

## Ben Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge": Born (un)free

Dr. Rosemary Alice Gray

*Unisa and University of Pretoria, South Africa  
Gauteng, South Africa*

Professor Rosemary Gray is Emeritus Professor in English within the Department of English at the University of Pretoria and Honorary Life Vice President of the English Academy of Southern Africa. She is a nationally rated researcher and her specialist field is the works of Ben Okri. She is currently completing a monograph consisting of 22 chapters on the Okrian oeuvre. Born in South Africa, she grew up in Kenya. She studied at the University of Cape Town and Unisa and, after returning to South Africa, she worked for 21 years at the University of Pretoria in the Department of English, where she was Head of Research, subsequent to four years at Unisa. She returned to The University of South Africa for four years after her retirement. She is married to the late Dr Derek Gray, a geo-chemist from the UK, and has three adult children. Her primary interest is research and working for NGOs; reading, swimming and gardening are her passions. She published a 33 year history of youth science in South Africa (a movement started by Derek), published by Oxford University Press.

### Abstract

As this prize-winning short story from Ben Okri's *Incidents at the Shrine* (1993) is a child's eye view of the Nigerian Civil War, I shall begin by briefly contextualizing Biafra's quest for freedom in the late 1960s. I shall attempt to reveal the ideological constructedness of both abstract and concrete aspects of wartime existence in Nigeria and the dynamic between them in relation to the trajectory of "Laughter Beneath the Bridge". The argument will attempt to show how the writer's graphic symbolism mediates perceptions of time and place informed by the ideology of power and violence while, at the same time, also having singular signifying possibilities and so limitations. My approach to the theme of freedom will thus be Rousseauesque in its lack of freedom thrust.

Using Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, I probe the fine line between "laughing with" and "laughing at", between pleasure and pain. Focusing on the pleasure/pain paradox illuminates how satire works in this story; the physical pain and suffering of the characters suggest how readers are implicated in and redeemed from represented systemic violence.

**Keywords:** Biafra; freedom; Julia Kristeva's "abject"; Milan Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*; "Laughter Beneath the Bridge"; Nigerian Civil War; Ben Okri; power and violence

## Introduction

A rousing tale of civil war and the curtailment of freedom, “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” alludes to the demise of Igboland in the Biafran war of secession (1967-1970), otherwise known as the Nigerian Civil War. This prize-winning short story explores the impact of civil strife on a nameless Igbo mother and her young son. Freedom, or rather the lack thereof, is thus considered from both a personal/ethnic perspective and a national viewpoint. A correlative of Chinua Achebe’s *Girls at War and other stories* ([1977]1983), Ben Okri’s story from *Incidents at the Shrine* (1993) is an example of a relatively rare perspective – that of a ten-year-old boy child as the narrating, experiencing ingénue. It is nonetheless rich in socio-historical and cultural interest. Significantly, it can also be read as a moving tale that shows clearly the universality of art and of human experience. One of the few Jewish holocaust survivors, Elie Wiesel attests to this claim when, in his *Souls on Fire* (1972, proem), he asserts: “Revolt is not a solution, neither is submission. What remains is laughter, metaphysical laughter.”

In an Afterword to his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980, 232-233), Czech-born exile, Milan Kundera, explains what is meant by “metaphysical laughter”. Drawing attention to the Absurd,<sup>1</sup> as does Okri in “Laughter Beneath the Bridge”, Kundera responds to his parable that illustrates what is meant by metaphysical laughter by pointing to the irony that the devil laughs because God’s world seems senseless to him; while the angel laughs too but with joy because everything in the world has its meaning. Pertinently, he draws a correlation with humankind: “... man uses the same physiologic manifestation – laughter – to express two different metaphysical attitudes” (232). In illustration, Kundera provides the example of someone’s hat falling “on the coffin in a freshly dug grave” (1980, 232). Quite obviously, he notes: “the funeral loses its meaning and laughter is born.” (ibid.)

