The representation of moral turpitude in the african novel: The example of Ben Okri in the landscapes within and dangerous love

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

WILLIAMS, BRIAN M. BA OBERLIN COLLEGE, 1996

THE REPRESENTATION OF MORAL TURPITUDE IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL:
THE EXAMPLE OF BEN OKRI IN THE LANDSCAPES WITHIN AND DANGEROUS LOVE

Advisor: Dr. David Dorsey

Thesis dated July, 1999

This study examines the portraiture of moral depravity in the African novel with specific reference to Ben Okri, and defines the authorial challenge that Okri poses to his readers. The study also explores the narrative differences between The Landscapes Within and Dangerous Love; the latter is an elaboration and revision of the former.

Working under the assumption that a filiation exists in the tradition of African realism, the study undertook a comparative analysis, which includes the works of Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah, as well as Okri. Soyinka’s and Armah’s works are used as barometers to measure changes and departures in Okri’s depiction of post-independence life in urban Africa.

The conclusions drawn from this study suggest that Okri revises the representation of moral depravity in the African novel through various techniques, which include his unique use of Yoruba creation myths and actual events such as the Biafran War. Okri’s ability to simultaneously explore individual and national consciousness through his young protagonists further defines his position in the tradition of African realism.
THE REPRESENTATION OF MORAL TURPITUDE IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL:
THE EXAMPLE OF BEN OKRI IN *THE LANDSCAPES WITHIN* AND *DANGEROUS LOVE*

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JULY 1999
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Chapter 1
Neglected Landscapes

Ben Okri was born in Nigeria in 1959. He made his first sojourn to London at the age of three and returned five years later to Nigeria, where he continued his education through college. His formative adolescent years, the period that saw his first real efforts at writing, were spent in Lagos. As he stated in an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Okri began to write as a way of waiting after he failed to get a place at a university in Nigeria.\(^1\) Nigeria’s sprawling capital was the inspiration for much of his early work and made an indelible imprint on Okri’s consciousness. His first article, which was about the failure of the rent tribunals in the ghetto, was published in 1976.

This article reveals Okri’s early awareness of social injustice and moral decay in the urban environment. According to Okri, “You cannot separate the environment from your conscience.”\(^2\) It was the environment that prompted Okri to first speak out through the medium of journalism. Even at this early stage as a journalist, Okri was trying to prompt a positive change in the environment through his writing.

Although his stint as a journalist was short-lived, it was fruitful because it helped Okri decide to be a writer. His short stories enjoyed much more success than his articles. Whether journalism or fiction, Okri’s early work attempts to tell the story of the sufferers, the same ghetto dwellers from whose lives his first mature attempts at writing sprang.


\(^2\) Ibid., 78
One of the many short stories that Okri wrote after his journalistic employment ended grew into *Flowers and Shadows*, his first novel. Woven around a set of familiar opposites, youth and experience, this first effort concerns a ruthless businessman and the consequences that his family endures for his sins. *Landscapes Within*, his far more successful second effort and half the focus of this study, is the tale of a lonely artist striving for clarity and humanity in the denigrating environment of the Lagos slums.

Thematically and structurally Okri’s first two novels are nearly identical. Both have at their core moral dilemmas and observations on the human conditions in the slums. Their structures are linear in conception and the works conform to a Western paradigm of realism. Also, dreams and vivid descriptions of urban decay are the recurrent artistic devices of choice in these narratives. After experimenting with Western forms of realism Okri turned to indigenous resources for his next two projects, *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*.

With these collections of short stories Okri employs an indigenous resource base while also experimenting with several themes and symbols from Western lore to produce the unique style that has brought him much acclaim in literary circles. The short stories are grounded in realism in the sense that they all take place in urban settings away from the forest, the uncontested realm of spirits. However, Okri stretches the boundaries of realism by injecting the urban setting with a surreal quality. Ato Quayson rightly points out that the inspiration and clue for this new direction in Okri’s work is Amos Tutuola’s *The Witch Herbalist of the Remote Town*. It is quite obvious that Okri elaborates on his use of the mythopoeic in full with *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*.

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The road's importance as a symbol in the Nigerian literary tradition is due to the work of Wole Soyinka. The road often represents a physical and metaphysical movement of transition in his work. It is not a place in itself, but a means of connection between places. The road is key in Soyinka's praise poem to Ogun, *Idanre*, and his play *The Road* and perhaps his most famous poem, "Death in the Dawn", and a climatic event in the novel, *The Interpreters*. With *The Famished Road* and its sequel *Songs of Enchantment* Okri defined his own position in Nigeria’s literary tradition as statesman for his particular generation, the children of the Biafran War, and carries this tradition in a new direction. Okri says himself; “My road is quite different. My road is a way. It’s a road that is meant to take you from one place to another, on a journey, towards a destination.”

This is the work for which Okri enjoys the most celebration. Unlike *Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within*, his first two novels, Okri’s magical realist texts are devoid of the usual temporal indices, rooted in the mythopoeic realm, and the forest is the setting for much of the action.

However, his later novels are similar to the first two in that dreams appear once again as recurrent artistic devices. Indeed *The Famished Road* and *Songs* are more like dreamscapes than narratives. The protagonist, Azaro, is a resident of the slums along with his mother and father, so that the reader sees the perspective of Nigeria’s poverty stricken citizens. Although Okri employs the esoteric rather than the familiar, he is still commenting on events in post-colonial Nigeria. Okri’s next volume, *Astonishing the Gods*, is a complete departure from his previous work. The narrative sets readers

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4 Wilkinson, 83.
hopelessly adrift on a journey, led by an anonymous protagonist, to an enchanted island where visibility and invisibility are relative and nothing is what it seems. This text is almost defined wholly by myth and magic.

No sooner than Okri completely delved into magical realism, did he return to realism and the gritty setting of the Lagos slums with Dangerous Love, a revision of Landscapes. African critic, Adewale Maja-Pearce, argues that Okri’s works published after Landscapes have not lived up to the potential of that novel. Perhaps Dangerous Love is an attempt to fulfill that potential. It is certain that Okri feels that he is not done with Lagos and all that it represents in literature and the Nigerian national conscience. Okri said of Lagos in an interview, "Those were my beginnings, but I’ve not even begun to describe them." Biodun Jeyifo rightly cites that in the realm of the realistic novel Okri is continuing a tradition started by pioneers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ayi Kwei Armah. This is a tradition defined by the problematic of creating a fictional reality that accurately reflects the chaos, and instability of post-colonial life in Africa’s urban centers.

Jeyifo asserts that Okri’s single most important contribution to this tradition is his choice to present “a mostly unsentimental depiction of how the youthful generation of post-Civil War Nigeria comes of age through an embittering experience which leaves them lost and floundering.” The value in such an approach is that it highlights failed relationships between elders and the young, while depicting the corruption of the society’s future, its children. Thus, the hope of Africa, the youth, are presented as a

5 Ibid., 78.

metaphor for the nation in its struggle to make good the unfulfilled promises of independence. *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* are narratives in which Nigeria's turbulent past and demoralizing present loom large over individual efforts to make positive changes. The lives of Okri's characters, each with their own landscape of losses, are linked to painful memories that are at once part of the national as well as the personal conscience.

These two volumes will be the focus of this study. In them we encounter Omovo, the lonely artist, whose single curse is sensitivity and perceptiveness. The unfortunate possessor of these tools, he is doomed to feel, observe, and interpret the chaos and moral decay around him through his art and meditations in his journal. This disintegrative chaos is felt at every level. Omovo’s family life is shattered; he is in love with another man’s wife, and he repeatedly loses his art-work throughout the story. Since he is a decidedly moral person, Omovo feels the sting of almost every wrong he witnesses or is aware of in Lagos. These incidents range from bribery on the job to seeing starving children torture pariah dogs in the street, his horrific flashbacks to childhood experiences during the Civil War, and haunting images of a corpse he stumbles upon at the beach.

In the “Author’s Note” of *Dangerous Love* Okri says that he came to see *Landscapes* "as the key to much of my past work and perhaps also my future." He also stated that what he wanted to achieve in *Landscapes* was much too ambitious for his craft at that time. Okri’s words in the author’s note paint his second novel as an entity that has haunted him throughout his career. *Dangerous Love*, then, is a redemption of sorts for Okri. What is he redeeming? We will return to that question later in this study. More than a decade later after *Landscapes* Okri revisits this story. The interim period that
separates these novels has a dual significance in that Okri spent those years in England, each year possibly setting him further and further away from an essence which he intended to recapture and redeem in Dangerous Love. Also, Okri matured into his forties during these years.

A diasporic existence can either alienate a writer from his homeland or give him a new perspective on it and perhaps a greater appreciation and understanding of it. Clearly the latter is the case with Okri. He represents a generation of younger Nigerians who are more educated and living abroad due to the disillusionment of the post-independence years and the absence of opportunities in Nigeria. Dangerous Love provides Okri with the opportunity to speak with more maturity and clarity about the disenchantment and ochlocracy that came with the first twenty years after independence. It is more definitively autobiographical in the sense that it speaks to the conditions of life for all who were young and living in Lagos at the time that Landscapes was first published. It shares the time, place, and most importantly the mood. Nevertheless, the growth involved from Landscapes to Dangerous Love is clear and unmistakable.

Okri is able to illustrate with more poignancy life’s galling landscapes and yet proffer, with harrowing faith and certain credibility, that something beautiful and worthwhile can still grow there. Landscapes accurately depicts the problems of post-colonial Lagos. But as Jeyifo rightly points out “the ultimate vision he proffers is reductively individualistic.” Omovo resigns to travel “the familiar darkness” alone considering only himself and holding out no hope for a light on the horizon. Such intimations befit a young writer or any exile living out a lone existence in the metropole, a familiar darkness. Dangerous Love acknowledges the present hardships and the ones that lay
ahead, but accepts their challenge and mentions nothing about a lone existence or darkness.

This aspirant tone that Dangerous Love carries permeates every aspect of the narrative, just as a despondent tone pervades its predecessor. In Landscapes not much is worthwhile, the age-old suffering that the characters endure bear no fruit, only weeds. The filth and decay of life in the slums stifles relationships and efforts at self-betterment. This social malaise is woven into the very form and structure of both books. However, in Dangerous Love the characters rise above the social disjuncture and moral solipsism at certain points throughout the story, if only briefly. This is not to say that the squalid surroundings or the desperate atmosphere vanishes from the landscape. I am suggesting that the bonds created between the characters or the conviction of a single character raises them above the chaos.

Dangerous Love is approximately 112 pages longer than Landscapes. This is mainly due to instances where Okri elaborates on certain scenes, or in some cases inserts new scenes. Such is the case with chapters that deal with Omovo’s sojourn in the seaside town called B. An introspective journey, not present in Landscapes, is key to these same chapters in Dangerous Love. It is mainly in these changes that we can identify Okri’s growth and his strategic positioning.

The question of audience eventually arises during any discussion on African literature. Issues such as orature versus the written word, or writing indigenous languages like Kiswahili as opposed to Euro-languages are permanent fixtures in the African literary tradition. At the core of all these issues is one defining concern, how to liberate African literature from the imprint and imprimatur of Europe. Often times critics gauge the

7 Ibid., 281
utility of a text, in great part, by who reads it or where it is published. It is not my intention to take up this debate here; I am simply trying to point out the uneven reception that *Landscapes* received from the literary world.

If the audience for *Landscapes* is hypothetically limited to the literary world, then that novel had an overwhelmingly African audience. It seems that the vast majority of criticism on Okri’s second novel came from African critics. What does that say about the novel? One could deduce that it received attention mainly from African critics because it is a second-rate novel at best and did not merit the attention of an international audience. It is also conceivable that Okri’s depictions of post-independence Lagos spoke so eloquently to the dilemma of nationhood that it sparked serious debate and reflection on the alleged promise of independence, self-culpability, and the steady stream of young promising African minds out of the country. Perhaps the message addresses the essence of Nigeria’s destiny with a veridicality that made it unpalatable to western critics: too much reality in the realm of fiction.

Indeed, even the African criticism on *Landscapes* is sparse. Okri’s magical realist texts, mainly *Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, enjoy the vast majority of his attention from critics. This is the case despite Okri’s assertion that *Landscapes* is the “key” to much of his work. Upon completion of *Dangerous Love* Okri was forced to seek another publisher as his present editor at that time told him to “hide it somewhere.” These two novels deserve more scrutiny than they have received to date. The value of Okri’s realist fiction and how it responds to the situation in Nigeria have not been adequately assessed. His realist fiction deserves a fresh look that includes his most recent effort, *Dangerous Love*. 
Okri's realist fiction is concerned with the complexities of the human condition and innocent suffering. *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* are epics of daily life in which Okri explores the human condition, more specifically moral behavior, how it is exercised, and the consequences of being moral. Okri challenges the morality of his audience by presenting his characters, each with their own landscapes of losses in a complex interplay of situations that dare his characters to simply love and be humane. This critical study will examine these works in an effort to accurately assess how Okri represents moral turpitude in the African novel and to identify the challenges that Okri sets forth in this representation.

