



Glocal Colloquies

For publication details, please visit:

<http://glocalcolloquies.com/>

In Conversation with Ben Okri: A Personal Interview

De, Asis

Mahishadal Raj College

West Bengal, India

ademrc@gmail.com

Published online: 09 May 2015.

To cite this article: De, Asis. "In Conversation with Ben Okri: A Personal Interview." *Glocal Colloquies* 1.1 (2015): 246-251. Web

Glocal Colloquies is a non-profit, international, double-blind, peer reviewed, refereed, open access E-journal. The journal is an initiative to create a shared space for scholars to engage in trans-cultural global literary conversations. The journal publishes critical and scholarly writings, interviews, book reviews on literatures and cultures from across the globe.

* The manuscript uploaded here cannot not be retransmitted or redistributed without written permissions from the paper's publisher/author. However, it can be used for research, teaching, and other academic purposes as long as it is properly acknowledged.

Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and the views of the author(s), and are not the views of or endorsed by **Glocal Colloquies.

De, Asis
Department of English Language and Literature
Mahishadal Raj College, West Bengal, India

In Conversation with Ben Okri: A Personal Interview
(Press Lounge, Jaipur Literature Festival, 23 January, 2012, 3:00 pm)



Jaipur literary festival needs no introduction to avid readers across the globe. Rather it can be defined as a rendezvous between creative authors and their audience. I had gone to Jaipur to be a part of this churning of the sea of literature. Out of it came the day, when the famous British-Nigerian writer Ben Okri was about to give his public appearance. It was the third Saturday of the year 2012 and I sat counting the ticktocks with a peculiar numbness to see my dream come true — the time was perhaps propitious as I was writing my PhD dissertation, which contained a substantial chapter on Okri's fiction. The ceremonious day came to a close—the public appearance on the main pavilion, the book-signing episode and finally the press-meet of the writer, which presented me with an opportunity to appear before him with a request for a personal interview, with all probability of being refused. But in Okri's endearing smile, the gods of Africa smiled too. And what followed was an anxious scholar's conversation with the prophet of words.

AD: Egudu – a character in J. M. Coetzee’s *The Novel in Africa*, says “You have read Tutuola. Now read my countryman Ben Okri. Amos Tutuola’s is a very simple, very stark case. Okri’s is not. Okri is an heir of Tutuola’s, or they are the common ancestors, but Okri negotiates the contradictions of being himself for other people in a much more complex way. Read Okri. You will find the experience instructive.” How would you like to explain it? How a novelist or the tone of the narrative becomes instructive?

BO: I don’t think the novelist sets out to instruct and anyway...Let’s just say the direct instructions in novels, is doubtful. I think novels instruct indirectly. They instruct by structure, by edification of the consumption of characters and events; they instruct symbolically, they instruct by the alternative angle taken to reality. They instruct by even not instructing. I don’t think that the Novelist’s job is to instruct. Even though Achebe said, very earlier on that—‘the novelist is a teacher’—it’s not a point of view I totally agree with. I agree with it in terms of specific necessities of Africa, a point—to look for where they came from, and what their history was? A novel is always situated at a particular time, and at a particular historical moment. Past that moment, the novel has to take on much wider responsibilities, like—responsibility of paradox, responsibility of surprise, responsibility of indirection, responsibility of irresponsibility, responsibility of reverence, invasion. The novelist takes much more complicated, much more shaded, much more graded, much more ambiguous roles. So, to instruct not deliberately is right... instruction is drawn from the reader’s view. That’s the reader’s business.

AD: Sir, often you love to talk and write about Dream and the act of Dreaming. How do you like to see it?

BO: I think Dream is definitely a parallel of existence, a quality of life. A dream is not just something we do sleeping. Dreaming is something we do as perpetually living in the mysteriousness of human condition. Being alive, compared to dream --- was like life. There is a sleep, and then there is an awake. I think dream is one of the greatest parts of life itself. Dream is life, particularly because it is to see the self in the strange mirror of consciousness. For that reason dream has an important relationship with fiction. The novel, fiction itself is in a sense, humanity’s way of dreaming as every novel you read is a parallel of reality. It is like a dream and to read a book itself is to dream, imagining something in a parallel way. Between dream and fiction there is great affinity.

AD: Childhood in your fiction seems to be a period of bliss. How would you like to differentiate between the childhood of any normal child and the childhood of a spirit-child?

BO: The childhood of a normal child is normal. The childhood of spirit child is ... Well, when I say that the childhood of a normal child is normal, I mean normal with all of its richness, of all its contradictions under the reality. Although it is to be said that most children have something of the spirit child. Most children are themselves the first time visitors to this reality. I have encountered childhood all over the world and I have noticed that children perceive this reality quite different from the way adults perceive it. They see things that we don’t see any more. But the spirit child is somebody who

carries the awareness of death in him. They carry the sense of the presence of the spirits around them. So for them childhood is more fraught with a constant dialogue of life and death. With a normal child the problem of living is not central. The normal child lives normally. For the spirit child every day is a choice between living and dying. If it is a bad day, they die, they just go. So every day is existential for a spirit child.

