



Nation, Nationness in The African Novel: A Fanonian Interpretation of Ben Okri's *Flowers And Shadows*

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Abstract:- In this era of postmodernism and globalization, it has become increasingly important to pay attention to how individuals, communities, interest groups and nations redefine and rename what is unique to them vis-à-vis an abstract humanity. This calls for a shift from all forms of intellectual essentialism to the basic differences and diversities in any given nation. For African literary scholarship, it implies a concomitant shift from the conception of Africa as a unitary entity to the internal struggles and challenges faced by individuals, groups and communities in the different nations of Africa. This inevitable shift is dramatized in the scholarship of the novel in Africa. Here, there is a new interest in how the novel tells of issues that affect the nation as an imagined community of people with equal rights and entitlements. Thus, in this study, we have adopted the qualitative research methodology, as well as the theoretical strand of Franz Fanon's third stage in the development of literature of the colonized in examining how Ben Okri has married both form and content in order to interrogate existing unequal juxtapositions in the experiential quality of lives of citizens in his Nigerian nation many years after decolonization. We have argued that in *Flowers and Shadows*, Ben Okri has dramatized the realities in his nation, particularly the insensitivity of the privileged class, the criminal neglect, as well as the numerous injustices suffered by those at the lower rung of the sociopolitical hierarchy in the imagined community of his Nigerian nation.

Keywords: Nation, Nationness, Africa, imagined community, Novel, Okri, *Flowers and Shadows*, Fanon, injustice, and postcolonial

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is an integral part of culture. It is a reputable tool for the assertion and retrieval of rights and entitlements in lived human communities, including the nations of Africa. In Africa, literary scholarship, particularly the novel has continued to serve as the voice of the dispossessed, oppressed, hungry and neglected individuals in various nations of the continent from colonization till date. For instance, during the days of the struggle for decolonization, the novel was engaged in raising the consciousness of the colonized on the condition of their existence, the need for the preservation of their culture from imperial misinterpretation and debasement, as well as urging them to take their destiny in their hands in order to free themselves from the powers that held them down. In the same token, the novel in independent Africa has not relented in the exposure of the disappointment of self-rule, particularly the neglect of the masses, as well as the insensitivity of the privileged class who inherited power at independence. This age-long role of literary scholarship as the bearer of the voice of the voiceless in Africa is in tandem with Franz Fanon's third stage of the development of literature of the colonized. As he contends in this somewhat eye opener, entitled *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon traces the development of literature of the colonized through three stages. At the third stage, Fanon argues that the colonized intellectual portrays his loyalty to his national identity through his imaginative creations. He contends that at this stage, the native intellectual is desirous of the need for a national existence and turns himself into an awakener of the people to their situation of existence. He further insists in this work, that cultural productions of the "wretched of the earth", (the colonized) must take on the habit of addressing his own people by taking up themes which interrogate the debased image of his people by the colonizing powers, and urging them to rise above the complacent acceptance of oppression, and fight for their existence as a nation of oppressed people

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with shared identity and aspirations. Fanon avers that due to the exceptional circumstances in which the colonized found themselves, such as: “in prison with the Marquis or on the eve of their execution”, there was therefore an urgent need for the use of literature “to speak to the nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouth piece of a new reality in action”. This, according to him should be properly called:

A literature of combat in the sense that it calls on the people to fight for their existence as a nation...it is literature of combat because it molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat, because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space (*Wretched*, 193).

Fanon further argues that the major role of literary production emanating from the colonized intellectual must substantiate the reality of their unfortunate experiences, as well as the survival of their culture against the forces of occupation. He avers that though the colonized uses the language and technique of the colonizer to deliver his message, he often interjects his work with his native dialect - to show his willingness to be as near as possible to his people. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and Ngugi wa Thion' go's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) are typical landmarks of Fanon's prescription. Again, Fanon's term *Literature of Combat*, is not only to emphasize the serious role of literary productions as potent weapons in the struggle for the restoration of lost rights, justice and entitlements of the oppressed, but also to sound a warning to the oppressor to desist from his ways, and a reminder to the oppressed to resist injustice and assault from the oppressor. Though Fanon wrote in an era when it was suicidal to engage in any form of physical resistance against the imperial powers, his prescriptions on the employment of literature as a virulent tool for voicing the challenges and desires of the oppressed, repressed and dispossessed have remained relevant to the people of the continent till date.