Opposing this kind of devil's laughter, is that of angels: "Two lovers race through the meadow, holding hands, laughing. Their laughter has nothing to do with jokes or humor, it is the *serious* laughter of angels expressing their joy of being" (1980, 233). He concludes with the philosophical paradox: "Both kinds of laughter belong to life's pleasures, but when it is carried to extremes it also denotes a dual apocalypse: the enthusiastic laughter of angel-fanatics, who are so convinced of their world's significance that they are ready to hang anyone not sharing their joy. And the other laughter, sounding from the opposite side, which proclaims that everything has become meaningless, that even funerals are ridiculous ..." (ibid.). Here, the abyss between fanaticism, on the one hand, and scepticism, on the other, signifies the kind of comic pantomime that Okri, a London-based Nigerian writes of in his "Laughter Beneath the Bridge", as well as in his "The Comic Destiny" from *Tales of Freedom* (2009)<sup>2</sup> or that which Florence-born exile, Dante Alighieri elaborated on in his celebrated medieval epic poem, *The Divine Comedy* ((1939]1975).

While Wiesel and his father were survivors of both Auschwitz and Buchenwald, capturing the horrors of Nazi Germany's extermination of its Jewish citizenry in his stirring novel about the Second World War, Okri, whose mother was part Igbo and *de facto* perceived as the enemy of a united Nigeria, is a survivor of the conundrum of internecine warfare. In an interview with Julia Rix in 2010, Okri was to explain: "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" (*The Guardian* 2010, June 2, n.p.).

Although the two historical events [the Nigerian Civil War and the Holocaust] are by no means equivalent, both writers fictionalize the all-too-common experience of man's

inhumanity to man; both underscore two intertwined imperatives of the human condition: freedom and laughter.

Despite the common tropes as evidence of indomitable human spirit, my concern in this article is not with representations of Germany, but with that of Nigeria. A mere four years after the re-publication of *Incidents ...*, Okri was to highlight the paradox of survivalist culture in *A Way of Being Free* (1997, 132), musing: “It is possible that a sense of beauty, of justice, of the interconnectedness of all things, may yet save the human species from self-annihilation.” Arguing that it should not be left to the “contemporary victors” to speak [or write] “for human history”, he cites Achebe’s dictum that “suffering should also give rise to something beautiful” (ibid.).<sup>3</sup> Okri asserts: “We are all still learning how to be free. Freedom is the beginning of the greatest possibilities of the human genius. It is not the goal.” (ibid.)

Freedom to worship, especially in the Christian eastern river states in Nigeria – the Islamic Hausa having gained control of the northern-based Federal government of the time – coupled with the right to benefit from their rich oil reserves were principal motivating factors for the Igbo secession. So, what was this tragic war about?

### **The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) in brief**

To reveal the ideological constructedness of both abstract and concrete aspects of wartime existence in Nigeria and the dynamic between them in relation to the trajectory of “Laughter Beneath the Bridge”, it is *first* necessary to provide a brief overview of war and of war’s alarms. Just as the world is all too familiar with the term “Holocaust”, so too are we familiar with that of “Biafran”. The very young and the old were among the first to suffer from the famine caused by the fighting in what was known as Biafra. Notwithstanding the severe

hardship and widely photographed emaciated children that resulted from the collapse of the breakaway state's "economy" [read "starvation into submission"] during the civil war, I offer a dismissive example of the kind of "contemporary victor" re-construction of it from the early 1980s that Okri cautions against, and which I quote in full to make the point:

Biafra, the name of an abortive Nigerian secessionist state (1967-1970) in the south-east of the country, inhabited principally by Ibo [sic] people. It seceded after mounting antagonism between the eastern region and the western and northern regions, Colonel Ojukwu declaring the east independent. Civil war followed. Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia recognized Biafra, while Britain and the USSR supported the federal government. When Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast, General Effiong capitulated in Lagos in 1970 and Biafra ceased to exist. (38)<sup>4</sup>

With the stroke of a pen, so-to-speak, an estimated eight million Igbos who lost their lives are erased from history and so too was their country. Pointing to the impact of the conflict on Ben Okri, Sarah Abdullah (2017,1) unintentionally underestimates it with a bland statement: "The event gave him first hand exposure to suffering", but then quickly observes that "his war experiences very much shaped his consciousness as a writer as they exposed many of the coercive political structures that were operative at the time and sensitized him to issues of ethnic violence in a conflict ridden society" (ibid.).

It is of interest that after the Biafran war, Kundera's Czechoslovakia, that was all too soon to suffer a similar fate of erasure, had joined forces with the Soviet Union to supply the Nigerian victors with jet fighters and transport aircraft (*The Almanac of World Military Power* 1972, 238). Not without pathos, Kundera – jazz pianist, turned writer – was later to reflect:

If someone had told me as a boy: One day you will see your nation vanish from the world, I would have considered it nonsense, something I couldn't possibly imagine. A man knows that he is mortal, but he takes it for granted that his nation possesses a kind of eternal life. (1986, 229)

This remark was precipitated by the recognition that in the previous fifty years, 40 million Ukrainians had been "quietly vanishing from the world without the world paying any heed"

(Kundera 1986, 229-230) – five times as many as the eight million who perished with their country in Biafra, as already noted. And, both Okri’s Biafra and Kundera’s Czechoslovakia have ceased to exist. But not so, the lasting impact.

