

Literature, Psychic Re-Engineering And National Transformation: A Study of Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love*

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The late Robin Williams, who played the role of John Keating, an English teacher in the film, *Dead Poets Society*, had told his students in one of his teaching sessions that no matter what anybody told them, words and ideas changed the world. If indeed words and ideas change the world, how does it happen? Is it possible to re-engineer human psyche? How can the whole body of a people's culture be changed in a bid to transform them? What is culture? Since a text is made up of words and ideas, is it possible that it become an agent of transformation? These are pertinent questions this paper seeks to answer using Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* as a primary text. Qualitative method will be used in the process of doing the paper to prove that indeed it is possible to re-engineer and transform human psyche in the process of nation building, especially in Nigeria; and that once a cultured man or woman emerges, a healthy nation automatically evolves with his or her emergence!

Keywords: words, ideas, human psyche and transformation, re-engineering, cultured person

Introduction

Social Change or societal engineering is a concept that is bandied about without people being really conscious of how this happens. Psychic engineering is even more apt in terms of the implications for social change and societal engineering. In essence, it may

not be possible to change a society without the change happening inside a person's being or without allowing the inner person to radiate the goodness that is within h(im/er), which s(he) in turn radiates to h(is/er) society. There is an Igbo adage which says that when a finger contaminates itself with oil, the oil spreads to other fingers or contaminates the other fingers from the one it first touched. We will not delude ourselves, though, that we can bring down paradise on earth; no, we cannot; but we can try to make life much better for the greater part of humanity.

In *Dangerous Love*, Ben Okri tries to expose the ills of the Nigerian society and has suggested how we could cure ourselves of the ills. Curing the ills of the society can only be done when we see the entire structure as defective and possibly begin to rearticulate it through a process of psychic engineering.

Conceptual Framework

Over the centuries, scholars have occupied themselves with the question of education, societal transformation and change. In the 18th century, Jean-Jacque Rousseau suggests a kind of education whereby moral education is introduced to the child before the age of 18. From 18, religious education is then introduced. The aim is to produce a human being capable of understanding the import of religious doctrines without being derailed into fanaticism (ile, 39-40). The German Philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* seeks the known truths which might be used to erect a general system of laws by a rigorous study of certain laws as duty established through a priori knowledge or reason, that is, knowledge independent of experience or empirical reality. Through this rigorous enquiry he establishes when an action

was moral and when it is not. He goes further to make argument for goodwill as the sole determinant of good and happiness. He then argues that there are moral imperatives limited by condition and therefore not categorical. However, moral imperatives that are not limited by condition are always categorical, for one is expected to act only according to that maxim by which one can at the same time will that it should become a universal law (9-22). By implication, therefore, Kant is trying to guide man towards moral actions that will indeed become beacons of light to all humankind in their universality.

What this means is that man has never existed in a vacuum. Things were always put in place to guide human behavior. Even Thomas Hobbes envisioned a social contract between the people and the state, whereby the people submit their will to the state, which in turn guarantees social order (Ile, 18-19). In all this, one sees that what has always been intended was social and psychic engineering in a bid to ennoble and improve humanity. This is what Ben Okri set out to achieve in his novel *Dangerous Love*.

Okri tries to awaken in the reader the desire for change, to create a “mode of information” as propounded by Murray Krieger which has replaced “mode of production” as history’s controlling force. This means that we can look at the historical process of change or transformation through the dialectic process of the drive to satisfy the desire for change or transformation: as when a desire for a particular kind of change dies out, another desire for a new kind of change arises. To understand the concept “mode of information” very well one must understand the Marxist “mode or means of production”. It can be understood by looking at man as a social animal with physical needs. These physical needs can, however, only be satisfied when man develops or produces the means to satisfy these needs. For example, man needs shelter; therefore, he develops or produces the means to build a house.

These means of producing the satisfaction to his need for a house is called **Forces or Means of Production**. In the case of “mode of information” man is looked upon as having inner needs for the ideal; however, these needs can only be satisfied when man uses the right information types in a certain way to satisfy them. In other words, it is not enough to have information: the information we have remains information until we have turned it into knowledge by letting it be filtered by our critical faculty which should always be guided by objectivity; and thereafter what matters is what we do with the knowledge which the information we have turned into knowledge avails us.

