which is a hitherto unpublished interview of Okri on the occasion of his first African Honorary Doctorate awarded by the University of Pretoria. Foregrounding interconnections, the fourth side of the prism is an innovative article comparing a work by South Africa’s acclaimed writer, Zakes Mda, with carefully chosen novels by Ben Okri. The covid-19 pandemic has played havoc with submissions; still in the pipeline is an article that provides a vital link between two of its principal writers, tracing as it does common aspects in Okri and Govender. The collection ends with two articles that explore aspects of the theme of consciousness in Ronnie Govender’s semi-autobiographical writing.

We begin with the foundation upon which the superstructure stands – “Looking Back: James Ogude with Ben Okri”, a conversation between fellow Africanists that took place in Pretoria in 2014. It touches on many key themes in African Studies. However, the select few appear to have found elaborations in the articles that have passed muster to be included in this issue of *JLS* that highlights the theme of “revisiting consciousness”:

- Writing is about basic humanity. It is about showing how affirming the local organically evolves into a concern for human welfare at large and beyond National boundaries. This, on its own, speaks of expanding consciousness.
- It is interesting and inspiring that, regarded in African Literary and Cultural Studies Scholarships as belonging to the Second Generation of African Writers, Okri, in this interview, tracks his model of the kind of writer who is local and universal to Chinua Achebe, of the First Generation of the African Writers canon. What we read into Okri’s response is the need to reassess the pigeon holes into which we critics are quick to categorise African writers as well as to provide a genealogy of this field.

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- The interview illuminates what Okri describes as his growth into African Literature. This is that he discovered it *in earnest* after he had left Africa – and consequent upon seeing this art as a world that fills in the gap and loneliness that he was beginning to experience as a result also of his being enormously immersed in the European Classics. He also notes that, writing from the West, he has felt acutely aware of Africa and of its multifaceted historical dynamics, but that good writing will always find its way across the world and beyond mere ideological posture.
- But the way into being interconnected with world artists is through being aware of how self-expression invokes – however remotely – what and how other great writers have said the same thing, as well as how one inevitably enters into locution with them. Okri feels that, while the trends are towards topical and contentious themes, not much appears to be happening in training artists on and in making critics aware of rhetoric.
- It seems thus that, concluding this interview, Okri expands on why he does not see himself as a magical realist writer. The reader will find James Ogude’s prompting rewarding; he begins this aspect of the interview by soliciting Okri’s response to being seen by Appiah as a magic realist writer in the way of the extraordinary, as opposed to the magical realism of Latin America. Okri responds that he works with “reality”, as opposed to “realism”, because the former includes that which is visible and invisible. The concluding lines are worth quoting at length:

Reality includes consciousnesses. Our consciousness is part of our reality. The way a people see the world is their reality. Otherwise you are privileging the philosophy that has pervasively determined what our perception of the real world is and should be. The colour yellow means different things to the Chinese than to the African. A tree has a different resonance for the Japanese than it does for the Nigerian. Consciousness is part of this. Myth, perception, and belief are implicated in consciousness. But all this is nothing without a craft that creates a new synthesis, an art that creates a new reality, an imaginative and a spiritual one, an enrichment of worlds. Philosophy is not enough. The inclusion of myth and beliefs are not enough in themselves. There must be a commensurate form and a consummate technique to embody it all, and there must be something to say. This is the most difficult thing. This is the holy grail of literature and art. It is why certain works stand out above all the others, why they endure, why they appear endless in possibility and interpretation. The writers have made something new and made them permanent.

We could have opened this issue of *JLS* with an article that traces the germs in Okri’s oeuvre to those texts that were published by Africans on Africa, especially on Western African cultural tropes. The alternative, one which highlights his elaboration upon Western canonical motifs, would have sufficed. Either way, the final picture would have been clear; this is that, in his writing, he enables the reader to engage intertextually with those whose