Ben Okri's first literary ruminations gave voice to a disillusioned post-colonial generation of Nigerians struggling in a miasmic society bequeathed to them by their elders. Quayson, with reference to his article on Okri's short stories and *The Famished Road*, echoes Jeyifo's assertion (made more than a decade earlier than Quayson's) that Nigeria's literary tradition is "inter-textually revised" in Okri's work. Thus, the best way to understand Okri's work is to set it beside that of other African writers. This is the growing consensus among critics. Therefore, *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* will be compared to Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969). Although these novels are set in different eras, all of them are urban in setting and deal with the theme of immorality; and they carry the bitter realization of the empty promises of political independence.

The greater immorality that Okri is writing against seems to be the unconscious or conscious refusal to become something better. In *A Way of Being Free*, Okri identifies

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8 Quayson, 148.
this as a fear of "a greater harvest of being." He refers to those who are guilty of this kind of immorality as cowards. Structural and narrative devices employed by Okri will be compared to a few other writers such as Soyinka and Armah, to determine how the writers depict moral turpitude, and to identify the uniqueness in Okri's method. In each novel, the protagonists are placed in environments where bribery and materialism are the norm. Such an atmosphere promotes an overwhelming pressure to acquiesce and grease one's own palms. Their refusal to internalize the decay of their surroundings creates the conflict that drives these narratives forward.

It is in the actions of the protagonists and revelations of their introspective journeys that we come closer to the moral premise of Okri's work. Indeed, all of his protagonists are on a journey of sorts, through which they find the strength to endure and understand their present reality. Omovo's particular journey is one of mourning. He must navigate the "familiar cycles of darkness" with no visible light on the horizon; faith is Omovo's only source of illumination. The following chapters are a close study of this journey through the landscapes within and without.

The next two chapters concern the tension between these two landscapes and how Omovo attempts to understand it through his art-work. Motifs such as the Biafran War, Omovo's paintings, urban filth, and the image of the mutilated girl will be discussed in detail. These two chapters contain the bulk of comparisons and references to the work of Armah and Soyinka. Chapters four through six identify the portents that Okri's work carry for life outside the world of fiction. They will identify the novels' moral imperatives, authorial challenges, growth between the two texts, and their overall utility.

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Chapter 2

Protagonists of African Realism

An isolated appraisal of *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* can succeed in revealing only a mere fraction of the dictums that Okri’s acroamatic prose contains about the emerging Africa and its youth. Scrutinizing the various configurations and connections between works and writers within literary genres yields a more holistic critical understanding of the prose and the genre itself. Just as Henry Louis Gates Jr. unraveled the trope of the “talking book” and “signifyin’” in African-American literature, African writers similarly signify on each other within the tradition of the realist novel. In 1988 black critics on both sides of the Atlantic sensed that it was time to define patterns and connections within the fiction of their respective traditions. At the same time that Gates published *The Signifyin’ Monkey* and years before the idea of a canon was accepted in Nigerian literature, Jeyifo called for more analysis on the “patterns and configurations of inter-textual revisions of previous writers in our modern African and Nigerian prose fiction.”¹

Therefore, I will set Omovo’s tortured journey beside that of Soyinka’s interpreters and Armah’s anonymous protagonist, ‘the man,’ to highlight connections and explore the new direction that Okri charts. Although Okri’s work comes almost a decade and a half later than Armah’s and Soyinka’s, *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* are concerned with

the same issues and moral dilemmas which concerned the generation that witnessed independence and its short-lived euphoria. This fact alone is a sad commentary on the senseless abiku-like cycles that plagued post-independence Africa. Independence came with such violent speed that old and new Africa clashed in a fusion that produced abiku-politicians born only to die and return again in a futile cycle with each new coup. This tension between the old and the new Africa is embedded in Soyinka’s, Armah’s, and Okri’s texts at every level. Before exploring this dichotomy further, it will prove useful to briefly look at the protagonists themselves as a group.

A collective awareness of the immorality in their societies is the common ground upon which these protagonists stand. In one form or another they are all on a journey to make sense of their surroundings and to guard their morality against the virulent environment. The interpreters’ proximity in social status to the ‘plastic’ society people that they despise sets them apart from Omovo and the man. It is this proximity that leaves the interpreters groping in the dark for the causes of the problems that they endure daily. Omovo and the man represent the masses of people upon whose hunched backs the society rests. The system of “one hand washing the other” has the most adverse effect on them. Unlike the interpreters, the man and Omovo are able to perceive the societal problems and articulate the causes quite well. There are several reasons for this.

Both Omovo and the man have meaningful relationships, which they fall back on for support. Dr. Okocha shares critical insight with Omovo throughout the novel and the teacher confronts the man with harsh truths. Omovo’s relationship with Ifewiya provides brief interludes of protection from the harsh realities of his life. Their socio-economic class guards against the sub-conscious blinders (material wealth and the false sense of
security that comes with it) that could potentially inhibit middle to upper class individuals from seeing the realities of social decline.

Omovo has yet another outlet, his painting. Like Sekoni, an interpreter, Omovo is able to rein in some of the disorganization around him through his art. Often reflections of the society’s gross underbelly, Omovo’s paintings provoke strong emotions from those who see them. In The Interpreters Sekoni’s sculpture, the wrestler, captures the tension between morality and immorality in the taut muscles of the sculpture. All of the protagonists are grappling with societies where moral codes have been inverted and redefined, therefore the trials that they endure are quite similar.

Indeed, at times, many of the scenes in the three novels seem to be identical. Omovo and ‘the man’ endure the same intolerable peer pressure of a society gone haywire. They are made to feel that their morality is, in fact, immorality under the system of “one hand washing the other.” Thus, the burdens of society’s sins are transferred onto the shoulders of Omovo and ‘the man,’ which allows the corrupt society to appear moral. The workplace is the center of this kind of pressure. A businessman from whom he has refused a bribe reviles ‘the man’ for his honesty:

The man looked at the face before him, pleading with the words of millions and the voice of ages, and he felt lonely in the way only a man condemned by all things around him can ever feel lonely. “I will not take it,” he said. The visitor did not touch his money. He did not even look at it. He only said, “Look, I mean it. I offer you three times. Is good money.” “I know.” “Then take it.” “No.” “You refuse?” “Yes.”
“But why?” he shouted, “why do you treat me so? What have I done against you? Tell me what have I done?”

The visitor cannot understand the man’s behavior. “Why do you behave like that? What is it?” he asked. In the moral order of the Ghana depicted in Armah’s novel, the man’s behavior is out of place; thus the burden of the visitor’s immorality is transferred to the man. In Ben Okri’s Dangerous Love Omovo is similarly cornered and browbeaten by a co-worker.

Joe smiled, and then lowered his head. “I hear things. People talk. Some people don’t like you.”
“People don’t have to like me.”
“Sure. But you spoil their business. They say you are too proud.”
“I do my job and go home and paint.”
“Sure. But that’s why you are a fool... You think not taking a little harmless bribe makes you special eh?”
“No.”
“The job you do is important.... That is why when you were interviewed for the job the manager asked if you would be co-operative. You said yes didn’t you?”
“I had to. I didn’t know it also meant taking bribes.”
“How do you think people make it in the company when the salary is so wretched?”
“Hard work, tailored spending. I don’t know.”
“Look man, it doesn’t mean anything to take a little bribe. If you don’t do it then at least don’t make it difficult for others.”
“So what are you saying?”
“The right hand washes the left. The left hand washes the right. Both hands are clean.”

Sagoe, in The Interpreters, learns a different immoral lesson when he tries to use his position as a journalist to vindicate Sekoni, his friend and an unfortunate victim in yet another instance of corporate corruption. Sagoe’s investigative article is used in the same

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kind of duplicitous dealings that it was intended to denounce. When Sagoe protests, his supervisor recites the inverted moral codes: “I know you think you owe some loyalty to your friend; believe me you don’t. In the end you’ll find that it’s every man for himself.” It is obvious that the moral person in the societies that these novels depict is swimming against the flow of an insidious current.

The manager’s last word to Sagoe, “It’s every man for himself,” brings to mind the debate about the communal and the individual and the relative importance of both. This particular aspect of the debate has come to symbolize the broader discussion on the new and the old Africa. Individualism, European languages, and a host of other cultural holdovers from the colonial era complicate matters as African-nation states attempt to forge their modern identities. Okri, Soyinka, and Armah depict this cultural drama in their narratives.

The authors cleverly comment upon the familiar binary opposition of African literature, individualism vs. communalism, in subtle ways so as to avoid bathos. This opposition is manifested through everyday conversations and relations between characters. Thus, the reader is challenged to see deeper into the mundane goings-on in a compound or work place and grasp the conflict between the cultural residue of Western imperialism and old Africa. How do these authors perceive the effects of social malaise on the people? Are the people becoming more individualistic or are they holding fast to their communal attitudes? Or have the people created a tenable hybrid attitude that reflects the fusion of old and new values.

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Okri holds out the most hope for communalism among the three. Soyinka’s interpreters are alone even amongst themselves at times, while there is barely a semblance of a community in *The Beautiful Ones*. Armah’s anonymous protagonist is a lone individual in his own home, among three children and a wife. The man’s quiet refusal to acquire material wealth through less than honest means has transformed his home into a space of alienation and silent accusations. The man dreads coming home after work so much that he is even thankful for the silence he encounters there:

The man walks into the hall, meeting the eyes of his waiting wife. These eyes are flat, the eyes of a person who has come to a decision not to say anything; eyes totally accepting and unquestioning in the way only a thing from which nothing is ever expected can be accepted and not questioned. And it is true that because these eyes are there the air is filled with accusation, but for even that the man feels a certain gratitude; he is thankful there are no words to lance the tension of silence. The children begin to come out of the room within. It seems their eyes are also learning this flat look that is a defense against hope…The man moves forward and sits at it [table] with his back to his guilt.5

The mutual aloofness that permeates the man’s home is a result of the shift towards individualism that Armah’s fiction perceives in Ghana. Everyone is out to profit for himself or herself and those who deviate from the norm are shunned, even in their own homes. Old values invade the individual space of another of Soyinka’s interpreters, Dehinwa, when her mother and aunt come from the village to visit their daughter in the city. They are waiting for Dehinwa when she returns with a drunken Sagoe draped over her shoulders. Dehinwa’s mother asks, “So this is what you people do in Lagos…is this a decent time for a young girl to be out?”6 The mother complains because she is distressed about a rumor that her daughter has gone astray in the city by marrying a northerner. The next exchange in the conversation is crucial:

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5 Armah, *The Beautiful Ones*, 41.
“But mamma you shouldn’t listen to that kind of talk. Next time tell them to mind their own business.”
“What did the child say? Tell people to mind their own business when it is their love for your mother that prompts them to speak?”
“Who I move with is my own business.”

Dehinwa is a young career woman living out a lone existence in the city. The mother’s frequent unannounced visits and condemnations of the young woman’s lifestyle are unwelcome intrusions upon the right to privacy and individualism that the city provides. Dehinwa refers to these intrusions as “blood cruelty.” In Lagos the village does not raise the child. This is a clash between new and old values. When Dehinwa’s mother tries to strengthen her case by recounting a relative’s premonition that Dehinwa had become pregnant, Dehinwa mockingly asks, “Who was supposed to be the father?” While the vision is enough to prompt the mother to charter a taxi to Lagos in the middle of the night, Dehinwa sees this as something trivial and laughable. She is part of a new generation that must hammer out their own moral codes in a space of cultural syncretism and political stagnation.

‘The man’ in Armah’s novel is struggling to eke out an existence in the same type of cultural and political space. Isolation in The Interpreters and The Beautiful Ones is reinforced throughout many instances in the novels. Sekoni, one of the interpreters, is driven to insanity by the corruption he experiences in the workplace; he is subsequently sent to an asylum. A young college student, whom Egbo has impregnated, resolves to have the baby on her own with or without his help. The Interpreters ends with an African-American spiritual that captures the essence of isolation, ‘Sometimes I Feel Like

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6 Soyinka, The Interpreters, p. 36

7 ibid., 37.
Similarly, Armah uses human touch as a vehicle to further illustrate the alienating effects of moral decay. The rich and powerful do not condescend to touch the man more than they have to. Estella, one of the man’s wealthier acquaintances, withdraws her handshakes “as if contact were a well known calamity.”