Thus, the indices of Fanon's third stage in the development of national literature of the colonized, especially the call on writers to employ literature as a weapon of combat against the forces of oppression and injustice, will help us locate Ben Okri's *Flowers and Shadows* within the context of *Literature of combat*. This is because, Okri's preoccupation in this novel is in tandem with Fanon's prescription for literature to be the mouth piece of the repressed, oppressed, dispossessed and marginalized people in the nation. The setting, subject matter, as well as the voices and actions of the characters he delineates in this novel, dramatize existing economic inequality, myriads of injustices meted to the poor, neglect, dispossession and oppression of the helpless and hopeless masses in his independent Nigerian nation. Thus, before we delve substantively into the major terrain of this work, it is important to understand the implication of the key words/ concepts in our research title.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

There is a distinction between a nation and its *nationness*. Even though scholars have not agreed on a generally acceptable definition of multifaceted concepts of nation and nationness, some have made commendable efforts. Prominent among them are Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Homi Bhabha. These theorists argue that aside of the commonalities binding a people together as members of the same nation such as unique location, map, flag, constitution, language, religion, culture, common history, values and aspirations for the future, there are other very necessary criteria required for the peaceful co-existence and development of citizens in any given nation. In his popular essay entitled “What is a nation?” (“Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?”), Renan, defines a nation as “a Soul”, and a “Spiritual Family” which is based on the free submission of the “Will” and “Consent” of the citizens for their collective good (16). He insists that, nationhood guarantees liberty and equity as well as centers on the idea of collective self-determination which derives from the individual's commitment to the good of others. He further declares that “a nation is a daily plebiscite” because it is:

A large aggregate of men healthy in mind and warm of heart that creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation... which demand the abdication of individual to the advantage of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist (20)

On his part, Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, argues that the power of imagination is of paramount importance in the peaceful co-existence of citizens in the nation. He declares that a nation is:

[A]n imagined political community. It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lies the image of their communion (6).

Accordingly, he argues that the nation is a “deep horizontal comradeship [of equals]. it is the fraternity that makes it possible, for so many millions not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (7). Thus, to both Renan and Anderson, the submission of *will* and *consent* as well as the power of inclusive *imagination* on the part of the citizens guarantee equity, rights and entitlements in the shared community of the nation. But in reality, there are obvious juxtapositions in the ways individuals in the nation

experience their *imagined communities*. It is these juxtapositions in the way citizens experience their nation that define their nations' nationness. Thus, there is a distinction between a nation and its nationness. The question then is, what is nationness?

Nationness is a morphological combination of the head noun, nation and the suffix, -ness. The *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* defines -ness thus: "suffix denoting quality or state, as in fineness, singleness". Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum in *A University Grammar of English*, confirm that "suffix frequently alter the [semantic value] of the base" (435). In the same sense the suffix -ness in *nationness* serves a related semantic and even ontological value in this study. "Nationness" means the condition of a nation or the quality of its conceived sense of identity as an individual, group of people, ethnic group, or better still as an "imagined community". The suffix -"ness" calls attention to the experiential quality of the nation, its citizens' experiential qualitative nature. It is in this qualitative or experiential dimension that we can gauge the nation's developmental stage or potential.

The questions then are, what quality of life have the people of Okri's Nigerian nation enjoyed since their independence? In what ways have their independence confronted the social contradictions that define their experiences in their imagined community? These are contradictions that create and perpetuate differences and contrasts thereby leading to uneven form of individuals, groups and national development. This unevenness and the condition of inequality of the citizens in it, is used to perpetuate a reflection of the nation's *nationness*. In *Flowers and Shadows*, Ben Okri represents the contradictions that constitute *nationness* in a vivid portrayal of the economic inequality, particularly the unjust dispossession, incarceration of the poor by the rich, as well as the criminal neglect of the masses to slums which are unbecoming of human habitation in a supposedly decolonized nation. And so Ben Okri tells us in this novel that in his Nigerian nation, those citizens:

From society's lowest depths are people who knew pain and lived pain. They are like weeds that spread the offensive odour of their lot wherever they went. That was why a hungry man is an angry man... In an age of plenty there is no consolation in living off the crumbs of the land (*Flowers*, 5)

It is in this unfortunate deprivation of those at the lower wrung of the nation's sociopolitical juxtapositions that the African novel, particularly, Ben Okri's *Flowers and Shadows* interrogates the nation's *nationness*.