art marked watershed moments in the evolution of cultures and philosophies. Because each defining point is fundamentally modernist, in the sense that opens up the known horizons and dismantles certitudes, the choice favoured a T.S. Eliot-centred reading of Okri in the article by Matthew Curr's "An Anzalduan Reading of Ben Okri's *In Arcadia*". Set against the background of Anzalduan border studies, this article explores Okri's positionality: as part of the great tradition and outsider critic of the humanist ethics and literary practices revered within that occidental legacy. The theoretical practice of this article replicates its central concern with tradition and the individual talent. As the contributor admits, the analysis is consciously new critical and Eliotian rather than deliberately evocative of Anzaldua, the purpose being to examine how Okri transforms the material that he inherits. In exploring this initial imaginary journey to the original Arcadia in the Peloponnese (the second stage of which is in *The Age of Magic*), Curr argues that Okri "places himself within the English tradition of subtly ironic displacement" while, at the same time, he "reserves his subliminal critique for the English protagonists of his pilgrimage who exhibit insularity, lack of artistic sensibility and solipsism instead of humanist refinement, concern for others and artistic finesse". Curr concludes that the journey to the Louvre in Paris "becomes one of self-examination and self-discovery; Arcadia does exist, yet it is within".

If Curr's article shines the radicalism of modernism in Okri's fiction, Rosemary Gray's "Countering Mind-forg'd Manacles in Ben Okri's *The Freedom Artist* (2019)", outlines an expanded and worldly landscape in which Okri is heard. In considering Okri's latest novel Gray investigates the possibility of mental and emotional freedom via high order thinking/[HOT] consciousness. It seems obvious that the author of this article is in dialogue with a select reading market – one that is fairly sophisticated, and one that does not need to be taken through the general points/backgrounds about the material and ideas that she argues are resonant in Ben Okri's *The Freedom Artist*. This article, which "itself reads like an Okri novel" according to one reviewer, seeks to unveil Okri's antidote to the proposition that the "normal" world is an asylum for mind control. Acknowledging its rich literary undercurrent, Gray hones in on William Blake, proposing that, responding to Blake's "mind-forg'd manacles" in "London", this novel is a linear progression of Okri's "anti-spell for the 21st century" in *Mental Fight*. More importantly, Okri's eleventh novel is, thematically, a penetrating exploration of how our freedom is being eroded by today's post-truth society and the need for a higher state of consciousness. This manifests in the double narrative of the initiation of the young male protagonist, Mirababa that runs parallel to that of Karnak, whose lover, Amalantis, is arrested and spirited away by the thought police for voicing the forbidden question: "Who is the prisoner?" Contrary to the general trend that focuses on the novel's intertextual underpinning, this article foregrounds sacred geometry and the ways in which both re-awakenings are made manifest by Okri's masterful embedding of the

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major arcana of Tarot wisdom within his distinctly dystopian storylines for the enhancement of consciousness. Two articles later, this issue of *JLS* returns to the inner wealth of the Subject that Curr and Gray's respective articles illuminate – albeit in the terms that have corresponding West African and Tshivenda Utopian overtones – in Sope Maithufi's argument, "*Mitshimbilo* ('Wanderlust Disease'): Africa's future in Zakes Mda's *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* and Two of Ben Okri's Novels".

Khombe (Marcel) Mangwanda then picks up on the self-apprehension/“upwaking” motif in Gray's article, in “Dream as a Journey of Self-discovery in Ben Okri's ‘Dreaming of Byzantium’” from Okri's 2019 anthology of short stories, *Prayer for the Living*. The article explores the way in which the dream episode in this short story serves as a journey of self-discovery or intuitive initiation. The author presents a thoughtful and richly textured analysis, paying attention to the interplay and constant slippage between dream and reality, undergirding his argument with dream theory. Mangwanda weaves a robust and compelling argument that is carefully anchored in contextual specificity. Analysis of the discourse and content of the dream episode, he suggests, may illuminate the nature of the self-discovery experience the protagonist gains at the end of the story.