AD: In the question of identity, for example, Azaro, we find him to navigate between the realities of the spirit world and the world of the reality. How would you like to interpret this negotiation of identity or identities?

BO: It's not identities. It's one identity. That's the important point. It doesn't have two identities, but he has one identity, in which two realities come together—the reality of history and the reality of eternity come together at the centre; and the experience is, at the centre of these two realities. If you can imagine two circles that intersect one another, he is always at the middle point of the intersection. It has one unified identity of the spirit, which is why his tone of voice and what he sees is so unique, which is why he was useful for me in the novel to explore all the secrets invisible, visible realities of Africa.

AD: To accommodate better in a new cultural space, one should negotiate with his/her identity and compromise (may not in full) with his/her cultural past. Do you agree?

BO: I agree and I disagree at the same time, because I think life is a negotiation of one's past, whatever a past is, wherever he finds himself. Life is always a negotiation of identity and reality, life is a negotiation of self and other, life is a negotiation of memory and reality. We're always surrendering to an act of negotiation. We are always negotiating identities. There is a stronger negotiation at express in the novel of a culture. I don't think that you negotiate with only your past. I think it's that you modify the relationship between your past and present. You modify, but don't exterminate it. It can't be exterminated. It's just modified, because that's why we human beings are perpetually adapting creatures; society shapes and moulds us, our world, time and history, it's constantly doing that... nobody can remain unmoulded and unshaped and unchanged. And I also think there is bit of a danger in including too much with the idea of identity. I think identity is a fluid and not a fixed thing. I think the whole idea of a fixed identity has given rise to many different kinds of complex and wars in the world.

AD: Please say something about the title of your novel *In Arcadia*.

BO: Yes (smiles), what do you mean to say?

AD: I mean this very 'in'-ness, of being 'in' a mental kind of...

BO: Yes, I know, I know and... I am surprised that you noticed that and I am very pleased that you noticed that! Well... the novel is a journey to Arcadia made by these eight characters as part of a filming experience. One of the points I'm trying to do in the novel, is to show how a journey towards an idea changes you. As you make that journey towards an idea, held in the mind long enough as a journey, or a sort of

pilgrimage even if we disagree with it, you are changed behind. In a sense, we are changed by the ideas we are working with. One of the ideas is a sense that there are ‘scenes’ of arcadia in life. Arcadia, in a sense is not a place. It’s not necessarily a place that you go to. It’s a state of mind, it’s a condition that you reach; it’s a state of spirit, a state of harmony, even of understanding, even state of equilibrium between all the different tensions. And so the title is implying that Arcadia is not some way that you get to. You’re already there, you’re already in it, if you realize. Some are in Arcadia, some are out Arcadia, but everybody in the book, every character at some point goes through an Arcadian moment because it’s impossible to live, to go to life without moving into some Arcadian moments.

AD: Please say something about the meanings of names of some of your characters—Azaro, Ade, Koto, or Lao, Malasso or any proper name you like to tell me about.

BO: Ade just means in Yoruba — something like ‘I have come’, ‘I have returned today’. Ade actually has in it a reincarnative implication. Azaro is a contraction and a corruption of Lazarus, and again it’s a hazard with life and death, the reincarnation aspect.

AD: In the sixth Book of *The Famished Road*, Dad—the ‘Black Tyger’ fights with yellow Jaguar, the dead boxer. What is the symbol behind?

BO: With the Yellow Jaguar, it is the interpolation of the world of the spirits into the world of the living through the height of consciousness. It is also a suggestion that the greatest battles, the real battles that take place, are not physical. They take place in a different realm.... It is also the contest of spirits.

AD: The journey motif, the metaphor of Road --- all are too significant in your novels. In chapter ten of the seventh Book of *The Famished Road*, Dad says ‘KEEP THE ROAD OPEN’(555), and again in the chapter one of the eighth Book, he says ‘A road that is open is never hungry’ (571). After a while, in the same chapter Dad again says— ‘All roads lead to death, but some roads lead to things which can never be finished. Wonderful things.’ (572). By the phrase ‘Wonderful things’ do you mean our dreams, inspirations and the arts of being and becoming?

BO: Yes, possibly for the reason that dreams transcend time. We say often, we have dreams, we have visions, and they’re confined to time, as it narrates to a motive space of 5years, 10 years. You hear of 10 year plans, 5year plans. But every time it is possible to have dreams and visions that goes on walking beyond time spans. It is also a hint. There are the physical dreams, physical visions, but there also may be wants of the mind, wants of the spirit, of culture, history, or a nation ... starting to realize the forgotten dreams of the society. It is meant to hint so many things.

