

Dream as a Journey of Self-discovery in Ben Okri's "Dreaming of Byzantium"

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Summary

This article explores the way in which the dream episode in "Dreaming of Byzantium", a short story in Ben Okri's collection *Prayer for the Living* (2019), serves as a journey of self-discovery. It begins by drawing attention to Okri's views on journey and dream, two recurring motifs in his work. It then offers a close reading of the short story, paying particular attention to the reality/unreality interplay that appears to underpin much of his work. Analysis of the discourse and content of the dream episode may illuminate the nature of the self-discovery experience the protagonist gains at the end of the story.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bestudeer die wyse waarop die droomepisode in "Dreaming of Byzantium", 'n kortverhaal in Ben Okri se bundel *Prayer for the Living* (2019), as 'n selfontdekkingsreis dien. Dit begin deur die aandag te vestig op Okri se beskouings van twee herhalende temas in sy werk, naamlik reis en droom. Dit word gevolg deur 'n diepgaande ontleding van die kortverhaal. Daar word in die besonder aandag gegee aan die wisselwerking tussen realiteit en irrealiteit wat skynbaar onderliggend tot baie van sy werke is. 'n Ontleding van die diskoers en inhoud van die droomepisode kan lig werp op die aard van die protagonis se selfontdekkingservaring aan die einde van die verhaal.

Many storylines in Ben Okri's *Prayer for the Living* reflect a number of recurrent and major preoccupations in Okri's work. For example, "Prayer for the Living", the short story that gives the collection its title, is about a man who enters a town full of dead people in search for his family and his lover only to discover that the living deserve more pity and compassion, more prayers than the dead. The short story raises the question of the blurred reality of humanity. In "An Inca Elegy", a meeting between a tourist guide of Spanish ancestry and a beautiful Inca woman he offers to marry, re-enacts and reverses the first contact between the Spanish conquistadors and the Incas. In a sense, the story stages an interplay between the past, the present and the future (ability to increase the number of the Inca population), given that her

nationalistic Inca self-consciousness is the root cause of the woman's resistance. "A sinister perfection" and "Ancient ties of Karma", which feature the theme of karmic transformation, as well as "Dreaming of Byzantium", provide a glimpse at spaces where the real and the unreal world exist side by side, thus highlighting the multifarious nature of reality. Both "The lie" and "Alternative realities are not true" deal with the meaning and search for the truth. Just as the collection contains stories featuring diverse themes and characters, those stories come in different shapes. Some, including "Dreaming of Byzantium", "Alternative realities are not true" and "Don Ki-Otah and the Ambiguity of Reading" are quite long and elaborate whereas others are what Okri himself refers to as "stokus" (an amalgam of short story and *Haiku*).

"Short stories", American short story writer Lorrie Moore (2015, par. 6) states, "are about trouble in the mind. A bit of the blues. Songs and cries that reveal the range and ways of human character. The secret ordinary and the ordinary secret. The little disturbances of man ... though a story may also be having a conversation with many larger disturbances lurking off-page". A story about a man's obsession with an ancient city, "Dreaming of Byzantium" fits that bill. The purpose of this article is to explore the way in which the dream episode in this particular story serves as a journey of self-discovery. It begins by drawing attention to Okri's views on journey and dream, two recurring motifs in his work. It then offers a close reading of the short story, paying particular attention to the interweaving between reality and unreality that appears to underpin the narrative. Analysis of the discourse and content of the dream episode may illuminate the nature of the self-discovery experience the main character gains at the end of the story.

It is now a commonplace, in speaking of Ben Okri, to observe, in the light of his interview with Vanessa Guignery (2015), that journey and dream are key motifs in his work. In the interview, Okri states that "[the] real journey takes place into stratas of consciousness, into Arcadias and anti-Arcadias. Journeys interest me" (1053). He goes on to explain:

If there's anything I like about the journey, it is its revelatory quality. It carries within it the reality of change. The person who leaves is not the same as the person who arrives. By its very nature journey lends itself to narrative, to analysis, and to revelation. A journey can be a physical vehicle for something more mysterious. Maybe the greatest problem with the novel is finding the right vehicle for the inner narrative to emerge. The inner narrative is what interests me. The outer form is an excuse. (1054)

