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Modern Slavery and its Manifestations: a Sociocritical Analysis of Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love*.⁵

ANDE Kouakou Antony,
Senior-Assistant, English Department
University Péléforo Gon Coulibaly of Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire)
Email: andekouakou@upgc.edu.ci

Abstract

L'objectif de cet article est de montrer les différentes formes de l'esclavage dans nos sociétés modernes. En effet, contrairement à ce que peuvent penser plusieurs personnes, l'esclavage n'a pas véritablement pris fin dans nos sociétés, elle a évolué et s'est même modernisé. *Dangerous Love* de Ben Okri fait l'écho de quelques-unes de ces nouvelles formes d'esclavage. Quand on lit ce roman l'on y voit, en réalité, des scènes choquantes qui s'inscrivent dans le processus de déshumanisation des personnages. Cette pratique moderne de l'esclavage qui, dans l'œuvre, se manifeste de plusieurs manières se constate non seulement dans le foyer mais aussi et surtout dans la vie des ouvriers.

Key-words: Esclavage moderne, femme, humiliation, ouvrier, salaire.

Résumé

The aim of this article is to show how slavery exists in our modern societies. Indeed, contrary to what many people may assume, slavery has not really ended in our societies, it has evolved and even modernised. *Dangerous Love* by Ben Okri gives an account of some of these new forms of slavery. When reading this novel, one can see, in fact, shocking scenes that are part of the process of dehumanisation of the characters. This modern practice of slavery, which is manifested in the work in several ways, can be grasped not only in the family setting but also and above all in the life of the workers.

Mots-clés: Modern slavery, humiliation, wage, woman, worker.

⁵ Ben Okri, *Dangerous Love*, UK, Phoenix House, 1996.

Introduction

Slavery is a very complex word; its “definitions have caused controversy for two reasons: first, there are differences of opinion about which practices should be categorized as slavery and thus designated for elimination; second, definitions have often been accompanied by obligations on States to carry out particular remedial measures. (Michael Dottridge, *et al*, 2002, p4). To emphasize this difficulty, Sebastian uses the expression “a catch-all and nebulous umbrella term” to refer to it (Sébastien Rioux, *et al*, 2019, p.2) because it encompasses a big number of practices. Considered as the status or condition of an individual over whom one or more powers attached to the right of membership are exercised (Jean Allain, 2008: 1), slavery is a "crime against humanity" (Nicole Siller, 2016, p.405). It caused much damage throughout the world and especially in Africa. It is estimated that about 12 millions Africans were transported to the New World (Graziella Bertocchi, 2015, p.2). Many abolitionists struggled and some are still fighting to put an end to this criminal act. In fact, despite appearances, slavery has never stopped (Ibrahima Thioub, 2012: 1). It has acquired new forms and is practiced differently today. In Africa, this practice was officially abolished in 1848 but it continued long after under diverse forms (Ibrahima Thioub, 2012: 4). Today, contemporary slavery has so flourished that even at home it is practiced. Ben Okri's novel, *Dangerous Love*, highlights this new form of slavery. In the book, the reader digs out shocking facts which give an idea to the reader of what slavery was all about. The descriptions of some characters as well as the way some of them are treated make it difficult to differentiate them from animals and objects. The scenes are so violent that they often leave the reader speechless. Such an inhumanity cannot leave anybody insensitive whence the necessity to wonder: How does modern slavery manifest itself in the author's work? How is it described? What does Ben Okri want to demonstrate through this novel? To answer these questions, we will resort to the sociocriticism of Pierre Zima as a theoretical tool for the analysis of this text. This article comprises three parts: the first part deals with familial setting as a nest of neo-slavery, the second part focuses on the suffering of workers and the third one articulates about Ben Okri's ideology.

1- Family setting as a nest of neo-slavery

In *Dangerous Love*, the process of enslavement begins early at home, between the man and his wife. This is seen through the treatment Takpo inflicts on his wife as an expression of love. The description of marriage or the daily life of couples in this novel is so queer that when reading, one wonders which kind of love is depicted in the text. In fact, instead of love, there is a hierarchy with Takpo as a chief and his wife Ifeyiwa as a servant. The relationship between Takpo and his wife as described in the following line demonstrates this fact: “When she heard his voice her legs weakened with fear” (p.101). Through this quote, one sees Ifeyiwa's place in the family setting. She bears the role of the servant and her husband that of “the tyrant and the oppressor” (Katherine Frank: 479). Takpo's wife's servitude echoes neo-slavery. The reason for this classification is that Takpo needs Ifeyiwa only just, for his own profit. He does not consider her as his wife. Many reasons can justify this behaviour. First of all, he proceeded through an arranged marriage to get Ifeyiwa as his wife. The narrator says: "The dowry was paid and almost all other arrangements had been finalized before Ifeyiwa knew what was happening. Without any choice