In other words, despite the citizens' common identity as members of the same nation, they do not identify with their *imagined community* (nation) in the same way. It is these *differences* in their experiences that foreground their *nationness*, their peculiar pattern of experience and identification with the nation. The idea implied in this argument is that, in concrete terms, particularly when it comes to the distribution of the nation's wealth, and opportunities, individuals, groups, and communities in the nation do not experience or identify with their imagined communities on equal terms. Thus, *Nationness* manifests at different levels such as class, ethnicity, race, gender, power and interests. Within the context of independent African nations, precisely the Nigerian nation which Okri portrays in *Flowers and Shadows*, it is obvious that while some citizens experience their nation from positions of power, wealth, privilege, interest and abundance, others experience the same nation from positions of hunger, abject lack, deprivation, unjust incarceration, oppression, repression, disposition and marginalization. These differences are like the individual peculiarities that manifest at the level of *parole*. Just as the *parole* can reveal the interstice or contradiction in the individual's assimilation of the langue, *nationness* manifests the underlying inequality or contradictions in citizen's experience of their nation. Thus, *nationness* manifests at different levels of sociopolitical interactions within the shared community of the nation such as class, ethnicity, race, gender, age, power and interests. It is these differences in the quality of conceived sense of identity of citizens in independent Nigeria that Okri sets out to chronicle in *Flowers and Shadows*.

Again, within the context of postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha in "Narrating the Nation", asks the following question that will serve to illuminate the nature or concept of "nationness". He asks: "If the ambivalent figure of the nation is the problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness'...?" (2). Words and phrases like "ambivalent", "transitional history", "wavering between vocabularies", and "indeterminacy" serve to buttress and justify our overall concern with the term "nationness". Underlying these is a basic dialectic. Again, in another work entitled *The Location of Culture* Bhabha further argued that this dialectic can be attained through counter-cultural productions such as the novel. He maintains that these new developments have transformed the modern nation to a site for perceivable social "differences", "nationness" and "dysfunction" in a number of ways which have been expressed through cultural productions such as literature which illuminate the experiences of the people. According to him, cultural productions such as literature:

Most commonly signifies 'a people', 'a nation' and an empirical sociological strategy for cultural identity... However, the narrative and psychological force that *nationness* brings to bear on cultural production is the effect of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy (*Location*, 140).

He maintains that as an apparatus of cultural identification, narrative discourses encapsulate various aspects of national life including “a continual slippage of categories like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or cultural differences in the act of writing the nation” (140). It is on this assumption that He emphasizes that: “nationness” begets creativity which is expressed in a form of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of the people or the nation and make them the immanent subject of a range of social and literary narratives (140).

It is indeed at this new level of interrogation that the African novel acquires its identity as “Literature of combat”. Thus, beyond the issue of cultural nationalism, “nationness” embodies issues of inequality experienced at the different stratum of human interaction in any given nation. In other words, *Nationness* is applicable to all societies where unequal relationships exist including the Nigerian nation which Ben Okri portrays in *Flowers and Shadows*.

Published in 1980, Okri's first novel *Flowers and Shadows* dramatizes the various ways in which the privileged class inflicts unnecessary misery, pain and death on their less privileged counterparts in the shared community of his Nigerian nation. The novel explores the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Jonan Okwe and their teenage only child Jeffia. Mr. Jonan Okwe is a successful business man who all his life has been driven by the fear of poverty occasioned by his dying father's last remark that “My son, poverty is a curse” (9).

