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Objects of Enchantment: Mind and Matter Correlation in the Fictional Writings of Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie

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Abstract Among the prominent literary voices in the postcolonial arena, Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie have carved a niche for themselves in terms of a search for anti-colonial sentiment. The language of the two writers is bestowed with a range of significations that exalt the common everyday objects to a higher level of sublime enchantment. The magical prose and delusionary writings of the two writers describe objects not merely as mundane items, but as constituents of a material realm, which is surreal, sublime, and bewildering at once. The paper seeks to understand the significance of object-metaphors in the fictions of the two writers. The material worlds described by these writers exert a delusionary influence on their protagonists. Thus, one could ascertain a curious mind-matter correlation, in that; minds get affected almost in an insane and surrealist manner by the objects surrounding them. The questions the paper seeks to ask are – how do objects determine sanity in the postcolonial space? Is it possible to distinguish the everyday objects from the exalted materiality in the postcolonial world? More importantly, how do the two writers bring about a subversion of the mind/matter dichotomy by populating their writings with material objects?

Keywords: Thing theory, postcolonial studies, mind/matter dichotomy, magic-realism, objects of enchantment.

In Asian and European antiquity [...] man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. (Soyinka 1976)



1. **Thing Theory: How objects constitute the human subject**

One of the significant critical formulations that have occurred in the contemporary times is the “thing theory”. Historically, one could observe the manner in which ‘things’ have been relegated to the backdrop in an attempt to foreground the human. The human mind, language and culture have received a higher degree of prominence in the critical literatures that have emerged since the enlightenment. There has been a constant obsession with ‘human-being’ as the subject of discursive analysis; so much so that, even the other of the human is always another human from a different race, class, gender or ethnic identity. The human interaction with the object, the mind and matter correlation, and the beingness of the objects, have not been considered as significant ideations for theoretical deliberations. Bill Brown in his article on “Thing Theory” questions this lack of insightful understanding of objects and draws our attention towards conceptualizing the thingness of objects. As he writes, “If thing theory sounds like an oxymoron, then, it may not be because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field” (Brown 2001: 5).

Things are considered as entities located “somewhere outside the theoretical field”, and therefore, cannot form a part of critical understanding that concerns itself with issues such as human rationality, progress, and history. Objects/things are merely mentioned in philosophical deliberations, but they are not recognized as epistemological devices that have contributed towards knowledge construction and rationalistic accomplishments. Thing theory ushers in a radically new way of comprehending objects by asking certain pertinent questions such as, how do objects constitute the human subject? How does the inanimate attribute an identity to the animate? How do two inanimate objects connect and correlate with each other in an attempt to construct the materiality of the human subject? In its theoretical investigation to answer such questions, the thing theory resorts to Locke’s formulation concerning the human subject as the “thinking thing” (qtd. in Brown 7). Thus, the ontology of things and their material affectations have acquired significance in the formulations of Brown. The grandeur of the human subject is ruptured by ‘thing theory’, which has



concerned itself with the manner and methods of alienation of things. As Brown writes, “Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects” (Brown 2001: 5).

Following Brown’s formulations in “thing theory” several attempts have been undertaken by critics and researchers to inquire into the ontology of things in literary texts. Brown provides us with the example of A S Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale* (2001) where a departure from ‘ideas’ to the ‘things that generate the ideas’ could be observed. In the text, Wolf-Man, a doctoral student, while writing his thesis peeps out of the window. Obviously, strained of the intellectual heaviness from the theories of Lacan and Derrida, Wolf-Man seeks solace in the tangible objects. The abstract abstruseness of ideas appears to negate his very being. He thinks, “I must have *things*” (Byatt 2). For Brown, this act of relinquishing things acquires significance as it exemplifies an inclination towards materiality and tangibility. Encountering the world of objects specifies a metaphoric necessity involving a new understanding of human subject as not constituted solely by the mind, but by objects around her/him. Having demonstrated the postulates of ‘thing theory’ and its relevance to literature, let us now locate the correlation of objects with the human self in the narratives of Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri.