For example, Okri presents the character, Ifeyiwa to the reader in such a way as makes the reader look at Ifeyiwa as representing a repressive cultural practice among the Nigerian ethnic groups, where young girls are forced into marriages they would, under normal circumstances, not contract, by their parents, who have their own selfish interests at heart in contracting the marriages: he represents Ifeyiwa and Takpo her husband as a mismatch. While the former is young and has formal education, the latter is old, relatively rich, but illiterate. By implication therefore, certain cultural practices are repressive. Why then would certain cultural practices be repressive, while others are not. What this implies is that culture in terms of values, beliefs, etc are constructed as the great German Philosopher, Fredriech Nietzsche had tried to prove not only in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* but also in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

But whenever man aspires towards the ideal in terms of transformation, he constructs also ideal cultural values as Kant argued in his proposal of *categorical imperative*, which states that “moral imperatives command unconditional conformity of our subjective maxim to a law, while the law contains no condition, that is, no reference to specific goals on which it depends (Kant as translated by Lewis Beck xii). For example

“an imperative is hypothetical (i.e, it has an ‘if-clause’) if it states that some action is right or advisable as a means to some specific goals” (xii). And so Okri’s *Dangerous Love* is an attempt to transform Nigerians by destroying the pieces of information they have accumulated over so many centuries without necessarily being able to turn them into knowledge which would have engendered the ideal through transformation of individual psyches.

Psychic Re-Engineering in *Dangerous Love*

Although the text has as protagonist, a certain Omovo, yet the story is woven around other great characters that represent human experiences: Ifeywa, her relatively older husband Takpo, Dr Okocha, the master artist, Omovo’s father, his wife, Blackie, his run-away sons Umeh and Okur, Tuwo the woman seducer and returnee from England, Keme the journalist, Okoro and Dele, who are both Omovo’s good friends and a host of others who represent ordinary people in Nigeria’s complex societies.

Omovo is the life-force of the novel, because through his experiences, the writer was able to give insight into the complex human nature as well as the nature of things in the Nigerian Society from which the setting was derived. Omovo lives with his father and his stepmother. He falls in love with a young girl of his age, Ifeyiwa, who unfortunately is Takpo’s wife.

Omovo’s father lost his first wife, who is Omovo’s mother, and so he relapses into drinking; and having no good job, he is unable to provide for his sons, especially Umeh and Okur, whose secondary school certificate results are good enough to take them to the university, but who cannot because their father is not able to sponsor their education. They lose all respect for him and he frustrates them into leaving home. Their departure, which sobers Omovo, however, becomes a way for him “to explore the hidden meanings of his life and to come to terms

with the miasmic landscapes about him. Painting became for him a part of his response to life: a personal and public prism” (84). Okri as narrator uses Omovo’s painting to structure information flow to the reader: he creates a scenario where that protagonist, Omovo,

[T]urns his gaze upwards at the sky. With his eyes wide open he tried to imagine objects. He tried to imagine darkness. He couldn’t. Then, shutting his eyes he tried to imagine trees, but he could not see them in all their solidity. He found that, as always, he had to create the image within him, he had to bring it into being as if he were painting it internally [...]. He began to think about the concrete basis of ideas, and about the long silent phases it had taken him to trap the scumscape on canvas, when his mind clouded (86).

The concrete basis of ideas could possibly be explained in the context of Platonic Metaphysics whereby that which is “truly real is not the objects we encounter in sensory experience but rather Forms, and these can only be grasped intellectually” (Moore and Bruder, 38). Furthermore, , it seems the, the narrator tries to explain the concrete basis of ideas using the quiet ruminations of the protagonist, Omovo. According to the narrator, “Omovo did a quiet stocktaking. He had lost his mother. His brothers had gone out into the world and were destroying themselves. He loved Ifeyiwa, but she was married. He is alienated from his father. He had a bad school certificate result. He had a mindless job in a hostile office (92).

Controlled thinking, according to Aronso, is a form thinking that is conscious, intentional, voluntary, and done with effort (105). Therefore, the concrete basis of ideas could necessarily lie in a thinking that is conscious and intentional and with effort in order to capture the concrete basis of a particular situation

And turn it into knowledge. Knowledge so captured could then be made functional through practical application to change situations. Thus being the case, Okri consciously and intentionally guides the reader systematically to action. The deliberate way in which he does this is identifiable in his choice of words and ways of saying them. From being controlled, Omovo's thoughts become *counterfactual*: In his moodiness, with a head inundated with thoughts, he remembers the body of the mutilated girl, a victim of ritual killing, he and his friend Keme, the journalist, had seen in the course of their sauntering in the night. Then

He wondered if the police, notoriously slow in their duties, had begun to investigate the horrible crime. As he thought about the girl, he felt guilty. He felt he should do something about it. But he was powerless. He felt a curious need of redemption. He felt that his powerlessness, and the powerlessness of all the people without voices, needed to be redeemed, to be transformed. With this feeling his urge to do the painting reached fever pitch (93).

Obviously the narrator wishes his works to redeem both his powerlessness and the powerlessness of people without voices? Will his works speak for them? Will they transform the powerlessness of those people without voices into an active weapon of engagement? May be; yes. One of the ways this could be done could be observed during the encounter between Ifeyiwa and Omovo. Ifeyiwa meets Omovo where he is reading Ngugi's *Weep Not Child*, a novel she had just read. They begin to discuss the novel:

"I cried when I finished it," she said.
"I didn't like the idea of the hero
wanting to commit suicide."
"The world should not make people

want to do that.”