in the matter the marriage was forced on her” (p.103). Simply put, forced marriage, which is one of the manifestations of modern slavery (Sébastien Rioux, *et al*, 2019:2) was applied on her. Paying the dowry was for Takpo like buying the person of Ifeyiwa. Henceforth, in Takpo’s mind, the girl having been bought, belongs totally to him. On this basis, he finds it fit to do whatever he wants hence the inhuman treatments inflicted on her.

Like many other African girls living under the pressure of tradition, Ifeyiwa did not “choose her master” (Katherine Frank, 1982: 482). She was not given that privilege. Exactly the way “European-oriented Modernity [was] forced on African tradition through slaving commercial activities and later direct colonial” (Fouad Mami, 2011, p.124) marriage was also forced on her. By the time she realised what was going on, all her fate was sealed. Her husband does not make things easier for her too. As a deep rooted girl in her tradition, Ifeyiwa was told, after the dowry, to accept anything. Her mother told her that everything would be alright (p.104). Her mother, in so doing, was just inculcating the tradition in her daughter’s mind, which permits to say that tradition paved the way for women’s submission, as Katherine Frank reveals in the following words:

While Emecheta's portrayal of traditional society is not entirely untinged by nostalgia for a simpler and in some ways purer rural existence, she is not blind to the injustices and suffering inflicted upon women by traditional customs and mores. Such customs and mores, in fact, are actually institutionalized forms of male oppression.” (Katherine Frank: 483).

Like many other African girls, she did not know that her wedding was being organised without her consent. As matter of fact, she was only informed when everything was ready; she was therefore confronted with the facts. Forced marriage canonizes another form of neo-slavery in the narrative, and in Amir Paz-Fuchs’ words, this is the way one can recognise it: "the core of the modern slavery conviction was based on the fact that this was a forced marriage, characterised by 'physical and mental torture', including severe beatings, abuse and threats.” (Amir Paz-Fuchs, 2016, p.760). For this critic, the characteristics of this marriage are physical and psychological torture including beatings, insults and threats. To this category, Nicole Siller includes “early marriage” (Nicole Siller, 2016, p.410).

Even if “tradition is not something waiting out there, always over one's shoulder [and even though] it is rather plucked, created, and shaped to present needs and aspirations in a given historical situation,” (Gusfield, J. R., 1967, p.358) it plays a great role in women’s submission and “enslavement through its rules and taboos” (Katherine Frank, 1982, p.483). In other words, traditional society and some precolonial African values are to be blame for women suffering and oppression certainly because they condoned this oppression. It can be assumed that Takpo is not totally responsible for his behaviour. He cannot be blamed completely for what he did to his wife Ifeyiwa. He was taught that way of acting and behaving because “as young men, [they] were getting socialised in masculine roles that assigned them dominance and control with due rights to certain services from girls.” (Sara Jerop Ruto, 2009, p.187). Through this quote, we understand that Takpo was taught to be a master and one who must be respected by the female gender and this is what he expects from girls. It is not his fault if he views girls in general and Ifeyiwa in particular “as commodities to serve an end. Because a girl is expected to leave her natal home and get married, it is not justified to invest in her” (Sara Jerop Ruto, 2009, p.187).

The treatment Takpo inflicts on his wife Ifeyiwa seems to be justified by the education he was given as a boy. When, for example, he makes her work for long hours (p.22), he beats her whenever and wherever he wants (p.22; 105). In addition, when he terrifies her (p.101) and then controls her movements⁶ he is doing what he saw “the expert members” (Bambi Schieffelin, 2007:19) do. All these elements that constitute the core of modern slavery seem not to be enough for Takpo who finds a pleasure in raping her. As matter of fact, Ifeyiwa is so scarred of her husband that when she senses his presence, she rushes to hide, as shown in this quote:

When she heard his rasping voice her legs weakened with fear. Her heart beat faster. Quickening her steps, she went past the apartment without answering his queries. She went through the scurvy backyard and into the stinking bathroom. She dropped the bucket on one of those stones people stood on while having a bath. Then she shut the door. The bathroom, for that moment, was her only refuge. (p.101).