Set in the Nigerian first capital city of Lagos, the narrative opens with the protagonist's encounter with the title ‘Presentiments’ which centers on the premonitions of impending disaster on the Okwe family as revealed through the dreams of Mrs. Okwe. Walking home one afternoon after visiting his friend, Jeffia comes across two street boys torturing an innocent puppy. On interrogation, Jeffia discovers that the boys are hungry and frustrated due to their father's unjust imprisonment following a false allegation against him by the rich in the society. Jeffia takes pity on the boys and buys the dog off them in order to save it from further torture. He takes it home and cares for it. Few days later, Jeffia returns the puppy through a newspaper advertisement by its desperate owner – Juliet. Coincidentally, Juliet turns out to be one of Mr. Jonan Okwe's mistresses.

As the action of the plot unfolds, it is revealed that Mr. Jonan Okwe's greed and obsession for wealth have driven him into framing up and imprisoning his ambitious and hardworking half- brother Sowho with whom he runs the paint business named Afioso Paint Industry. With his half- brother Sowho languishing in prison and the determination to be super rich, Mr. Okwe puts so much of himself into the business at the detriment of his wife and only son. This neglect elicits Mrs. Okwe's artistic talent of drawing and the love of flowers which she tends with great passion. A telegraph one morning from Sowho announces the completion of his jail term and his imminent visit to his brother Mr. Jonan Okwe. This is followed by series of phone calls in which Mr. Jonan Okwe is threatened with the scandal of revealing his immoral and scandalous life style- particularly the plan to make public the photographs of him in bed with a girl. This arouses his anger for Juliet whom he suspects to be the mastermind of the impending scandal. In his rage, he visits Juliet to ascertain his suspicion. Faced with Juliet's denial, he beats her up and kicks her precious puppy to death. Jonan's life is further made miserable by an unbending demand for salary increment and the eventual mass resignation of his staff. Among them is Gbenga, his longest serving employee who is rumored to be at the verge of setting up his own paint industry. In Jonan's thinking, the man Gbenga knows too much about his illegal business deals and must be stopped. He hires thugs to deal with Gbenga. The thugs beat Gbenga to a state of coma and dump him along the road in the darkness of the night. Coincidentally, driving home after a party that same night, Jeffia out of compassion is forced to stop to assist Cynthia, a nurse from a nearby clinic – knelling over the body of his father's dying employee. Again, coincidentally, Cynthia turns out to be the daughter of Oduko – another victim of Jonan Okwe. Oduko's unjust imprisonment which was masterminded by Jonan Okwe had led to the demise of his wife- Cynthia's mother. Gbenga eventually dies, leading to the detention of both Jeffia and Cynthia by the police for interrogation. Jonan's brief visit to the police commissioner leads to the immediate release of both suspects and a permanent closure of the murder case.

Sowho finally makes his appearance and an argument between the two brothers leads to a fight. At the least opportunity, Sowho makes an escape in his car. Jonan goes after him in his own car. They both crash into one another. The cars go aflame and Sowho dies instantly. Jonan survives long enough to utter the names of his wife and son. Meanwhile, in an attempt to stop the fight between the two brothers, Mrs. Okwe faints and is rushed to the hospital. This unfortunate incident throws Jeffia into a state of confusion. He finds consolation in his new found friend Cynthia. The demise of their breadwinner and the forceful dispossession of their property by Jonan's relations leave Mrs. Okwe and her son miserable and vulnerable. Soon, they are attacked by armed robbers who make away with their remaining two cars. Deprived of the necessary material provision, mother and son are forced to move down the social scale. They rent two bedrooms in Amukoko - one of the poorest areas in the city – a sharp contrast to the opulence and serenity of Ikoyi where Jeffia has lived all his life. In this city slum, Jeffia comes face-to-face with the pain, misery and squalor of the guttered world of the nation's poor. The novel ends in optimism as Jeffia gains admission into a tertiary institution on scholarship. Mrs. Okwe

secures a job with the ministry of Education and concludes the painting she's been doing for a long time. The painting is about flowers in the shadows.