On the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, AMA Kirk-Greene (1970, 340) notes:

... how it all happened, why, and who was to blame; all these issues that will arouse many sorts of minds to continuing analysis and argument. The time-span is unlikely to be less than that covered by the shadows of suffering and suspicion inseparable from the aftermath of any civil war. It may, given the precedence of the American Civil War, last for longer: the rights and wrongs of that tragedy have their ardent advocates a hundred years and more after Gettysburg.

Kirk-Greene concludes ominously: “The wounds of history do not heal quickly; some indeed leave their mark on the nation’s soul for ever.” (ibid.)

Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (2011, 11) interpolates usefully on the abstraction of “the soul”:

The human soul, having the mind, consciousness as its instrument, projects and negotiates with the life horizons. And so the living agent, with the influx of individualizing life of the specifically human inventive/creative/imaginative system through which the human mind operates, projects not only necessary links for the vitally expanded functioning of onto-poietic becoming, but also and foremost unfolds in tandem innumerable morally, aesthetically, emotionally, imaginatively evaluative threads as well as other lines of sense through which the living agent progressively acquires a human mind. The human mind continues the work of the vegetatively-vitally subservient agent now unfolded in a self that imaginatively projects, in a determined, self-selective, and self-decisive human individual.

The core of her Inaugural lecture, from which this excerpt is taken, climaxes as follows:

The intentional system of consciousness directing this entire apparatus of life and compassing its full extent – from primitive sensing, feeling, desiring, evaluating to constituting the world, to esoteric longings to escape all that existentially binds and to transcend it – that is, the living agent, who incorporates the prerogatives of the human mind, amounts to what we call the ‘soul’, in whose fulgurating *symphony* of life’s becoming, the entire course of life resounds into *infinite* realms. (ibid. emphasis added)

Of the cacophonous “marks on the soul” of war-torn Africa, Kole Omotoso (possibly one of the most widely published post-civil war writers and leading musician) lamented in his 1997

*Woza Africa [Come on Africa]: Music goes to war:*

What is happening in Africa? Why are signs of positive gains being overwhelmed by tragedies of sisters and brothers killing one another? Why are children being wasted and men, women and the aged turned into *heaps of corpses* and stragglers on refugee routes through the forests and valleys of Africa? Surely something is wrong with our continent. (1997: Foreword; emphasis added)

It seems to me that Omotoso’s rhetorical questions invoke a mythic conjunction between Milan Kundera’s devil’s laughter and Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection. With regard to the chilling symbolism of “heaps of corpses”, Kristeva argues in the *Powers of Horror* (1982, 2-3) that what she terms “the abject” is a breakdown of meaning caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object or between self and other. An incident in “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” serves to illustrate this fracture. En route to their home village, the lorry carrying the child narrator and his mother is stopped at a checkpoint where the passengers are searched and interrogated. In the course of the interrogation, some passengers are summarily shot and a young woman is being brutally gang raped. Yet the stupefied passengers either turn a blind eye to the violence or, concerned with their own fate, offer no resistance to it (Cf. Abdullah 2017, 1). More pertinently, Kristeva explains that the primary example of this breakdown of meaning is the *corpse*, for it traumatically reminds us of our own materiality.<sup>5</sup> This symbolism pertains to “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” where, together with the bridge, it becomes emblematic for lack of freedom and the horror of internecine strife.

Okri transports us imaginatively to consider the loss of meaning caused by the insanity of internecine warfare. Here, where the bridge becomes a simulacrum for those in power, that is, those with the power to inflict violence, those “beneath” the bridge are the living dead caught in the fray, together with the bloated corpses in the river below the bridge, which can no

longer flow because it is choked with “the swollen *corpses* that were *laughing*” (Okri 1997, 18; emphasis added) – a dirge of the devil in a symbiosis of Wiesel and Kundera’s metaphysical laughter and Kristeva’s abjection. In addition to the corpse, Okri picks up on a correlative physiological symbol that, in line with Kristeva, elicits the horror of the abject (i.e. shit), and its attendant macabre laughter. Being gruffly interrogated by a soldier with the comical, allusive sobriquet of Frank O’Nero and instructed to “speak a word of your language” to prove he is his mother’s son, the child – choking back his terrified laughter – blurts out something in his father’s language. The words are incomprehensible to the inept soldier, so mother quickly interprets “that he wants to shit” (8). The expletive “shit” has the same effect as Kundera’s example of the hat on the coffin; the bully’s authority is completely undone, and “The soldiers passed the joke all the way round the barricade” (Okri 8).