The Famished Road and *In Arcadia*, to mention but two examples, bear evidence to this statement. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro's constant coming and going is spiritual. An abiku child, not only is he destined to die soon after his birth and be reborn to the same mother over and over again but he is also able to interact with spirits and see things other people do not see. Critics have been unanimous in identifying the road Azaro sees in one of his visions as a

metaphor for the journey to a better future Nigeria aspires to. In the words of Elleke Boehmer (2017: 153-154), “Not merely a path of life, or the way of the poor, it is the spaghetti junction of various planes of being, of dead, unborn and living, of spirits and ancestors. The road multiplies, reproduces itself, subdivides: it pullulates with mangled disproportionate bodies, mythical apparitions reminiscent of the stories of Amos Tutuola, manifestations of a world out of joint, of mysterious, inexorable corruptions”. For Elif Diler and Derya Emir (2016: 93), because years of building the road have yielded little tangible result, it is the subtext of this novel that the road in question leads to a future that will ultimately bring transformation that does not happen soon. As Fanny Monnier (2019, par. 1) rightly suggests, “Transformation may occur in two different spaces: in the outside world with political in-dependence, and within the self with the evolution of the characters – to which one should add transformation in the reader’s perspective”.

The journey motif is also central in *In Arcadia* (2002). Olusola Ogunbayo rightly reads the expedition to Arcadia by the six-person documentary film crew to the Peloponnese consisting of disillusioned individuals from diverse backgrounds who have been supported by a common benefactor as an illustration of “Okri’s myth of the search of lost origin, where the past is revisited, understood and deconstructed in order to project into the future” (2015: 92).

In another part of the interview referred to above, Okri speaks of the nature of dreaming. An important aspect of his conception of dreaming concerns the interplay between dream and reality. He sees dreams as no less objective than day-to-day reality. As he puts it:

When we fall asleep at night, or in the afternoon, we experience a complete universe, different from this but made up of its elements. It has its own logic. It is as real as anything that we experience here It is a world in which you live and you have your being (1057)

The difficulty of distinguishing between the dream world and the real world is well captured in his remarks that

What does it mean when we talk about the real world? When we talk about reality and the things that we see and hear and touch? Are we creating the world that we experience? Does the world exist utterly, separate from us? Is the world indeed as we perceive it to be? Or is it quite different? Is there any way of seeing the world as it really is, given the fact that we only experience it through our senses, and with the intermediary of our brains? All of these are crucial questions about the nature of reality. (1057)

Okri sees no binary opposition between dream and reality and has explained the use of dreams in his work as a way of expressing the link between reality and unreality. As he argues:

... If to dream is to inhabit a world with its own logic, a world as apparently real as the one we are living in, to re-dream is to take that capacity to a more conscious level. It implies that some aspect of us has a link to the core of reality itself. (1057)

Absent from this early explanation, perhaps because of its attempt at generalisation, is the clarification Okri brings on his concept of dreams in an interview with Robert Wood (2019, par. 13) about *The Freedom Artist*:

Bringing things back to a reality that we are not facing. There is an aspect of reality that is a dream in the sense that it is unreal to us. Dream for me has many meanings. There is a dream that is a source, a resource; a dream that is a homeland of the psyche. There is another dream, which is the dream of the world that is asleep. The word dream is like the word voice. It has many faces. *The Freedom Artist* is about the many faces of this dream, this nightmare.

This observation is particularly important in terms of the subject matter of the short story under analysis. As will become clear below, the dream scenes in the text depict the main character's psyche. The interplay between dream and reality, highlighted in Okri's interview with Guignery, is also prominently projected in "Dreaming of Byzantium", a typical Okrian narrative interspersed with accounts of crossings from one realm to another and one in which the distinction between dream and reality sometimes becomes completely blurred. The purpose of this article is not to belabour the fantastic elements of the short story, which include "situations and events that defy logic, distorted time and sequence, dispassionate narrative voice" (Craven 2019, par. 10, 13 & 14). Rather, it is to undertake a close reading of the short story in an effort to explore and analyse Okri's inscription of the dream as a journey of self-discovery.