This works both ways as the man attempts to remain pure by not touching the filth that surrounds him, like the banister at the beginning of the novel:

He moved absently to the left of the staircase and reached for the support of the banister, but immediately after contact his hand recoiled in an instinctive gesture of withdrawal. The touch of the banister on the balls of his fingertips had something uncomfortably organic about it.

That organic quality is the result of rot “that imprisons everything in its effortless embrace” and is aided by “left-hand fingers in their careless journey from a hasty anus-sliding all the way up the banister as their owners made the return trip form the lavatory downstairs to the offices above.” This rot is merely a microcosmic reflection of the filth that for decades has piled upon the society.

The reader will find little recourse from this alienation in Armah’s and Soyinka’s novels. Soyinka’s biting satire and comedic approach to this alienation is simultaneously undercut by the seriousness of the very things that he is ridiculing. Derek Wright correctly deduces that Armah’s vision “offers no avenue of escape from a bleak determinism of recurring, encycled corruptions.” However, Okri’s novels offer instances of resistance to the norm, where The Interpreters and The Beautiful Ones conclude that capitulation to it is the inevitable outcome.

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8 Armah, The Beautiful Ones, 38.
9 Ibid., 11.
10 Ibid., 12.
Omovo’s compound is a space where communal values are present throughout the novel. Okri invests the compound with these values through Omovo’s paintings in *Dangerous Love* and *Landscapes*. The whole community takes an interest in his work. They gather around and make comments about his latest pieces, often to Omovo’s distress. The paintings do not belong to Omovo alone, they are an extension of the community because Omovo is a part of the compound. Okri familiarizes the reader with every member of the compound (especially the men), even the nameless children that Omovo tosses coins to. As Omovo moves between the compound and the city he always passes the compound men. A strong fixture in the community, they are continuously encircled on their stoops engaged in “mantalk” or drinking.

The men of the compound come to embody old values and the ritual cleaning is the most striking example of this. At the beginning of the third chapter the compound men are engaged in yet another session of boasting and verbal jousting, when it becomes apparent that it is time for the compound to be cleaned. One factor which helps to make this passage an exemplary model of communalism is that Okri’s explanation of this event is akin to communal or village lore:

The cleaning day had a story of its own. It began when the women revolted against having to do all the dirty jobs in the compound, sweeping the corridor and the backyard, unblocking the drainholes, cleaning the toilets. They had a meeting and decided to ask the men either to contribute to the work or to pay them for their labours. But the men laughed at the idea. It was simply inconceivable. The next Saturday, however, the women refused to do any cleaning. The bathroom began to stink. The water that couldn’t flow from the bathroom into the gutter soon flowed through the compound and gave off an infernal smell. The toilet became unusable. The men were furious. They too held a meeting and came up with the decision to prove that they could do the jobs without grumbling or asking to be paid. They did, and it became a compound tradition. It also became a social event. Every second Saturday, while they cleaned up, they told one another outrageous jokes and improbable stories, they made a lot of noise, they chattered and laughed and
Saturday, while they cleaned up, they told one another outrageous jokes and improbable stories, they made a lot of noise, they chattered and laughed and sorted out the little quarrels of the week. And after the cleaning was over one of the men invited the others to his room for an evening's session of drinking and mantalk.¹²

Thus, the compound takes on the identity of a contemporary urban village. It is a space where old and new values are in a state of flux. Sharp bits of glass line the compound walls to protect against thieves; and village talk now revolves around corrupt politicians and how they “piss on our heads.” However, what sets Okri’s vision apart from Armah’s ghetto or Soyinka’s Lagos is that the compound’s destiny is in the hands of the people. It will be whatever they make of it, meaning that the possibility for reform or re-vitalization is present in Okri’s Lagos.

Compounds, workplaces, and society are seen as human creations. Okri does not allow us to shift the blame to imperialism or international capitalism. It is the people who are at work to the benefit or detriment of Nigeria. When Keme and Omovo stumble upon the body of a mutilated girl in a park, the blame is placed squarely upon the shoulders of Africans. “Why does Africa kill her young?” Omovo asks. After an anonymous tip from Keme and Omovo, the police arrive at the park only to find that the body has been moved. Okri describes in great detail the shiftlessness that characterizes the workplace, from Chako who spends the day studying football coupons to the other workers who endlessly engage in senseless gossip.

Amid this shameless indolence the manager chooses to fire Omovo for refusing a bribe from a wealthy patron. The manager elects to uphold the system of “one hand washing the other,” punctuates his disgust of Omovo’s honesty by firing him, and indulges in nepotism by replacing Omovo with a nephew. In both of these instances

¹² Okri, Dangerous Love, 91.
individuals are unwittingly manifesting moral decay through their actions. Soyinka depicts the filth and decay, but the cause has an overarching omnipresent quality that takes matters out of the individual’s hands. His interpreters are hapless pawns who have a vague recognition of the problem but are clueless as to the root of it. Like Omovo, the man in The Beautiful Ones is well aware of the problems and what causes them. But he is so completely surrounded by filth that he never rises above it. The novel is pregnant with this sense of futility.

One must be careful not to oversimplify the issue when discussing old versus new values in these novels. It is easy to make ‘new’ synonymous with evil and ‘old’ connected to all that is moral. Fortunately Okri, as well as Armah and Soyinka, make this impossible for the reader. All of the characters are culpable at some level. As stated earlier, Soyinka’s interpreters are only one step away from becoming that which they hate. Egbo impregnates a young student out of wedlock and Sago bribes his interviewers to win a position on the newspaper staff. Armah’s anonymous protagonist wearily admits “there was no more point in his continuing efforts to keep the rot out of himself.” Okri’s revision of this all-encompassing culpability, however, is the most complex.

At different points in Landscapes and Dangerous Love the most vilified character can rightly accuse another, who seems to be the least culpable, of the worst moral transgressions. Such is the case at the end of the novel when Takpo thrashes Omovo for sleeping with his wife and causing her to run away back to her village. While one considers the possibility of adultery on Omovo’s part, we are reminded that Takpo treated his wife, Ifeyiwa, like a slave and subjected her to the worse kind of abuse. Does Takpo
have the right to accuse Omovo? Can Omovo and Ifewiya be condemned for their affair? Does Dele, one of Omovo’s friends, have the right complain about how Nigeria robs opportunities from its young when he is trying to leave behind his pregnant girlfriend for a new life in America? The answer to these questions is that there are no easy answers.

The same men that gather for mantalk and the ritual cleaning beat their wives, commit adultery, and act violently towards each other. Through these complex moral dilemmas Okri demonstrates that even old Africa with its values and attitudes had its share of problems and that no one is completely moral or immoral. The complexity of moral views that Okri presents in his work and the power to recreate and revitalize society with which he invests his protagonist are his unique contribution to the genre of realism in African literature.

Okri’s prose is embedded with instruction and admonition relevant to Nigerians and individuals everywhere. This advice points towards a path of rejuvenation and creation. Okri’s way of being free requires honest self-reflection that probes the darkest realms of our inner-landscapes. True progression cannot occur if individuals cannot honestly see themselves. Dr. Okocha and Omovo wrestle with this issue in *Dangerous Love*:

“We do not look at ugly things enough,” he said.
“Ugliness is the face we always turn away from,” the old painter said.
“When things are bad people don’t want to face the truth.”
“In ugliness,” Omovo said, “we see ourselves as we never want to.”
“And so ugliness festers while the people cry for images of beauty, for illusions.”
“But how can we be happy if there is so much ugliness around and if we paint ugly truth?”
“How can we be happy if we lie to ourselves?”
“We can’t.”
“Things have got to improve. But first we have to see ourselves clearly, as we are.”

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13 ibid., 123.
Earlier in this same passage Dr. Okocha, after Omovo verbally recounts one of his experiences during the Civil War, profoundly states:

"The original experience must be the guide. But what you make of it, what you bring back from it, the vision, call it what you will, is the most important thing."\(^{14}\)

This is yet another piece of advice that reveals a path to regeneration from the collective transgressions against humanity. Instead of wallowing in the chaos that has been created and perpetuating its cycle, one could glean a lesson from it and use the knowledge to improve matters. The omnipresent forces of immorality, against which the protagonists strain to protect their souls, are represented by similar images in all three novels. However, the aspirant tones in *Dangerous Love* and *Landscapes*, to a lesser extent, are what set Omovo apart from Soyinka’s and Armah’s protagonists. This optimism in Okri’s prose proffers that beauty can grow out of suffering and chaos.

\(^{14}\) ibid., 122.
Chapter 3

Serious Stains

Authors of African realism often, in their texts, blot the external landscapes they describe with pollution and endow the air with miasmic qualities. This attitude illustrates the extent to which corruption has pervaded the society’s literary imagination. Physical surroundings literally come to life forming a putrid force that mirrors the serious stains on the moral fibre of the novels. This omnipresent force is a recurring motif of filth and guilt found throughout Dangerous Love and Landscapes. Okri’s use of this motif is similar to that of Soyinka’s and Armah’s in The Interpreters and The Beautiful Ones. All three writers employ images of excrement and pollution to emphasize the extent of the corruption in their respective societies. Domestic spaces like bathrooms, shower stalls, overflowing trash-cans, and compound grounds are transformed into rotten spectacles of immorality and all that has gone wrong with the society.

The dirt or detritus is often piled up or caked on to such a degree that it seems to have taken on a life of its own, thus revealing the absence of any one individual with enough will to go against the grain. Such an image also illustrates how advanced the problem has become. Indiscriminate flatulence, vitriolic curses, and spit hurled into astounded faces bespeak the people’s resignation to wallowing in the corrosive environment that they have created. Bribes are commonplace and social institutions that were once meant to uphold civility exist to perpetuate the system of “one hand washing the other.” The characters exist in a space where immorality has supplanted morality. Spinning from the
whirlwind effects of decolonization, the urban centers described in the novels are in the throes of a violent newness that is at odds with traditional modes of being and conduct. This tension results in warped moral codes that the physical filth represents.

Including the aforementioned images, Okri’s revision of this motif involves some new contributions. Arguably, the Biafran War is one of the most important themes in Nigerian literature. Okri portrays this event as a cultural/political watershed in such a way that leaves blood on the consciences of all his characters, if not their hands. Although, Dangerous Love and Landscapes are set 20 years after the fact, the Biafran War remains a turbulent undercurrent in the characters’ lives. The landscape of each character’s life is rife with galling losses that could break the strongest spirit. Thus, personal lives become microcosmic reflections of the wreck that is Okri’s post-independence Lagos. Omovo’s paintings are yet another means by which decay is highlighted. Finally, the corpse of the mutilated girl, that haunts Omovo, is a grim sign of Africa destroying its own future. The corpse symbolizes the destruction of Africa’s most precious resource, its children. The youth and their plight in contemporary urban Africa are a recurring motif in Okri’s fiction.

Dangerous Love, Landscapes, The Interpreters, and The Beautiful Ones are smeared with graphic allusions to feces and flatus. By using this imagery the writers effectively state that people are showing the worst parts of themselves, the waste, through their immoral actions. The most graphic illustrations are reserved for the corporate world and socially prominent people in all four novels. Thus he conveys the disgust for the elite class of puppets that simply succeeded to the powers which colonizers had held. Omovo nearly suffocates in the miasma created at an art exhibit attended by such persons:
He pushed his way through fat women, spitting women, pretty women, tall bearded men, nondescript men, stammering men, sharp, neat university satellites; through stinging sweat smells, fresh perfumes, jaded aftershaves, mingled farts.¹

Beneath all the airs and cologne that these people wear Omovo can still smell the rotten stench of their ways. In yet another scene Omovo unwittingly walks into his manager’s office and is repulsed by the repugnant smell of flatus in the air:

After a few seconds Omovo discerned a certain pungent smell in the office. He wrinkled his nose. He knew. The manager, squirming in his seat, knew that he knew. The silence remained. Omovo brought out his handkerchief, covered his nose, and took two steps backwards.

“That’s why I have a secretary,” the manager said, eventually.

