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Quest for Recolonization: Nigerian Nationalism and Confiscation of Democracy in Ben Okri's the Freedom Artist

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Abstract

This study discusses the literary illustrations of the Nigerian nationalist government as being a tyrannical regime in Ben Okri's *the Freedom Artist* (2019). Being a Nigerian and widely known literary writer, Okri fictionalizes tyranny, reflecting real political life in Africa, as a ruler exercising oppressive power, resembling a tyrant in real life. This study focuses on showing the parallels between the tyrannical strategies manipulated by the Nigerian nationalist government in postcolonial Nigeria to establish a cohesive nation and the methods employed by white colonial powers during the colonization of African territories – with a special focus on Nigeria. Despite their different historical contexts, both colonial and postcolonial regimes demonstrate similar oppressive tactics in terms of governance and control. Therefore, it explores the way *The Freedom Artist* demonstrates the Nigerian nationalist government and its doctrines as outcomes and modified iterations of neo-colonialism, carrying forward the legacies of colonial rule. This perspective posits that postcolonial Nigeria and its quest for independence are heavily affected by colonialism, showing that postcolonial Nigeria is a constructed formula deeply fed by colonial paradigms following the period of so-called decolonization in non-western spaces and especially “the third world”. Given the Nigerian context in Okri's *The Freedom Artist*, this type of postcoloniality is mirrored in the framework of recolonization, referencing that recolonization is a novel phenomenon, desired by the members of the nation, in postcolonial Nigeria.

Keywords: Recolonization, Confiscation, Totalitarianism, Neo-colonialism, Nationalism

ویستی دوباره کۆلۆنیالیزه کردنه وه: ناسیۆنالیزمی نایجیریا و زهوتکرنی دیموکراسی له رۆمانی

(فریدهم ئارتیست) ی بێن ئۆکری

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پوخته

ئهم توێژینهوهیه ههڵدهستت به لیکۆلینهوهی وێنا ئهدهبییهکانی ناسیۆنالیزمی نایجیریا وهک رژییمیکی ستهمکار له له رۆمانی فریدهم ئارتیست (۲۰۱۹) ی بێن ئۆکری. وهک نوسهرێکی ناسراوی نایجیریا، ئۆکری له پێگه ی وێنای ئهدهبی چه مکی ستهمکاری دهخاته بهرچاو ههروهک له ژبانی سیاسی رهنگی داوهتهوه به شیوهیهک که ئهو راستیه بیردهخاتهوه که ستهمکار له زادهی ژبانی ئهفریقادا دهسهلاتداریکه که پیاوهی هێز دهکات به شیوهیهکی سهروکتەر و توندرو. ئهم توێژینهوهیه تیشک دهخاته سهر دهرخستنی ئهو هاوشیوه ستراتیجیه ستهمکاریانهی که له لایهن حکومهتی نایجیریای ناسیۆنالیستیهوه به کاردههێنرێن له نایجیریا دوا داگیرکاری بۆ دامهزراندنی نهتهوه و ولاتیکی یهکگرتو و ئهو رێگا ستهمکاریانهی که له لایهن داگیرکهره سێ پێستهکانهوه به کاردههێنران له ماوهی داگیرکاری ولاتانی ئهفریقا - به تایبته جهختکردنهوه له سهر نایجیریا. سهرهپای جیاوازییه میژویهکان، ئهم توێژینهوهیه باس لهوه دهکات کهوا ههردو رژییمی داگیرکاری و دوا داگیرکاری تهکنیک و ستراتیجی سهروکتهری هاوشیوه له روی حوکمرانی و کۆنترۆلهوه به کاردێن. بۆیه، توێژینهوهکه له پێگه ی فریدهم ئارتیستهوه حکومهتی ناسیۆنالیستی نایجیریا و بیروباوهره ناسیۆنالیستهکانی وهک بهرهممی دوباره بونهوهی داگیرکاری و وهک میراتگری حوکمی کۆلۆنیالیزم نیشان دهدات و دهریدهخات که درێژه پێدهری هه مان سیاسهتهکانی حکومی داگیرکاره. ئهم تیگه یشتنه دهریدهخات کهوا نایجیریای دوا داگیرکاری و ههولهکان بۆ سهربهخۆی کاریگهری داگیرکاریان له سهر ههیه، ئهمهش ئهوه نیشاندات که نایجیریای دوا داگیرکاری هاوکیشهیهکی دروستکراوه که به قوڵی له لایهن پارادایمهکانی داگیرکارهوه بهردهوامی پێدهدریت له دوا ی ئهو ماوهیه ی پێدهوتریت نههێشتنی داگیرکاری له ولاته نا رۆژئاواییهکاندا و به تایبتهی "جیهانی سییهم". به رهچاوکردنی بارودۆخی نایجیریا که له فریدهم ئارتیست وێناکراوه، ئهم جۆره دوا داگیرکارییه رهنگدانهوهی دوباره داگیرکارییه که ئاماژه بهوه دهکات که دوباره داگیرکاری دیاردیهکی نوێیه، له سهر بنهمانی ئارهزومه ندانهی ئهندامانی نهتهوهوه له نایجیریای دوا داگیرکاریهوه.