It is pertinent to note early in this article that dreaming is a motif that Okri has used previously in his work, and most notably in *The Landscapes Within* (1981) and in *Dangerous Love* (1996), the second version of his second novel, as well as in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. Rosemary Gray (2018), in a powerfully argued article that discusses the use and effects of dreams in Okri's second novel, observes that

not only does the dream-inspired discourse predate both diegetic time and time of narration, but the narrative is also situated within a collective African unconscious. The novel is prefaced by two nightmarish dreams recorded in a real/fictive notebook; dreams which, in turn, become embedded in the text as a dreamtime echo of the novel's first climatic point at the end of Part One of this four-part novel. (76)

Gray goes on to note that "[t]hese dreams dictate the narrative thrust and tone of Okri's second novel ..." and that "Okri's imaginative rendering of the workings of the subconscious mind penetrates deeply into the narrative thread

and structure of *The Landscapes Within*, defining its section themes ... and culminating in the focal character's brief insight into the meaning of 'The Moment' (286)". What is instructive from Gray's analysis is the insight that the topic under discussion can usefully be approached from a structural angle as well as a discursive angle. (This point will be taken up later in the article where discussion will concentrate on the meaning of the final scene of the novel.) Another useful point: Whereas in *The Landscapes Within*, the dream serves as an element of remembrance, as Gray has shown in the article alluded to earlier, or as a "premonition of some sorts", in the words of Daria Tunca (2004: 92), it is as a journey motif that it is used in "Dreaming of Byzantium", as will become clear. Of relevance also to the argument of this article is Renato Oliva's (1999: 189) claims that for Okri dreaming is "itself action. Dreams can activate energies". Relaying this view, Adnan Mahmutović (2012: 167) observes that, in *The Famished Road*, "dreams are not social and not merely individual phenomena of the suppressed unconscious". Viewed in the context of this article, the discussion about dreaming in "Dreaming of Byzantium" becomes, in fact, a discussion about whether the man's dream has personal as well as social consequences.

It is also pertinent to note at this point the significance of the title of the short story. As historian Thomas Russel (2017: 205) notes, "It is widely assumed that the city [of Byzantium] was founded sometime in the seventh century BCA by Megara, or by a group of colonists led by Megararians" As Russel also reminds his readers, "On 11 May AD, Constantinople was consecrated; here the history of the city of Byzantium ends, and the history of the Byzantium empire begins" (246). So, before the narrative begins, its thrust is voiced loud and clear. The dreaming referred to in the narrative, the title implies, refers to something unreal. In the light of Okri's views on journey and dreaming in his interviews with Guinery and Wood alluded to above, this article examines the connection of this utopic dream to the journey of self-discovery motif that runs through the short story.

The significance of such a connection can be addressed most productively by a closer consideration of the ways in which the journey motif runs through the story. Structurally, "Dreaming of Byzantium" can be divided into three parts. Part one, which consists of Sections 1 to 5 set in the real world, describes the protagonist's journey into obsession. Part Two consists of Sections 6 to 20 and focuses on his dream experience. In Part three, which comprises Sections 21 and 22, narration returns to the real world. As will become clear, this narrative structure reflects Okri's intention to highlight different facets of the protagonist's experience through its focus on two worlds, the narrative suggests, that are intertwined and replace each other in the protagonist's mind.

Journey involves displacement, physical or spiritual. It evokes places, domains or worlds. It also involves destination. Byzantium is the main destination in the story, although an unrealistic one from the vantage point of

history. Journeys or travels also involve travellers. As David Levey (2005: 5) points out, journey is important “as not only a narrative of an actual movement of discovery, but also as a metaphor for individual and cultural change”. The protagonist in “Dreaming of Byzantium” is a man obsessed with an ancient city he has been dreaming of visiting for twenty years. But this dream that never materialised in the real world does so during sleep. The short story explores his experience through a simple story line: He meets a stranger in a café in his West London neighbourhood for the second time. After he returns home, he falls asleep and dreams that he is in the city of his dreams.

The first section of the story describes how the protagonist becomes obsessed with the desire to visit an ancient city. His preparation for the journey provides the short story with its starting point. His past is marked by failed attempts to fulfill his dream, a notion captured in the opening paragraph:

For a long time he had been trying to go to Byzantium. He had started the journey many times. For twenty years, he had been setting out at the same time of year. But whenever he set out the journey always became complicated. On one occasion he found himself in another city without knowing how he got there. The journeys took a life of their own. They took him not where he wanted to go, but where the journeys themselves wanted. (29)

The idea of Byzantium as a utopic destination becomes more “real” as can be seen in the following passage:

He had approached Byzantium as one approaches the stories of a famed kingdom beyond seven mountains. Only rare travellers return from it with gold-rimmed eyes. He had approached, but had been unable to find the gate by which to enter. (29-30)

The sarcasm of the above passage, captured in the words “unable to find the gate by which to enter”, forces the reader to take stock of the nature of the man’s obsession. His obsession with visiting an ancient city, nurtured by his excessive exposure to excessive information about it, including photographs, drawings, paintings, travellers’ tales and ancient legends, gave life to the dreamlike universe he inhabits, as revealed in the following passage:

Byzantium became a living place in his imagination. Is there anything more real than what we have created in our minds, with all the power of our imagination and ignorance?

