

## DISORDER IN THE POSTCOLONY<sup>1</sup>

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### RESUME

La littérature africaine anglophone, francophone ou lusophone est très proche des réalités politiques et socio-économiques du continent noir. Ainsi des écrivains comme Ben Okri et Soni Labou Tansi, dans les deux romans sur lesquels porte cet article comparatif décrivent le désordre qui caractérise la société africaine postcoloniale et ainsi expriment leurs préoccupations socio-politiques. Bien que les deux auteurs utilisent des tons différents, leur objectif commun est de voir émerger une nouvelle Afrique.

**Mots-Clés:** Afrique, pouvoir, désordre, théorie postcoloniale, dystopie

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### ABSTRACT

*African literature, be it Anglophone, Francophone or Lusophone is very close with the political and socio-economic realities of the black continent. Writers such as Nigerian Ben Okri and Congolese Soni Labou Tansi, in the two novels discussed in this comparative paper describe the disorder that characterizes the African postcolonial society and thus voice their socio-political concerns. Although both writers use different tones, they have a common objective: the advent of a new Africa.*

**Keywords:** Africa, power, disorder, postcolonial theory, dystopia

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1 I will be using this term to mean the postcolonial state or the former colony

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional preoccupation of African literature has been with the question of cultural identity. In what Simon Gikandi referred to as “the archeological impulse,” African literature aimed at creating a “sense of connection with the original community, and appealed to the background of African traditional life and history” (76). Abiola Irele says that “it was a way of repositioning the collective self in a willed act of renewed self apprehension which ultimately should lead to the deregulation of the western paradigm” (73). Writers such as Achebe, Senghor, and Camara Laye just to name a few have worked in that sense. Their works aimed at showing an alternative African worldview, self-sufficient enough to relativize western culture and contest its hegemony.<sup>2</sup>

Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* and Soni Labou Tansi’s *La vie et demie*, the two texts on which this paper is based, are not to be read in that vein. Both novels could be classified in another major trend of African Literature judiciously referred to as “a new realism” by Abiola Irele, a new realism which although inherent in the traditional nationalist project distances itself from the Africanist discourse and questions the African societies themselves (Irele 77), given the disorder that characterizes them, because in the two texts mentioned above, the writers’ purpose is justified by the disorder that characterizes the societies.

Disorder can be defined as a “lack of order, a state of confusion, or else a breach of public peace or a riot” (*Webster’s New World College Dictionary*).<sup>3</sup> In *The Famished Road* and *La vie et demie*, disorder is so prevalent that it seems to be the norm, and order the exception. One could thus speak of an aesthetic of disorder; a form of writing, or of art where the world seems upside down. In this paper I contend that the aesthetic of disorder is for both Ben Okri and Soni Labou Tansi a means of expressing socio-political concerns. I will show the manifestations of disorder first in Ben Okri and next in Soni Labou Tansi. Then I will give a tentative explanation of that aesthetic. Since in my

2 Chinua Achebe said that his mission as a writer was to African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and value, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. (In Gikandi 381)

3 Jonathan Marshall argues that a disorder can sometimes be beneficial and as such should be tolerated by a representative democracy for the latter to function (2010, 1). I concede this point, but here I am talking about a form of disorder that is really disruptive and which, as he admits, is deadly disruptive since it can impinge on ‘human rights’.

sense, disorder in Africa definitely results from a problematic adjustment to a certain postcoloniality, postcolonialism will be my frame of analysis. So an initial discussion of this notion is necessary.

## I- POSTCOLONIALITY AND DISORDER

Postcolonialism or postcolonial theory is a critical position from which to deconstruct colonialism's past self-representations and legitimating strategies. In the same vein, it posits as its goal the study of the postcolonial condition, which is a set of circumstances directly or indirectly related to colonialism, imperialism, or any other form of relationship characterized by oppression and domination. As suggested above, one aspect of the aftermath of colonialism (and subsequent colonization) in Africa is the difficulties (that) many postcolonies on the continent have been confronted with in their task of nation building. And these difficulties have often been symbolized by various forms of disorder.

For Cameroonian sociologist Achille Mbembe, disorder seems to be inscribed at the core of the postcolony "[d]isorder is part of a set of particular signs that confer on the current African age its character of urgency, its distinctive mark, its eccentricity, its vocabulary, and its magic; and makes it both a source of terror, astonishment, and hilarity at once" (15). He goes on to say that "the postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion...also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that are in place, and constitute a distinctive regime of violence " (102).