III. CHARACTERIZATION

The characters we encounter in this novel are realistic Nigerian citizens. They are chosen from the two unequal social relationships existing in the nation such as the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, the exploiter and the exploited, the employer and the employee, the jailer and the jailed. Each of them is a good representative of his/her social class in contemporary Nigerian nation. Through their words, internal monologues, actions, experiences and interactions, Ben Okri paints a vivid picture of the existing class distinction within the Nigerian nation space. The novel shows that while those at the apex of the divide struggle to maintain their position by exploiting and suppressing their fellow citizens, those at the margins are equally seen fighting to resist the suppression of the rich. The Okwes, particularly Mr. Jonan Okwe and his business associates represent the privileged class. This class controls the nation's economy. They are employers of labour, and the exploiters and jailers of the poor. They live in posh homes located in the serenity of Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Apapa. They wield high influence over the fate of the generality of the nation's citizens because they are connected to those who run the affairs of the nation. On the other hand, the less privileged citizens are represented by Oduko, Gbenga, Juliet, labour leaders, the two street boys and their unjustly imprisoned father. Members of this class are at the mercy of the rich and reside in the dehumanizing slums of Ajegunle, Amukoko, Surulere and Ijora. They spend their lives working for the rich. Unfortunately, the greed and nefarious activities of the rich bring the poor pain, injustice, hunger, misery, and death as portrayed in Gbenga's case. Other characters like Oduko, Gbenga, Sowho, Ode, Policemen and Afioso labour leaders appear as background characters whose experiences, voices and actions advance the plot of the novel while dramatizing the existing social inequality with its resultant physical and psychological degeneration in contemporary Nigerian nation. Perhaps close analyses of some of the major characters in the text will suffice at this point.

Mr. Jonan Okwe is an agent of exploitation, oppression, injustice and destruction. By the time the narrative begins, he is portrayed as a successful business man with a poor background. He has climbed the social ladder through numerous ruthless and heartless business dealings. As a growing child, his father met an early demise when a plague befell their village. During this time, those whose people could afford medical treatment outside the village survived. His father died "because there was no money to get him out of the village for medical treatment" (p.111). Thus, his obsession with work and material advancement is as a result of his father's dying remark that "My son, poverty is a curse" (p.9). This last wish of a dying father provokes Jonan's determination to rise above his childhood penurious state. In his bid to climb the social ladder and remain there, Mr. Okwe unleashes numerous physical and psychological tortures on his fellow citizens, including his half-brother Sowho, his longest serving employee Gbenga, and Cynthia's father Oduko. For instance, in his determination to covet the family paint industry, he incriminates his hard working and ambitious half-brother Sowho and convicts him in a trumped-up charge sentencing him to jail. Also, his false allegation against Cynthia's father Oduko ends in two years' imprisonment for this poor employee of Afioso paint industry. The ripple effects of Oduko's unjust imprisonment include destabilizing the once happy family of Oduko as his wife dies of spinal meningitis two weeks after his release from prison. This psychological torture drives Oduko to near insanity as he resorts to alcoholism causing his only daughter Cynthia lots of embarrassment as she grapples with the stress of working as a nurse and caring for a drunken father.

Jonan's greed for wealth is portrayed in his exploitation of his workers in the paint industry—making them go on strike. Despite the numerous negotiations with labour representatives on the need to consider a pay rise when rival companies were offering about forty seven percent more than Afioso. Jonan's refusal leads to a strike and the mass resignation of his staff. In order to stop Gbenga his longest serving staff from resigning and setting up a rival paint industry, he masterminds the gruesome murder of this hard working fellow who has faithfully served him for many years. He unleashes his wickedness on his victims with the dictum that "When there is a thorn in the flesh, just remove it" (p. 169). It is certain that it is the likes of ruthless Jonan Okwe that have unjustly imprisoned the father of the two street urchins. This is decipherable from the reason given to Jeffia by the boys for their father's imprisonment "They say he thief. What can a poor man do? If man no die, he no rotten" (p. 5). The language suggests a feeling of pain, hopelessness and helplessness due to lack of fair hearing occasioned by inability to afford the fees for legal services. Also, in Oduko's case, lack of necessary funds to engage experienced judges and magistrates to match those of the wealthy Jonan Okwe, force him to admit to a crime he did not commit. As he anguishly writes in his diary, "My lawyer advised me to plead guilty. He say I have no chance against our *Oga*. My daughter. How can I tell her the truth that she will believe me, eh?" (p. 80). Through Oduko's unfortunate experience in the hands of Jonan Okwe, Ben Okri raises the reader's