Every day he went to this place that was on the margins of his mind. This place existed alongside his day work, his everyday tasks. (32)

It seems consistent with the general meaning of this story that, in the man’s mind, dreaming about an ancient city takes precedence over anything else in life. There is a sense of impatience in the passage above, signaled by the use

of the interrogative form, with what is equated with irresponsible behaviour. The journey motif in the context of this passage is brought to notice by the use of the verb “went”. Its metaphorical dimension is confirmed in the narrator’s observation that “Every day he went to this place that was on the margins of his mind”.

Predictably, the man’s obsession impacts not only his lifestyle but also the way he deals with people around him. The passage below highlights the way in which his obsession marks the point of his disjunction from reality.

Slowly he became a shadow in the city where he lived. The world ceased to notice him. He passed into daily insubstantiality. But in his dreams he acquired form and body and freedom.

He developed growing mastery of this secret domain. As he lost the city of the day, he gained the city of his dreams. (32)

It is in this state of mind that he meets a stranger in the café for the first time. The stranger, the reader learns, “had the air of a wandering magician. He could even have been a wizard. It was those piercing eyes. They saw through illusion” (34). Not only does the stranger’s overall appearance – his piercing dark eyes, strange dress and cavernous voice – and the changing mood in the café as a result of his presence contribute to the fantasy, but also the nature of the exchange they have:

“I see that you like the world misty”, he said.

“I do.”

“Too much reality, eh?”

“The world seems unreal.”

“What is real for you?”

“Far-off places that I cannot get to, dreams more real than fire.”

“So you too are haunted by unattainable dreams?” (33)

An important feature in the utterances in this scene is the introduction of the reality/unreality dichotomy that permeates the narrative discourse of “Dreaming of Byzantium”. The real world is presented as both different from and related to the unreal world. The use of the word “misty” to differentiate between them is illuminating.

When they meet in the café for the second time, the stranger, who had “a faraway look in his eyes, as if he were looking beyond the veil of the world” (36), engages the man in a conversation that once again revolves around the reality/unreality theme. When the stranger unexpectedly and bluntly asks the man: “Are you still haunted?” (36), he replies “Yes” (36). The stranger says: “I thought so” (36). When the man asks why, the stranger replies: “Unreality makes the world” (36). The man goes on to say: “I thought reality made the world” (37). The stranger emphatically replies: “Unreality makes reality” (37). The difference between the two worlds, the stranger insists, is between

a world that is made by reality and one that is made by unreality. Then he goes on to explain what has been wrong with the man's approach thus far. "You have not understood the power of your dreams or the gift of your obstacles" (37). And also: "You have been defeated by reality The only way to defeat reality is with unreality" (37). The alert reader would see the utterances in this scene and on the occasion of their first encounter as echoing the view Okri expresses in the interview with Vignery alluded to earlier that, in reality, there is no boundary between reality and unreality. At the end of the scene, the man agrees to the stranger's invitation to look him in the eyes and choose either the sword or the fire, and to reveal his choice to no one. "Now go home and we will see what happens", says the stranger before he disappears from the man's sight. Thus, seen in the general context of the story, this exchange serves to set the scene for the dream experience the man is about to live.

The man's dream is important in its structure as well as in its content, as will become clear. Predictably, the start of the man's journey into the unreal world coincides with his waking up in a luxurious Istanbul hotel, from where he would make his tour of Byzantium.

That night, unusually for him, he fell into a deep sleep. He had hardly touched his head when he was encompassed by the dark.

Next morning he woke in an alien bed. The room was new to him. He had the curious feeling of having been transported to a world that was mildly familiar. (38-39)

This passage illustrates the idea that both the real and the unreal worlds not only exist side by side but are actually intertwined, a notion highlighted in the previous scene. But soon enough, the distinction between reality and unreality slowly blurs. Contributing to the blurring of the lines is the phrase "mild familiarity", a clear reference to the "dreams" the man has been having, but also the presence of some of his own clothes in the room. However, he is not alone. He finds himself in the company of a woman, allegedly his wife, with whom he has made the trip to Istanbul and who, later, accompanies him in a tour of the city.