The argument shows how the writer’s graphic symbolism mediates perceptions of time and place informed by the ideology of power and violence while, at the same time, also having singular signifying possibilities and so limitations. These possibilities and limitations are pointed to in a synopsis of Okri’s short story, where its title suggests either “the fusion of the phenomenal and divine worlds in artistic representation” to quote Volynsky’s transcendental, Platonic view of symbolism in 1900 (Chadwick 1971, 58); or, in terms of human symbolism, where “[t]he Symbolist tries to arouse in the reader **by the melody** of his verse [or poetic prose] a particular mood” (Bryusov in 1894, in Chadwick 1971, 58), the laughter beneath the bridge conflates both signifier and signified to evoke absurdity and metaphysical laughter.



### **“Laughter Beneath the Bridge”**

My attempt to reveal the ideological constructedness of both abstract and concrete aspects of wartime existence in Nigeria, already discussed, and the dynamic between them in relation to the trajectory of “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” is now addressed more fully.

In terms of setting, the story can be divided into three sectors. It begins in an evacuated boarding school where three abandoned children anxiously await the coming of their mothers. Sadly, only the narrator’s mother arrives, and she dare not risk implicating the remaining two children in the accident of her own birth. The bitter satire of their alternative, inevitable fate is patent! Then there is the journey in a dilapidated lorry through the forest away from Igboland, involving further trauma at the checkpoints. And, as a prelude to the final setting on the bridge manned by trigger-happy soldiers, there is a brief but important interlude of homecoming and cultural enactments of the Egungun ritual among the young village children. This ritual ultimately brings the innocents, in a fatal final dance, onto the bridge and into the hands of power and violence.

The opening gambit at once draws the reader imaginatively and emotionally into the civil war milieu and its impact on the young left to forage for survival: “Those were long days as we lay pressed to the prickly grass waiting for the bombs to fall ... Three of us were left behind. We all hoped someone would turn up to collect us. We were silent most of the time” (1997: 1). The backdrop to this dramatic scene is yet more chillingly symbolic with vultures circling the school; “religious maniacs” screaming about “the end of the world”; and “a wild bunch of people from the city scattered through searching for those of the rebel tribe” (ibid.) and opportunistically looting the chapel. Reminiscent of Wiesel’s adage: “What remains is laughter, metaphysical laughter”, life has lost its meaning as underlined by the bathetic

images of the Irish priest furiously peddling away on his Raleigh bicycle and ghosts flitting through the ransacked chapel. The transparency of these negative symbols is, however, mediated by positive ones: a multitude of lizards take over the school premises, while the child narrator, as displacement activity, “dreams” of his childhood crush, Monica. So, what could these two symbols signify? In what ways can they be read as correlatingly positive?

Although an Igbo friend informs me that lizards are sometimes eaten as a delicacy by his tribe (pers com.), I choose to follow Mazizi Kunene’s view in *Anthem of the Decades: A Zulu Epic* (1981), where the salamander symbolizes swiftness and an absence of ingenuity. The Zulus of South Africa see it as the opposite of the chameleon, representing slowness and ingenuity. Sopelekai Maithufi comes closer to what I believe may be Okri’s intention, saying that both animals should not be seen as binary opposites or as standing for them. “It is about harmony and reconciling the thesis with the antithesis. The solution is synthesis” (pers com.). Illustrative of creative genius with its implication of harmonious co-existence, the ingenious narrator happens upon a parallel synthesis between Monica and the lizards, stating: “I dreamed of her new-formed breasts when the lizards chased us from the dormitories, and when the noise of the fighter planes drove us to the forests” (3). Thus, much of the ideological constructedness of wartime existence in Nigeria is embedded in the narrative viewpoint. Abdullah concurs, saying: “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 that what the reader eventually has is a graphic picture with all its horrors intact” (2017,3). Despite some factual errors, Abdullah concludes with a pivotal statement about Okri’s narrative strategy: “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 a series of vivid visual shots” (ibid.). Extending the operation of eidetic memory, it is through the child’s obsessive

preoccupation with Monica that the narrator matures gradually and sufficiently to experience the meaning of civil war in all its ugly reality and to realize that once Monica is unmasked and captured, the soldiers will have their way with her and he will never see her again.