کلێله وشهکان: دوباره داگیرکاری، قۆرخکردن، ستهمکاری، داگیرکاری نوی، نهتهوه، ناسیۆنالیزم.

1. Introduction

1.1. Postcolonial Nation and Nationalism

Postcolonial theorists analyze the concepts of nation and nationalism in different ways, their interpretations are influenced by colonialism's legacies and decolonization's

complexities. They challenge the erroneous beliefs of these concepts. For many, these conceptual constructs are mere myths and false perceptions, examining their implications within historical and social contexts. Postcolonial theorists reveal the complexities and contradictions within nationhood and nationalism, moving beyond their "idealized" origins. According to Roskin & Berry (1997, 121) nationalism is "an exaggerated sense of the Greatness and unity of one's people". This aligns with the Nigerian independence after colonial rule that was marked by the nationalist government for whom nationalism was a medium thereby making false promises and mythical perceptions about the regained promised land, namely Nigeria. After gaining independence, the circumstances worsened, and the hopes and aspirations of nationalist movements were shattered. As Ayo Kehinde (2010, 87), in an article entitled "Rulers Against Writers, Writers Against Rules: The Failed Promise of the Public Sphere in Postcolonial Nigerian Fiction", comments on the visionary aspirations of revolutionary nationalism in Nigerian fiction that the corrupt post-independence government's frustrations and disenchantment overshadow them. Okri's novel reflects the nation's current state after independence, highlighting the government's failure to fulfill its promises, making the literary characters thirsty for this.

The ongoing pattern of corrupt tyranny being replaced by another has defined the politics of almost every continent with few signs of changing or diminishing. Consequently, with the failure of the political system, revolutionary nationalist aspirations have been thwarted, leading to the emergence of nation and nationalism as products shaped by political manifestations within contemporary society. This resembles the way Ernest Gellner (cited in Ahmed, 2022, 91) argues that nationalism is primarily a political phenomenon that encompasses a politicized manifestation, ideology, and principle. It is a political entity with significant implications and impacts on society, shaping notions of identity, power, and governance. For Gellner, nations and nationalism are modern constructs and phenomena that nations are essentially myths having been created to suit the requirements of the modern world (Hall, 2010.326). Gellner's ideas challenge the notion that nations are timeless and eternal entities, instead emphasizing their contingent and constructed nature.

Moreover, postcolonial nationalism focuses on statehood as a political construction and structural paradigm, viewed as political entities serving political powers within a defined territory. Anshuman Mondal's interpretation of statehood falls into this category, arguing that nationalism operates within a political arena and ideological move rather than

promoting national unity (Mondal, A. (2011). The nationalist government's failure following Nigeria's independence led to political disarray and destabilized national security. Local rulers and nationalists restricted freedom to a great extent, resulting in an unlikely domination by security-minded leaders. Such a phenomenon is widely reflected in Okri's *The Freedom Artist*. The state security strategy failed to address national and social developments, resulting in insufficient social, economic, and military stability. The failure of nation and nationalism in Nigeria has been criticized as a myth and misleading slogan perpetuated by leaders to gain their interests. The Nigerian nation has thus been shaped by nationalist propaganda, that is deeply indebted to Western colonialist worldviews. According to Gellner (1983, 55), nationalism is instrumental in the formation of nations, suggesting that it plays a crucial role in defining collective identities. Mellor (1989, 6) defines nationalism as the political expression of a nation's inherent values, suggesting that nations preexist the emergence of nationalism itself. Each nation has its unique version of nationalism, which serves as a means for a nation to assert and promote its identity, culture, and aspirations through political actions and ideologies. Nationalism arises as a response to an existing sense of national identity, shaped by its historical, cultural, and political contexts.