As the reader sees her through the man's eyes, the woman is described as "beautiful, in an unfamiliar way" (39). She "was not young and was not old" (39). She is also described as distant and cold at times, close and warm at another time, and condescending at some other times. Perhaps most significant is the fact that, especially at this stage of the story, she is presented in terms that suggest that Okri uses her as a magical tutelary figure, a kind of mediator between the real and unreal worlds in the same way he uses the stranger (apparently a magician) in the previous scenes: he in the role of the one who sends the man to the unreal world and she in the role of the one who welcomes him.

It is consistent with this role that she is the one who informs him that the posh hotel they are staying in is Raffles Istanbul Hotel. It is also significant

that when he first notices the woman's presence in the room, he discovers that she is an artist.

When he looked across at what she was doing he saw, to his surprise, that she had begun to fill out the spaces of a drawing. She sketched the shape of a minaret, with people in the background, and pine trees scattered in a small park. (40)

In portraying the woman in the room as an artist, who is able to paint the type of landscapes the man used to collect as part of his fascination with Byzantium, Okri effectively constructs her as a "dream" companion for the man. In the narrative, the woman is indeed positioned as a symbol of the blurring of boundaries between reality and unreality. The reader is here reminded that "every drawing" he saw in the real world about Byzantium was a hieroglyph. That Okri uses her as such a symbol is reflected in the fact that throughout his interactions with the woman, the man comes to notice that not only she is not always present in his world but that she also keeps changing shapes and colours.

With the inscription of Raffles Istanbul Hotel, a popular tourist destination and a symbol of modernity, as the entry point to the dream world, the journey motif assumes centre stage in the dream episode. A tour of the city is scheduled so that the man can fulfil the dream of a lifetime. The woman hands him a note from the concierge, inviting him "to go through an itinerary of places he wanted to visit in the city" (42). The narrative appears insistent that the kind of visits that Mr Oaza (as the man is known in the dream world) had in mind for his journey in the city is precisely what he and Nergis, the concierge, discuss: Beşiktaş, a ferry journey along the Bosphorus, the Dolmabahce Palace, the Hagia Sophia, etc.

As the drive round the city begins, Okri plays with and foregrounds the man's inner dreams. He does so by bringing on stage a character – the guide – who serves as a seer. The guide is very articulate about the man's misplaced expectations when he speaks to the man at the start of the tour:

"All who came here were changed by the dreaminess of the location. Four times the city has changed its name. And each of its names is a portal to one aspect of its dreams. Names are important here", said the guide, turning to stare at him.

"What do you mean?"

"To seek Byzantium is to seek a city hovering above this one, a legend half lost among cathedrals and ruins. It is like seeking to live in a poem. No one who finds it escapes." (49)

The guide's remarks, in the passage above, illustrate how emphasis is laid on dreams associated with the changing names of the city as well as on the legends and magic associated with the various civilisations that shaped it.

Implicit in the guide's reminder is the suggestion that the man himself may have fallen prey to the same degree of ignorance and naivety like the other tourists. As if to prove the point, the guide's evocation of the names associated with the history of the city as they drive alongside the Bosphorus sends Mr Ozara off in a dream. In the dream, he is metamorphosed into "the Sultan's palace with its centuries of Ottoman rule, its gold-leaf ceiling, its crystal and mahogany staircase, its magnificent carpets, and the room in which time is frozen, where Atatürk died" (51). Metamorphosis, as Kathie Birat (2015: 1074) notes, is a motif that Okri frequently uses "to explore the proximity of the real and spirit worlds". But this is not the only time the man falls into a slippage during the tour of the city, and in his dream as a whole.

The inscription of the dream as a journey of self-discovery is suggested through the way Ozara's visit to Istanbul in his dream is marked by a succession of slippages. Indeed, the dream episode is replete with instances where Ozaa falls into slippages, thus accentuating the sense of unreality and fantasy prevailing throughout his dream experience. Maurice O'Connor (2017: 193) writes, explaining one of the difficulties in reading Okri's texts: "... the reader is asked to hold in suspension a series of seemingly disconnected events and only towards the close of the narrative may a fruitful interpretation emerge". The profuse number of slippages in the dream episode can partly be ascribed to this technique.

