

“The Young Shall Grow”: Violence, Conflict and Coming of Age in Ben Okri’s *Laughter beneath the Bridge*

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Abstract

Although Ben Okri’s work has been much acclaimed for its stylistic innovation and the social and political issues it raises, the coming of age aspect of his short stories have not been processed in detail. I aim to look at one of his stories “*Laughter beneath the Bridge*” as a narrative that traces the influence of the female rebel on the developing consciousness of a young child who gain exposure to social and political injustice by coming into contact with her. I will specifically look at the way exposure to violence, sexual awakening and initiation into adulthood intersect to shape the growing consciousness of the adolescent child in the story.

Keywords: Ben Okri, *Laughter beneath the Bridge*, coming of age fiction

Ben Okri was only seven years old when the Nigerian civil war broke out. The event gave him first hand exposure to suffering. In fact his war experiences very much shaped his consciousness as a writer as they exposed many of the coercive political structures that were operative at that time and sensitized him to the issues of ethnic violence in a conflict ridden society. In an interview to *The Guardian* titled “Ben Okri: My family value” the writer portrays the influence of the conflict ridden survivalist culture of war days on his own family, “My mother was half Igbo [from the south-east of Nigeria] while my father was Urhobo, from the Delta region, so the war was a family thing. We spent a lot of time hiding Mum – and I nearly got killed. I’m still stunned by what people are able to do to their neighbours.” (n.pg)

Okri’s short story “*Laughter Beneath the Bridge*” Nigerian Civil War as a backdrop to explore the relationship between personal and communal survival during times of ethnic conflict.

In the story “*Laughter Beneath the Bridge*” the general masses use three types of strategies in order to ensure their survival. These three survival strategies are flight, submission and alignment. These three strategies coincide with the three places the story is set in namely the town where the narrator has gone to study and from where his mother has come to pick him up, the check post where the bus they are travelling on is forced to stop and his home-town where he reaches at the end of this journey.

The story begins with a detailed description of the flight of the staff members at the campus right after the first signs of war appear. The first ones to leave are the principal and the teaching staff. They are followed by the kitchen staff. In the end it is the students who are taken away by their parents. The higher an individual’s position in the social hierarchy the more keen he is on saving his own neck. This is especially true of the head master who departs without thinking for one moment that he is responsible for the safety of his staff and the students. The same applies to the priest who can be seen “riding away from the town on his Raleigh bicycle” (1) after the cultists loot his church. His priority to save himself here over runs his duty to protect the church.

The narrator on his way back to his home town observes another form of survival strategy which is submission. The bus on which the narrator is travelling with his mother is taking other people to their home towns as well. On the way the bus is stopped at many checkpoints and all the passengers submit themselves to be thoroughly searched and interrogated. During this interrogation people are being killed and worst a woman is being raped but the passengers turn a blind eye to it and do not register any form of resistance against it. The narrative in this part of the story combines the serious and the humorous to convey both the horror of the interrogation and the irony of it being conducted through thoroughly unqualified agents. The soldiers first ask all the passengers to step down and then interrogate them one by one. A genocide of the rival tribe goes on as those are killed instantly who are unable to prove that they belong to the same ethnic background as the dominant group for which the soldiers are working. The horror of the entire interrogation is indicated through graphic statements like “There was a pit not far from the barricade. The bodies of the three grown up men lay bundled in the pit. One of them had been shot through the teeth” (5). However what takes away from the event much of its grimness is the fact that the soldier’s way of affirming the ethnicity of the passengers is neither an authentic nor a viable method. This is quite evident from the scene where the mother realizes that “the interpreter who was supposed to check on the language didn’t know it too well: so she extended the prayer, went deeper into the idiom, abusing their mothers and fathers, cursing the suppurating vaginas that must have shat them out in their wickedness” (7). The irony of the situation is made poignant by the fact that the narrator’s mother though belonging to a rival tribe is able to pass the test just because she knows the other language through her husband. This in itself is evidence enough against the rationale for this illegitimate and unjust killing. The narrator’s mother and father though from different tribes can live quite peacefully in their home without a conflict whereas in the outer world political forces entice people to kill each other in the name of similar differences.