consciousness to the corruption in the nation's legal system which has denied the masses of fair hearing in legal matters. The rich succeed in imprisoning the innocent masses because they are in collaboration with the legal system. Oduko's imprisonment despite his innocence is indicative of the fact that the judiciary is more concerned with monetary acquisition rather than the delivery of their statutory duty. They have failed in their position as the last hope of the common man in the nation. Through these cases of unjust imprisonment of innocent citizens by the reach in the nation, Ben Okri raises the reader's consciousness on class distinction, as well as the corruption in the nation's legal system. The rich succeed in imprisoning the innocent masses because they are in collaboration with the legal system. The nation, thus, becomes a space for the pervasion of justice, a space where man's inhumanity to man holds sway.

Again, through the interactions of the protagonist Jeffia Okwewith other characters in the novel, Okri paints a vivid picture of the wickedness of the rich as well as the squalor, injustice and human degeneration existing within the nation space. By the time the narrative begins, Jeffia is portrayed as a nineteen year old lad from a wealthy background who is yet to be exposed to the harsh realities of life. But as the action of the plot unfolds, Jeffia is seen reacting compassionately to the suffering and helpless persons and animals that cross his ways. For instance, he plays compassionate and messianic roles to the suffering puppy, the two hungry street boys, and Cynthia when faced with the challenge of getting the dying Gbenga to the hospital. His impulsive and compassionate reaction to the plight of the needy in the story is indicative of his disapproval of his father's ruthless and heartless ways of dealing with people. Few examples of these will suffice at this point.

The story begins with Jeffia's encounter with the two unnamed street boys who are torturing a puppy which has strayed from its dotting owner. "One held the dog by the legs, while the other, it seemed tried to stick a piece of wood up its anus. Indifferently, they watched it struggle. The bigger of the boys held the dog's mouth to prevent it yelping" (p. 4). Soon, it is discovered that the children's aggression towards the innocent puppy is as a result of their lack of food and clothing occasioned by the unjust imprisonment of their bread winner. On interrogation, it is revealed that the boys have gone all day without food and are desperate to eke out a living which the dog could not provide. It is therefore obvious that their brutality against the dog is a transferred aggression. "We don't eat dogs! They snapped at Jeffia" (p. 5). Everything about their appearance is indicative of their deprivations and pauperized position in the society. Jeffia paints a vivid picture of their appearance thus: "The two boys looked like the new breed of small boys conductors of the Kumbi buses. They were ill dressed. Their khaki shorts are dirty and in tatters. Their shirts were bottomless and too small. Their hair was unkept and their faces were very serious (p. 4). Meanwhile, their tattered physical appearance is a sharp contrast to that of Jeffia who is the son of a wealthy business man whose wickedness has killed and landed many people in unjust imprisonment. Okri comments that Jeffia is impeccably dressed in his expensive "White Adidas canvas shoes, his well-cut, moderate bottomed trousers, his rich looking blue polo-neck, and the Polaroid sunshade on his face" (p. 4). The boys' reaction to Jeffia's offer of two Naira in exchange for the dog reveals that they are not as aggressive and brutal as the society has made them. With the sum of two Naira in their kitty, they are grateful and excited at the assurance of a meal occasioned by Jeffia's magnanimity: "The smaller boy ran up to him... I want to say that we are very grateful for the money. It was as if they have suddenly come alive" (p. 5).

However, Jeffia's detention and interrogation by the police for assisting the nurse (Cynthia) in getting the brutalized Gbenga to the hospital, raises his consciousness to the injustice in his nation. This relationship further exposes him to the harsh existential condition of the nation's poor. When Cynthia takes him through the struggle for bus; he comes face-to face with the lack of value for life on the typical Lagos Street. For the first time Jeffia sees life in its harsh reality:

At last I knew what she was getting at. Why she had made sure I struggled in the bus, to see beggars', the dead, the starving, the deeply suffering and the hopelessly alone. Why she took me through the bus- stop and put us in the main stream of rushing and struggling (p. 189).