Takpo is a real threat to Ifeyiwa, who prefers the stench of the toilet to his presence. The reference points out that when she hears her husband's voice, her feet shakes and her heart beats quickly out of fear. This excessive fear is due to Takpo's violent actions on her. To better stress his dominance upon Ifeyiwa, he chooses from his insults repertoire, as Cauvin Jean puts it to humiliate her in front of his friends: "Pick up the tray and go. Go! Can't you see that we were talking? You dese foolish girls of nowadays, hah! You see two men talking and you ask me nonsense question about water. Get out before I begin to beat you!" (p.122). One might even get the idea that Ifeyiwa is held into servitude; unfortunately, that is not the case: she is Takpo's wife who should have her rights. Takpo does not see Ifeyiwa as his help, as a person with whom he shares his life. Ifeyiwa cannot be said to be Takpo's help. For him, she is a sexual toy. As an African woman, she shares the same destiny as her sisters whose “real job [...] was to lie on their back and open their legs to man's passage to the kingdom of pleasure.” (Ngugi, 1977: 304). Her value is simply reduced to pleasure, sex. Simply put, she is a “sexual slave” (Katherine Frank, 1982, p.488) and this is justified by the rape she is victim of by her own husband (p.106).

The words used against her help understand that for Takpo, Ifeyiwa is stupid. The words “foolish”, “senseless” reinforce this position. It is reasonable to argue that Ifeyiwa and all women in the same situation live as “virtual prisoners within the confines of the homes they clean” (Joy Zarempka, 2000:12). It is therefore no coincidence that the narrator refers to her as slave (p. 105). This oppression is tantamount to slavery. It should also be remembered that as a married woman who lives in her own house the word slavery is not suitable. However, if this is the case, it means that there is a problem. Ifeyiwa, through this term of comparison, suffers as a wife. Her condition is worse than that of a slave because the house, which was supposed to be a haven of peace for her, becomes a place of misery. The house symbolizes thus, prison cell for her. The inappropriate treatments of her husband are evidences of her plight. Indeed, he overuses her and does not give time for a rest. Moreover, she is beaten severely when things are not done accordingly. (p.22). This behaviour is similar to slaves' who, for a reason or another, were beaten and mistreated as

⁶ It should be emphasised that controlling the actions of an individual, especially one working under the authority of another, is a form of bondage. *Prosecutor v Dragoljub Kunarac, Radomir Kovac and Zoran Vukovic* (Trial Judgment) IT-96-23-T and IT-96-23/1-T, ICTY 22 February 2001 at [117] (italics added), quoted by Amir Paz Fuchs, op. cit., p.765.

explained by Lord Cranworth: “Beatings could be prompted by what might appear to any unbiased observer as an utterly trivial error, or indeed for no error at all.” (Lord Cranworth, 1912: 52). In other words, just like slaves, Ifeyiwa is beaten when her husband feels the desire to do so and certainly to quench the thirst of beating her. She has, thus, become one of these "domestic slaves" (Amir Paz-Fuchs: 776) suffering in their own homes. At the end of this first part, we notice that the enslavement of the housewife is a problem that needs much attention. The next point will be devoted to the treatments inflicted on workers

2-workers or Slaves

Modern slavery also manifests itself at work through the treatment inflicted on workers. In the novel, workers are so ill-treated and overexploited that only sadness can be read on their faces (p.228). Ann Jordan believes that “forced labor often occurs when people are told they will have one set of working conditions and then are forced to work under completely different conditions for little or no pay.” (Ann Jordan, 2011: 4). Simply put, workers are experiencing forced labour in this company. Such an atmosphere in which workers evolve can instil violence in them, as evidenced in this quote: “The exhaustion, the heat, the frustrations and attritions of work made people that bit more ferocious” (p. 259). Employees work in extreme conditions and this reality has a negative impact on their behaviour. In the above quote, the narrator uses the adjective “ferocious” to qualify them. This adjective, which is mostly used to describe animals, permits to understand that employees are turned into animals in the factory. And the aggressiveness is the result of their pain and as the narrator rightfully puts it, concerning this character: “harassed, maddened, and on the perpetual brink of losing his job, Tuwo couldn’t take it anymore. One morning in the midst of a new quarrel, Tuwo seized a machete and chased her [his wife] round the room. He lashed at her and missed both times. Murder raged in his blood.” (p.119). The difficulties and the ongoing frustrations at work push some workers to resort to violence to solve their problems. For Amir Paz-Fuchs, “Extreme conditions which shatter an individual’s dignity may be evidence that the individual has not taken up such work of her own free will.” (Amir Paz-Fuchs: 775). Indeed, workers were not given the opportunity to decide freely: during their job interview, “their co-operation to bribing” was a criterion for their recruitment. (p.253). In other words, they had no choice: whether they accepted to do what was expected from them or they failed to be hired.

