

# Lookin Back: James Ogude in Conversation with Ben Okri: 26 April 2014, University of Pretoria, South Africa

## James Ogude

JO: Thanks Ben for giving me a chance to interview you. I want to start with this honour that you have received, the honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria. Our understanding is that the University of Pretoria is the first university in Africa to bestow an honorary doctorate upon you. How significant is this honour to you?

Okri: Every recognition received for work done out of love and out of passion is significant. In this particular instance it is very moving. African universities have been slow to appreciate the work that I have been doing. It is fitting that South Africa is the first from the continent. It says something beautiful about where South Africa is right now. It says something about its spirit, the way it perceives itself and the world. It speaks well for South African intellectual society. I am aware that when Chinua Achebe was here many years ago to give the Steve Biko lecture that South Africa also took the opportunity to recognise the immense contribution he has made. This shows that South Africa has a long and profound relationship with the continent's writers. I am thrilled to be appreciated in this way. But the feeling is reciprocal, because I have a soft spot for South Africa too and consider myself an adopted son of the land. My writing seems to strike a chord with South African people. Perhaps it's because of the theme of freedom that informs my work, the need to go beyond boundaries in exploring the wider possibilities of our art and our humanity.

JO: Thank you. You will probably be happy to know that last year we also honoured Professor Njabulo Ndebele whom you must know very well.

Okri: Yes. A wonderful writer.

JO: I know you have talked about the significance of South Africa to you. Is it important to you that this honour is happening in South Africa

twenty years into democracy? This year South Africa is celebrating twenty years into democracy which will be on the 27th of April.

Okri: That adds layers of significance to the honour. It is worth contemplating what it means that South Africa is enjoying 20 years of its independence, that it continues the extraordinary journey it has made since freeing itself from apartheid, under the interested gaze of the world, and that it remains a largely peaceful society, an important presence on the world stage. To those of us who are South African watchers across the world it has been a source of satisfaction that it has managed these last twenty years without much acrimony. It has its problems but then which post-independence nation doesn't? The first two or three decades after independence are bound to be difficult ones, bound to be transitional. It takes a while for nations to acquire the right balance, to begin to realise their possibilities. Twenty years is a milestone and South Africa has done a lot better than many other African countries in their post-colonial story. It hasn't succumbed to the dangerous temptations of civil war and revenge. It continues its journey of democracy. And there is still much to be done. You are no longer a minor at twenty. You are now a grown up among the nations of the world. Congratulations in getting here.

JO: You make a very important point that the project of nation formation or building is never a very simple one and that brings me to how people tend to be very pessimistic about the destiny of the continent and the sentiments that we get here are very similar: "you are all heading the same way". But you seem to have a very strong sense of optimism and this is something I also pick up from your own writing, not just about the whole continent, but humanity in general. What do you say about that in relation to Africa's future?

Okri: There are people who have made a career out of predicting doomsday scenarios for Africa. If you read these people you would get the impression that Africa should long have disappeared under the weight of its inefficiency and corruption. By now Africa would have ceased to exist. But all you have to do is speak to the economists. Some of the largest growing economies in the world right now are African nations. The world is turning to Africa as the scene of the next great economic expansion.

My optimism about Africa is well founded. I know the inner matrix of the African spirit. I also grasp what appears to have been the causes for the perception of despair. It could be put down to two or three factors. One is the adjustment of one mode of being to another. From the African past to the African future a journey is being made. All

nations go through periods in which they appear to falter. If you look at the long complicated histories of America, England, France or Russia, any of the so-called great nations of the world, you'll see that they all went through these great challenges of poverty, chaos, corruption, justice etc. They are still going through them, in their advanced stages. It is part of the growth of nations. And the growth of nations has to do with the ethical and cultural education of its people. This cannot be done by force. When it is done by force it often leads to an inward collapse of a system in the end. It has to happen organically. The African spirit is communal and family oriented, with a sense of shared responsibility, shared progress. In the dialogue between Africa and the rest of the world that has been taking place over the last fifty years there has been a slow but significant transformation in the African ethos. The next hundred years will be important for Africa. This depends on two factors. One is how it deals with the problem of disguised neo-colonial threats. A degree of responsibility about how we handle our resources, how we handle our land (there is too much selling off of our land), and how we handle the perception of our future will be very important. I don't need to name what I am talking about. People will understand what I am saying. We are going through a second phase of a quiet new colonial threat. The whole continent needs to be vigilant right now. The other thing is a greater sense of social justice. This is paramount in Africa. We have too many slums, too much poverty, too much inequality. There are too many loopholes for siphoning money from our national coffers, for the non-payment of taxes by those who should pay them as a fair contribution to their societies. These are things that politicians, as they gain strength and confidence in their responsibilities, will hopefully eventually deal with. The African spirit is essentially progressive. All you have to do is look at its art, its rituals, its literature, listen to its songs, study its dances. The African spirit is very quick. It learns fast. We are a very adaptive people.