In his portrayal of Monica, Okri successfully creates the young girl child as a mediating moral force among the Nigerian power brokers and leaders. To borrow loosely from Ezenwa-Ohaeto,<sup>6</sup> Okri goes beyond the socio-political level to the deeper, more fundamental level of the myth of origin. “In the myth, the Almighty sent His daughter, Idemili, to the earth in order to give a moral character to Power, which in the beginning ‘rampaged our world naked’” (1993, 134). As leitmotif, dreaming of Monica serves to unify the three phases of the story.

Forced to abandon his school mates, when his Igbo mother collects him, the narrator “tried to think only of Monica” (4); on board the homeward bound lorry, “starving and bored” (6), he again thinks of Monica; clouted by a soldier for mimicking the blowing of his nose onto the lemon grass at a check point, he “saw one of Monica’s masks in the stars” (ibid.); bemused by the brutal raping of a fellow traveller, he “thought of Monica” (7); and it is her brother, his little friend Ugo, who was shot and tossed into the river, ominously giving a “face” to one of the corpses under the bridge. Prefiguring the final dramatic action in the tale, Monica is captured for belligerently speaking her language – understood to be that of the enemy – after having her Egungun mask torn off her face, itself a cultural sign of ill-omen. Early on, we read that the precocious Monica broke the “sexual taboos and began dancing our street’s Egungun round town, fooling all the men” (2).

In his *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka ([1976]1995: 42) provides insight into the significance of the Nigerian Egungun ritual and Monica's capture in the context of dramatic depictions of man's attempt to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being:

The real unvoiced fear is: will this protagonist survive confrontation with forces that exist within the dangerous area of transformation? Entering that *microcosm* involves a loss of individuation, a self-submergence in universal essence. It is an act undertaken on behalf of the community, and the welfare of that protagonist is inseparable from that of the total community.

Even more pertinent for my discussion is the description of Monica's truly harrowing experience – urinating “down her thighs”, shivering “in her own puddle”, wailing and jabbering “in her own language” (21). We deduce that this is the mother tongue of the “born (un)free”. However involuntary, these actions pre-empt Monica's capture and death “on behalf of the community”. Soyinka concludes that, “The transmission is individual. It is no less essential to the sum of fragmented experiences, individual and vicarious” (1995: 42). Thus, Monica's “insane laughing mask split in the middle of the face” (21) serves not only to evoke a “consoling metaphysical statement from natural phenomenon” (Soyinka 42), but also to remind us of Wiesel's maxim on “metaphysical laughter”, Kundera's explication thereof, and Kristeva's notion of the “abject”. Multiple allusions to the devil's laughter in “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” weave a linear thread throughout this tragi-comedy.

In addition to those already examined, consider, for example, the sight of three grown men “huddled in a pit” (5) and the child narrator's account: “One of them had been shot through the teeth. Another one was punctured with gunshots and his face was so contorted it seemed he had died from too much laughing” (5); “The taste of madness like the water of potent springs, the laughter of war,” the ten-year-old narrator reminisces, “that is perhaps why I remember it as a beautiful time. And because in the lorry, with corpses drifting past along the

road and soldiers noisy in their jeeps, we were all silent” (9). Piling on the agony, Okri adds that, “The soldiers were laughing above the bridge ... Above on the bridge, one of the soldiers laughed so hard he had to cough and spit at the end of it” (17). And, just prior to the narrator’s realization of what was causing the terrible smell from the river and Monica’s explanation that she sat under the bridge because that was where Ugo’s body had been tossed into the river, we read that, “... she started to laugh. I had never heard that sort of twisted laughter before. After a while I couldn’t see her clearly and I called her and she laughed and then I thought it was all the swollen corpses that were laughing” (18). These graphic instances conflate in an elegiac fugue. As if commenting on the inevitability of the death that follows the unmasking of the Egungun, a symbol for the transitional deaths of both Monica and Biafra in this story, Kundera writes: “When a big power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness it uses the method of *organized forgetting* ... Politics unmask the metaphysics of private life, private life unmask the metaphysics of politics” (1986, 235). In their book entitled, *Long Drums and Cannons* (2001, 18, Margaret Laurence and Nora Foster Stoval tellingly observe: “Masks are a tangible means of connection with the other world.” Elaborating on the metaphysics of the Egungun culture – where dancer and Egungun merge – they add that, “[Masks] 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” (ibid.).