“He was young, and too much of a visionary, and people of the world are trapped in social roles.”

“I like the title.”

“It’s from Walt Whitman.”

“Weep not, child.”

“let none of us weep” (102).

The experience of reading a text that captures the totality of human experience creates room for a discourse situation which involves controlled and intentional thinking towards concretizing ideas. Therefore those who read gain information, which becomes knowledge eventually through critical dialogue with oneself or through discourse situations as the above between Omovo and Ifeyiwa. And once ideas are grasped as such, problems are solved and individual psyches as well as a nation’s body politic is transformed or re-engineered through the application of knowledge so gained; for consciously or unconsciously, the narrator shows in the above dialogue in *Weep not Child* how literature could be put to practical use in the discussion between Ifeyiwa and Omovo. He makes us see the need to discuss ideas and the cognitive experience such discussions will avail the reader; for, as human beings, we are constantly observing objects and events, interpreting them, comparing them with past experiences, placing them into categories and encoding them into memory, a cognitive process involved in perception, organization, interpretation and comparing of information derived from observing the physical world and the happenings therein as well as the inner world which we carry in us. And because cognition is part and parcel of memory which involves the storage and retrieval of the pieces of information so far gathered, it allows for reason, which is the ability to make references and draw conclusions using the knowledge gained from perception, having stored them for eventual retrieval. Through reflection,

which is symbiotic to memory, cognition and reason, the quality of the stored information is evaluated and prescribed to solve problems.

A Psychic Re-engineering Process

The re-engineering of the human psyche is indeed a complex phenomenon. Psychic engineering is a form of social psychology, the phenomenon of which is social influence –that is, ‘the effect that the words, actions, or mere presence of other people have on our thoughts, feelings, attitudes or behavior, according to Aronso’ (35). For example, in a bid to re-engineer our collective psyche, to help us re-memory, the narrator takes the reader back to Ifeyiwa’s village in his typical flashback style, thereby imposing the warped human conditions on to our consciousness so that we can make our thoughts of changing the situation conscious, controlled and intentional and thereafter crystallize a solution. Observe the portrayal of the warped human condition in the society:

Her village was still in a state of aggression with the neighbouring village of Ugbofia [...] The two villages were about a mile from one another. The stream that flowed past both villages connected them in many ways. In the past they had intermarried. Then a boundary dispute grew and acquired serious dimensions. They now regarded one another with deep mutual suspicion. The things that connected also provided elements for discord. Histories were dredged up. One village called the other the descendants of slaves. The other village replied in words just as strong. The forest that separated them, the stream that connected them, the air that they both breathed, became permeated with violence. Ifeyiwa wondered bitterly why there should be any fighting at all (108).

One wonders why two villages that had intermarried among themselves in the past now regarded one another with deep mutual suspicion. This thought will arise immediately one wants to find a solution to the problem by trying to be conscious of one's thoughts and charge it with focused power. One may want to understand the causes of the prejudice. These are valid social psychological conditions that one may have to become conscious of in the bid to finding solutions to the as problems. According to Aronson, et al., 'one first explanation for what causes prejudice is that it is the inevitable by-product of the way we process and originate information –in other words, it is the dark side of human social cognition (29). As had earlier been implied in this paper, information is not power; knowledge is. The pieces of information we take in remain information until we process them or sift them through our objective filter. Once we have done that those pieces of information become knowledge or positive information, which we then must apply for the knowledge we claim to have to be meaningful; for true knowledge or positive knowledge brings enlightenment or illumination, the kind of illumination the novel's protagonist, Omovo, receives toward which is like "a tumble of words turning in him, exploding into thoughts and speeches, in being and words, in visions and emotions deeper than the urge that made him paint" (362).

In such a state, Omovo sees time break up into every moment, into endless possibilities of life. Time is the sea for him, a million lights revolved on every crest where past meets present, present meets future. And so shaking with excessive love, he sees the vision of terrifying and unfinished portrait of Humanity in its helplessness, where hope is subverted and where corruption reigns. He feels burdened by desperate but unheard prayers of slaves and ancestors. He feels the treachery of leaders, the lies and corruption of the old generation, their

destruction of future dreams, their rape of the past of their country and how they collectively rape their future. He wonders why Nigerians never learn their lessons. And since they refuse to learn from history, their existence becomes a vicious circle of squalor, which keeps producing mad and angry youths. Omovo wonders why there are traitors and disunity everywhere; he reasons that if Nigerians remained deaf to history, then they would be enslaved not only by history, but also by themselves, their attitudes and their tribal madness and so each person would be for himself and the smiles of the rich would grow more predatory while children would weep their lives away burning in infernos of hunger and disease. Omovo reasoned that if Nigerian history had hurt Nigerians enough, they would stop betraying themselves and instead transform themselves. He believed what Nigerians needed was vision, a clear and positive vision combined with action. He believed there was need for Nigerian people to have dreams, because in dreams begin responsibility. He thought that unless Africa was transformed, the continent would dwindle and be swallowed by predators (362).