The nationalist government of Nigeria is portrayed to have caused Nigerian people – represented by literary characters – as inviting recolonization since independence has appeared as being mythical propaganda. From the outset, nationalism was supposedly an anti-colonial tool for the colonized in the third world aiming at standing against colonial rule. However, the cohesive bond between the leaders and the colonized people was tested by divisive attitudes following the independence, putting nationalism in question and fragile. Barrington (2006, 3-30) argues that internal nationalisms, which demand privileges or independence, are a growing source of instability. Ethnic, cultural, or regional movements arise when groups feel their entitlements, legacy, or economic advantages are being overlooked within the dominant national framework. This may lead to civil conflict and unsettled political conditions, as seen in Nigeria, contradicting the authentic goals of nationalism, as Anthony Smith (cited in Ahmed, 2022, 87) argues that the primary objective of Nationalism was to unite diverse local identities into a single nation-state to respond to feudalism and imperial oppression. It also advocated, Smith further states, popular sovereignty and individual freedom and nationalists fought against imperial and colonial rule, sometimes adopting populist democratic appearances. Ahmed meanwhile maintains that third-world nationalisms often turn into tyrants as imperial and colonial powers

established their colonialist models in the third-world spaces and diverted third-world countries from their democratic foundations. This study examines in Okri's *The Freedom Artist* the transformation of nationalist leaders in Nigeria into neo-colonialists, it investigates the complex interplay between aspirations, external forces, and democratic erosion in post-independence Nigeria.

1.2. The Complications of Democracy

The confiscation of democracy in African countries in the postcolonial period where nationalist governments utilized neo-colonial legacies to practice an authoritarian regime led to various social, cultural, economic, and political disarrays. The problematic status of democracy has been a point of concern for many years in Africa and Nigeria. Bad governance, violence, civil rights violations, political instability, freedom of expression, and authoritarian regimes have all contributed to the erosion of democracy in the region. The literary depictions of Nigeria have critically tackled these issues, providing insights into the complexities and challenges of democratic governance in the country.

The text under examination addresses the impact of the political rule on development and democracy, postcolonial challenges, and actualizing governance in Nigerian politics. This study analyses how the tyrannical nationalist government of Nigeria has experienced political instability, economic hardship, and extensive violations of human rights. Okri's literary illustrations present a real version of the political situation in Nigeria, aligning with Ayittey's analysis in his book *Africa Betrayed* (1992), that the tyrants have devastated the whole Nigerian nation. Following the Declaration of Independence, nationalists almost always militarily junta seized power. Similar to the literary testimonials, Ayittey in the foreword of this book addresses the issue of neo-colonialism with a devastating critique. For Ayittey, Africa's harsh realities to external causes deeply belong to the misuse of power by the African leaders, who are to blame for betraying the legitimate dreams of their people and the continent's traditional political structures that are in opposition to the paradigms of totalitarian regimes (Ayittey, 1992, xii). African leaders and nationalist governments have denied the citizens the post-independence freedom that they previously wished for and struggled for from colonial rule. However, they have created an unstable political society where freedom of expression, poverty, social justice, and violence became a part of their everyday reality to a degree that the citizens hoped to have

remained under colonial rule rather than being objects under the local neo-colonial tyrannies.

The literary characters actively seek alternatives to the nationalist government, they long for another form of Western colonization, as the characters yearn for improved living conditions, albeit in a less oppressive manner. The characters may proceed to experience a free life – compared to the oppressive nationalist state. The chosen text portrays this reality and critiques the nationalist government by showcasing the negative impact on Nigerian society during the post-independence in the light of Hannah Arendt and George Ayittey's arguments to support the critique of nationalism. This study thus scrutinizes the portrayal of literary characters who encounter the stark reality of a usurped democracy, they are deprived of the democratic exercise of their rights in the "liberated" and "independent" postcolonial Nigeria. This situation indicates that bitter reality for which independence only stands for raising the flag and never moves out from the framework of several slogans the nationalists have always hailed for.