The smell grew worse, as if it too were positing a new law of corporate physics: that hot air rises to the top. Omovo refused to speak for a while. He held his breath, released it, and then breathed in measured shallowness.²

Indeed, the new law of corporate physics that Okri alludes to is that the manager is actually the flatus personified. He has risen to the top through bribery, nepotism, and other foul practices just as flatulence rises. Later in the same passage Okri does away with the allusions, and Omovo speaks directly:

“I can see right through your pretence of good office relations. I’m not impressed. You don’t have to try and frustrate me any further. You’re very civilised, very decent. You’re shit. Time will wash you away.”³

The manager is labeled as human feces. He is the personification of excrement. This scene in Dangerous Love and Landscapes is almost identical to one in The Beautiful

¹ Okri, Dangerous Love, 41.
² Ibid., 323.
³ Ibid., 324.
Ones. The man comes home to find Koomson, a politician, terrified at the turn of events caused by a coup:

His mouth had the rich stench of rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the new smell had gone down in the mixture with the liquid atmosphere of the Party man’s farts fill the room. At the same time Koomson’s insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder which in its fullness sounded as if it had rolled down all the way from the eating throat thundering through the belly and the guts, to end in further silent pollution of the air already thick with flatulent fear.4

Once again an individual who has acquired wealth and status through dishonest means is transformed into a breathing sack of excrement. The man and his wife, Oyo, can hardly bear to be in the same room with Koomson because of his disgusting stench. “How he smells,” Oyo complains. But Armah does not stop there, he continues with his literary scatology. The man and Koomson are forced to flee through the latrine when armed agents of the latest coup come looking for members of the old regime. Assuming the role of the nightsoil man, the man leads his human bag of excrement into the “shithole” and through the passage, intended for nightsoil men, that tunnels under the latrine and surfaces behind it.

Having nothing to fear from the agents himself, the man is motivated to help Koomson because he wants the foul smelling ‘party man’ out of his home. Similarly, Okri’s Omovo removes himself from the foul smelling space by quitting his job. Politicians and the work place are most commonly represented as excrement in all four novels. Both are omnipresent forces in the societies depicted in the novels. One cannot avoid politics or jobs. Omovo and the man manage to win a small victory by briefly escaping or ridding themselves of the filth. However, Omovo will eventually have to

4 Armah, The Beautiful Ones, 163.
find another job to support himself and another corrupt party man will take Koomson’s place.

Soyinka’s protagonists are more resigned to the fact that the filth is inescapable. In *The Interpreters* the base of the office building where Sagoe works is submerged in a pool of scum, which suggests that its activity is figuratively rooted in filth. The newspaper is just another extension of the corrupt party people and their hired thugs. It is located in central area of the slums for that purpose. Initially, Sagoe is taken aback but he elects to take the advice of a co-worker and “grow fat for the smell.” This bit of advice simply means that the smell will not matter much once Sagoe’s pockets grow fatter from the underhanded activities of the newspaper:

Sagoe looked through the rear window. The wall dropped sheer onto a canal which led water into the lagoon. This water was stagnant, clogged, and huge turds floated in decomposing rings, bobbing against the wall.5

In keeping with the rest of the novel, Soyinka gives in to grotesque hyperbole, sarcasm, and dramatic imagery to further illustrate moral decay. Sagoe goes out to cover a scene where a nightsoil man has tipped over his cart in the street. This passage must be quoted at length:

It was hardly five, but already Sagoe had begun to encounter the night-soil men. Next to death, he decided, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of our beloved country. Mathias had passed the sight earlier in the morning as his bus made a sudden, near disastrous swerve to avoid the spot. Round the corner of the Renascent High School it lay, some yards from the first bus stop entering Abula Ijesha. Over twenty yards were spread huge pottage mounds, twenty yards of solid and running, plebian and politician, indigenous and foreign shit. Diminished admittedly-dogs have peculiar tastes and some

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drivers were not quick enough and churned through it—but typhous as ever, unified in monochromatic brown.\(^6\)

SoyinkasuggeststhatexistinginaflatulentenvironmentiscommonplaceintheLagos that he portrays. The fact that people are content to let excrement smolder under the sun and put up with its stench, is testimony to the fact that they tolerate their society in decline. As Sagoereflects, “Shit is the most vernacular atmosphere.” It is completely normal; immorality usurps morality. And as Soyinkastates everyone, plebian and politician, indigenous and foreign individual contributes to the problem. Okri, Soyinka, and Armah forcefully confront readers with excrement to impart the same sense of ubiquitous shit and its civic equivalent that the protagonists experience. In *Landscapes* Okri illustrates this sense of being trapped through a scene in the home of Ifeyiwa and Takpo and a scene on a city bus. In each case individuals are trapped in a flatulent environment:

Ifeyiwa found her husband disgusting. Often as she ate her food in a corner, he would calmly fart. She would hear the sound and soon afterwards the smell, which she had grown used to anticipating, would overpower her. She would immediately lose her appetite. But she wouldn’t be able to get up and leave the room for fear that this might annoy him.\(^7\)

Ifeyiwa is trapped with Takpo, a domestic tyrant who abuses her. Omovo briefly finds himself in a similar situation on a city bus:

His buttocks in their dirty, smelly trousers were poised in front of Omovo’s face. He wondered irritably: *suppose this conductor unknowingly let out a fart?* He turned his face the other way. He felt angry and futile.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) ibid., 108.

\(^7\) Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 98-9.

Like Armah, Okri uses the city bus as a smaller model of Lagos in this instance. Omovo, jammed in between passengers on the overcrowded bus and similarly stuck in the ghetto, is forced to smell the conductor’s rank posterior for the duration of the ride. His face is held close to the worst that society has to offer. Okri and Armah use garbage and pollution in the same way that they use excrement. The physical landscape is tarnished with all manner of rubbish which, at times, takes on a life of its own by producing unnatural growths and mixtures. Omovo notices such a growth in *Dangerous Love*:

They passed the scumpool with its green water. Omovo stared at its surface. He stared at the rubbish that had been poured into the stagnant pool. He noticed a mattress in it on which had grown bright red mushrooms. He shivered.  

This scumpool with its abnormal growths appears throughout *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love*. It is an example of how immorality can grow and fester like a cancer when it is ignored. Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones* begins with such an example, an overflowing trashcan:

It was at the durbar that the little boxes (trashcans) had been launched. In the words of the principal secretary, they would be placed at strategic points all over the city, and they would serve, not just as containers for waste matter, but as shining examples of cleanliness. In the end not many of the boxes were put out. The few provided, however, had not been ignored. People used them well, so that it took not time at all for them to get full. People still used them, and they overflowed with banana peels and mango seeds and thoroughly sucked-out oranges and the chaff of sugar cane and most of all the thick brown wrapping from a hundred balls of kenkey. People did not have to go up to the boxes any more. From a distance they aimed their rubbish at the growing heap, and a good amount of juicy offal hit the face and sides of the box before finding a final resting place upon the heap. 

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9 Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 123

Politicians and the rich create this environment in which Omovo and the man exist. The trashcan campaign in *The Beautiful Ones* is nothing more than the government’s pro forma gesture at cleanliness/morality. Politicians line their own pockets by selling their citizens out to foreign interests. “Dey jus dey piss for our head. We all be like gutter,” as one of the compound men in *Landscapes* aptly puts it. Wright, in his analysis of *The Beautiful Ones*, correctly asserts that the world in which workers and the poor exist is composed of the rich people’s excrement. This can also be said of *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love*. It encompasses all the personal spaces in the protagonists’ lives. In *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* Ifeyiwa seeks refuge from her husband in the compound. Fleeing the personified filth that her husband represents only lands her in the midst of literal decay in the bathroom:

The bathroom, for that moment, was her only refuge. The zinc roof was low and the compartment was small. The cracks on the walls widened at night and looked snake-like in the day. Slats of grey light filtered into the murky darkness. Slimy substances clung to the walls. The floor was covered in a stagnant pool of slimy water. As she stood there she was suddenly startled by the noise of something thrashing around in the water. It was a rat. She opened the door and watched the rat as it kicked and swam in the bathroom scum.  

This degrading environment echoes the immorality of the urban environment and adds to the frustration and struggle of the characters. The pollution and the scum act as demoralizing agents that are always present. They literally act upon the characters. Ifeyiwa is denied a safe haven from her husband by the rat and filthy pool of water. The scum filled pool in the compound yard has such an effect on Omovo that he is driven to paint a scum-scape. In *Landscapes*, the act of love making between Omovo and Ifeyiwa

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11 Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 95.
is eclipsed by the grim description of the space in which they rendezvous. At times the grime is a barrier between the two, as seen in the following example. “Between him and that figure was the dark and dirty street. It was a fluid wall.” Yet in other instances their relationship perseveres despite the filth—“And whatever grew between them grew in the midst of the grime, the overcrowding, and the wretched sanitation of the compound.” Omovo’s own home is one space that remains unconquerably oppressive in *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love*:

The sitting room was scantily furnished. There were four cushion chairs, their bodywork multi-coloured with age and use; some of them creaked like barely suppressed rebellious little farts whenever anyone sat down. Omovo could make out a couple of holes on one of the cushions. Between the two chairs was an over-large centre table. The surface had now acquired multiple scratches, burns, grease, sticky stains; the brunt of indifferent usage. The walls were originally marine blue. Now they had fingerprints and other smudges stamped within arms reach. Omovo could not figure out how these stains had got there: and suddenly he was depressed by an assaulting vision of stains, stains, and more stains.

Again Okri uses scatological allusions in the description of the cushion chairs. He goes on, in this passage, with descriptions of the carpet, which is pockmarked with shaggy holes and a malodorous kitchen “screaming out for a proper cleaning.” Like their house the consciences of everyone in Omovo’s family are stained from misdeeds that they subjected each other to and the familial relationships are threadbare if not completely tattered. The house is the physical manifestation of years of un-reconciled wrongs and guilt that have been allowed to fester in the family. Just as these physical

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13 Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 103.
14 Okri, *Landscapes*, 70-1.
spaces are polluted and scarred, the inner landscapes of the characters’ lives in *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* are marked by losses.

Just after the table of contents in *Landscapes*, Okri inserts a quote from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. “For whom is it well, for whom is it well? There is no one for whom it is well.” Almost everyone in *Dangerous Love* and *Landscapes* is a victim of seemingly unbearable losses. The first book in *Landscapes* is entitled ‘Losses’ and the first painting that readers see Omovo complete is called ‘Related Losses.’ It is no coincidence that Omovo loses this first painting to a thief. His second painting, ‘Drift,’ is lost to a military officer who thinks that Omovo’s work “mocks the great nation’s progress” and seizes the painting. Omovo has also lost his mother and two brothers. At different points throughout both novels Omovo is “suddenly touched with a sense of things irrevocably lost, of places that cannot be reached.”

Nothing is well. Omovo’s father lives with the shameful knowledge that he is a failure in the eyes of his three sons. He also bears the guilt of driving his first wife to an early grave and turning his two eldest sons out of the house. Keme, Omovo’s best friend, is haunted by the memory of a ten year old sister who disappeared one day never to be seen again. Ifeyiwa’s father, engulfed with the grievous onus of accidentally killing a young girl, is driven to suicide. Her brother loses his mind and is subsequently found dead in a river. In an effort to escape this “ravaged landscape” and provide her family with a useful dowry, Ifeyiwa marries Takpo, a complete stranger. Her marriage is marked by emotional and physical abuse. Ifeyiwa’s virginity is violently torn from her:

Then he sent her to buy some drinks. When she returned, and had her back to him, he dropped two Madras tablets in her coke. Afterwards she felt groggy. And she could not summon the energy or will to resist him when he

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took off her pants and climbed on her. Then she felt him as he penetrated her, plunging ripping her open. She started to cry. He got off her, opened a bottle of Vaseline. After applying the Vaseline he struggled over her again, and penetrated roughly. She felt the tear of her flesh, and she cried out. He didn’t enjoy the act. When he got off her, and got dressed, he stunned her with a slap on her face.  

Ifeyiwa’s life becomes a landscape of losses. This idea of loss pervades *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love*. Okur, Omovo’s distant brother, laments in a letter, “Omovo, we have all badly lost something.” The statement is vague, specific, simple, and complex all at once. It is the sobering conclusion of a generation struggling to make sense of a society precipitated by the sins of their elders. What is being lost is human decency. Furthermore, in the mad dash to collect bribes, ascend the social ladder, and acquire material possessions the landscapes within are neglected and unexplored.

People become strangers unto themselves, which opens another door to arbitrary cruelty and immorality. While riding the bus Omovo and a friend, Okoro, reflect on how they cannot remember how to do traditional dances or speak their native languages. Omovo asks, “How did this happen to us, eh?” Okoro replies, “We’ve been selling our souls without knowing it, I guess.” Omovo concludes, “Yeah. Something has been stolen from us, all of us.”

