

Women Empowerment in Nigerian Society: An Exploration of Dangerous Love

by Jana Publication & Research

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Abstract:

The sociopolitical environment of postcolonial Nigeria in regard to female emancipation is critically examined in Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love*. This essay explores how Okri portrays the struggles women encounter, focusing especially on Ifeyiwa's persona, who personifies the fortitude required to oppose structural injustice. The work skillfully demonstrates how women's growth is hampered by economic marginalization, gender discrimination, and a lack of educational possibilities. Lagos is shown as turbulent and corrupt, serving as a metaphor for the larger social limitations that women encounter. Okri highlights how education has the power to empower women and promote their agency while challenging patriarchal standards. Ifeyiwa's journey serves as an example of how women may overcome systemic barriers to regain their identity and establish their independence. By combining themes of political unrest, gender injustice, and corruption, *Dangerous Love* challenges the social restrictions placed on women while promoting their freedom. According to this study, Okri's book not only exposes women's oppression but also predicts how education and self-awareness will empower them. In the end, the study examines how *Dangerous Love* adds to the conversation on gender justice from a feminist perspective, offering an optimistic narrative that recognizes the essential role of women in creating a more equal society.

Key Words: *Dangerous Love*, women, Okri, Ifeyiwa, gender.

Introduction:

Women empowerment is the capacity of a woman to challenge traditional values that restrict her potential, access resources, and make strategic life choices. It entails a transition from a state of powerlessness to one in which women have autonomy and control over their lives, both in the domestic sphere and in the broader community. This may entail political engagement, economic autonomy, and access to healthcare and education. Irshad Ahmad Reshi and Dr T. Sudha writes in their research paper about

women empowerment. "Giving women the tools and chances they need to exercise their rights, take part in decision-making, and take charge of their own life is known as women's empowerment". Sudha and Reshi 1353

Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* is a multifaceted narrative that delves into the themes of love, art, and societal disillusionment through the perspective of its protagonist, Omovo, in postcolonial Nigeria. Although the novel primarily concentrates on Omovo's artistic and romantic struggles, it also subtly explores the theme of female empowerment, or rather, the absence of it, within the restrictive social context. This paper will analyse the ways in which patriarchal structures and societal expectations influence the portrayal of women in *Dangerous Love*, specifically in terms of their roles, agency, and opportunities. Furthermore, it will investigate whether the novel implicitly or explicitly suggests any potential for female empowerment or resistance within its narrative framework. The actuality of Africa is depicted in the works of Ben Okri. His trilogy is predominantly political, as Okri observed the political discontent that occurred during the civil war of African Nigeria. The novels of Ben Okri are characterised by the incorporation of mythological elements and the realistic events of Nigeria. His concept establishes an environment in which his younger generation can contemplate and develop their identities within their nation.

With a population of 170 million, Nigeria is home to almost 200 ethnic groups. Three major ethnic groups have a major influence on the nation's policies. Nigeria was divided into the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the east, and the Yoruba in the west by Richards' 1946 constitution. Nigeria gained independence from foreign rule in 1960, and in 1963 it became a federal republic. The country was ruled by the military and given a second republic in 1979 and 1980. It was the time of military uprisings and the outlawing of the slave trade. However, five youthful army majors from the south, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwa, once again took control of the country. The Igbos were then executed in large numbers as a result of a counter-coup in Northern Nigeria. As a result, the Igbo fled to the east and founded Biafra, their own republic. The 30-month-long Nigeria-Biafra conflict lasted from July 1967 to January 1970. Many critical studies about the Biafran War followed the massive fictional and non-fictional narratives that surfaced in 1970.

Many authors frequently used the Biafran War as a supplementary setting in their writings. The authentic events of the Biafran War are skilfully incorporated into the writers' inventive use of characters, plots, setting, and narrative. Renowned Nigerian authors like Adichie, Ademoyega, and Emecheta drew heavily on the Biafran War as inspiration for their writings. Biafra has given many authors a wealth of material to work with when crafting their stories. Okri depicts the struggles people face in the wake of neo-colonialism in his novels and short stories. At close range, he witnessed the dread, the ridiculousness of civil war, the emancipation of women, the psychodrama of the brutal fight, and military atrocities. As a result, he uses his characters' descriptions to illustrate the violence. He also looks at the ramifications of his own conflict theory. According to Maurice O'Connor,

Okri's work's original idea, which Nabakov calls the "throb," is the innocent person's confrontation with the brutality of the Civil War. His novels are motivated by the need to relive those experiences in order to understand the terrible absurdity of what might be described as fratricidal conflict in the national narrative. (52)

¹ Ben Okri shows in *Dangerous Love* how the Biafran War caused people to lose their identities, cultural history, and cultural legacy as well as to be corrupted and destroyed collectively. Lagos is portrayed by Okri in *Dangerous Love* as a dirty, overpopulated, and polluted reality. He depicts the widespread chaos, political upheaval, and anarchy that characterise African society. He specifically confronts the worry and corruption that have grown accepted as normal for women in society. He provides examples of how corruption in African nations has caused people to become estranged from their native country. Okri also draws attention to Nigeria's indigenous problems, such as deceit, unemployment, tribal hostility, dishonesty, corruption, women's identity, and customs.