2. Intellectual Restrictions and Shrinking Spaces in Ben Okri's *The Freedom Artist*

Ben Okri's dystopian novel *The Freedom Artist* (2019) takes place at the heart of Nigerian society where free speech is banned. Karnak, the protagonist, is a young man searching for a lost artist who might inspire others with the notions about freedom. It is an examination of how freedom is under grave threat and democracy is eroded in postcolonial Nigeria under the nationalist government. The novel follows the journey of Karnak, who sets out to discover the truth behind the disappearance of a legendary artist, Anton Waker, and then reveals the condition of freedom. Karnak also searches to find his love, a young woman who is arrested without being warned by the nationalist government. The novel delves into the themes of censorship, political persecution, and the constraints on free expression within the so-called democratic society. The readers find out that freedom of expression and creativity are gravely suppressed. *The Freedom Artist*, meanwhile, depicts a variety of modern issues such as the development of authoritarianism and the erosion of free thinking. It further portrays the role art and creativity play in human struggles and the quest for freedom, illustrating that they are necessary for rescuing citizens from the hands of dehumanizing tools as operated by the nationalist architects. The narrative sheds light on the difficulties the characters encounter, represented metaphorically through

imprisonment, which in turn fosters a sense of uncertainty about their perception of reality.

Karnak describes characters as having no right to freely read or write, a governmental attempt leading to the suffocation of the nation's members. When he meets a mysterious woman named Nela, he becomes curious about the missing artist and begins to question the oppressive regime under whose rule he spends his life. Reflecting on this, the opening lines of the novel by a third-person omniscient character begin with uncovering the post-independence reality in Nigeria and symbolizing it as a prison:

It is written in the oldest legends that all are born in prison. This prison is all they know. The literature describes life in it. Religion hints at redemption from it. Having lived here all their lives, humans have ceased to see it as a prison.... They created music of such beauty that they temporarily forgot their underlying misery. Their civilizations became so successful that they forgot they were in prison. They began to think they were free (Okri, 2019, 3).

Such an analogy of Nigeria to a prison-like space is a reminder of the establishment of modern institutions as being mere producers of confinement in non-western spaces and authoritarian territories. *The Freedom Artist* thus depicts how freedom has been threatened in post-independence Nigeria through the image of prison and the constant question of "WHO IS THE PRISONER?" throughout the story where characters are trapped in a society like rats for whom democracy represents a myth. The story reveals the post-independence truth of the Nigerian nation after the years of independence by examining the idea of imprisonment extending beyond physical walls, emphasizing the multitude of restrictions and oppressions individuals face, encompassing social, political, and psychological limitations. In an interview with "The National" in 2011, Okri demonstrated his interest in reality as being depicted through fictional portrayals. He states: "We like to think that the world is rational and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there's more to the fabric of life." When asked what attracted him the most, he reveals that he is "fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives. Everyone is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality." (Masad, 2020). Such personal desire from the side of Okri has made him touch the reality of Nigeria which has always been blurred for the outsiders as his literary characters illustrate the bitter reality in modern Nigeria, where their freedom is confiscated. This disillusionment prompts the literary characters to

repeatedly question: "WHO IS THE PRISONER?" as they wrestle with their circumstances, seeking a deeper comprehension of their own identities and the status of their nation

The promulgation of disillusionment in postcolonial Nigeria in the novel forces the literary characters to experience traumatization, violence, and lack of freedom of expression to a degree that they cannot practice their full democracy. This is a betrayal of Africa for the characters, for them, the promised land has not yet been born and does not seem to, for after many years of independence from colonial authority, unrest has erupted and people are treated harshly. Death becomes the gift that modern Nigeria awards them if they practice their liberty through reading books and publishing books as the omniscient nameless, narrator states:

This was one prison too many and riots broke out every. where. The authorities tried to suppress these subversive ideas. The police confiscated large numbers of books. They imprisoned publishers and booksellers. They destroyed all forms of printing. These versions of the founding myth were burnt in public squares. People were forbidden to read them, under punishment of death (Okri, 2019,6).