AD: Say something about the character of Mum, the sincere, struggling guardian figure, who sometimes suffers from obsession, and even madness, and again becomes the somber, soft, loving and caring mother at the end of the trilogy.

BO: Mum, the mother—she represents in a way one aspect of the river, of the imagination, and of the continuity. Father represents energy, reality. Mother represents spirit. But it's not really Mum, you should be looking at in relation to that—it's the Great Mother that is at the back of *The Famished Road*. It's the Great Mother.

AD: What would you like to say about the beginning of *Infinite Riches*? Is it simply the beginning of 'the end' (i.e. the last of the *TFR* trilogy) as Dad says?

BO: It's impossible to say! I don't believe in endings.

AD: At the end of *Infinite Riches*, the last chapter doesn't have any title and that is basically a poem. What's your opinion about it?

BO: Because there's a structure in the trilogy, that people have not quite understood. It's a trick. It follows the structure—*The Famished Road* is childhood, *Songs of Enchantment* is middle age, *Infinite Riches* is old age. *The Famished Road* is youth, maturity and old age in three books. But there is also the three periods of Africa, three periods of the civilization of the land. It is the earliest period when it sprouts; there is the major period when it develops; then the period when it dies, crumbles. So in a sense there are two kinds of music—music of Africa's past, music of Africa's future, which is called post-colonialism, that's always been meted. With *The Famished Road* you see the sense of the dying of old Africa. There's a famous saying that when a fruit is at its ripe then it is closer to its death—that's why it is called *Infinite Riches*—it's almost the beginning of the departing spirits of the land. In this sense it's a tragedy. So there are many layers of the trilogy. It's not a sequel, they are the layers of investigation—it's a kind of meditation on triplicities. The first book is childhood, meditation and imagination. The second book is an enchantment of song and the spirit. The last book, *Infinite Riches* is of history, in a sense of history being born and of history dying. It becomes a poem at the end because at the moment of the birth into its new reality, just before it is born into its new reality, it transcends history. That's why it becomes poetry, because prose belongs to history and poetry belongs to something beyond history.

AD: The journey in *In Arcadia* begins from Waterloo station. Hunting of life's treasure begins from a place historically connected with the defeat of Napoleon and a turning point of modern history. What about this choice?

BO: Very good question. One of the things that interested me in *In Arcadia* is the movement of man through reality which is seamed with historical presences to moments, in which the intersection of eternity and history is my meditation in *In Arcadia*, mediated through art. So of course it has its start from the Waterloo station, because for me it's a concrete condensation of a historical moment. So it starts from a

defeat and ends verily in the Louvre, in the art gallery. That is why the journey in *In Arcadia* starts with a memory of a defeat and ends in a painting.

AD: The journey of *In Arcadia* begins in August (p.66). You have also written a short story named 'The Dream Vendor's August'. Do you have any particular fascination for August? (I should admit my debt to Prof. Pietro Deandre of University of Turin, who asked a similar question to Okri as early as in 1990. But *In Arcadia* has been published in 2002. I found a simple coincidental link only.)

BO: What month is August in the calendar year? (Smiles) It's the eighth. (Smiles again and asks for my notebook. Then writes the numerical digit 8 on the page and continues moving the pen on the number, as a child practises writing numeric numbers!) Now see! (He stops moving the pen at the point where the two circles meet to form the number 8). One is the world of reality, and the other beyond our known reality, converging at this point (Smiles again and leaves me mesmerized). There are eight characters in the novel (smiles again).

AD: My last question on this novel. *In Arcadia* shows a mingling of first person and third person narration. Is it your purposive opening up of multiple points of views to Arcadia? Or what it is?

BO: Yes, to open up multiple points of view to Arcadia. Again, it's not just to open up point of views to Arcadia. It's the way in which Arcadia opens point of views to us as well. Each character in a way is emblematic of an aspect of reality. So, therefore, the image seems of eight people travelling to Arcadia, but it's actually one person.

AD: Thank you Ben for your patience and the care you have shown in answering my questions. Now this is the final question, with which I would wrap up. What are your views on Education and Culture?

BO: The true purpose of *EDUCATION* should be to awaken human genius. *CULTURE* is a secret ingredient in civilization. It is the frozen things we bring with us from the past transformed by the ever-living fire of the mystery of being.

*The abbreviations used in this interview are the initials of Ben Okri (**BO**) and Asis De (**AD**).

Acknowledgement

I must express my deep gratitude to Mr. Kamal Bangal, Assistant teacher of English, NaikuriThakurdas Institution for accompanying me and making videography of the interview. I am also indebted to everyone, who helped me in transcribing the interview and its repeated checking.

Asis De is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of English Language and Literature at Mahishadal Raj College, West Bengal, India