Ben Okri deftly weaves together and portrays the authentic African reality that envelops Omovo and Ifeyiwa's love tale in *Dangerous Love*. Omovo is portrayed in the book as a metaphorical character who represents the difficulties faced by artists. Through his painting, he articulates his thoughts. His art is a reflection of the social realities. The societal ills are depicted in his paintings. He advocates for freedom and nonviolence. He

transforms society from darkness to illumination through the medium of painting. He employs art as a means of addressing societal issues. The color he employed in his painting was a reflection of the people's fears, recollections, visions, and intuitions. His paintings compel individuals to contemplate the tribulations of conflict. He has a distinct understanding of the purpose of his art as an artist.

He resolved to establish a straightforward vision in his paintings, beginning with what he was familiar with and the experiences that had caused him the most pain, as well as the suffering of the individuals with whom he identified. He desired for Okri's works to evoke the sentiments and unspeakable positions that he experienced, which in turn fed into streams and streams that fed into vast oceans. (268)

The writer demonstrates Omovo's affection for art in a judicious manner. Omovo aspires to create art that serves as a reflection of reality, much like a creator. Okri posits that art is capable of transforming both personal salvation and social correction. It possesses an immense capacity to alleviate the post-colonial issues of society.

Ken Saro-Wiwe, advocated against the administration, appears to have had an impact on Omovo's character. Omovo is depicted as a budding artist who declines the opportunity to sell his paintings to Europeans. By refusing his painting, Omovo establishes himself as a non-conformist and shows that he is an authentic African artist who defies the imperial authority. The imperial power confiscated his picture "Related Losses" from his home because he planned to show it to Ifeyiwa. This illustrates the fake nature of the civilisation. By illustrating the filth of Omovo's surroundings, Okri highlights the disastrous status of Africa in the 1970s. Omovo is surrounded by violence, deception, hunger, and pollution in the city of Lagos. According to Okri, the legitimacy of Africa's independence is tainted. The book is also filled with examples that show how terribly poor the people's lives are.

A trader named Takpo set out to find a village so that he might start somewhere new. His dream was to marry a young woman who would help him when he grew old. He learnt about Ifeyiwa, a beautiful young woman who had gone to secondary school. He went up to Ifeyiwa's family's elders. "The dowry had been paid and nearly all other arrangements had been

finalised before Ifeyiwa was aware of the situation." "She was compelled into marriage without any choice" (104).

After being married, Takpo and Ifeyiwa moved to Lagos. "The initial months after her arrival were marked by a feeling of loneliness and the recognition that she had left behind a lot of belongings. The procedure had been started by her. After that, she gradually realised that her partner was repulsive, and each step after that was a step forward into a landscape of losses (104). Ifeyiwa watched her husband go about his everyday business.

His features included a big, elastic mouth, brownish teeth, stern eyes, and a small skull. He was stooped, tall, and his arms were outstretched. His behaviour appalled her. He chewed on his chewing stick all morning, spitting the twisted fibres all over the place. He didn't have style. He had a lot of hair. She had the hardest time adjusting to the fact that he treated her like a slave. An appetite loss struck her instantly. But she would not be allowed to get up and leave the room for fear of upsetting him. (104–105)

Ifeyiwa sobbed as she thought about what lay ahead. She also noted that Takpo was a very possessive man. She endured torture so that she may have sex with him. She refuses to accept him, though. He lavished her with presents and financial support to make her feel good. Because he was angry, he started to beat and discipline her to a certain degree. Takpo's envy stemmed from her seeing Ifeyiwa conversing with her classmates at school. So he accompanied her home and again prohibited her from attending the evening classes. For Ifeyiwa, Okri is a perfect example of the importance of education. She didn't like living with Takpo, but she decided to take control of her life. Male chauvinism serves as an example of the struggles women face in achieving their freedom. The woman, who longs for the freedom to choose for herself but is suppressed by cultural pressure, is thus subjugated by the male. Men always repress women's identities. Ifeyiwa is unable to continue her study since Takpo controls her during her nighttime classes. A man's actions are always justified. Okri criticises the shortcomings of society while painstakingly illustrating his female figures. He argues for women's liberation and argues that they face injustice. He makes an effort to emphasise that women cannot attain social equality unless men assist them.