Okri employs the technique of dramatic monologue by means of an unnamed narrator, who represents all people in viewing the reality of Nigeria under the nationalist government. The narrator provides a broader perspective on the state's maneuvers in restricting freedom and suppressing democracy. This approach allows the readers to grasp the overall situation from the outset, before delving into the specific experiences of individual characters. The narrator introduces the concept of democracy by utilizing the metaphorical image of a prison, providing a distinct perspective on the state of affairs in the country. Thus, the narrator's statement demonstrates how freedom and democracy are mythic constructions for the characters. The Nigerian neo-colonial system under the nationalist government in *The Freedom Artist* is portrayed as a totalitarian regime for using similar techniques and policies as argued by political critics. Such techniques align with Canovan's (1992, 27) characterization of totalitarianism as being:

A system of ruling that does not allow individual freedom whatsoever and its main goal is to control all the aspects of life under the authority of government and ruler. In other words, totalitarianism is identified as an absolute power of terror, which aims to control everything in the state as Arendt describes as "an attempt to exercise total domination".

The text coincides with Conavan's criticism of the system in portraying the reality of the Nigerian nationalist government's absolute implementation of a single-party political ideology, which serves to suppress the freedom of the literary characters. *The Freedom Artist* thus shows the fact that the Nigerian modern state uses its political ideology produced by colonialists once upon a time in the past to restrict the freedom of the citizens.

The nationalist practices of postcolonial statehood function more within a suppressive political arena and oppressively ideological framework, rather than promoting national unity to invite all members without any prejudice. This reminds us of the reality Anshuman Mondal maintains that statehood is a political construction and structural paradigm that is affiliated with political power within a geographical area (Mondal, A.A. (2011). Mondal's connection between statehood and political power is thus negatively transformed into the social life of Nigeria in the novel, all people should abide by the rules and regulations set by the state to maintain the power that the government enjoys to practice.

The Freedom Artist is one of the post-nationalist African manifestations whose primary concern is the betrayal of the nation by leaders of independence. This betrayal by the nationalist government and leadership has been portrayed by Chatterjee – in the third world contexts – in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), saying: "The leaders of African struggles against colonialism and racism had spoiled their records by becoming heads of corrupt, fractious, and often brutal regimes" (Chatterjee, 1993, 3). This statement reflects the portrayal of critiqued nationalist leaders in the novel who were at the forefront of African movements against colonialism and racism and marred their reputations by assuming roles of authority within governments that were marked by corruption, internal strife, and occasionally oppressive practices representing a modern totalitarian regime. This also reminds the fact that Okri is successful in depicting the reality of the nation, the novel thoroughly tells the narration about the nation. This aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's argument in his book *Nation and Narration* (1990) that the novel is the imagination and the narration of the nation in which he explores the complex relationship between nations and their narratives, arguing that national identity is not a fixed or essentialist concept but a product of ongoing cultural and historical interpretation. Bhabha highlights the role of storytelling and narrative in shaping national identity, Bhabha in his preface argues that nations and narratives share common origins, often obscured by time, shaped by myths, legends, and collective memories. These

narratives are flexible and influenced by individuals' imagination and "mind's eye," establishing boundaries and potential for a nation or narrative. He challenges the idea of a singular, unified national narrative and explores the multiplicity and hybridity of narratives within a nation (Bhabha, 1994, 85-93).

Recognizing the Nigerian modern state as a totalitarian regime after gaining independence, it becomes evident that 20th-century totalitarian regimes have employed innovative methods to exert control over the entire population, aligning them with a specific political ideology. Given this historical context, various modern nations are proven to be like such regimes including Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, the Fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union under Stalin. These regimes are marked by “absolute” power, whose leaders applied complete control over the state (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1965, 31). The Nigerian Nationalist government has similarly used absolute power to control all aspects of life through terror and other repressive techniques. This system of controlling individual’s life by depriving them of their rights through terror and censorship could be regarded as villainous because the regime relies on evil acts and wickedness to exert its divine sovereignty as depicted in the novel.