The salary is another problem for workers: it is used as a means of pressure and this is what Achille Mbembe says “postcolonial African regimes had attempted to integrate and discipline the bulk of the urban population through the mechanism of the salary – a gift, when examined closely, allocated for the purposes of institutionalizing a form of domination having its own rationality.” (Achille Mbembe, 2001: 54). Because of the misery in which they live, workers have no choice but to accept the miserable conditions in which they work. Their life is in danger and they know the risk they run but they are powerless vis-à-vis this situation. The misery in the country resulting from the unemployment pushes them to remain stuck to the least they find. The first difficulty they face with is to accept the low pay. Low salary, indeed is considered a means of implementation of modern slavery because, poor people or “the dominated” (Achille Mbembe, 2001: 6) work hard sometimes at the cost of their lives to enrich their employer while they starve

sometimes to death. Ngugi wa Thiong'o rightfully said that "a handful of people still profits from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of the many being the joy of the few" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1987:12).

Modern slavery is also applied when workers are threatened not to be paid (p.119). The employees in this textual universe are so oppressed, so mistreated by their employers that they are miserable. Sadness and unhappiness can be read on their faces because of hardship. The narrator's description of their daily lives allows the reader to assess their suffering:

But he stopped at his compound front and, breathing in deeply the smell of earth and dew, stared at the crowds of ghetto-dwellers hurrying to their different jobs. The morning was all mist and in the mist people hurried, like shades in an earthly purgatory, to the bus-stop. With heads bent forward, as if they were carrying invisible burdens, they all trudged in the same direction. (P.228).

The description of these individuals is pathetic: they are like slaves working for the benefit of their employers. They suffer internally, and the "bent head" demonstrates their plight. The invisible burden they carry is real: their mind is full of worries that seem impossible to be solved. Joe, a character in the novel, could not be clearer when he describes his salary as "salary so wretched" (p.252). This is the true reason of their sufferings: they work hard for a miserable wage and are not allowed to complain for fear of being fired by the employer. So, in silence, they brood over their anger and sad fate. The frustration they feel which cannot be voiced against their bosses is automatically directed against innocent people (p.119). The great stress as well as the fear of dismissal is a serious problem for the workers.

Michael Dottridge recognises that "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily" (Michael Dottridge: 12) is slavery. The use of violence by employers no matter its form is not for granted; there is a reason for that. Brett Shaddle recognises that "Violence can force someone immediately to halt certain actions; the threat of it can regulate conduct; its performative aspects reinforce relations of dominance. Thus violence and pain could be imposed for necessary ends" (Brett Shaddle, 2012: 59). The employers resort to threats and all sort of violence to submit poor workers to their will and thus urge them to produce more. They want them to remain under their control.

Psychological violence, which is another form of violence, is also used against workers. This generally happens when the victim refuses to compromise himself. The case of Omovo is instructive. He was unwillingly transferred by his superior after refusing to comply with the demand of his boss. Transferring a person without his consent is the manifestation of modern slavery (Amir Paz-Fuchs: 768). On this basis, an employer has no right to transfer an employee without his consent. Unfortunately, when Omovo refused, he was fired the same day. As the boss of the company, the employer deliberately decides for his workers. In his mind, he thinks it possible to treat them as he sees fit, just to show them that, "here, the master is me" (Frantz Fanon, 1968: 19). This further reference to the words of Omovo's head of department makes it clear that the workers are victim of verbal violence at work: "Shut up! Listen, young man, you are the most frivolous, unserious, uncommitted, conscientious, and insubordinate member of this department" Look at the rest of them. And the manager indicated the office at large. (p.244). This statement by

the head of department indicates that the employees are forced to comply with his own demands. The orders he gives to Omovo, show that he has no consideration for his workers. The qualifiers used by the subject of the speech are evidence that he wants the one he is addressing, namely Omovo, to be submissive like the others.

It should be noted that unlike Omovo, the others have accepted this new form of slavery in which individuals are insulted and humiliated every day (Zarempka: 12). The remark from the manager shows that Omovo is the only one in the company who is still resisting and challenging his authority. Indeed, for the manager, Omova is not supposed to oppose his orders or even give his point of view. In other words, he had to endure the demands of his employer without flinching.