Ben Okri's topics include violence, criminality, hatred, social reality, social injustice, and love. Okri studies emancipation of women, unemployment of the younger generation, incorrect political leadership, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Along with these issues, there is discussion of the characters' psychological states, societal expectations and demands, teenage awareness, and individual freedom. He places a strong emphasis on how a person's social surroundings affect their mental health.

Okri discusses the global prevalence of discrimination against women and the emancipation of women. The social, educational, and cultural backgrounds of women are also suppressed, as Okri emphasizes. They are not always regarded equally in the eyes of the law. The character of gender is a challenge that nearly all countries are currently facing. Women are more engaged in the economic sector than males. However, they were subjected to discrimination as a result of gender equality. The African women's dearth of equal education is a significant repercussion. This inequality is also absent in the realm of employment. According to Geraldine J. Fraser-Moleketi, a Special Envoy on Gender:

a variety of factors contribute to the absence of fundamental education for girls. The absence of fundamental sanitation facilities in educational institutions is a significant concern. The absence of sanitation has resulted in one in ten school-age African females either skipping school during menstruation or dropping out altogether, according to research conducted by UNICEF. Another contributing factor is the pressure to marry at a young age. . (18)

Okri emphasizes that these are the reasons for the absence of female education. Ifeyiwa's character is significantly affected by all of the issues. Child marriage resulted in the cessation of her education. Violence emerged as a critical approach to the advancement of women. They experience violence from strangers, intimate partners, neighbors, and acquaintances. The use of rape as a weapon of war against women is widespread. The girl baby's depression is a result of both domestic and sexual abuse. Without any support, they are pushed into a little circle. Okri firmly believes that in order to improve women's equality, the legal system must be applied with integrity.

Okri illustrates how women serve as the cornerstone of society. For a number of reasons, they are not given the same privileges, though. They have to be involved in every important facets of society. According to Moleketi, women are more noticeable in public life but aren't always acknowledged outside of it. African women have consistently assumed a significant leadership role in their families, communities, and civil society, despite the fact that their contributions are frequently overlooked. Currently, they are also gaining more recognition as senior civil servants and legislators.

Therefore, it is imperative that women be granted equal privileges throughout the entire industry. Okri endeavors to ensure that all genders are educated equitably in order to inherit the future of Africa. In the majority of his works, Okri emphasizes the critical importance of education in all developing countries, including Africa. Consequently, the empowerment of women is essential for the advancement and expansion of Africa.

The narrative of Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* is captivating, as it intertwines the personal struggles of women with the broader socio-political and moral decay of Nigerian society. The novel emphasizes the methods by which women establish spaces of resistance and resilience in the face of systemic oppression by examining Omovo's journey and his interactions with female characters. The paradox of empowerment in an environment dominated by corruption, brutality, and cultural rigidity is underscored by Okri's depiction of gender dynamics within a deteriorating social framework. The resilience of women in the presence of adversity is one of the novel's most significant revelations. The female characters in *Dangerous Love*—whether they are mothers, partners, or marginalized voices—exemplify a quiet yet potent defiance of societal expectations. Although the novel does not explicitly advocate for feminism, it subtly critiques the structures that restrict women's agency, demonstrating that empowerment frequently involves personal defiance, solidarity, and the assertion of one's identity in a world that aims to eradicate it. This nuanced portrayal of women challenges the stereotypical passivity that is frequently associated with female characters in patriarchal narratives.

Conclusion: The novel's portrayal of the deteriorating Nigerian society functions as both a backdrop and a catalyst for the challenges faced by women. The broader historical realities of postcolonial Nigeria, where women's roles have been influenced by both

tradition and modern socio-political disruptions, are reflected in the corruption, violence, and political instability that define the novel's setting. Okri depicts a world in which the struggle for survival is perpetual, and the conflicts of women for empowerment are exacerbated by this chaos. They are not only fighting against individual oppressors, but also against a system that perpetuates gendered injustices. In spite of these obstacles, *Dangerous Love* provides glimmerings of optimism. Okri posits that empowerment is feasible, even in a society that is corrupt and in decline. Women challenge oppressive norms and assert their presence in spaces that are intended to exclude them through their acts of resistance, whether subtle or overt. The novel therefore suggests that genuine societal advancement can only be achieved when both men and women are liberated from the restrictions of a rigorous and unjust system. *Dangerous Love* offers a multifaceted examination of the empowerment of women in a society that is in the process of disintegrating. Okri's narrative demonstrates that the resilience of women continues to be a potent force of change, despite the fact that corruption and brutality are actively working to suppress and oppress. In doing so, the novel not only critiques the shortcomings of a patriarchal society but also foresees a future in which the boundaries of empowerment can be redefined by the strength and agency of women.

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