In the next article entitled, "*Mitshimbilo* ('Wanderlust Disease'): Africa's Future in Zakes Mda's *Sculptors of Mapungubwe* and Two of Ben Okri's Novels", Sope Maithufi proposes an alternative understanding of modernism, so much vaunted in the evolution of Western arts. Maithufi's point of departure is that Zakes Mda, a South African novelist who has distinguished himself by drawing extensively on the contact zones between the Indigenous peoples of Southern Africa and the Bantu-speaking peoples, recalls Ben Okri, in so far as the latter rewrites the discourse of “Abiku”. Both writers, Maithufi argues, excel in the extraordinary; but while Okri is evidently tweaking and mobilising the trope of *Abiko* that is heard in the so-called First Generation of African Writers – Achebe and Soyinka, to be precise, Mda seems almost completely unconcerned with the canon, introducing, instead, the popular that has not yet found its way into the institution of African Critical Theory. For Mda, the motif, touched on in Gray's article, is *mitshimbilo* (“wanderlust disease”), which is a Tshivenda concept that Mda deploys in order to take on the East African Slave Trade. These authors, Maithufi notes, respectively bring back to focus the paths along which Africa fell victim to these tragedies. He also argues that, in a manner that turns colonial history of Africa on its head, these authors correspondingly retrace these sites of trauma through techniques of memory – all non-realist, all articulated in the interphases of the written word, visual and performance arts and all African modernist to boot.

Engaging locution between Mda and Okri, on the one hand, with African Diasporic writing, on the other hand, Maithufi remarks that *mitshimbilo* works out a wider Continental – African – counterpoetics on a trans-nationalism on the South. Through it, Mda addresses the East African slave trade. Because

of the tendency in African Literary and Cultural Studies to address the trauma of Trans-Atlantic slavery, that which the East African slave trade wrought on Africa seems to be ignored. The beauty about *mitshimbilo* is that it chimes in with Okri's view that a writer, being local, must strike a chord with basic humanity in general. This is why, as the article continues, so Gramscian is *mitshimbilo* that it is borne out in distinctive accentuations of respective popular narratives. These tell a new history of the world; one which inserts Africa in optimistic and profound ways of seeing, as opposed to the Anthropocene and to an Afro-Futuristic one. Maithufi continues that Mda uses *mitshimbilo* to undermine the colonial modernity of the ship and of the island brought about by this slavery, and to privilege expanded sense of consciousness. In elaboration, the article sets up a dialogue between *mitshimbilo* and the trope of the "wanderer child" – *Abiku* – that Okri deploys in his recovering of the spirituality and cultural wealth that Africa appears to have lost to Trans-Atlantic slavery and to neo-colonialism. Both tropes, *mitshimbilo* and *Abiku*, function at the level of the story and fantasy, and this speaks of their fragile but deep connection with human survival.

In "A Decolonial Reading of Ronnie Govender's 'Over My Dead Body'", Rajendra Chetty once again highlights the contemporary relevance of this issue of *JLS*. With the recent illegal change in the South African Constitution with the Land Expropriation bill, the article is particularly pertinent in the irony of its discussion of the attempt "to build decolonial sensibilities and delink from the grand narrative of the colonial literary landscape in the short story 'Over My Dead body'", Chetty asserts. What is topical, too, is the way in which Govender uses the world of art to make a decolonial statement. The contributor argues that decolonial artists work in the entanglement of power and engage with a border epistemology, those in the margins, the wretched of the earth. Resonating with Okrian aesthetics, "Over My Dead Body" seeks to heal by delinking, or regaining pride, dignity, and humanity. The paradox of historical legacies of the community of Cato Manor being repeated by the current dispensation is important. The article concludes by citing nuggets from intertexts, placing the essential argument in a global context. Ireland and Palestine are invoked as exposing parallel conditions of hegemonic domination and human rights violations. The approach is decolonial, revealing a semi-autobiographical writing back to a no longer existent imperial but a neo-colonial centre, foregrounding as it does the issue of silence/silencing that "keeps the horror of Cato Manor and what happened there a singularly deep wound in the national consciousness". As Chetty observes: "Silence or neglect appears to condone racism, xenophobia, hurt, harm and lack of concern".

Appropriately, this issue closes with Lindy Stiebel's "Made in Cato Manor: Ronnie Govender and the Fight to Preserve a Personal/Public Space". Asserting that It is the history "and the lives lived in Cato Manor that spurred Govender on to write some of his best-known short stories, in the collection

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*At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, Stiebel supports her discussion with a triumvirate of postcolonial theorists – Said (1994) on “rival geographies”, De Certeau (1984) on “walking in the city” and Boym (2001) on nostalgia (both reflective and restorative). The article explores the profound link between Govender’s consciousness and Cato Manor, not only an infamous site of contestation and forced removals, but also Govender’s heartland.

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