If the people at the school survive by fleeing and the passengers by submission, the people at the narrator's home town ensure further security by allying themselves with the soldiers. When the stream is clogged by the dead bodies it is the respectable citizens who render their services to the soldiers by donning masks and going out to clear the stream. When the water begins to stink "...gas masks and wooden poles had to be distributed to respectable and proven citizens of the town so that they could prod the bodies and clear the rubbish to enable the corpses to flow away beneath the bridge? We saw these respectable citizens marching down our street. They were doctors, civil servants, businessmen, police constables. Their pot-bellies wobbled as they marched." (19) The image of a potbelly here is ambivalent. It is a sign of wealth and success but also a manifestation of a physical disease, an accumulation of abdominal fats which can lead to major health problems. Both meanings are applicable here. The bourgeoisie here safeguard their positions by aligning themselves with the powerful but this alignment is metaphoric of a diseased condition which leads to a sense of complacency and lack of action to bring about any change in society.

In contrast to these people are those who have been marginalized and expelled from the community. In "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" it is Monica's family that is expelled from the town. When the narrator comes back to the town and inquires about Monica his mother tells him, "The townspeople pursued them from their house and the family scattered in the forests." (11) For such people the struggle for survival is twofold. They are not only pursued by the soldiers but have also been abandoned by their own people. Monica being acutely aware of this marginalization reacts strongly not only to the soldier's occupation but also to the insensitivity of her own community.

That is why as the story progresses the narrative focuses more on Monica and her conflict with both social and political forces. This is quite evident in the very title of the story "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" taken from the pivotal incident where the child for the first time witnesses the floating corpses of the killed in the company of Monica. During a nocturnal visit to the stream both Monica and the narrator, after an uneasy encounter with the soldiers, sit beneath the bridge. Above them are the soldiers. The bridge in the title hence acts as a metaphor for the dividing line between the two groups, those who are empowered and those who are disempowered. The contrast here becomes even more excruciating because it is two young kids who are pitted against the bulwark of soldiers. It is the soldiers who laugh above the bridge and their laugh is a cruel laugh. It is a laughter accompanied with a feeling of power and control. In contrast to it is the grotesque laughter beneath the bridge; of Monica and the dead bodies. It is an ambivalent laughter in which conflicting emotions co-exist. It is at once the liberating laughter of the carnivalesque body and the painful laughter of physical pain. Her laughter directly undermines the authority by suspending the officialdom of the curfew and giving vent to the oppression within her. The laughter above is dominating but the laughter beneath is disturbing even threatening as the soldiers can not take it and bark orders to stop it.

The story takes much of its appeal from the character of Monica. However this appeal is generated through the narrator, a child in his early teens whose unadulterated perception of the world around gives as much an insight into his own development as it does into Monica's. Hence in the story the narrator is not simply an observer but an important character whose initiation into adulthood is quite traceable in the story. In fact the story with its first person narration takes the reader right into the psycho-sexual development of the child narrator who develops both physically and mentally during times of war. The story begins with the unformed mind of a little child subjected to an unexpected and brutal process of growth. The narrator's witnessing of the atrocities of war and his thoughts about Monica run parallel in the first half of the narrative when the child has still not reached his home town. From thereafter the two strands merge as Monica enters the story herself. Thereafter it is not her memory but herself in flesh and blood that gives the story its narrative thrust.

Monica whether physically absent or present in the story is a continuous influence on the narrator's consciousness. In fact the story can be read as the narrator's account of his relationship with Monica. The narrator in the story is the only person who does not pass judgment on her. Instead of simply objectifying her as an object of desire the narrator affirms and confirms of her otherness and forms a holistic relationship with her. The narrator in the story engages in a genuine selfless relationship with Monica where his thoughts and feelings are with her and not about her and her presence colors his entire being; a phenomenological experience as explained by Buber "Love does not cling to the I in such a way as to have the Thou only for its "content", its object; but love is between I and Thou" (14). That is why as the story progresses he comes to share her consciousness which reveals the brutalities and injustices of war on him.