JO: So would you say that it is in the terrain of culture where this spirit, what you call the African spirit or the African inner matrix, is sustained?

Okri: Culture is at the core of the African spirit. It is where our ability to survive and our sense of humour comes from, our inner strengths and creativity. It is the source of our resilience in the face of innumerable attacks on our identity. I am talking about culture in all its aspects, literature, music, art, dance, rituals, traditional modes of being. Africa has to deal with the world on its own terms. But this takes time.

To go back to your original question about pessimism and the African condition. I heard two people wondering about the progress that has

been made in the last twenty years. But on a different scale twenty years is quite short in the lives of nations. It took many nations two hundred years to achieve the possibility of democracy. We are having to accomplish the many things older nations accomplished, in a short time. That is a great deal of expectation. But having said this, look around. The terrain has changed. The trouble is that because we are living through these changes we don't notice them. There is still much for Africa to do, and there are still some invisible shackles to throw off, but Africa's potential is huge. It is tremendous. If we are wise enough, if we are hardworking enough, the future is African. But only if we have vision, rigour, and hard work.

JO: I will come back to that later but I want to take you back to this honour. As a writer do you think the academy, especially in Africa, has a role in affirming our men and women of letters? In other words is legitimation important for sustained career in writing?

Okri: Something happened in the late sixties in many independent African nations. The universities decided to teach the people their own literature. When I was growing up most people read trashy American and English novels. Many of them still do. I could give you names but I don't want to make more famous people who are already bad enough as writers. It was only by the corrective teaching of the best of our literature that the continent began to have an important dialogue with itself. This is crucial. People need to read the world's writers. But they really need to read their own writers. They need to read their best writers. They need to expect from their writer the highest standards. They need to expect their writers to be as good as, if not better than, writers anywhere in the world. There should not be a selective appreciation of our writers just because they are our writers. We should demand from them the highest standards. We should demand them to extend the possibilities of their art, their novels, their stories, their poems, their dances, their paintings. They should push the possibilities forward so that the achievement of our writers should also be the achievement of the human race. I take the view that writers write both for their people and the world. It is a dual thing. In the past writers have been made to feel that they should write only for their people, their people being defined in national terms and, in some cases, tribal terms. That is regressive. Our writers should write for us but they should also write for the world. Because we should all read the best writers in the world. We read Shakespeare not because he wrote for us, but because we limit our humanity by not reading him. The same should be true of our best writers. The world should be diminished by not reading us. We

must write so well, and so truthfully, that to not read us would limit your humanity wherever in the world you come from.

The academy should appreciate, but only with the highest standards. It should never be a validation of mediocrity. It should be a validation of excellence. For that reason it is not too bad to be a little bit slow in the appreciation of writers. I think that sometimes a too quick appreciation of writers can as it were ...

JO: Get to their head?

Okri: ... or encourage them in what could actually be a lazy stage in their development. Writers are very strange creatures. Some writers do their best work very early and do nothing worthwhile afterwards. Some get better as they get older, as they understand the complexity and the depth of their art, and the complexity and the depth of the human spirit. It is not easy creating an art commensurate to what you have experienced or what your people have suffered or what you perceive of the world about you. It takes time to achieve the synthesis of self and world, to find a unique tone for expressing the complexity of your experiences and perceptions. When writers are appreciated too early, there is a danger we might deprive them of the deeper gifts of their artistic discoveries. But what does too early mean? It is a relative thing. I incline towards slowness. I'm just entering the deep strange territory of my art.

JO: Would you say that the best of the arts should necessarily aspire towards the universal?

Okri: Achebe believed that the writer should be local first, that they could only be universal by being local. He is a wonderful example of that. Except that he breaks his own rule. He is universal as well as being local. The same is true with Soyinka. But if you are local and do not achieve universality then all is lost. The great writers in the world understand that it is not just a Russian, German, French or English condition, but that it is primarily a human condition. It may have the reality of a particular place, but its grasp must touch in a deep way the human in all of us. It is in the human that the universal lies. You cannot really touch the local if you do not touch the universal.

JO: Is this about our human connectedness?