Omovo attempts to capture this sense of loss on the canvas when he paints. Painting, for Omovo, is a means “to come to terms with the miasmic landscapes about him.” It serves a “personal and public prism.” The scum-scape painting, ‘Drift,’ is the second painting that readers encounter in both novels. A pool of filthy stagnant water in the

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16 ibid., 100.
17 ibid., 69.
18 ibid., 223.
compound inspires Omovo to do the piece. Omovo creates a "snot-coloured scumpool full of portentous shapes and heads with glittering dislocated eyes." He creates an image of ugliness so real that even the stench of the actual scumpool is communicated to those who view the painting. Ifeyiwa shivers when she sees it. The painting provokes uncomfortable thoughts about the stains and stagnant pools that define the darkest areas of one's inner landscapes. Omovo is frightened as well when he observes what he has created. But he, more than any one else who views the painting, is willing to acknowledge what the painting means for him:

He knew wordlessly what he had attempted. He had walked around the large green scumpool a thousand times. He had smelt its warm, nauseous stench and had stared at it as if hidden in its green surface lay the answer to a perennial riddle. He was also a little afraid of the uncharted things that had happened within him: the obscure, the foul correlatives which had been released on the canvas-snot-coloured, viscous, unsettling.19

Omovo is not afraid to observe ugly things found in the landscapes without, nor does he shy away from scrutinizing vile things within himself. The military officer at the art exhibition, however, is at the other end of the spectrum:

"Why did you do that painting?"
"I painted what I had to paint."
"You want to ridicule us, eh?"
"It is you who are reading hidden messages into it."
"You mock our independence."
"I am not a reactionary. I am an ordinary man, a human being, I struggle to catch the bus, I get shoved, I go to work, I cross the filthy creek at Ajegunle every day."
"You are not allowed to mock us."
"I had to paint it, so I did."
"We are going to seize the painting."
"Why?"
"This is a dynamic country."
"Why is my work being seized?"

19 ibid., 33.
“We are not some stupid drift, in a bad artist's imagination, you hear?”
“It is not illegal to paint, is it?”
“Now you may go!”

'Drift' confronts the military officer with the undesirable spaces of his own internal landscapes. At a glance the painting provokes a small window of honest reflection. The officer's inner demons spill out as he contemplates the state of the country and his place in it. Spurning the undesirable truth, the officer opts to seize the painting. In this scene the officer is the voice of the government. The government chooses to let ugliness fester under a thin veneer of normalcy, rather than admit to the decay in their country. This is the attitude of regression that locks individuals, as well as governments, all over the world into destructive cycles. Progression and change in a government and individual can only occur when they choose to see themselves as they really are.

The first painting ‘Related Losses’, seen in both novels, conjures up dark images in the collective conscience/memory of Nigeria. Surreal in its morbid darkness, the painting is a portrayal of children playing around a tree. Omoyo takes this normal occurrence and twists it into something sepulchral:

The tree was thick-bodied, permanent. Its branches had been unnaturally amputated close to the trunk. The children were naked, curved, and had protuberant stomachs. Their legs were wiry. The sky above the tree and rooftops was defined by clouds of charcoal shadings that resembled a bundle of dead bodies. The drawing was stark and basic. It had in it something quivering, inherently, cruel.

The people of the compound bickered endlessly over this piece, but one man, Tuwo, gives some relevant insight. In a nonchalant manner, Tuwo mentions to Omoyo that the painting reminds him of the Biafran War. This is the first in a long line of references and

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20 ibid., 49-50.
21 ibid., 8.
allusions to the war in both novels. The war represents a huge blot on the conscience of
the Nigerian nation-state. Furthermore, the war haunts individuals who were involved in
it directly or indirectly. In Dangerous Love and Landscapes what transpired during the
war is the collective transgression of Nigeria and its citizens. Okri takes readers back to
the scene of the crime through Omovo’s terrifying flashbacks and the futile attempts of
those around him to suppress memories of the atrocities that occurred during the war.

Once again Omovo is alone in his willingness to acknowledge this ugly sore within
himself and his own guilt. Okri uses Omovo as a prism through which he depicts
unspeakable and ghastly scorched landscapes. In his interactions with other characters
Omovo stirs this abysmal pool within their consciences, forcing them to deal with the
war. In one such conversation, after Omovo graphically recounts a childhood experience
during the war, even while Dr. Okocha, the elder figure in both novels, admits that he has
repressed his memories of the civil war:

The old painter’s face clouded over. Eventually, in a hollow voice, he said:
“I feel the same way. I have not told my experiences in the war to
anybody, except my wife. And I haven’t painted about it either. (Dangerous
Love, p. 122)\(^{21}\)

Dr. Okocha only shares his war experiences with his wife. In several instances Okri
emphasizes how deeply engrained the Biafran War is in the conscience of Nigerian
society by linking the flashback sequences to profound issues in the characters’ lives. In
the first chapter of the second book of Dangerous Love, one of Omovo’s flash backs is
preceded by images of the mutilated girl and followed by memories of his brothers and a
letter from them as well:

\(^{21}\) ibid., 122
Omovo couldn’t escape from the dead girl. She followed him in his dreams and haunted his memory. She reminded him of an event he had witnessed when he was in Ughelli, his home town during the civil war. That night he had been sent on an errand by his father to go and by some herbs. Omovo walked in search of the herbalist’s house and was soon lost. He had wandered into curfew time. As he stood under the tree crying, he saw a crowd of wild people coming down the street. They had sticks and cudgels. They chanted and in their songs called for the killing of Igbo people. Then they went to a hut that wasn’t far from his position. Then he saw them drag out an old man and a girl. They beat the old man into a bloodied whimpering mess. And they carried the girl away.22

The dead girl that Omovo stumbles upon at the park is a major motif of communal self-destruction in both novels and a horrific event in Omovo’s life. As stated earlier, the dead girl is a graphic illustration of Africa destroying one of its most vital resources, the children. That this event should provoke memories of the war speaks to how horribly scarred the civil war left Omovo and the extent to which it remains with him some twenty years later. Okri skillfully links national and personal consciences through these painful memories, related losses. In yet another scene, Omovo is discussing the dead girl with Okoro. Okoro, a veteran of the war, is callous and unfeeling due to the things that he saw in battle. Earlier in the novels, when Omovo told Okoro about the dead girl, Okoro dismissed it saying, “But why is he so worried about a dead body?” Later Omovo brings it up again and Okoro opens up, he allows himself to explore the dark areas inside himself:

Okoro laughed nervously. Then he was silent. Then he swore and said: “During the war bodies didn’t vanish. They simply decayed or were eaten by dogs. You know I remember seeing a man’s leg under a tree. A burnt leg. No toes. Maggots were crawling out of it.” “Take it easy.”

22 ibid., 67.
“Sure I’m taking it easy. I forget, that’s all. You learn the trick of forgetting. You just dance when you can, get a woman, go to work, and forget.”23

Okoro chooses to bury the experience, letting it decay inside of himself just like the man’s leg under the tree. Later in this dialogue Okoro asks Omovo to change the subject and Omovo replies, “Sure, let’s change the world, why just the subject?” As Okri states in *A Way of Being Free*, the artist is helplessly on the side of good. Omovo has no choice in the matter, which is why he cannot be content to just change the subject or forget. He cannot accept that the filth and chaos around is all the world has to offer. Therefore, Omovo struggles with memories of the war in an effort to learn something from it and grow from the experience. Random acts of violence, black outs, and the state of his family and generation are all things that trigger flashbacks of the war in Omovo’s mind. He has not yet come to grips with it, but the fact that he has the flashbacks and tries to make sense of them suggests that Omovo realizes their significance and has begun the journey.

The Biafran War is represented as a motif of blood staining the conscience of the Nigeria portrayed in both novels. ‘In the Shadow of War,’ the first story in *Stars of the New Curfew*, is Okri’s best expression of the collective guilt that he perceives in the war. Omovo shows up in this story, at least in name, once again. Intrigued by three soldiers patrolling the village Omovo, as a child, follows them into the forest and witnesses an execution. He runs home to tell his father the unspeakable act that he witnessed only to find, upon his return, his father drinking palm wine with the same three soldiers:

Omovo rushed to his father and pointed frantically at the three men. Omovo, overcome with delirium, began to tell his father what he had seen.

23 ibid., 221.
But his father, smiling apologetically at the soldiers, picked up his son and carried him off to bed.\textsuperscript{24}

Omovo’s father is the sole sanctuary of morality and safety for him at this point. This recourse too is snatched away, just as the forbidden sight destroys his innocence, when his father turns out to be in league with the murders. This fact is probably lost on the protagonist of this short story because of his age. It is the readers who have the dreadful knowledge of the guilt. However, the adult Omovo of *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* has an understanding of the things he witnessed as a child. The narrator’s explanation of this understanding in *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* is relevant to the experience of the Omovo in *Stars of the New Curfew* as well as the flashback that it refers to in the novels:

He had never been able to come to terms with the forbidden sight, the serious stain of that night. Whenever he witnessed an act of terror, he always became that little boy who watched helplessly. And he could never escape the fact that he too was stained in some way.\textsuperscript{25}

Omovo must come to an understanding about the stains he sees in the landscapes without and within. Okri uses images of decay and rot to document disillusionment with post-independence life and its subsequent moral morass, just as he uses the Biafran War and a foreboding sense of loss to illustrate the characters’ inner turmoil. The accretion of the filth signifies its degrading effect upon the people. Ifeyiwa laments that she has wound up “With rats. With a man she hated.” Her rat-infested compound and turbulent marriage mirror each other. The correlation between the scum-pool, the painting ‘Drift’, and Omovo’s inner landscape is all too obvious.


\textsuperscript{25} Okri, *Dangerous Love*, p. 67-8.
It is prudent to reiterate here Okri's perspective on his own universe, which is quoted in chapter one: you cannot separate the environment from your conscience. This awareness defines the journey that the protagonist embarks upon at the beginning of both novels; it is a journey of mourning, hence his shaved head. Omovo must derive some meaning from the decay of the physical environment as well as within himself, and use what he has learned to transcend the chaos. As insurmountable as it seems, Okri believes that this evil can be overcome and he challenges his readers to have similar faith in the face of seemingly unconquerable odds. This challenge will be the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Ogun’s Challenge

Fifteen years separate the first publications of *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love*. For all of its brilliance, from the then youthful Okri, critics, namely Jeyifo and Maja-Pearce, dubbed *Landscapes* as reductively individualistic. In other words, the novel lacks utility. It does not hold a message or any advice for readers as to how they can transcend the chaos that the novel so eloquently depicts. Perhaps at 22 years of age Okri, like his young protagonist Omovo, was just becoming aware of the artist within himself. That the author and protagonist are at similar thresholds in life would make it difficult for the authorial vision to see too much farther than the protagonist.

The storyline of *Landscapes* casts Omovo as a burgeoning artist struggling to comprehend the suffering around him. Similarly, Okri’s first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, is rooted in his early articles about the injustices of ghetto life. *Landscapes* is obviously a continuation of his exploration of the environment and the effects it has on the human condition. Clearly, Omovo’s and Okri’s objectives in *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* are similar if not the same. They are both trying to understand the chaos of life in Lagos and convey it in their art. Okri likens himself to Omovo in an interview with Jane Wilkinson:

(JW) What about *The Landscapes Within*, with the lonely artist figure?
(Okri) That is more autobiographical in the landscape. I knew every detail of the terrain.
(JW) When you talk about the terrain are you talking about the landscape without or the landscape within?
(Okri) The landscapes without. The landscape within is imagined, the external one is autobiographical. The details of his condition are not mine, the details of his predicament—to some extent—were.¹

Later in the same interview with Wilkinson Okri says of Omovo, “He’s going through a passage. At the end of that passage it’s impossible to say whether there’s maturity or disintegration.”² Okri, a lonely artist himself, was also going through a difficult passage early in his career. He experienced extremely lean times between the publications of Landscapes (1981) and Incidents at the Shrine (1986). Okri’s prolific writing during the interim between Landscapes and Dangerous Love suggests a maturation process in his craft. The significant changes and additions in Dangerous Love also point to this growth. It is in these changes that Okri’s authorial view and challenge are found. As previously mentioned in the first chapter of this study Dangerous Love is described as redemption for Okri. The novel is an attempt to redeem the suffering of those subjected to injustice and squalor. Okri’s view changes in that Dangerous Love suggests that this suffering does not have to be in vain. Valuable lessons can be reaped from suffering and can be used to re-make the world. He posits that a prosperous and peaceful future can rise from the chaotic present.