Omovo's thoughts becomes a practical way the narrator begins the re-engineering of our collective psyche:

[...]. In vision begins responsibility – and even as we die, and shrink, and are taken over, reduced, seen as animals, as invisible, even as the streets spill over with the poor, even as we dance our lives away, and celebrate the powerful, worship like servants at their vulturous shrines, we can utter psychic decisions and set forces into motion that could change our lives forever –in vision begins action –in action begins our destiny –for the things that you do change you –and the changes affect other things you do – to him that hath shall be given –seek and ye shall find –to him that hath not shall be taken from, even that which they haveth – you either become, or you die – (362).

Again, during the moment of illumination, a word kept repeating itself to Omovo. The narrator tries therewith to hypnotize his audience into action. He guides them on how to

Begin the action:

Transfiguration – transfigure the deception of education – all education is bad until you educate yourself – from scratch – start from the beginning, from the simplest things – assume nothing –question everything – begin again the journey from the legends of creation – look again at everything – keep looking – be vigilant – understand things slowly –digest thoroughly – act swiftly –re-dream the world – restructure self – all the building blocks are there in there chaos – USE EVERYTHING – USE EVERYTHING WISELY – EVERYTHING HAS SIGNIFICANCE – (362).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From culture to the individual, from the society to education, every facet of the Nigerian life needs re-engineering as Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* (1996) has proposed. Indeed, as the narrator urges us, we must “transfigure the deception of education (363). If we must transfigure the deception of education, then we must begin to transfigure our idea of culture. This concept as we have known it must be dismantled; as Eagleton puts it, one of the original meanings of culture is “husbandry” or the tending of natural growth” (1). The Nigerian peoples, for example, hold their traditions, their ways of life, their values and beliefs very dear to their hearts. However, change means that they must begin the journey of transfiguration by beginning again the journey from the legends of creation to looking again at everything. In other words, there must be a point where our values, beliefs, traditions, customs, etc meet for the BEING in us to begin a journey to being fully evolved, to lose its specificity.

We face religious, ethnic, racial, social and political challenges.

Therefore, to live as human beings, we must look for positive values where ever we can – in sacred books, texts as well in inter human relationships. We must let reason, which is also a gift from God, be the filter of everything that goes into us. We must ask questions, even ourselves. We must weigh things objectively, we must continually seek justice, conquer prejudice, get rid of ignorance and narrow-mindedness. We must train our minds to be democratic. As the narrator in *Dangerous Love* puts it, “we must look again at everything ...keep looking...be vigilant ...understand things slowly ... digest thoroughly [...]” (363). In other words, we must what we experience—that is, we must know what justice is, what prejudice is, what ignorance and narrow-mindedness are. For example, when one does a favor to somebody even when the person is least qualified to obtain the favor, the one doing the favor is being unjust and awakes in the person denied a feeling of resentment. When one denies somebody something due him, one is unjust and thereby awakes the resentment of the person deprived. When we entertain a feeling or message our ego that we are better than somebody based on accumulated negative information or stereotype, then, we are prejudiced. When we do not know and we do not know that we do not know, then we are ignorant. How do we recognize narrow-mindedness? When we are not able to know that another opinion apart from ours exists, then we are narrow-minded. Again, we must recognize a mind as democratic if the mind refuses to be dogmatic and recognizes that other views exist; if the mind accepts individual differences and is courageous enough to ask questions, if the mind develops the capacity to filter things we take into our God-given filter, which is reason. That mind must also at all times be objective in appreciating things.

Finally, a cultured man emerges from this process and he or she becomes an aristocrat of the soul, a democrat of the mind, a thoroughly educated man with all his or her mental faculties ready for use. Terry Eagleton, in his, *The Idea of Culture* had explicated on the various versions of culture: culture as

cultivation or as Francis Bacon puts it, *manurance* of the mind (1).; culture as source of action and negation of it (19).; culture as “a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence” (81). As Eagleton further puts it, “if culture means the active tending of natural growth, then it suggests a dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what the world does to us” (2). Therefore A cultured man is the man who has conquered prejudice and gotten rid of ignorance. He or she continually seeks the ideal or perfection and is at peace with the world. And with his or her emergence, culture assumes a new definition: a constant fight to get rid of ignorance and prejudice, a constant struggle toward the ideal. And just as a cultured man or woman has emerged, a healthy nation evolves automatically with his or her emergence.

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