2. **Materiality in the Narratives of Okri and Rushdie:**

Booker Prize winners Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie have carved a niche for themselves, in terms of their search for an anti-colonial sentiment through their fictional writings which depict magic, mystery and mayhem. The notion of ‘unconventional hero’, which is common to both the writers’ work, arises out of a reaction to the colonial experience. The linguistic creativity of these two writers presents us a range of significations that ennoble the common everyday objects to a higher level of sublime conjuration. Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie’s hybridic writing style combines the postcolonial voices, settings and objects with the magical reality that is depicted in their novels.



The 'common' objects and materials that feature in their writings often depict deeper realities of life and society. For example, Okri's novels have a repetition of everyday objects such as candles, moon, pictures/photographs, eggs, masks, feathers- eagle's, chicken's, blue coloured, rainbow, moon etc., which elevate the tone of the novel to a more exalted state. These objects in the novel illustrate the socio-political metamorphosis of Nigeria, the collapse and merger of boundaries between human and super-human space, the cycle of birth-death-rebirth and the dynamics of postcolonial magic realistic elements. Similarly, in the writings of Salman Rushdie, one observes deployment of multiple masked realities, which create a chaotic space in the novel. He utilizes objects such as curtains, rooms, planets, moon, pictures, letters to present variegated issues of identity crisis, violence and trauma, human subjugation, cultural otherness, hyperbolizations and masked realities. The magical prose, the quasi-poetic narration and the delusionary writings of the two writers describe objects not merely as mundane items but as constituents of a material realm which is surreal, sublime and bewildering.

Ben Okri's Novels *The Famished Road* (1991) and *Songs of Enchantments* (1993) present a narrative epistemology, which is constructed by protagonist Azaro's unearthly mysterious consciousness. The rupturing of reality to introduce the supernatural elements and devices (which play an important role in the novels) through the medium of simple everyday objects is presented in a lyrical manner. The various uses and aspects of magic realistic elements/objects, their effectations and affectations place the novels in the arena of postcolonial studies. As Gareth Griffiths observes that Okri's fiction (especially the latter ones) "It rejects the subaltern status of African modes of knowledge and reinstates an African ontology and epistemology in place of the dominant Euro-American frame" (Griffiths 326).

The 'narrative schema' adopted by the writer blurs the boundaries between the living (human) and the spirit (supernatural) world and where, Azaro trespasses to the other world create an illusionary effect throughout the novels. Azaro seems to afloat in a hybridized space where he visualizes both worlds by eluding the cycle of birth-death-rebirth of an abiku (spirit child). These magical and mysterious visions occur through different objects and many a



times create mayhem and destruction around Azaro. This beautiful poetic narrative flows smoothly like a river with occasional disturbances and tremors, which are catapulted by enchanted objects.

Shalimar the Clown (2005) is not just a journey from innocence to betrayal, but also a gradual creation of trust on the resilience and endurance of the human spirit. The narrative is a portrayal of a cyclical life cycle that foregrounds 'death-in-life' and 'life-in-death' - a perpetual cycle of birth, destruction and regeneration. Through this novel, Rushdie presents multiple dimensions of the postcolonial space. Ambivalence of identity in the realm of multiple truths leads to ruptured identities. Stephen Morton argues that,

Shalimar the Clown sees Rushdie attempting to find a literary form appropriate to describe the transnational social and political relations that underpin globalization.

(Morton 131)

The mundane objects and gifts of Ophulus Max for Boonyi create chaos in the paradise of Shalimar (Noman) and Boonyi. The so-called 'exotic things' bring about tumult and wreak havoc in the pristine valley of Kashmir represented by the village Pachigam.