Okri: About the human connectedness but mainly about the human condition. When you pick up a book or when you go to watch a play, and the curtain opens you are not watching as a Xhosa person or a Luo person

or an Urhobo person. You are in there as a human being affected by your particular experience and history. But first of all your heart, your spirit, your compassion, your sense of outrage, needs to be engaged. It is you as a human being that must be touched. That is the only way in which works can speak to us. African Literature is at its best when it is also universal. I remember a conversation with Achebe many years ago. He spoke about his meeting with James Baldwin. When James Baldwin read *Things Fall Apart* the first thing he said was, “Okonkwo, that’s my father.” The novel made a connection to Baldwin in a personal way. It spoke to Baldwin across tribe and continents. That’s what literature does.

JO: Let me take you back a little bit, when did you realise if ever, that you have some creative talent – that you can write?

Okri: I didn’t realise it suddenly to be honest with you. At school I was going to be scientist. My dream was to be an inventor.

JO: That is what you share with Achebe.

Okri: Was he going to be a scientist too?

JO: He was going to be a medical doctor.

Okri: He was going to be a doctor, so he was going into the healing side. Mine was invention. I wanted to be an inventor. I wanted to make things. I wanted to create things. One of my dreams was a jacket that could also be a radio. Invention was my thing, along with physics and mathematics. Then something strange happened around the age of fourteen. I had finished school. There was a year in which I was not doing anything. I was waiting for my results. I began reading the books in my father’s library. They were books I was forbidden to read. I began my reading with the great classics, the Greeks, the Russians, the *Arabian Nights*, Shakespeare, Dickens. My first conscious reading was Plato, the Symposium, then *Timaeus*, then *Critias*. That started something. It started a set of questions. By the time that summer was over, and I had worked my way through one shelf of my father’s books, my destiny had changed.

I read myself from one kind of destiny to another. The other factor was the discussions I used to have with my father about Greek philosophy, ethics and African philosophy. I used to argue with him about African philosophy. Did it exist? My father would say yes, there is African philosophy, very great African philosophy. I used to ask him where these books were so I could read them. He would say the books

were there but much more significantly – and then he would make a gesture that included the world about me. I did not understand what he meant till many years later during times of poverty and nostalgia in England. I started thinking about the implication of my father’s gesture. Those thoughts lead to the mode of writing that became *Incidents at the Shrine* and eventually *The Famished Road*. The third factor is the stories my mother told me. She told me oblique stories. They all had odd angles. My form of storytelling is oblique, with odd angles. I got it from my mother. When she wanted to tell me something she didn’t say it straight away. She never said, “Ben don’t do this, Ben don’t do that.” She would tell me a story instead. The story was always oblique. I could never quite work out what she was trying to tell me. That made me think. It made me question. Years later I came to realise that the best African storytelling is also oblique. African art at its best is oblique. That is our mode. There is a whole philosophy in this.

JO: From what you are telling your models were fairly complex. You have got your African, your classical European sources.

Okri: And then African literature itself which I came to it rather late. You were taught Achebe and Soyinka and other Nigerian writers in school alongside the classics of the world. But I discovered African literature in my late teens. I had already started writing by the time I discovered it. I really discovered it when I was away from Africa. It was so much fresher for that reason, so much purer. It came to me as itself. You read African literature in Africa as part of your growing up and you don’t see it quite so clearly, because the text is within the text of the world it is situated in. But you read it away from home and you just have the text, and the text is a world. For me it was fuller, richer. Just having the text and not having the text of its world complicated my reality. It gave me a great excuse to study over an intense period, the heart, the core and the edges of what we consider African literature. That came quite late but it was fortunate because it meant I already had an open vision of literature before I came to our own.

JO: Any particular writer that stands out for you in this period?

Okri: The names are endless. I wouldn’t do them justice. Here are some: Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, Peter Abrahams, Es’kia Mphahlele, Aidoo, Ngugi, Achebe, Coetzee, Soyinka, Okigbo, Peters, Okot p’Bitek, Gordimer. I read widely and intensely and continue to do so.

JO: You are, or at least are seen as, part of the Black Diaspora in the West. Has this shaped your writing in any significant way and is location important when it comes to writing – at least for you?

Okri: It has shaped my understanding of craft. This is the unspoken subject in modern African criticism – the subject of craft. I do not know if I am a Diasporic African writer or not. I think that the writer writes. If the work is any good it is a contribution to where you are and where you are from. Being in England has compelled me to write with not only a profound sense of Africa at the tip of my pen but also with a sense of the contemporary and historical challenge that it is important for us to meet. Which is to say, we are not only writing in the context of Africa, we are also writing in the context of Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Austen, Joyce, Camus; it is not only Achebe, Bessie Head, Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek. It is also Walcott, Toni Morrison, Dostoyevsky; it is a world context. You suddenly realise that your responsibility to your literature is also responsibility to the literature of the world. Being in the West compelled me realise the worldwide context of writing.