The above traits constitute what I referred to earlier as the postcolonial condition which, applied to the African continent can be summed up as a state of multidimensional excessive disorder and confusion, which are reflected both in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Soni Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie*. Ben Okri's novel shows a society expecting a major event, independence. It is a society in transition, a period fraught with uncertainty where power struggles are already present with their corollaries of violence and subsequent poverty. The book is replete with the germs of the future troubles of the post-independence period. As for Soni's novel, it is the story of the failed independence of an African country under the yoke of a ruthless dynasty of dictators. Although disorder in that book sometimes lends itself to laughter, it is nonetheless terrifying and extreme.

## II- DISORDER IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

Ben Okri's novel is set in an unidentified African country, in the period immediately preceding its independence. The actions of this plotless novel revolve around Azaro, a boy, who is the main character. He witnesses all of the events that take place in the novel. In the text, disorder is caused by groups competing for power. We are on the eve of independence; politicians and their supporters are organizing campaigns and rallies to convince people to vote for them; and gifts are one of their favorite means of seduction. In the novel, a milk distribution by the Party of the Rich creates a commotion in a poor neighborhood. People are impatient and cannot wait for their turn to receive the milk:

The women's kerchiefs were torn off, shirts were ripped apart, milk spilt everywhere and powdered the faces of the women and children. With their sweating, milk-powdered faces they looked like starving spirits (124)

And the milk turns out to be spoiled, later creating a further disorder:

*Women screamed that they had been poisoned and said they had crabs clawing around in their intestines. Children seared the evening with the livid heat of their weeping. The refrain of vomiting began.... All the jollity and good feeling of Sunday gave way to groans, to cries of incomprehension.... This went on all evening. The compound became a place of vomiting; the tenants vomited at the house fronts, along the passage, in the toilet, outside the bathroom and the sound itself seemed catching. (130)*

The scene of confusion and the symbolism of decay expressed by the two quotes are both indicative of the poverty, the lack of cohesion and the state of disintegration of the society in question. We are at the end of a long colonial rule and not much has been done for the indigenous people, because economically, the colonial system was an externally oriented one. Also, those who are getting ready to take over from the white rulers seem morally unprepared for the challenges resulting from independence. Making people fight for spoilt milk probably, in an obscene way, increases the donors' sense of power. On this eve of independence, one can here recognize the germs of a typical characteristic of African postcolonial states, what Mbembe calls "the violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness" (115).

In *The Famished Road* disorder is also caused by individuals who are simply idle and as a result are ready to fight for no reason and under any circumstance.

*In the diabolical heat of that afternoon, six illegitimate sons of minor war lords enacted a battle of ascendancies....They were disinterested enemies. They went on lashing and bearing the whips. Then one of them broke the spell, caught the other's whip, and they both grappled, fell rolling on the ground, their backs covered with blood and sand. It became impossible to tell what party they supported, what codes they were fighting for, or what was the purpose of their battle....They are the madmen of our history,' one of the inhabitants on the street said. 'They are just waiting for a crazy war to come along.' (192-193)*

This example shows individuals who, as a result of a lack of education and orientation, cannot come to terms with life in an ordered modern society. Their loyalty does not primarily go to the state, but to individuals or people they relate to on another basis. Adebayo Williams writes in *this* regard that “the nascent civil society is thus trapped between a postcolonial state and a resilient traditional authority which still commands the allegiance of the majority of the people” (361). These individuals are the potential tools that will be used by political criminals in their search for power. Here also, on this eve of independence, are the germs of armed organizations, official or semi-official, specialized in the use of force and charged with administering violence; they are used in the establishment and re-establishment of authoritarian rule in postcolonial Africa (83).

In sum, in *The Famished Road*, disorder is socio-political, and it is created by future political authorities and also by individuals who enjoy confusion for its own sake. Looking at all this rampant violence on the eve of independence, Azaro the main character apprehends the future of the country, precisely its forthcoming independence period as a time of further confusion, dominated by bandits:

*The thugs whipped themselves into future eras. They whipped themselves into future military passions. They thrashed the women and the children alike... under the fears of their new ascendancy, the certainty of their long future rule, and their inevitable transformations into men of power, the thugs made the air crackle with their contempt for those of us in the outer darkness, whose faces all seemed like one, and who threatened the party with nothing but chaos. (451)*

This disorder seems even to extend to socioeconomic realities:

*There were stalls of goods everywhere, and filling the air with the smells and aromas of the market place, the rotting vegetables, the fresh fruits, the raw meat, roasted meat, stinking fish, the feathers of wild birds and the stuffed parrots, the wafting odors of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow-dung and sahelian perfume and pepper-bursts which heated the eye balls and tickled the nostrils. And just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of objects. (161)*

This disorder in Ben Okri's novel is seen by Ben Obumsele as the author's vision of the human world as a whole: "[It] is an obscene jungle in which the individual is lost and incapable of achieving rationality" (29). As much as this reflection is true, I would suggest that it would be more applicable to the postcolonial world in general and to Africa in particular, because on the Black continent, disorder is often so totally self-destructive that one wonders if people are governed by reason.