3-Dangerous Love and the call to awareness vis-à-vis modern slavery

In this novel, Ben Okri wants to convey a message: he wants people to do their best in order to slow down and even stop modern slavery that has so spread in the world. The author knows that things will not be easy. He is aware that if nothing is done, things will get worse. For this reason, he has decided to act and his actions consist in describing facts crudely without masking or hiding anything. In so doing, he joins Pierre N'da for whom the ultimate way to make people conscious is to use the following method: "by exposing them before our eyes, by displaying them in front of us, it is to better show them, to show the naked realities, the way they are, to make people aware of them and stigmatise them." (Our translation) (Pierre N'da, 2011, p.2).

For Djiman Kasimi, this crude exposition is nothing but "the aesthetics of shock" which he defines as "a syntagm that translates the highlighting of an iconoclastic writing commensurate with the crisis to which the totality is subject" (our translation) (Djiman, 2012:3). Indeed, the description of individuals and spaces in this society is atypical. What the narrator says about the subjects allows understanding that one is dealing with sub-humans or beings who share the same natures as animals and things. The elements he uses are either in the realm of animalisation or objectification. The following passage is an illustration: 'I swept away the cobwebs, cleaned the corners, broke down the insects' nests on our ceiling, and drove out all the wall geckoes and lizards' (p.22). The dwelling place of these subjects is shared by all kinds of animals and insects. Spiders of all kinds as well as lizards have found shelter in the house of Takpo and his wife. Their home is therefore like a nest where all sorts of animals find a refuge. Selom Gbanou asserted that the process of animalisation makes it possible to 'animalise the human and humanise the animal'. (Selon Gbanou, 2013: 51). In other words, they have lost their identity to acquire that of the animal.

Let us remind that "humiliation, ownership, exploitation and denial of free choice are concepts of general application that shed light on modern practices through their historical antecedents." (Amir Paz-Fuchs : 774). Bluntly speaking, insults are omnipresent in this new form of slavery and as Mike Kaye puts it "abuses and exploitation were endemic in the system." (Mike Kaye, 2005:19). As a result, Ben Okri's novel is awash with them. Thus, while some insults are used to humiliate the recipient, others are used to belittle, to show the vile character of the person to whom they are addressed. Among these, one can quote the following expression: "you are a nothing." (p.235). This declaration is a judgment that the subject of the speech makes against the

other person. Through these words, the speaker shows the insignificance, the nullity of the other. Here, it says that the subject is worthless. In other words, this individual has no value. To put it trivially, we can say that he is nothing and that his presence, in a word, is equal to his absence. The purpose of this address is to establish the difference between the speaking subject and the recipient. Having lost their value, human beings are considered less than humans; hence the will to remind them their place in the society. Another reference comes to support the first one and it goes thus: "But you are unimportant. They can spit you out just like that." And also "'You're nobody. They can just spit you out.'" (p.235). People who have lost all their value are subjected to all kinds of demeaning words. Insults like: "useless boy like you..." "Foolish girl" (p.117), "Use your eyes, you idiot!" (p.217) give an idea of what the human being represents in today's society. As much as slaves were humiliated and treated as subhuman, these individuals in this society are demeaned by insults. Some subjects are even objectified to emphasise their uselessness as seen in the following statement: 'Madam, you look like a lorry!' (p.12). This is the intention of the writer: he wants to share people's suffering and help fight this unjust system that has spread in the world. The author resorts to all these harsh and humiliating words to shock the reader and then to draw his attention on how deep the problem is. The different insults and demeaning expressions aim at arousing one's anger and psychologically hurting not only the characters but also the reader in order to urge him (the reader) to act.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that modern slavery is not a new practice: it existed long ago in our societies and still exists today. Today, it has taken different forms and affects many social classes including housewives who undergo all kind of injustice. Indeed, from physical to psychological violence, women rank among the most influenced people by this system. Living in a patriarchal society, she only undergoes men's mood whose actions are sometimes backed and also reinforced by tradition. In fact, some elements in tradition are in favour of men's supremacy upon women. Concerning workers, they also go through this modern slavery which turns them into animals and homeless people. Due to their poor living conditions, they have no choice; and thus feel compelled to accept these ill-treatments. Through this novel, the intention of the author is obvious: to expose the social facts the way they are in order to urge the world to act in favour of these people who are still suffering in their own homes and at work. These treatments sometimes have serious effects on the victims leaving a trauma in their mind. Ben Okri wants to establish an egalitarian and equal society where men and women do not develop any complex. He wants workers to be respected by their employers and the same for employees.

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