The narrator's engagement with Monica strengthens as the story progresses. In the beginning of the story she appears as more of an object of fascination for him as he constantly thinks about her sensual walk and half formed breasts but later she becomes a subject with which the narrator holistically engages. As the story progresses he is ready to break the social codes for her since he realizes his fullest potential with her. He goes out with her on the night of the curfew, accompanies her beneath the bridge and dances the Egungun. From a passive child he emerges as a mature adult ready to take action and act protectively towards her.

To understand how Monica makes her mark on the conscious development of the boy it is necessary to first

examine her as an individual. Throughout the story her radical attitude is highlighted to show how the child's encounter with her plays a significant role in developing his consciousness. Monica's rebelliousness and non-conformist attitude remains the focus of the narration all through. Right from the beginning little incidents are thrown in by the narrator to show the frenzied, nervous and recusant energy that characterizes her spirit like her insistence on competing with the boys to swim across the river. She likes to take challenges and is someone who is all ready to be up against the tide of social conventions.

However more than stubbornness it is her insurmountable spirit that eventually builds her stature as the hero of the child's narrative. Infact she very much exemplifies what Okri himself said about humans in one of his interviews, "We humans will always throw up our rebellion. We will always throw up our opposite. We will always throw up what questions us. We will always amaze and surprise ourselves. You tie ropes around the human personality, you put boundaries around it and you put policemen all around and guns and we human beings we'll always find a way to subvert it." (Mo) The interesting fact that Monica does it all but in doing so does not do away with her sensuousness and sensuality. The narrative craftily subverts the idea of a feminine sensibility by giving so much of generative strength to her character but without taking away any of her charms as a young and beautiful girl.

In the second half of the story where Monica and the child meet in person, the raw and wild energy of her character becomes more obvious. If she is portrayed as a "wild and beautiful cat" (2) in the beginning, she turns into a little tigress as the story progresses. She wishes to go "carry a gun. Shoot. Fire" (16). She mediates as can be discerned from her own admission under the bridge, "This is where I've been. All day I sit here and think" (17). It is her inward thirst for self-expression along with the suffering she has gone thorough that forces her to act the way she does.

Monica's suffering is far more complicated than the ordinary people around as she not only has been subjugated by the soldiers like the rest but has also been dispossessed of her dear ones. Her family has been expelled from the village and her brother has been killed. She herself has been abandoned by the community. Though she is accommodated by the narrator's parents in their house they are not there to support or stand by her in her rebelliousness. The community too is afraid of the soldiers and hence does not support her in her wish to dance an Egungun for her brother. In that way she is very much like Antigone who is left all alone in her wish to offer funeral rites to her brother and is the only one courageous enough to go against the state edict of burying the body of Polynices. In Okri's story the social edict takes on the form of a curfew which the elders are afraid of breaking but the young ones are not very mindful of. She is definitely a rebel and a non-conformist and therefore has always been different from the rest of the people. Her position is much more vulnerable as compared to the narrator whose familial bonds provide him the kind of physical and emotional security he requires. Hence she is at once a victim of economic, gender and ethnic division.

The narrator on the other hand is far more naïve and young and does not understand the nature of war and suffering. The story is as much about his entry into the adult world of atrocity as it is his entry into manhood. It is his encounter with the soldiers of the opposing party that initiates the process of realization for him. He witnesses violence but being a child does not comprehend it. The beauty of the narration lies in the very fact of the child narrator reporting with the utmost objectivity without spelling out things for the reader so what the reader eventually has is a graphic picture with all its horrors intact. Hence it is not an event that is built up through a series of images but the images that build up an event thereby developing the narrative in series of vivid visual shots.

The rape of the light-complexioned woman, in this regard, is one such instance. The child does neither understand rape nor empathizes with the woman. He merely reports it. The word rape is never spelled out but the description is so graphic that the brutishness of what is happening to the woman is not lost on the reader even for a single moment. It is only later when the child witnesses a soldier leer at Monica that he is perturbed. The event is also significant because it acts as a foreshadowing device. Hence at the end when Monica is taken away in an army jeep there is little doubt as to her fate being any better than that of the molested woman. The rape is also clearly juxtaposed with the sexual drive of the narrative. The child's desires are much more complex than being purely physical since she is not someone to be simply experienced by him. The soldiers on the other hand objectify the light-complexioned woman by using power and control and treating her as an object of self-gratification. Later during the night of the curfew when the narrator walks with Monica on the bridge and is encountered by a soldier, the same mechanics of the subject-object relationship are evident in the way the latter eyes the girl "He eyed Monica, stared at her legs.... He looked as though he was confronted with the biggest temptation of his adult life"(16). The soldier simply reduces her to a tool of sexual gratification unlike the narrator who affirms and confirms of her in her entirety.