An especially clear instance of slippages occurs at the herbal shop, on Asmaalti Caddesi where Ozaa and the woman who is his wife are drinking red tea. The shop owner asks him whether he has found Byzantium yet. The implication does not go unnoticed by Ozaa, who once more falls into slippage.

He found himself in a bazaar. Then he was in a shop looking at scarves and wraps. Then he was in a restaurant, drinking ayran. Then he had a vision of domes and spires against a deep blue sky. Birds were circling the spires. All the while the guide was talking about the city. (56)

Even the woman was a cause for slippages: "Sometimes she appeared small, other times she appeared tall. Sometimes her hair was blonde, other times red. She too was a slippage, but she was always the same beneath her changing forms". (57)

And again, this scene in the Balıkçı Sabahattin fish restaurant:

Later, when they were walking down the street, he saw an old house, "she was telling him about her life in a narrative of spices and blue clothes". Her words turned into yellow birds in his mind. They were the lost fragrance of golden incense. (57-58)

Abdelkader Ben Rhit's argument (2019: 58) about this type of scene in Okri's work, and particularly in *The Famished Road*, is illuminating. As he explains,

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This constant drawing of the two worlds, their colliding and their co-existence form the nature of the story, its contents and its forms: the fantastic and the real, the concrete and the symbolic, and the unceasing of the coming and going from and to them.

The slippage scenes in the dream episode – and indeed the whole dream episode – are good examples of Rhit's idea of Okri's mode of representation of the intertwining of the real and the unreal in his work. The focus on reality and unreality in the short story under discussion is also visible in the woman's utterances during her conversations with Oaza. Notice, for example, the exchange between Oaza and the woman in a café near the Golden Horn. While drinking tea, he notices yet another change in the woman's appearance. "She was different but the same" (53). He asks her who she really is.

"I am a dream that you had once and will have again."

"A dream I had once?"

"Before your obsession with Byzantium",

A smile trembled on her lips.

"If you like, I am the dream of Byzantium itself."

"How?"

"In the world in which you dwell, a castle can become a song. This city is full of dreams and here dreams can become things. But things can also become dreams. I half understand you."

"There are many realities in this place. In which reality do you want to live?"

(53-54)

The woman's declaration of relativity, crucial to the story, refers to Oaza's metamorphosis in his slippage into the Sultan's castle. But it refers, generally, to "the constant drawing of the two worlds, their colliding and their co-existence" Rhit refers to. Notice also the woman's utterance – "dreams can become things (but) things can also become dreams" – which suggests the lack of boundaries, and therefore, easy transition between the dream world and the "real" world. Her revelation that she is the dream that he once had and will have again would prompt the attentive reader to see in this passage the terms of Okri's inscription of the man's dream as the search for something or someone else. When, at the end of the exchange, Oaza asks the woman if he could live the reality of red and yellow spices in the nearby shops, she suggests that is possible only if he can do what he does best, that is, to dream.

The particular importance of the notion that "a dream can be the highest point of a life" (as stated in *The Famished Road*, 500) is also apparent in the exchange below between Oaza and the woman later at dinner at the hotel.

"I can only be here when you dream me", the woman with him said, after they ordered.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"If you forget to dream me I won't be here."

“Why not?”

“It is the law of the world in which we meet”. (59)

In order for reality to materialise, the text seems to insist, it must be “preceded” by a dream. The woman goes on to say: “I am how I am because of how you are. Mutually, we create our reality (59).” And also: “There are worlds where we meet but don’t know it (59).” This exchange is one of the several reminders in the text that, in reality, there is no boundary between the real world and the unreal world.

The exchanges between the man and the woman, the insistent reference to dreams and the multiple instances of metamorphosis his dreaming brings about – all these elements validate the significance of the man’s dream as a journey of self-discovery. The idea that the narrator conceives the beginning of a new era in the man’s life as coinciding with the end of the dream is brought to notice in Sections 22 and 23. These last two sections take the reader back to the real world. Shortly after waking from the dream, the protagonist revisits the café. He meets the stranger and wants to know if the experience he had was a dream or real. The stranger’s suggestion that he buys the man a ticket to Istanbul so that when he is back he can tell which is more real fits with the underlying notion that “unreality makes the world real”, a point made repeatedly and emphatically by the woman in the dream.