3. Okri's 'Mask': Agent of Revelation and Enchantment

Ben Okri locates Azaro in a liminal zone where Azaro transcends the real and the imaginary, the human world and the underworld of spirits, and vice-versa. An abiku narrator-protagonist is presented as a 'hero' (an unconventional one) who survives the torture directed towards him from his fellow companions from the other (spirit) world. The novel is replete with objects and images, which are magical, spiritual and unreal. One of the most prominent magical objects, which recur in the novel, is "mask". Be it the grotesque figures of the masquerade, which brings chaos and disturbances in the lives of the ghetto people or the enchanted mask, which Azaro chances upon in a mystical forest ground - both of them present to us an alternative reality seen through the medium of masks. As is described in the novel *The Famished Road*,



What had fallen on me? I looked around. Beams of light converged on me. [...] Like a skull sliced in half and blacked with tar, was a mask that looked frightening from the side but which was contorted as an ecstatic laughter at the front. (Okri 2003: 284)

Azaro tries to find parallel between the mask and the ‘paradoxical spirits that move amongst men and trees [...]’ the enchanted mask creates an illusion/ alternative visualization of the real world when azaro wears it over its face. The mask serves as an agent of transcendence into another world. The bright sunny forest turns into night. As Okri presents,

When I looked out through the mask, I saw a different world. There were beings everywhere in the darkness and beings were each of them a sun. They radiated a brilliant copper illumination. I saw a tiger with silver wings and teeth of a bull. I saw dogs with tails of snake and bronze paws. (285)

A simple object like ‘mask’ creates a dreamy land of enigma and apparition. The existing grotesque and strangely mysterious visions of Azaro are elevated to more enigmatic visuals through the ‘mask’.

Okri frequently describes about the ‘bejeweled eyes’ of the spirits around Azaro. His frequent reference to various moonstones, precious and semi-precious stones create an aura of magicality and mystery. The references and correlation of human beings to Earthly metals and stones bridges the gap between the living and the non- living entity. The objectification of living entities in the narrative of Okri exhumes the importance of simple objects/things that are described in the novel.



4. **Rushdie's 'Curtain': Frontier between the Earthly and the Metaphysical World**

In *Shalimar, The Clown* (2005) the recurrent image of a curtain distinguishes the existence of two juxtaposed worlds - the innocent and the pristine charm of Kashmir from the violent and terror-stricken land of riots. Shalimar/Noman joins the extremists pretending to believe in their ideologies and cause. But his ultimate goal of his life remains to kill Maximilian Ophuls. His first step towards avenging Boonyi's betrayal is conceived while listening to the Iron Mullah, "By crossing the mountains they had passed through a curtain and stood now on the threshold of the world of truth, which was invisible to most men". [266] The curtain serves as an important object-metaphor, which conceals as well as separates two worlds or cultures. A symbol used as a metaphor for Trans-culturalism, it is a boundary that separates the innocent, magnificently beautiful, multicultural and hybrid world of old Kashmir from the violent, betrayed and divided world of the new terror-stricken Kashmir valley. It divides the actual truth from the illusion of misguided ideology.

The 'curtain' serves as a means of metamorphosis of Boonyi's husband from the innocent, young village artist to a ruthless killing 'apparatus'. The humanly qualities again seem to be objectified through this transformation. By crossing over to the other side, Shalimar takes his first step to avenge the betrayal of his wife. The passage through a curtain brings out a journey from the earthly to the metaphysical. The narrative utilizes such recurrent object-metaphors to create a meditative prose on the state of human existence.