Although the war accounts, which also form the setting of the story are narrated in a matter-of-fact tone, the narrator's thoughts on Monica are filled with a dream like quality peculiar to a nearly adolescent boy whose daydreams shape his day to day experiences of the world as much as it shapes his internal thought process. For the first half the pattern of the narrative is quite evident. The narrator starts with the description of the events

happening outside the world and then interrupts them by references to Monica. For example the story begins with the description of war, “Those were long days as we lay pressed to the prickly grass waiting for the bombs to fall.” (1) and after a description of the human and creatural life during these times the second paragraph ends with, “And all through that time it was Monica I thought about” (2). Then again during his encounter at the check post on his way back when a soldier smacks him hard across his head he sees “one of Monica’s masks in the stars” (6). It is as if his sensory organs detect the elementary properties of a stimulus but his brain refuses to interpret the high-pitched, hysterical and fanatic atmosphere of which he is a part. Her thoughts provide him a temporary detachment from his immediate surrounding blurring reality and partially substituting it with a visual fantasy. These daydreams provide a kind of liminal space suspending perception and paving way for him to eventually perceive reality through Monica’s eyes. That is why as the story progresses the physical attraction the narrator has for Monica transforms into a genuine relationship where the child starts looking at the world in her light and gains a new understanding of the meaning of growth and suffering and their relationship.

In the larger context of the story Monica fills in the role of a learning institution. Through her the narrator learns more about the world than the school he has left behind. She is the one who initiates his involvement into a world of communal relations. Before that he lived in an alienated mode, a state of detached abandonment. She is the one who initiates his involvement into a world of I-Thou. As he encounters her he becomes a person capable of whole heartedly responding to the unique particularities of not only her character but also the world around.

Through his interaction with Monica the narrator is able to experience war in all its completeness. Before this it is like “an insane feast going on somewhere in the country.” (3) but afterwards it is something serious, violating the sacredness of the natural world, disrupting its flow as is symbolized by the blocking of the stream with corpses. Earlier on the narrator is in a state of inertia “waiting” for the bombs to fall. Later he becomes an active participant in the events trying to help Monica stay out of trouble, dancing the Egungun along with other kids.

The child narrator is influenced by Monica just because she offers an alternative perspective. If the whole community thinks about saving their own necks, Monica does not. It is her different view of looking at things that changes the way the narrator looks at reality. It is with her that he sees the dead bodies in the stream for the first time, “Then something shifted in my eyes. The things on the water suddenly looked different, transformed....The stream was full of corpses that had swollen, huge massive bodies with enormous eyes and bloated cheeks” (18). The pollution of a natural space like stream here is metaphoric of the whole disruption of the natural order which has hitherto been not acknowledged by the narrator. Moreover the verbs “shifted” and “transformed” manifest the evolved, changed and shifted perspectives with which the narrator views the world. This change in the way the consciousness of the narrator perceives reality is only brought about with his interaction with Monica.

As the narrative progresses the boundary between the narrator and Monica begin to obliterate. In the story both the narrator and Monica are located in a different position and hence view things differently. The child narrator is a male whereas Monica is a female. He is on the threshold of manhood whereas she has already matured physically. In addition to it are the socio-economic differences that are class and family related. The narrator belongs to a stable, united and loving family as can be discerned from his mother’s concern for him. Monica on the other hand belongs to the outcast. She has also suffered the loss of her brother Ugo. Added to it is her metaphysical experience of having taken a spiritual journey. Her spirit seems to have taken a long journey from her body twice in the story. The first time it happens when she nearly drowned trying to outswim boys, “I watched them dragging her through the muddied water : her face was pale, she looked as though she had taken a long journey from her body.(2)” It is only after that she takes to going around with the Egunguns. The same happens when she meets the narrator persuading him to accompany her during curfew hours. This estrangement of her body from the spirit manifests that she is able to go beyond the confines of the physical. That is why when she dances the Egungun she does it with such intensity and abandoned that it becomes impossible to restrain her. Through her dance she is able to tap into that ancestral energy that at once occupies as well as sets her free.