One may not be wrong in saying that Okri deliberately delineates Jeffia as a "border crossing" character through whose eyes the reader is exposed to the sharp contrast between the two sides of the divide in the Nigerian society. Jeffia is sensitive, discerning, generous and compassionate to the needy. Despite his wealthy background. He is devoid of the wickedness and arrogance of the rich in his society. Interestingly, in the end, Jeffia suffers degeneration. He is plucked from the opulence of his Ikoyi home and howled down the slums of Amukoko.

IV. SETTING

Published in 1980, *Flowers and Shadows* is set in Lagos - the first capital city of Nigeria about twenty years after independence in 1960. Between independence and this time, the nation had survived a devastating civil war which threatened the unity of this multi-ethnic and multi-religious shared community known as Nigeria. The end of the war which had no winner and no vanquished ushered in a new set of privileged social class who were predominantly business men. Their major preoccupation at this time was to attain positions of wealth and remain there by all means. In most cases, this inordinate quest for material advancement by the

privileged class was realized at the detriment of those at the periphery of the nation's margins who were daily exploited, marginalized, maimed and even murdered by the rich. It is this chasm between the rich and the poor in Nigeria of this period that Okri sets out to chronicle and condemn in this novel.

In order to authenticate his account of the actual challenges of the poor in his nation, the author engages names of real life places and believable characters in the narrative. The actions of the plot take place in real life locations within the Lagos metropolis such as Ikoyi, Victoria Island, Apapa, Surulere, Amukoko, Ijora and Ajegunle. Also, the characters are accorded both indigenous Nigerian names and common English names. We have such names as the Okwes, the Doyes, Gbenga, Oduko, Sowho, Ode, Juliet, Cynthia, and Jeffia. This similitude of characters and settings with real life people and verifiable places show that as a member of the shared community of the Nigerian nation, Okri is abreast with the happenings in his nation. Here, he sets out to tell the truth about issues of concern in a typical urban city in independent Nigeria. These issues of concern include the issues of corruption and class stratification which have resulted into varied forms of human degeneration. In order words, the author appropriates this novel in the exposure of the decay, neglect, wickedness, corruption, injustice and death inflicted on the poor by the rich and powerful in their pursuit for personal gains/material wealth. In telling the truth about the events and experiences of the people of his nation as he perceives it at this time, Okri adopts the city of Lagos as a spatial metaphor for all nations in Africa where corruption, wickedness and man's inhumanity to man hold sway. These nations according to Okri are spaces for injustice, inequality and contradictions. In this novel Okri portrays his Nigerian nation as an ideological site where "The hard-working man suffers while the lazy lounge in an abundance they never truly earned. The weak are oppressed while the strong go on in their oppression, evil rages in spite of good..." (p. 126).

In terms of spatial setting, the places or locations where the actions of the plot take place can be demarcated into two different locations as those inhabited by the rich and those inhabited by the poor. While the rich like the Okwes, the Doyes and Ode's parents live in decent and serene places like Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Apapa, the poor reside in the slums of Amukoko, Ajegunle, Ijora, Surulere and Alaba. The author comments on the decency, opulence and sanity of the environment inhabited by the rich in the nation thus:

The streets were well tarred and well inter-connected. Tall pine trees with branches that swished in the night air lined the streets. The air was fresh and smelt of distant seas. The houses were decently spaced, dignified. Some people cynically called Ikoyi 'the Europe of Lagos'. For it was here that most of the rich and powerful relaxed away from the turmoil of Lagos ... The Doyes' house stood on a boulevard, its front view adorned with whistling pine trees and a large garden of flowers (p. 139).

Members of the privileged class are in the habit of either exchanging visits with one another or frequenting exotic hotels and bars for relaxation. The Okwes and the Doyes are fond of these forms of visits and relaxation. One of such bars frequented by the Okwes is described as possessing "a rich man's setting, a place for those who had money to spend. It was the kind of place that tickled the Nigerian ego, the closest approximation to visiting Europe" (138). While relishing their luscious meals and choice drinks in the opulence of their homes, hotels and bars, these privileged individuals are unoblivious of the confusion, squalor, lack, misery, and death suffered by the poor residing in their immediate neighborhoods of Ijora, Amukoko, Ajegunle, Alaba and Surulere. Again, while the rich cruise around town in posh MercedesBenz cars along well tarred roads around Ikoyi and Victoria Island, the poor in Ijora and Ajegunle are seen either "struggling to get into Kunbi buses, enduring "the endless bickering of the passengers, the crowdedness, and the stench" (p. 188). The author notes that when the situation gets so bad, some people resort to "climbing into the Kumbi bus through the boot". When forced to journey to Ijora by a Kunbi bus ride with Cynthia, Jeffia gives us a vivid glimpse of this degenerative, chaotic and penurious world of the nation's poor:

The roads were bad, filled with ugly potholes, dirty. People who looked sickly and exhausted milled past us ... There was a man under the Ijora Bridge who had no legs. He was sleeping beside the spot people had habitually used as a urinal. There was a boy no more than fourteen lying on the side of the road with flies dancing all over his swollen body. He was dead. There was another group of children all crying round their beggar mother. Her breasts were dry. A bus had come and people rushed to get on. They crowded, swamped, and pushed. Some caught the bus, some didn't. A man cursed. His breath smelt foul, his face was scored with suffering and misery (p. 188).

As the narrative draws to an end in the 'Epilogue', Okri engages the sight of the protagonist Jeffia to chronicle the squalor and degeneration which have become the lot of those who inhabit the slums of the nation's capital city of Lagos. The author notes that the maddening cacophony, filth and hopelessness in places like Ajegunle, Alaba and Amukoko are sharp juxtapositions of the opulence, decency, order and serenity of Ikoyi. It is implied that due to the insensitivity of the members of the privileged class, the residents of these slums have resigned to their squalor and now "live in the sad crude simplicities of poverty". A Busy Street in the slum of Amukoko on a typical Saturday morning is vividly pictured by Jeffia thus:

The streets were dusty and dirty. Children were naked...the vendor's horn announcing his arrival with the daily stock of newspapers. A number of men stood in front of their houses masticating their chewing stick

with a dog-like verve. The record shops were already open and had begun blaring their discordant mixtures of music into the street. The women who sold rice were chanting 'Oni rice re O! Some children, their stomachs shrunken, their faces eager, their plates empty... a stagnant pool of greenish water has refused to dry up... a woman poured her baby's excreta into the stagnant, greenish water... a filthy dog was licking someone's excreta at the corner of the scum (p. 205).

It is therefore obvious that the filthy attitude of these slum dwellers is conditioned by the prolonged neglect of their environment by the relevant government authorities. Thus, Okri's criticism is not directed at these residents who have lost all sense of decency, but at the nation's rulers for their criminal neglect of these inhabitants of the 'guttered world' in the capital city of Lagos. Okri empathizes with them and absolves them of any guilt pertaining to their indecency and cacophony when he declares that: "For as dirty as the place is and uncared for as the roads were, the lives of the people are a heart-breaking celebration of the strength of the human adaptability" (p. 205).

V. CONCLUSION

Ben Okri's *Flowers and Shadows* teems with characters, events, situations, and even language which raise our consciousness to the issue of juxtapositions in the experiential quality of lives of citizens in his Nigerian nation despite the many years of decolonization. In tandem with Franz Fanon's prescription for literature to serve as a weapon of combat, as well as the voice of the colonized, Okri deliberately paints a vivid picture of the criminal neglect of the masses through the use of various literary devices, particularly setting, characterization and language. In terms of characterization, the novelist delineates characters who cut across the two divides of social inequality in his Nigerian nation such as the rich versus the poor, employer versus the employee, the oppressor versus the oppressed, and the jailer versus the jailed. In terms of setting, the author engages names of real life locations. This similitude of characters and settings with real life people and verifiable places is indicative of Okri's aim of engendering the desired change through raising his readers' consciousness on the existing inequality in the shared community of his Nigerian nation. In terms of language, it is obvious that Okri switches between Pidgin English and Standard English language narrating the story of *Flowers and Shadows* in order to highlight the social inequality in the nation. Each speaker of either variety of the language is a true representative of the social class he/she belongs in real life every day independent Nigerian nation. This is in tandem with Franz Fanon's prescription that the literature of the colonized must speak the voice of the colonized, as well as serve as a potent weapon for the resistance of oppression, repression and dispossession of the colonized in the *imagined community* of the nation.

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