The narrative ends with the man’s wandering in the streets of a northern city, three months later. The context of the final chapter is noteworthy. Attracted by the sound of the aria from Johann Sebastian Bach’s Goldberg Variations emanating from a building, the man decides to take a look, only to find that it was a ballet class in progress. The reader is here returned to the narrator’s repetitive references to Bach’s Goldberg Variations made in the dream episode. A short selection is listed below:

As head touched the pillow, he went off into another slippage. The woman was no longer there. In her place was Bach’s Goldberg Variations, played upon an invisible piano. Suddenly he was not himself any longer. (60)

He woke to find himself in the Hagia Sophia. He had no idea how he got there. The guide was not with them. He felt in the cathedral a great sense of spaciousness. He felt the woman with him, but he could not see her. She was with him in fragments of the Goldberg variation that was floating about him in the air. (61)

The aria from the Goldberg Variations was in the air again. He listened to it while he looked at the sprawl of houses across the city. The city had become the music. (64)

Such references to Bach’s musical composition, made mostly in association with the woman in the dream, suggest a connection between her and the woman playing the piano in the scene described at the end of the story.

This brings the discussion on the centrality of the dream as a journey of self-discovery. That love is a major motif in the dream episode is evident from a number of conversations between Oaza and the woman who claims to be his wife. When, in their conversation in the Asian side of town, he tells the woman that he has missed her, her reaction is swift: "You can't have missed me or I would be there (64)". Then she pursues: "Do you know how strange it is to not be the centre of your loving attention?" (64). And also in the Çiya restaurant, near the Eminönü Pier, the man's question to the woman as to why she speaks so little and her response that "It's better to listen" leads them to a series of observations about love, as can be seen from the following extract:

"I can hear a woman thinking that it is easier for her to love someone she does not know".
 "Really?"
 "Yes"
 "What else can you hear?"
 "I can hear a widower thinking that we meet people late in their personal story and that is where the difficulty of loves comes from. What can you hear?"
 "I can hear a student thinking that we fall in love with a woman's face and are often disenchanted with the character behind it".
 "Many women are thinking that too about men."
 "Some survive disenchantment and discover true love."
 "True love can only come after disenchantment." (66-67)

It is clear from this extract that both characters share in an awareness of the social and moral causes that lead to disenchantment in romantic relationships. The narrator's voice endorses theirs, implicated as it is in the recurrent association of dream and reality.

Reading the last scene of the story in which the man recognises the woman at the piano, the attentive reader is reminded of the episode in the Asian side of the city in which he was in a waiting room with a woman "practising tango steps to music in her headset". It is revealing that "He slipped into someone's mind and didn't know how. It was a man thinking of his girlfriend. That morning he realised he could not live without her, he realised also that one morning he would commit suicide and it would never be clear why he had done it, because all the evidence showed that he should have been happy" (65). One observes from the narratorial discourse in this passage that it alerts the reader to the possible association between the dreaming subject and the subject in the dream. If as the narrator states, "As if he were experiencing what the Gnostics called the multiplicity and oneness of being, he was always something different and yet the same" (60), then it becomes clear that Okri implies that such a possibility exists.

The last scene is a pivotal one in terms of the journey of discovery motif in the short story. Here the man is brought to the realisation that his reality before the dream is being replaced by a new reality. To put it in another way, in

“Dreaming of Byzantium” the boundary between the real and the unreal is a simple dream. The point is that, in this allegorical journey to wholeness, the obsessive dream that characterised the man’s lifestyle is displaced and even erased in order to highlight a more realistic vision of life. It is not until the end of the short story, when the man wakes up from his dream and the obsession with Byzantium fades away, that the reader makes sense of the complex representation of the dream experience as a journey of discovery.

As may have become clear, “Dreaming of Byzantium” is a universal parable about life in which human beings are reconciled with their pasts as portrayed through the protagonist’s reconciliation with his own past. Indeed, through his dream experience the main character is taken back to a time in his life he has forgotten, a time the pianist’s stunning rendition of the Goldberg Variations appears to take him back to. The reader is left to wonder who this pianist is to the man. The dream marks the end of his obsession to visit an unreal world and the beginning of a more realistic approach to life. It represents a psychological bridge uniting the multiples spaces of the man’s identity. This further confirms the view expressed by Kaustav Kundu (2018: 125) that Okri uses dreams as “vehicles of hope, which have the ability to offer a new reality to people.”

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