Through the dance of the Egungun Monica also engages in an I-Thou relationship with the spirits of the dead. The Egungun has both mythic and modern dimensions in the story. On a familial level it represents Monica’s wish to honour her dead brother assuring him a place among the living. It is also a desire on her part to compel the living to uphold the ethical standards of the past generations of their clan. As her whole family is scattered she takes over the responsibility of the Alagba (a family elder who presides over ancestral rites) and heads the whole masquerade. On a communal level she takes on the responsibilities of the initiates whose job is to spiritually cleanse the community through dramatic acting and miming and is supposed to be possessed by the spirits of the ancestors exposing the unethical or amoral behavior that has occurred in a community.

During the dance Monica and the revered mask she wears become one. Margret Laurence writes in *Long Drums and Cannons*, “Masks are a tangible means of connection with the other world. They are regarded with reverence and at the same time provide a near-touching of the revered object-god become flesh-for in the act of

the possession of the dancer by the spirit of the mask, dancer and mask merge in a union of the mortal and the immortal”(18). It is a moment when the dancer actually fuses with the mask seeing things through the eyes of a spirit that takes hold of them. In the story Monica is also possessed by the spirit of the Egungun as she dances with more and more frenzy until it becomes difficult to control her.

Monica also dances to ensure the survival of her cultural traditions. In African culture it Egungun is a dance associated with ancestor worship. During the dance the spirits of the dead enter the bodies of the dancers communicating advice to the living. Hence it becomes an expression of ensuring a place for the dead among the living. It is done for the well-being of the community which is said to be spiritually cleansed after the performance. By dancing the Egungun Monica suspends the officialdom imposed by the soldiers and make way for a carnivalesque mode where the official order is subverted. It liberates both the dead and the marginalized as the dancing Egungun is both Monica herself and the spirit of the dead which possesses her. At the end the Egungun has performed its function of spiritually cleansing the community as it is only after the dance that the stream finally unclogs and the dead bodies floating on it flow down clearing the water. Hence it is her sacrifice and not the efforts of the so called respectable members of the community that purifies the town. Since dancing the Egungun is forbidden by the soldiers, Monica is seized by them and ordered to speak in the language of the dominant tribe. When she is unable to do so she is carried away in an army jeep. In the over all context of the story Monica symbolically sacrifices herself in order to ensure the survival of communal rites

It is through her unpronounced heroism that the narrator learns what it means to grow; to be mindful of the suffering of others and to feel them as if they are one's own. Monica feels for the dead. When she laughs the corpses laugh along. It is as if she shares a communicative space with them which the others don't. Moreover to her the dead are an integral part of community and honouring them is a way of upholding those cultural rites on which lay the foundation of a communal existence.

Like the rape the phrase “The young shall grow” earlier on inscribed on the wooden bodywork of the lorry make sense to the narrator later in the story, after Monica is arrested. On a superficial level it has an ironic tone questioning the nature of growth meted out to those children that are brought up during times of war. Nevertheless the growth of their consciousness has far reaching effects as it leads to his transformation as a passive observer to an acutely aware member of society. What he has around him is violence, brutality and conflict but that does not stop him from engaging in a genuine relationship, an act which gives new insight about the injustice meted out to those who are marginalized and objectified during war. Ben Okri himself says, “Don't despair too much if you see beautiful things destroyed, if you see them perish. Because the best things are always growing in secret”.

The story ends on a note of maturation, a better understanding of the world around and growth; growth of a consciousness who partakes of another consciousness helps in the construction of meaning in the light of the new information gained through this interaction as it happens in the case of the child narrator. In the case of Monica growth is a metaphor for the experience of pain, suffering and misery and the ability to still dream out of it all as she does of paying respect to her brother by dancing the Egungun. It is her will that overcomes great suffering. Ben Okri himself says in his interview, “We go from struggle to struggle first to struggle against suffering , then to live and realize the potential seeded in our bones”.(Mo)

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