The idea of building from chaos is an integral part of Yoruba lore. Essentially, Okri draws upon an indigenous resource, the story of Ogun, to address a modern problem. This speaks volumes concerning Okri’s strategic positioning in the tradition of African realism. Okri’s generation faced a chaotic Lagos with little hope as three decades of fruitless independence and the Biafran War characterized their childhood years. Thus

¹ Wilkinson, 80.
² ibid., 81
Okri’s realism, as Jeyifo cites, is written from the perspective of the sufferers, which elevates the ghetto to a status of more importance than setting:

“...this is Lagos rendered not as mere backdrop or setting to the stories but experienced through the suffering, anguished consciousness of characters who move through the story and the city as parallel, interlocking aspects of a single nightmarish reality.”

A main component of the nightmarish reality is the Biafran War. The war plagues Omovo’s conscience and adds to the bitterness of his present predicament. Likewise, the war also stains the national conscience. The deplorable condition of Lagos is the symptom of the unresolved suffering. Okri simultaneously explores individual and national conscience in his depiction of post-Civil War Nigeria. He effectively posits that it will take the courage of Ogun to re-make the society. Thus Okri occupies a position that embraces creating a fictional reality that reflects the violence of the city. He branches off and uniquely defines his position by proposing that the solutions are actually found in the chaos.

The redemption in Dangerous Love hinges upon dialogue, introspective monologues, and Okri’s use of indigenous myths. Pivotal scenes are augmented with lines that offer more insight and critical observations, which are absent in Landscapes. The revisions plot a clear course of action against the moral aporia and corruption that the novel decries. Okri’s call for honest self-perception, balanced vision, purposeful living, and an understanding of history’s bearing on the present is made just as forcefully as his graphic depictions of Lagos and its concomitant problems.

 Furthermore, Okri uses a ritual archetype, the story of Ogun, as a coup de théâtre. The use of such a story defines the difficulty of the challenge that Okri sets forth. That it

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3 Ogunbiyi, 280
will take the courage worthy of a god to re-make the world speaks to the potential and strength of the human spirit and the extent to which the world has been corrupted. Okri manifests a two pronged attack in his treatment of the issues raised in *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love*. While the narratives focus specifically on Nigeria, the intuitive reader will notice that the details are African but the over-arching predicament is common to humans around the globe. *Dangerous Love* admonishes Africans not to forget old Africa in the midst of a difficult present and offers the international community a new perspective from which to ponder age-old problems. *Dangerous Love* is far from individualistic.

The 15 years of added maturity with which Okri wrote *Dangerous Love* find voice in Dr. Okocha. Arguably, Dr. Okocha’s limited role as an elder in *Landscapes* is due mostly to Okri’s youthfulness at that time. Okri himself has said that what he wanted to do with *Landscapes* was too “ambitious” for his craft at that point. At age 22 Okri simply may not have experienced enough or molded his own ideas adequately enough to create a credible elder figure. In certain scenes the discrepancy between the status of elder given to Dr. Okocha in *Landscapes* and his actual interaction with Omovo is glaring. Two such scenes are Omovo’s return from the town of B and the discussion on ugliness between Omovo and Dr. Okocha; they will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Experiencing Omovo’s frustration and anger in these scenes naturally leaves the reader vicariously hungering for direction from Dr. Okocha. Unfortunately, readers are presented with meager additives that do nothing to quell their hunger for answers to the perennial human problems that *Landscapes* presents. However, this is not the case in
Dangerous Love. In these critical scenes Okri fills in the gaps with instruction that challenges the readers with the monumental task of exploring their inner landscapes and tapping the potential found there. Not only is this true of the two dialogue scenes mentioned in the previous paragraph; the revision of Omovo’s ultimate revelation, ‘The Moment,’ is improved upon as well in Dangerous Love. The revisions in Dangerous Love reflect Okri’s clarity of vision and purpose. Before discussing ‘The Moment’ the previously mentioned scenes involving Dr. Okocha and Omovo will be discussed.

At the conclusion of Landscapes Omovo is driven to the brink of madness when he returns from the town of B. After the assistant deputy bachelor informs him that his father is in jail for murder and that Ifeyiwa is the latest casualty of village warfare, he suffers a mental breakdown. Omovo runs raving through the streets only to through himself to the ground in a violent fit. After several unsuccessful attempts by the men of the compound, Dr. Okocha steps in to calm Omovo. But after such an intense scene Dr. Okocha’s reassurance is sorely lacking and muted:

“Remember your responsibilities, remember. Are you mad? Are you going mad? Madness is a stupid escape, eh, it is a stupid escape. What’s the matter with you?”

Dr. Okocha’s response is miniscule in comparison to the ordeal the Omovo is going through. At this point in the novel Omovo does not see a reason to continue the struggle against the chaos around him. Like his father, who capitulated and committed murder, Omovo is ready to let the inhumanity around him eclipse his inner landscape. Dr. Okocha’s response is thin and could scarcely bring a person back from such a point. He gives no concrete reasons why Omovo should not give in. This silence from Dr.

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4 Okri, Landscapes, 278.
Okocha’s muted voice is audible. So much lies behind the words “responsibility” and “escape” but Okri does not give the meaning to readers in *Landscapes*. This results in what seems like a lack of meaningful intervention, when actually full explication is what has been left out.

Furthermore, this is the extent of the contact between Dr. Okocha and Omovo during this scene and the last contact that they have in the novel. Omovo is left on his own to find his way through a slowly thinning mist of insanity. Alone he has to come to terms with the incarceration of his father and the death of Ifeyiwa. Okri extends this scene in *Dangerous Love* adding dialogue and interaction more befitting a relationship between mentor and student. In the following revision the words Okri chooses are quite different:

“Are you mad, eh? You haven’t even been born yet. Have you forgotten—have you forgotten your responsibilities? Pull yourself together. You’re a man—an artist—a warrior.”

By actually reminding Omovo of his three-fold identity as a man, artist, and warrior, the meaning behind the word ‘responsibility’ is clarified. Omovo must maintain his sanity because it is his duty as an artist to reinvent existence and push the boundaries of the possible, as Okri asserts in *A Way of Being Free*. As a warrior and a man Omovo must have the courage to manifest his visions into a physical reality. Perhaps Okri alludes to *The Beautiful Ones* when Dr. Okocha tells Omovo that he has not even been born yet. This is to say that Omovo is no where near reaching his full potential and to go mad without giving himself a chance would be a sin and a waste. These sentiments are echoed in *A Way of Being Free*:

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5 Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 378.
Weave your transformations in your life as well as in your work. Live. Stay alive. Don't go under, don't go mad, don't let them define you, or confine you, or buy your silence.6

In *Dangerous Love* Omovo spends the night at Dr. Okocha's home to recover from his mental break down. In this added scene Dr. Okocha has a long monologue about life and suffering. He speaks until Omovo falls asleep and continues to impart wisdom to his sleeping companion. The message in this monologue echoes the quote, by Rainer Maria Rilke, that prefaces the novel. “Shouldn’t these ancient sufferings of ours finally start to bear fruit?” He encourages Omovo to embrace life even at its bitterest moments because the bitterness will soon turn to honey. The only way to taste the honey is to endure. The following excerpt captures the core of Dr. Okocha’s monologue:

“But don’t let grief kill you. You are not born yet. You haven’t painted enough. You haven’t had an exhibition of your own works yet. You owe it to what you are suffering now to make sure you survive. You owe it to us your people. The Greeks have a saying that the skylark buried its father in its head. Bury this girl in your heart, in your art. So live, my son, live with unquenchable fire. Let everything you are suffering now give you every reason in the world to master you life and your art.”7

Dr. Okocha goes into even greater detail about why Omovo should persevere. He addresses Omovo’s grief directly. Dr. Okocha advises Omovo to let Ifeyiwa’s death be an inspiration to create art and fight against the kind of ignorance that caused her death. He admonishes Omovo to learn from his father’s mistake and avoid the murderous path that he chose. (Omovo’s father had let the external landscape corrode his spirit. When he found his wife, Blackie, and Takpo fornicating in the shower stall, he murdered Takpo. Lunging at the two adulterers, his father’s descent into immorality is defined by

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his baptism in the filthy scum water of the shower stall.) Dr. Okocha’s monologue, which is quoted above, is not found in Landscapes. Its presence in Dangerous Love is evidence that Okri developed a better understanding of suffering and its role in individual and communal life.

Individually, Omovo owes himself the chance to develop fully because he has not been born yet. He has not reached his potential and there are a great many things that he must accomplish. Dr. Okocha mentions exhibitions and ideas that Omovo has yet to articulate on the canvas as part of an individual responsibility. Omovo’s communal responsibilities are expressed as well. Dr. Okocha states that Omovo owes his people too. Omovo is not alone in his suffering; everyone around him has their own landscape of losses. However, Omovo is the only one in the narrative who has an objective understanding of the suffering. At times he seems to stand outside of everything and observe his generation and the historical circumstances that account for their present situation. Omovo owes it to his people to share his visions through art and work to manifest them as a member of the community.

Okri’s recognition and inclusion of both individual and communal responsibility reflects his understanding of modern Africa’s precarious cultural inheritance. Western influences and the individualistic tendencies that come with them are part of modern Africa’s colonial legacy; this cannot be denied. Okri does not entertain any romantic notions of returning to a communal utopia of ancient Africa. Yet he does not completely dismiss indigenous values that embrace communal attitudes. Okri proffers that Africans must negotiate new cultural influences from a position of strength, which would be their own indigenous values. Where Landscapes may be reductively individualistic,

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7 Okri, Dangerous Love, 381.
Dangerous Love is progressive and perceptive in its conception. The dialogue on ugliness and self-perception, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is yet another example of the keener insight that characterizes Dangerous Love.

However, before analyzing the dialogue in Dangerous Love it will prove useful to look at its forerunner in Landscapes. The discussion on ugliness and self-perception is critical to both novels because an honest perception of one’s self is posited as a prerequisite for any kind of positive transformation. Positive transformation of internal and external landscapes is, after all, a major concern of Landscapes and Dangerous Love. Held against its revision in Dangerous Love, the following passage from Landscapes bears the marks of a young artist beginning to define his ideas on truth and morality:

Silence. Omovo stared at the slimy greenish covering on the scum and felt nausea grip his stomach.

“It’s in ugliness that we see ourselves as we don’t want to.” Immediately after Omovo said that he dimly understood why Ifeiyiwa had been silent when she looked at this painting of the scumscape. Then he said: “You know, I am an unhappy person.”

“You feel things too much. You have truly a broad vision. It is such visions that make great works. But they are no substitute for real life. Omovo I have known you for some time now. I like you. Try and live, try and act when you should. I don’t know...I will be out of town for a short while, about two weeks or so. When I come back I will look you up and see how far you have gone. It's always our duty to try and manifest whatever good visions we have. Anyway, I will see you later. In dreams begin responsibilities. An Indian poet said that.”

In the above passage, it is Dr. Okocha’s response that reveals Okri’s tentative approach to dealing with the issues contained in the dialogue. Though well ordered, Dr. Okocha’s response is vague and does not fully engage Omovo’s profound observation. Each line of Okocha’s response taps the surface but does not to plunge to the depths of

8 Okri, Landscapes, 118-9.
what Omovo is struggling to comprehend. Omovo is looking for balance. His problem is that he has allowed the ugly aspects of the external landscape to consume his vision. He is obsessed with the ugliness, which results in his unhappiness.

Dr. Okocha reminds Omovo that he has a broad vision. What is implied by ‘broad vision’ is the ability to see beauty and undesirable things; this is balance. But Okri does not spell this out in Landscapes. Nor does he explain that trying to live and take appropriate action means not allowing the ugliness to stifle your spirit. The clearest line in the above excerpt is Dr. Okocha’s assertion that one must manifest whatever good visions one may have. Though well ordered, the rest of Dr. Okocha’s response fails to match the profundity of the original observation. However, this is not the case with the revision of this passage in Dangerous Love. The dialogue, which is quoted at length on page 21, offers actual solutions and detailed explanations.

In the revision it is Dr. Okocha, not Omovo, who shares the powerful insight that ugliness is “the face that people always turn away from.” By placing these words in Dr. Okocha’s mouth Okri further strengthens his status as an elder. Okri further augments Dr. Okocha’s response with insightful comments about truth and ugliness:

“"When things are bad people don’t want to face the truth. I don’t know why the old painters always made Truth a beautiful woman. Truth is an ugly woman. But her ugliness exists only in the eyes. I would choose the face of Medusa as a good image of truth. She is actually a profoundly beautiful woman and we can only face her with the help of a mirror. That mirror is art."”9

This is the response of an elder artist who is concerned about the growth and progress of a young painter. He uses art, a medium Omovo understands, as a metaphor to explain

9 Okri, Dangerous Love, 123.
truth and the human relationship to it. Dr. Okocha goes on to tell Omovo that ugliness festers while people ignore it and grope for illusions. He argues that happiness is impossible as long as people are dishonest with themselves. Dr. Okocha states, “Things have to improve. But first we must see ourselves clearly, as we are.”