JO: You are steeped in a fairly complex world of writers and you are emphasising the idea of craft. Is this the art of doing it?

Okri: It is the art of doing it to the best of your ability, doing it well. Craft is one of the invisible elements which contributes to a work's endurance. It is the means by which a character presented is clear in your mind, the means by which a story moves, the means by which a story enters your subconscious, goes deep into you and becomes part of you. The craft is the means by which the complex nature of what you are saying is freighted in the most permanent way to present and future generations. It is the unspoken subject in African criticism. By that I mean African criticism tends to look at the functionality of the literature: themes, ideology, schools, and so on. But the element of craft, which has had a huge impact on 20th century writing across the world, especially the period of modernism and afterwards, is not much addressed. In African criticism you will get studies of the post-colonial, the post-modern, the application of theory, but you will rarely get an analysis of sentences or a study of how a paragraph gets its effect.

Because of the legacy of Flaubert, Camus cannot write an innocent sentence. He knows he is writing under the rigorous shadow of the master. In craft you inherit a great fire of difficulty. You don't just write any old sentence. You are aware. All the time.

JO: You are carrying a complex tradition with you.



Okri: A complex and difficult tradition. A tradition that has been pushed forward so far that to write in complete innocence, without being aware of what has been done in the tradition of your art, is to write yourself into oblivion. That is where we are right now. It can no longer be denied.

JO: Does it matter which language you are using?

Okri: It does not matter what language you are writing in. You still have to deal with the achievements that have been wrought in your field. You still have to deal with the great discoveries that have altered the history of your art. You can write innocently in Urhobo or Ibo or Yoruba but sooner or later it will be seen in terms of the greater achievement of the novel, the poem, the short story everywhere. It will be read in relation to *Ulysses*, *Death of the King's Horseman*, *Don Quixote*, *Beloved*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, the short stories of Chekov, *War and Peace*, *Achebe's African Trilogy*, *Crime and Punishment*, the poems of Emily Dickinson and so on. In that sense the world of literature has shrunk, not expanded. When you ask me what the implication has been of writing in London I would say it has made the pen more ambiguous, more difficult to wield, heavier with responsibility, and yet more joyful.

JO: I know writers don't like labels – being confined to philosophical categories – but many would insist you are Africa's foremost magical realist and after the release of *The Famished Road*, Antony Appiah made a very important point that, although you are writing through the mode of magical realism, there is a sense in which your kind of magical realism is very different from that of Latin American writers. His argument was that while the spirit is not metaphorical or imaginary for you it is more real than the world of the everyday – what do you say to that? Do you make a distinction between the real and the spirit world, the secular and the spiritual?

Okri: Appiah's comment was very prescient. He subsequently made other comments about my work which will be found to be incorrect. However he is a philosopher whom I respect. I have no quarrels with the label magical realism, but when it is applied to my work it shows that people are not seeing what I am doing at the level of sentences. Nor do they see the deeper themes and intentions and techniques. The phrase magical realism has people imagining that in every sentence something fantastical, illogical, and wonderful is happening without any basis in reality or in the text. It gives an impression of flightiness, wonder and fabulous poetry that doesn't grapple with real things. That is not

applicable in my case. Having said that magical realism – though a very broad church – has few genuine masterpieces. A distinction needs to be made between the many texts of magical realism and the few that give that label its distinction and power. When critics label my work as magical realism they are not aware of what I am doing at the level of sentences, and sometimes in the space between sentences, or in the architecture. It is important to go back and look at what I am doing. Looking at the short stories *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*, and the novels *Dangerous Love* and *The Famished Road* sentence by sentence brings one to a different and a much more complicated conclusion. One of the things that becomes apparent is that I am working with reality. Reality is wider than realism. Reality includes the visible and the invisible, and is the perfect synthesis of both. Reality includes consciousness. Our consciousness is part of our reality. The way a people see the world is their reality. Otherwise you are privileging the philosophy that has pervasively determined what our perception of the real world is and should be. The colour yellow means different things to the Chinese than to the African. A tree has a different resonance for the Japanese than it does for the Nigerian. Consciousness is part of this. Myth, perception, and belief are implicated in consciousness. But all this is nothing without a craft that creates a new synthesis, an art that creates a new reality, an imaginative and a spiritual one, an enrichment of worlds. Philosophy is not enough. The inclusion of myth and beliefs are not enough in themselves. There must be a commensurate form and a consummate technique to embody it all, and there must be something to say. This is the most difficult thing. This is the holy grail of literature and art. It is why certain works stand out above all the others, why they endure, why they appear endless in possibility and interpretation. The writers have made something new and made them permanent.

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