### III- LA VIE ET DEMIE : FROM DISORDER TO DYSTOPIA

Like Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Soni Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie* is set in an imaginary African country called Katalamanasie. The novel is powered by conflicts existing mainly between the Guides (local name for the presidents) and Martial's ghost, the defunct opposition leader and his supporters. In this novel Azaro's prediction comes true. Those who wanted power before independence are now in power as life presidents or military rulers, with no other object than to rule at all costs. Actually, Africans...had only exchanged monkeys for baboons (Williams 353).

In *La vie et demie*, Soni takes disorder to such an unspeakable level that one might refer to the novel as a dystopia<sup>4</sup>. Here are gathered all of Mbembe's characteristic signs of the current African postcolonial state that makes it at once "a source of terror, astonishment and hilarity" (108). One would speak here of dystopic disorder, a disorder that results from the social, political and moral re-

4 The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines Dystopia (or anti utopia) as an imaginary place or state where people are usually afraid because they are not treated fairly, where they are dehumanized and live fearful lives.

percussions of the different Guides' ridiculous decisions. At one point the Guide bans the "black color" in the country because of the indelible black blood stain he has on one side of his face. After his girl friend leaves him and disappears, the Guide submits all the citizens to a systematic intimate search. The police are ordered to arrest anyone with a cross at the beginning of the hips, for the girl had one in that area of her body. Also, all the guides that replace each other as head of the country have a sexual activity that is way out of proportion. For example, one of the guides has an annual two weeks of "sexual" meditation during which fifty virgins keep him company, a ritual that lasted for forty years and produced hundreds of children. This shows the "penis" as one of the classic ingredients of power and control in the former colony (Mbembe 125).

At a more dreadful level, when a guide hears that the country has been nicknamed "enfer" (hell), he organizes a hunt for the word "enfer" wherever it can be found. This particular decision culminates in the murder of hundreds of priests and pastors and the shooting of a congregation that sang a hymn including the (word "hell," or again ordering the burning of any book containing that same word....(135)

Further confusion stems from a direct clash between government and opposition. crowd where the ghost of opposition leader has been spotted, resulting in the following spectacle:

*Tout le monde fuyait. Les vivants, les morts, les près-de-mourir, les va-pas-s'en-tirer, les entiers, les moitiés, les membres, les morceaux que la rafale continuait à poursuivre. Des régions humaines fuyantes criant « vive Martial » et leur marée était inhumaine. Ces régions tombaient, se relevaient, couraient, tournaient, laissaient des lambeaux de viande exsangue. Là-bas la rafale tirait toujours. Et bientôt, des chars à la poursuite de cette vase fuyante... (40-41)*

Juxtaposed to the above scene is this macabre one at the cemetery:

*On voyait des têtes sans yeux, des mains sans chair ni peau qui continuaient à saisir l'air, des jambes qui ne marchaient plus. Les grillons étaient nombreux, les rats aussi, qui creusaient parfois leurs trous dans le cadavre. Le soleil incendiait les sables huileux-ça puait, ça puait, une herbe rare jaunissait par endroits, mettant ces racines dans la boue des morts. Mais la terre était plutôt chauve, triste, amère, affligée. (137-138)*

As the successive leaders of Katalamanasie demonstrate, the postcolonial state is characterized by a loss of the sense of limits and proportion. And disorder results not only from this mindset, but also from a lack of plans and projects for the societies they are supposed to lead. Leaders sacrifice the essential to the non-essential.

From a diachronic perspective, it is clear that the disorder that started around the time of independence in *The Famished Road*, has gotten worse and reached a dystopian level in *La vie et demie*. Soni's text has thus responded and gone beyond the confirmation of Ben Okri's apprehensions. One might now wonder about the motivations of both writers.

#### IV- THE (CRITICAL) IMPULSE OF THE INTELLECTUAL

Novelists are intellectuals who most of the time behave as the critical conscience of society. In that sense, they critique, criticize, condemn or simply explain social phenomena among other things. Concerning specifically the Third World, Fredric Jameson says that the intellectual is always, in one way or another, a political intellectual (74). Carlos Fuentes even speaks about the "exaggerated responsibilities foisted on the Third World intellectual as a result of the critical weakness of civil society"<sup>5</sup> (in Williams 354). Ngugi Wa Thiongo in the same vein writes, talking about African writers:

*The writer responded to the decay by appealing to the conscience of the new class. If only they would listen! If only they would see the errors of their ways! He/she pleaded, lamented, threatened, painted the picture of the disaster ahead, talked of the fire next time. He or she tried the corrective antidote of the laughter, ridicule, direct abuse with images of shit and urine, every filth imaginable. (6)*

That is why some critics posited African literature as "a political philosophy, defined as a reflection on the ideal standard for society and government, with African writers assessing political situations and moulding or redirecting their readers' thoughts (Ugochukwu).