Since it is art that enables people to look into the eyes of Medusa, it is the artist’s responsibility to create the mirror. Artists create the images that reflect the beauty and underbelly of the human personality; it is up to individuals to look into the mirror. Okri challenges readers to honestly look within. The filth and chaos depicted in Okri’s realist fiction are the consequences, according to him, of choosing illusions over reality. At the end of the above passage Omovo questions his mentor who stresses honest self-perception:

“But you don’t really paint ugliness,” Omovo said.

The old painter smiled. “I used to. That’s all I used to paint. I would draw the bad roads, paint the women in their filthy backyards. And I did it so much that my life became filled with misery. You reproduce your work in your life. And I am poor. My life became unbearable. So I started to paint bright things, happy subjects, the smile of a child on the edge of the sea, the proud hunger of the truck pusher, the defiance of the motor tout. My life opened up a little. Now I try to do both, to have the ugliness as well as the dreams.”

“I can’t seem to do anything. Often I am overwhelmed by unhappiness.”

“You are young. Everything you feel and see now will be your reservoir later. But you feel things too much. Art is a poor substitute for real life. I like you. But live! Life fully. Act whenever you feel the necessity. Don’t live only in your head. You are in the world.”

Dr. Okocha is saying that one must look at the ugliness in life, but not dwell upon it. His observation about the effect of his painting upon his actual life, speaks to the ability that people have to make their visions become a reality. Dr. Okocha’s accusation that

\[10\] ibid., 123-4.
Omovo feels too much becomes clearer because it is followed, three lines later, by "Don’t live only in your head." It is an admonition against living in an ivory tower. This challenges readers not to simply ponder or cite problems, but to act. Okri uses the quote from the Indian poet a few lines later, but he makes an important distinction. Dr. Okocha uses the word vision instead of dream. He says, "In visions begin responsibilities." In the conclusion of ‘While the World Sleeps,’ the first chapter in *A Way of Being Free*, Okri states that people perish for want of vision. He uses the word vision instead of dream because the former has less of a fantastical connotation.

Written seven years after *Landscapes* and eight years before *Dangerous Love*, ‘While the World Sleeps’ outlines what is expected of Omovo as an artist. Okri lists in detail the moral responsibilities that come with the artist’s talent:

"The poet needs to be up at night, when the world sleeps; needs to be up at dawn, before the world wakes; needs to dwell in odd corners, where Tao is said to reside; needs to exist in dark places, where spiders forge their webs in silence; near the gutters where the underside of our dreams fester. Poets need to live where others don’t care to look, and they need to do this because if they don’t they can’t sing to us of all the secret and public domains of our lives."\(^1\)

Omovo performs the duties of the poet in *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love*. He is the fictional manifestation of the proverbial poet in ‘While the World Sleeps.’ Throughout both novels Omovo always observes undesirable things such as the scum pool. Several of Omovo’s flashbacks recount the forbidden sights of dead bodies and mob violence during the Biafran War. In these instances the young Omovo is found staring at the ungodly sights, for which he is chastised. The flashbacks reveal Omovo’s uncanny attraction to the underside of human nature and foreshadow his development as an artist, an artist who

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\(^1\) Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, 1.
will reflect the stains as well as the bright things. He often paints late into the hours of
the night and the paintings serve as the song of the “secret and private domains” that Okri
mentions above. The paintings also represent Omovo’s journey into his own inner
landscapes.

Okri’s description of these introspective forays is fuller and more in depth in
Dangerous Love as well. A passage called ‘The Moment,’ at the conclusions of
Landscapes and Dangerous Love is an exemplary model of this. In Landscapes Omovo
only finds corruption, chaos, lies, frustration, and futility when he reaches inside himself.
It is as if the external environment penetrates his being and snuffs out any inkling of
possibility or hope that he may have. The passage in Landscapes effectively
communicates Omovo’s anger and bitterness. He is a young artist who is denied the bliss
of a numbing ignorance, only to be burdened with a keen sense that his generation is one
of losses. A youth in such a position should be angry; however, this is all that the
passage expresses.

Simply the placement of such a major revelation in the last pages of the novel carries a
great deal of weight. The bleakness of Omovo’s outlook at this stage of the narrative
suggests that there is no recourse. It seems that Okri is throwing up his hands and leaving
readers to drown in the abyss of “quintessential helplessness” and “ugly webs” along
with Omovo:

The moment. Every moment fissioned into its endless possibilities of life.
A million suspended fragments revolving on the crack of every crest. Deep
shivers of love. The seized sense of an unfinishable and terrifying portrait of
humanity. Quintessential helplessness. Engrams of futility. Subverted
vision of wrecked hope. Uncharted, psychic caverns of corruption.
Desperate prayers unheard. A word, a decision, a transfiguration, a step upon
a broken bridge; an emotion, an intuition; a child weeping its life away, a
destruction, a death, a waste, a soul losing itself, a scratch of insanity, a
wilderness of endless wandering; an array of generations and generations of losses; a lifetime shattered by anything.\textsuperscript{12}

The passage continues in this vein for several lines and ends with “Everything.” After such a morbid vision concluding it with an encompassing word like ‘everything’ suggests that there is nothing beyond the present chaos. The futility expressed in this passage is embedded in its very structure. There are no complete sentences in the passage; they are all fragments. Okri actually uses the word ‘fragments’ in the second line of the passage. Thus, an image of disillusioned people cutting their feet on the shards of their own broken society in a futile race is evoked through structure as well as prose. Armah and the Accra that he depicts in \textit{Fragments} (1969) instantly come to mind. Baako, another lonely artist and the protagonist of \textit{Fragments}, struggles to comprehend his shattered environment much like Omovo. While Baako succumbs to madness, the end of \textit{Landscapes} does not determine Omovo’s fate. However, the passage quoted above foreshadows a grim outcome.

A single paragraph is dedicated to ‘The Moment’ in \textit{Landscapes} and it is a paragraph of unabashed pessimism and anger. ‘The Moment’ grows to two pages and a half in \textit{Dangerous Love}. The revision is still rife with anger and frustration, but it is of a different brand. It is an anger that laments the problems with a lucid understanding of the causes and consequences, unlike the ‘The Moment’ in \textit{Landscapes}. Added admonitions and solutions further set the revision apart from the first version. Okri uses his protagonist’s introspective moment to speak directly to the reader as he finds the words that he did not have fifteen years ago. A quotation from an unidentified Indian poet is

\textsuperscript{12} Okri, \textit{Landscapes}, 272.
repeated in different forms three times in this passage. Omovo realizes that responsibility
begins in dreams, visions, and action. Most importantly, it dawns upon Omovo that the
foundation for an improved future can be found in the rumble of the present chaos around
him:

But chaos is the beginning of creation- God created chaos before he
created order- a greater order- chaos is rich in possibilities- in vision begins
responsibilities-transfiguration- transfigure the deception multiplied by
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 the chaos- USE EVERYTHING- USE EVERYTHING
WISELY- EVERYTHING HAS SIGNIFICANCE.¹³

This is the core of Okri’s authorial challenge in Dangerous Love. He challenges the
reader to remain positive in the face of so much negativity and erect something
worthwhile from it. Despite his Urhobo background, Okri employs Yoruba lore to issue
this challenge in Dangerous Love. He dares readers to delve into the chaos that abounds
and find the raw material for a progressive future. This is similar to the story of Ogun,
god of war and iron. According to Yoruba lore, Ogun was the first to travel from the
world of the gods to the human realm. However, when he made this journey he spent a
brief period of time in a spiritual nebulosity that was neither here (physical realm) nor
there (divine realm). The space was characterized by chaos. Ogun, at great risk to
himself, erected from the disorder a bridge for his fellow gods to follow sparing them the
descent into chaos.

Similarly, Okri challenges his readers to ignore personal risk, sacrifice individuation,
and delve into the chaos around them, organize it, and use it to build a better society. He

¹³ Okri, Dangerous Love, 363.
urges them to refuse to believe that what is before the eye is all that there is; re-dream the world and then re-make it. He further demands that they dive into the chaos and emerge wiser and more powerful. This passage bares the mark of a mature writer whose ideas and opinions are fully developed. Okri is decisive and insightful here. He observes, “our history hasn’t hurt us enough or the betrayals would stop.” Okri goes on to say that “you either become or you die.”

The revision of ‘The Moment’ is defined by perceptive addenda like these; it is a call to action.

The dialogues and monologues discussed in this chapter are directed at the reader as well as characters in the narrative. Okri is speaking to the reader during these scenes. Omovo’s revelation and Dr. Okocha’s lessons are Okri’s views as discussed in the first chapter of A Way of Being Free. Visionaries, in this case artists, have a responsibility to constantly provoke the human conscience and stretch the possibilities of reality. They should spark a hunger for a greater existence. The rest of the community should not limit the artist’s vision or their own. Okri challenges readers not to resist the poetic (art), but to face their own truths and histories that the poetic insight reveals.

14 ibid., 362.
Chapter 5
Okri’s Realism

Okri’s realist work responds to the crisis in Nigeria by speaking through youthful protagonists, giving the setting agency, and confronting the violent modernity of Lagos with a ancient creation myth. The setting has agency because it literally acts upon the characters as a kind of omnipresent force throughout the novels. Accurate representation of actual post-independence life in fiction has been a paramount issue in the tradition of African realism. Okri deals with this familiar problematic issue by creating barren landscapes that are disturbed by oases of beauty. The startling contrasts remind readers that beauty can grow from suffering, a major theme in Okri’s realism.

_Landscapes_ and _Dangerous Love_ are soundtracks to early post-independence Nigerian history and testimonies to the endurance of the human spirit. _Landscapes_ (1981) was published at a time when Nigeria stood on an important threshold as a nation-state. In the 1980’s the military relinquished its decade long hold on power to an elected civilian government. Just as artists responded to independence during the 1960’s, their successors responded to democratization in the 1980’s. The birth of a new generation of novelists coincided with Nigeria’s second attempt at democracy.

Urbanization also marked this period as Nigerians flocked to Lagos in search of better opportunities, which created a mixture of ethnic identities. The Lagos depicted in the novels does not offer much more than a concentrated reflection of Nigeria’s declining state. The narratives are set at a time when the milestone of independence had been
reached some twenty years earlier. The characters have no milestones to look to for some sort of subsequent grand improvement. Okri and other novelists in his generation had their beginnings in this milieu. Thus, *Landscapes* sits at the crossroads of a chaotic state brought on by the circumstances of post independence life.

But why the crossroads? By the early eighties the children of the Biafran war had come of age and it was their turn to become productive members, and eventually the leaders, of the society. What did their elders teach them in preparation for this time? In what direction would this generation take the society? These issues are also the reason that Okri chooses children or youth barely out of their teens as his protagonists.

By using young people as protagonists Okri dramatizes the destructive cycle of violence that engulfs one generation of Nigerians after another— "The young shall grow." Given the context of this quotation, as the last line of 'Laughter Under the Bridge,' it can be taken as an admonition and a grim foreshadowing of the destructive cycle. In this short story Okri recounts the experiences of the Biafran War through the gaze of a young child. While en route from school, the young protagonist encounters countless roadblocks manned by thuggish soldiers who demand that he 'speak his language' upon pain of death.

The roadblocks serve as the central setting of violence in the story. Innocent people are interrogated, raped, and murdered at the roadblocks. By the conclusion of the story the protagonist and another character, Monica, come upon a bridge where soldiers have set up a roadblock. When they climb down under the bridge to avoid the soldiers, the children stumble upon a makeshift grave for Igboos. Amid the stench of dead bodies the protagonist runs home, while Monica erupts into a fit of twisted laughter.
Okri’s unsentimental depiction of youth ensnared in the violent relations of post-independence Nigeria is ominous. Elders pass on a legacy of violence and chaos to the youth, inoculating them with a sense of corruption and futility at an early age. Okri explores the results of such an inheritance in Landscapes and Dangerous Love. Omovo’s peers forsake home and move to America or Europe. The devaluation of home results in the loss of vital human resources. Others, like Okoro, become despondent and content to be another cog in the wheel. The mutilated girl in the park is a recurring motif of squandered youth and quashed potential on the part of the Africans themselves. Omovo constantly reflects on his scarred generation:

“I should do a painting of my friends-children of war-children of waste-the war generation-lost in the cities-lost in offices-lost in traffic jams-trapped in the mazes of daily life-the maze of our history.”