5. **Pictures/photographs: An Alternative Reality**

Pictures/photographs in *The Famished Road* play a pivotal role in introducing and familiarizing Azaro with an alternative reality as viewed through the lens of a camera. The camera and an engagement with what it does, is not merely a reproduction of reality but a chanced glance into the alternate world of realities. Michael Taussig argues that it is the



“scientificity” assumed of the medium (its function primarily to record reality, to be in Okri’s world the “concretizer”) that enables the camera to be easily assimilated and become almost transparent (199). To quote from the novel,

When I looked closer at the pictures we all seemed strange [...] Mum was blurred in both eyes, the children were like squirrels, and I resembled a rabbit. We all looked like celebrating refugees. (Okri 108)

Here, the camera and its product – that is, the photograph convincingly passes into Okri’s syncretic world. The subsequent logic operating in Okri’s fiction and the vacillation between recording and reflection that initiates his child protagonists into action give the camera a privileged status. Azaro is presented with an alternative reality about himself through this medium of ‘camera’. The photographer is, furthermore, in Okri’s words: “representative of the changing consciousness of the people”. Okri, deals with the dichotomy between the two forms of the visual and what they reveal about each other rather than being interested in making commentary on the obsolescence of one, or danger of the other. Thus, he also describes the photographer as the “counterpart to Azaro’s consciousness,” the one who facilitates a “dialogue between technology and tradition”. The photographer is shown as the alter ego of Azaro.

In a similar vein, In *Shalimar, the Clown* the iron mullah Bulbul Fakh denounces and demolishes the picture that an infidel draws in her/his mind. The picture that the extremist and the non-extremists have with them is completely different and thus they reside in two different worlds. The picture distinguishes the two worlds and exemplifies how the picture of the infidel is a complete farce. To quote from the text, “We know that the universe is an illusion and that truth lies beyond the illusion, where the infidel cannot see” (Rushdie 267).

6. Letters: Weapons to Avenge Death

To avenge the death of her mother and father, Kashmira targets Shalimar not with arrows or knives but with her letters that were her “arrows of hate” (374). She slowly kills Shalimar’s ego, which is the real cause of her parents’ death. Yet his hurt ego fails to find satisfaction in their death because his efforts to obliterate their presence are negated by Kashmira, a living reminder of both Boonyi and Max. Her letters transport the characters to the enchanting world of Arabian nights. Letters undertake an attempt to magically transform the self into Scheherezade and Shahryar both of who remind us of endless tales of enchantments.

My letters are curses they will shrivel your soul. [...] My letters are poisoned arrows. [...] I am your black Sheherezade, she wrote. [...] Or I am Prince Shahryr and you are my helpless virgin bride. [...] Every night I tell the story of your death. (Rushdie 374)

Kashmira’s words transport us to an enigmatic and revengeful enchantment where the story of avenging her parents’ death gets interlinked with the events of Prince Shahryr and Sheherzade. Letters serve as objects of enchantments, which eliminate Shalimar’s ego gradually and provide Kashmira with a kind of soulful satisfaction.

7. Conclusion:

Material objects are shown to be means of prosperity on a superficial level. Western objects come with certain alien love which native women cannot but simply appreciate the objects as museum pieces. Ophuls Maximilian’s seduction of Boonyi, and their relationship – during which he pampers her with expensive and exotic gifts before abandoning her - suggests a clear allegory of America’s foreign policy in South Asia. America’s power seduces, its affections imprison, its commodities corrupt, and it abandons once it has achieved its objective. Boonyi, is thus a product of America’s love for the world, and when she speaks, she speaks in the voice of Kashmir. She tells Ophuls:



I am your handiwork made flesh. You took beauty and created hideousness ... Look at me. I am the meaning of your deeds. I am the meaning of your so-called love, your destructive, selfish, wanton love. Look at me. Your love looks just like hatred. ... I was honest and you turned me into your lie. This is not me. This is not I. This is you. (Rushdie 205)

Boonyi is incapable of internalizing these 'westernized' objects and utilizing them in her native habitat. Western objects with colonial imprints cannot buy native love nor can they acclimatize to the cultural specificities of the geo-political condition of Kashmir. In an Achebean manner Colonial objects disrupt nativity to create a situation where 'things fall apart'. The material worlds described by these writers exert a delusionary influence on their protagonists. Thus, one could ascertain a curious mind-matter correlation, in that; minds get affected almost in an insane and surrealist manner by the objects surrounding them.

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