Of the importance of remembering the past that Okri reconstructs here for the country of his birth, Kundera expounds: “A nation which loses its past gradually loses its self. And so the political situation has brutally illuminated the ordinary metaphysical problem of forgetting that we face all the time, every day, without paying any attention” (ibid.). Faced with the

“abject”, or with what Kristeva (1982, 3) describes as being “at the border of my condition as a living being”, one can choose to “expel” oneself, to “spit” oneself out, or, to redream the world, as Okri suggests in “Laughter Beneath the Bridge” (1993) and in *A Way of Being Free* (1997). In the latter, non-fictional book, almost in echo of Achebe’s notion of the birth of the beautiful via suffering, Okri asserts: “Whatever resilience has kept wounded people and devastated continents here, alive, can be transfigured to make them strong, confident, and serene. They have to question everything in order to build for the future” (1997, 132). Thus the key to the thrust of Okri’s short story can, arguably, be found in its closing aphorism: “The young shall grow” (22), for this, too, is the legend painted on the side of the “old wooden bodywork” (4) of the overcrowded lorry transporting the Igbo mother and her pre-teen son away from Biafra, on their journey through the insect-infested forest where Nigerian soldiers wait to torture, rape and butcher their own countryfolk. The juxtaposed dichotomy between death and survival is, of course, evocative of the cycle of life.

## **Conclusion**

In a subsection of her *Powers of Horror*, entitled “An exile who asks ‘where?’” Kristeva argues: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, of refusing.” (1982, 8) Significantly, she concedes that this is “Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter – since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection” (ibid.). Using her notion of the abject, I have attempted to allude to the fine line between “laughing with” and “laughing at”, between pleasure and pain. Focusing on the pleasure/pain paradox illuminates how satire works in Okri’s story. The freedom to laugh<sup>7</sup> juxtaposed with the curbing of laughter can be explicitly connected with the physical pain and suffering of the

characters, particularly that of the young narrator, suggesting how readers are implicated in and redeemed from represented systemic violence.

As if pointing to Okri's motivation for the composition of "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" and the need for its wider dissemination, K Olu-Ololabi laments the dearth of critical capacity in Nigeria. In his Inaugural lecture at the University of Ibadan, he attributes the state of regression to this fact and contends that, "All these signs of impending perilous times are products of our unexamined living ... but the good life, an ideal that philosophers have sought since time immemorial, can only be realised by constant rigorous and critical reflection" (2011: 43). This kind of critical reflection is evident in the works of both Achebe and Okri; it is also what I have striven to achieve in this presentation.

#### Notes

1 What would be the point of living if you thought that life was absurd, that it could never have meaning? This is precisely the question that Camus asks in his famous work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He says, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Camus and Absurdity | Philosophy Talk <https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/camus-and-absurdity> (accessed March 18, 2018).

2 Cf. Rosemary Gray, Recovering our true state of being: Ben Okri's fable, 'The Comic Destiny' (2009). *English Academy Review: Journal of English Studies* 34(2) 2017: 35-50. [//doi.org.1080/103131752.2017.1411465](https://doi.org/10.80/103131752.2017.1411465).

3 See also Chinua Achebe, 1999. Imagined Commonwealths. *Cambridge essays on Commonwealth and International Literature in English*.

4 Quote from *The Europa Year Book 1968* Vol. II, Africa, The Americas, Asia, Australia. London: Europa Publications p.1005. Although not a leading figure in the Council of War, Colonel Philip Effiong was the first Vice President of Biafra.

5 Julia Kristeva elaborates; "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and puss, or a sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react or accept" (1982: 3).

6 See *Critical Approaches in Anthill of the Savannah*. Ed. Holga G Ehling. Special issue of *Matatu* 8 (1991). 155 pages. In Review by F. Odun Balogun. 1993. *Research in African Literatures* 24 (2): 133-134.

7 Anca Parvulescu explores the highly complex and ambivalent historical relation to laughter in "Laughter and Literature" (2017, 2), tracing the rhetorical invocations of the tradition to show that "literature is a site where various anxieties about laughter become legible. Literature offers us chronotopes [sic] of laughter in need of extended description".

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