While the above passage depicts Omovo’s generation as victims of their history, the next one describes them as the new agents of the destructive cycle:

“That is my generation. Scavenging for blood money. Corruption money. Scavenging our futures, our history. A generation of guilt, and blindness, and infernal responsibility.”

Indeed, the young shall grow. However, what they grow into depends on the lessons that their elders teach them. This is what lies behind Okri’s use of young protagonists in his realist fiction. The relationship between Dr. Okocha and Omovo, members of once warring ethnic groups, reinforces the message. It is a strong denunciation of ethnic hostility and an affirmation of the role that elders have in African communities. As Soyinka comments in Opera Wonyosi, the harsh realities depicted in these novels

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1 Okri, Dangerous Love, 191.

2 ibid., 357-8.
affected every man, woman, and child as soon as they left the relative safety of their homes. Okri illustrates this fact with scathing probity. The physical setting itself also tells a story.

The setting is invested with agency in both novels. The ghetto has a surreal and real effect on the characters as Okri pushes the limits of his contention on the environment and human conscience. Okri believes that the environment cannot be separated from individual conscience. So as his characters navigate through the slums, what they encounter has a definite impact on them. In some instances this impact is literal, while in others it is surreal. Ifeyiwa and Omovo often meet for a secret rendezvous and take long walks. As they move through the ghetto Okri’s descriptions painted the couple as an island of hope and love in a sea of rot and corrosion. The following quote exemplifies how the setting, in this instance, helps to evoke an image of beauty from chaos:

They began to take long walks together. They walked down bushpaths, dirt tracks, streets without names. They passed huts devastated by the rains. Children, with their heads covered in sand, played and cried on the roads. And even the dirt littering the streets, the rotting fruits and vegetables, and the carcasses of dead animals at the roadsides, became part of the enchantment of their walks.... They walked through scenes of unbearable poverty, their faces lit up by the sun.°

In the above excerpt the focus is on the relationship between Omovo and Ifeyiwa, however, the images of the ghetto speak so strongly here that the readers’ attention is split. While the love between Omovo and Ifeyiwa takes prominence, the setting does not allow readers to forget the atmosphere of decay and risk, thus emphasizing the young couple’s desperate need for the comfort that their relationship provides. Alone, the

° ibid., 104.
repressive nature of the environment is hard to withstand. Ifeyiwa is demoralized by what she sees around her:

She was revolted by the decay of life about her. The women around seemed to age so quickly. They bore many children and struggled to feed and clothe them. They quarreled endlessly about all manner of small things. They became embroiled in petty compound intrigues. The hot afternoons poured through their lives and made them look much older than they actually were. They became flabby-breasted, weary, absent-minded, servile. She didn’t want to be like them.⁴

In this case actual people function as part of the decaying environment. Ifeyiwa, already worn down by an abusive husband, fears that she will one day become like the rest of the women in the compound. The nightsoil man is also a human manifestation of the dilapidated environment. A familiar figure in African realism, he, too, makes an appearance in Dangerous Love and Landscapes. The carrier of society’s waste, the nightsoil man is charged with the task of clearing the latrines of excrement. In the following excerpt the nightsoil man, in retribution for their children’s disrespect, exacts a bribe from the elders of the compound before he will carry off his foul smelling load:

The elders got up. The nightsoil man chose his moment. With the awkward and sometimes wicked dignity that comes with such labors, the nightsoil man struggled, snorted, and then deposited the bucket right in front of the elders, in admonishment for the bad training of their children. The effect was staggering.

‘Hey, carrier, are you mad, eh? You don crase?’ the elders screamed.

The nightsoil man, cricking his neck, weaving as if in a hallucination, slouched away from the incredible deposit. When the full implication of his act became clear the whole place erupted. The elders, the neighbors, the women around, screamed and howled. People fled in all directions. The elders fell over their chairs and kicked over their table of drink and kola-nuts in their extreme haste to escape the smells. There was a terrible din of outraged screams, entreaties, curses. The stench was enough to drive a whole village insane.⁵

⁴ ibid., 105
⁵ ibid., 267
This is an overpowering instance in which the environment acts upon the characters in the novel. Through its human representative, the nightsoil man, the environment humbles the people and has them at its mercy. The descriptions of the polluted roads, withered women, and the nightsoil man are instances where the environment has a real effect on the characters. Pushing the limits of realism, Okri also injects the environment with a supranormal quality that has a profound effect on his characters. The constant blackouts in the city often trigger flashbacks of the war in Omovo’s mind, the darkest part of his inner landscape. In Dangerous Love a blackout conjures up visions of the war in Omovo’s mind. He is trapped in the memory of a murder that he witnessed as child until the lights return. The arbitrary seizure of the lights creates a sense of unreality and reinforces the chaos that defines life in the ghetto. Okri confronts the chaos that he perceives in Lagos with a creation myth, the story of Ogun.

Okri all but spells out his allusion to the Yoruba god in ‘The Moment,’ Omovo’s revelation in Dangerous Love. He advises readers to look back to the beginning of time for the answers to modern problems—“Begin again from the legends of creation.” The story of Ogun is just that, a Yoruba creation legend. Okri employs indigenous resources in a manner different from Soyinka’s and Armah’s. In The Beautiful Ones Armah uses indigenous concepts of time and consumption to reveal the corruption in Ghana. The tedious time frame that the man exists in is represented as the waste produced by the carefree philandering of politicians and the rich.

Soyinka opts to satirize middle class and educated Africans’ relationship to African traditions. He accomplishes this through the continual debates his protagonists have on the unimportance of the ancestors. Omovo has his doubts as well, but by the conclusion
he finds hope and direction in Ogun's example. He realizes that he must descend into the
chaos to find the building blocks of the future. Omovo's identity as an artist is similar to
that of the hero-god. As defined by Soyinka in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*,
hero-gods like Ogun are cast as questers of intermediary zones and explorers of
uncharted territories where humans dare not tread. Okri explores this theme in *A Way of
Being Free*, with relevance to the role of the artist. The only difference is that artists
explore uncharted spaces of the physical realm while hero-gods probe the cosmos.

Omovo stands alone, among the protagonists discussed in this study, in his similarity
to the hero-gods. In *The Beautiful Ones* the man does not have a medium through which
he can express his vision. His anonymity, reinforced by the lack of a name, places him
among the rank and file despite his inclination to go against the grain. Soyinka's
protagonists are vaguely aware of the problems but cannot articulate them. Sekoni is the
only notable exception. However, his knowledge drives him mad and he is killed before
he can really use his new found artistic talents seen in his only sculpture of the wrestler.
Omovo, however, is blooming by the end of *Dangerous Love*. His awareness,
unders:standing of the environment, and artistic talent makes him a visionary.

By defining him in this way Okri lifts the lonely artist figure to an elevated status in
the human community. The artist is trusted to guard the human conscience and to
proveke it at times when the rest of the community would rather ignore it. Their art
provides the mirror through which the human community can view themselves in truth,
beauty, and ugliness. Okri is unique in this manipulation of the creation myth.

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One might argue that by employing mythopoeisis and other supranormal elements in his realist texts Okri suggests that standard realism projects a view of reality that does not engage the fusion of the magically real with the real. Okri’s short stories in *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew* can be used in defense of this argument. Although most of the stories are set in the urban ghetto, which would seem to dictate a realist mode, Okri stretches the boundaries of realism to the breaking point. The argument is further augmented by Okri’s further use of magical realism in his later works such as *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, magical realist texts. However, *The Landscapes Within* and *Dangerous Love* problematize the argument stated at the beginning of this paragraph.

In these texts Okri confines himself to a Western paradigm of realism and yet manages delineate the fusion of the real world with the supernatural realm without stressing realism’s boundaries. He accomplishes this by using spaces in the physical realm that are natural intermediary zones between this world and the spirit realm. Dreams, sleep, night/darkness, and art are spaces where Okri can defy time and other structures of the real world without actually fracturing the realist mode in his narrative scheme. Okri can include the fantastic and maintain narrative believability in realism. This method has its beginnings in *Landscapes*. The conflict between Omovo’s internal landscape and the external landscapes are depicted in magical realist terms through his dreams. Long after he stumbles upon her in the park, the corpse of the mutilated girl continues to visit Omovo in his dreams:

I do not know how long I had been sleeping when it happened. I was walking and walking and walking and walking; I did not seem to be going anywhere in particular. As I went past every tree turned into some kind of oddly colored mist. Then when I looked back the trees had turned into the
image of the dead mutilated girl I had seen in the park. It was strange: I saw her vividly but I could not see her face; she had no face. I trudged on and on and on. I saw a light at the end of this forest and I made for it. I never reached there. I woke up.7

The dreamscape acts as a portal through which Okri can switch the setting from the ghetto to the forest, the uncontested realm of the spirits. As long as the dreamscape is open Okri is free to invoke the spirits of the forest in this scene. When Omovo wakes up the realist mode is restored without having been disturbed. In both novels Omovo’s paintings serve as surreal representations of Nigeria’s condition. The morbid intimations of ‘Related Losses,’ described in the novel, is the best example (see 33). In Dangerous Love Okri is more adept at including the supranormal without fracturing the realist mode. He employs the night/darkness as a conduit through which he transitions into the esoteric realm.

In Book Three of Dangerous Love Omovo is out after dark when he stumbles upon the meeting place of a secret society. As Omovo nears the meeting place the scene becomes less real and more esoteric. Okri speaks of the smell of incense, the thickening of the bushes and trees, the sound of riotous singing, and the peculiar darkness. Finally the transition from physical to spiritual realm is complete as Okri states, “The night was a forest of signs.”8

Once again Okri seizes an opportunity to lead readers to the forest, where the spirits reign. As the scene progresses Omovo witnesses masked figures with whips and a central Egungun dancing to the beat of talking drums. When Omovo decides to leave and continues on his walk, Okri moves back into the real world with one line- “The wind

7 Okri, Landscapes, 3.
8 Okri, Dangerous Love, 269.
blew sharply into his face, relieving the smell of incense with the wet familiarity of rotting vegetation." The last vestiges of the esoteric realm are vanquished by the common emanations of the ghetto. Rituals and the spaces where they are executed are the catalysts and points of connection for the fusion of the esoteric and the real. Participants in these rituals meet mostly at night, when spirits are said to walk the earth. Okri uses the ritual as a means of capturing the esoteric without disturbing the realist mode.

Finally, Okri uses sleep and dreams to make the leap to the esoteric realm at the conclusion of *Dangerous Love*. After an arduous journey to the town of B Omovo falls asleep in his guest quarters. While he is asleep Omovo embarks upon another journey that lasts an entire lifetime. This journey is a quest for a magical blue door that he ignores at the beginning of the journey. Omovo only realizes the bliss that lies behind the door after he passes it by. Compelled by wanderlust of some sort, he cannot turn back for the door because of all the distractions that lay ahead of him. Okri's prose slip into the familiar form of his magical realist fiction during this passage. Omovo encounters sheep with heads of hyenas, ostriches with the eyes of owls, legless magicians, and armless musicians. The memory of the blue door haunts Omovo through all of this.

He is not able to free himself of the wanderlust and search for the door until he is an old man. Omovo does not actually find it until he dies and stands in front of it as a spirit. Remember, the journey spans a whole lifetime. Just before the secrets that lay behind the door are revealed to him, Omovo wakes up. He had been asleep for eighteen hours; this is an abnormally long time to sleep. However, such a long duration of sleep befits the kind of dream that Omovo has. Through sleep and dreams, Okri is able to depict the magical journey of human destiny. That destiny is to be born, live, suffer, and bleed.

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9 ibid., 270.
magical journey of human destiny. That destiny is to be born, live, suffer, and bleed. Humans are drawn to it just as Omovo is, despite the happiness that waits behind the blue door. The door is found again, according to Okri, only through death. Once again Okri shifts between realms and maintains narrative credibility in both of them.

Okri’s realism allows him to depict, in no uncertain terms, the violent relations of the Nigerian nation-state. While his magical realist texts comment on the crisis in Nigeria, readers can get bogged down or distracted by his references to the fantastic. The chances of this happening with *Landscapes* and *Dangerous Love* are slim. There are no three-headed spirits or witches to get in between the reader and images of ethnic hostility and degrading poverty. References to the esoteric are limited to spaces where they may ordinarily surface in the physical realm. Thus he communicates to the reader in a much more direct manner the predicament that confronts modern Africa, and for that matter, the world. How will people transform past stains and betrayals into a solid foundation upon which they can stand and confront a troublesome present and an even more uncertain future? With brilliance Okri’s realist fiction poses this question and proffers a basis for answering.
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