<sup>5</sup> A recent UNESCO report states that there is an emergence of civil society in Africa, under the guise of neighborhood mutual aid, sports and leisure associations, discussion groups, religious or cultural circles, civil forums, independent local radio stations etc...(2009). But I contend that these groups are all vulnerable to political and state influence, as acknowledged in the final pages of the report.

In that sense, Ben Okri is worried by the disorder in Africa. But in another move, he examines its genesis and attempts to explain its causes. He relates the disorder to the transformations that the society is going through, transformations which are themselves powered by metaphysical causes. What is happening here seems to be a reflection of what is happening in interstellar realms:

*New spaces were being created while all we saw were the mundane events of thugs and canvassing cars and the violence of political struggles. New spaces which we couldn't name, and couldn't imagine, but could only hint at with unfinished gestures and uncompleted proverbs. (449-450)*

Azaro once receives an indication of this transformation of the world, as he carefully pays attention to his surroundings:

*Steadily over days and months, the paths had been widened. Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted. The area was changing. Places that were thick with bush and low trees were now becoming open-spaces of soft river-sand. In the distance, one could hear in the sounds of dredging, of engines and road-builders, forest clearers. Each day, the area seemed different. Houses appeared where parts of the forest had been. Places where children used to play and hide were now full of sand piles and rutted with house foundations. There were signboards on trees. The world was changing and I went on wondering as if everything would always be the same. (104)*

So for Ben Okri, all the confusion and disorder on this earth and in Africa seems primarily to result from transitory changes that we cannot always control. This means to say that cosmological phenomena have an effect on this earth. But these mystical allusions should not make one conclude a definitive departure from social realist preoccupations, because the awareness of these transformations is accompanied in Okri by a sense of hope, expressed for example in Azaro's mother's prayer that, in a nutshell, says that our time of happiness will come:

*I listened to her calling for strength, pleading for Dad to get a good job, for us to find prosperity and contentment. She prayed that we should not die before our time, that we should live long enough for the good harvest, and that our suffering should turn into wisdom. (227)*

Okri's stance is thus one of hope based on the sense that Africa's turn to be stable and rich will come. In an interview given to Nima Elbagir, Okri confirms this idea. He says that "in the midst of so much blood and wars and tribal divisions and all of that [I see] a rich, complex, confusing music in which a new melody, a new note, is slowly merging, slowly sounding through." (Interview with Elbagir)

On the other hand, Soni Labou Tansi adopts a stance of condemnation and denunciation accompanied with anger. Hence the terrifying scenes he depicts in *La vie et demie*. In the foreword to this novel, he states that he writes to interrogate the current institutions of the world "where man is determined to kill life." He adds that "the world of fear that he creates is meant to make things change ultimately" (p.9). In the preface to another novel, *Le commencement des douleurs*, Soni writes in the same vein : "J'écris et je crie pour forcer le monde à venir au monde" (p.8). Critic Eileen Julien noticed the Congolese writer's somewhat radical position. She states that "*La vie et demie's* construction makes us aware of our world not as the world within which we do and must operate, but as one that can be interrogated, held accountable, and ultimately changed" (139). Although Okri and Soni adopt different stances with regard to the disorder in Africa represented by political instability, wars and other calamities, the following reflection by Adebayo Williams applies to both of them: "[W]riters serve as a beacon of hope to others in a beleaguered society. In the darkest moments of despair, they serve to bolster flagging spirits and to reinvent the struggle for emancipation of society" (355).

## CONCLUSION

Ben Okri and Soni Labou Tansi have adopted the aesthetic of disorder, sometimes mixed with scatological humor, to express socio-political concerns. Okri and Soni's texts can be classified into "a type of African discourse as an effective and cognitive process where textual expression continuously interacts with the concrete reality of history and significantly bears upon the urgent concerns of the contemporary world" (Irele 68). Ben Okri explains the African situation as the Black continent undergoing a time of transition whereas Soni simply shouts his anger, thereby expecting a new world to come to life. Seen in postcolonial terms, the aesthetic of disorder that both writers adopted can be seen as a tool of criticism and a decolonizing methodology.

My discussion also shows how texts respond to one another, across both language and time divides. Both texts as Ruth Browne would say comply with the criteria of relevance, which is the “balance between a commitment to one’s art and a necessary engagement with one’s political circumstances” ( 3 ). Browne further sees the above notion a guiding paradigm in the context of African literature in which the writers “explore the connection of [their] work to the experience of [their] people and [deal] with the role of literature in the education of young people and adults in an African context” (2).

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