One of the totalitarian manners as witnessed from state acts is the suspension of law and treating the law in a heavenly manner. Nigeria’s state behavior comes into existence by suspending the law and eliminating human values through destructive and villainy tools. Villainy could be any sort of terror, evil acts, and immorality that is done by the totalitarian state. This aligns with Orwell’s statement that totalitarian state villainy is a basic evil of man’s modern world. Orwell warns individuals against the possibility of establishing totalitarian governments as inspired by the Nazis and the Soviets: “Totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph everywhere” (Brodeur, 2001, 5). Therefore, Orwell puts the responsibility on people to stop the continuation of totalitarianism all over the world. The novel depicts how the oppressive practices of an authoritarian ruler persist even after the end of colonialism. The literary characters, instead of finding the anticipated freedom and progress following the conclusion of colonial rule, discover themselves under the grip of a neocolonial regime that intensifies their difficulties. This stark contrast to their initial expectations leaves them disillusioned and prompts them to question the perceived advantages of independence.

In line with Orwell's assertion that it is the responsibility of the people to combat totalitarianism, the novel employs an impactful literary technique through the enigmatic character known as the boy warrior. This character serves as a symbol of rebellion and opposition against the oppressive nationalist government and its neo-colonial structure as the narrator states "When the authorities learnt about this new appearance of the boy-warrior, troops were sent to the field in great numbers" (Okri, 2019, 303). This indicates that the authorities are exercising caution towards him because they perceive him as a challenge to the nationalist government's power. By embodying mystery, the boy warrior becomes a beacon of hope and liberation for the imprisoned characters in the story. His role and deeds contribute to the examination of themes centered around resistance, freedom, and the fight against oppressive systems. The boy warrior's acts of defiance and the hope he inspires in others lead to a transformative moment, where the authoritarian regime is either challenged or weakened as the woman, who is imprisoned under the totalitarian regime, shares her account of the torment and brutality inflicted upon her and others, she also discusses the boy warrior. She describes the boy warrior in detail, highlighting his significance in the face of oppression and violence "They are going to torture and kill him... if they kill him, they kill something in all of us" (Okri, 2019, 321). As a compelling literary device, the boy warrior represents the unwavering determination of those who refuse to accept subjugation and strive for freedom. Through his presence and actions, the novel delves into themes of resistance, liberation, and the struggle against oppressive systems.

Postcolonial nationalism thus plays a significant role in shaping Nigeria's current nationalist government, resulting in the establishment of a totalitarian regime. Moreover, the Nigerian government's actions and policies are in line with Gellner's perspective (cited in Hall, 2010, 326), which indicates that the Nigerian government manipulates and exploits nationalism to consolidate its power and create a totalitarian regime in which the literary characters find it dissatisfactory and show resistance against it in *The Freedom Artist*. Meanwhile, the novel also demonstrates the resistance against modern Nigerian tyranny as an old man, who is a mysterious character, represents nationalism as a movement or a tool for resistance in his expression of a modern tyrannical nation. This represents that the old man believes that nationalism itself could be reused to fight the nationalist government. He is the symbol of freedom-reclaiming the potential of creative thinking, imagination, and the art of storytelling in a constrained society. The old man also helps Karnak along in his quest for knowledge and understanding throughout the story. This resistance is portrayed

at the end of the story through a revolution against tyranny. The wrinkles on his face represent the plights and predicaments the nation has gone through. His aged face symbolically suggests a wealth of experience and wisdom. At the beginning of the novel, the old man and a boy, named Mirababa, take turns in reading a tale, the old man tells Mirababa: "One day, my boy, you must take a leap into the unknown and discover what has been hidden from us ..." (Okri, 2019, 13). To strengthen his case for resisting the oppressive regime, the old man persists in sharing the harsh truth of life in a prison-like environment with Mirababa while they both delve into a story about a child's journey to attain freedom as the old man states:

Don't be like the rest of us. Follow your nature. Follow your questions. Those who try to escape prison end up in another one. Escape that one and they find themselves in one another. This world is a succession of prisons and there is no escaping the prison of the world. In our family, we have broken out of the prison beyond prison and the prisons beyond that. I'm the last in the line... I'm an old man who has spent his life in prison and dreams only of freedom (Ibid, p 14-15).

The word "escape", which is uttered as a piece of advice, reminds the readers of the country – embodied in the form of prison for its citizens – in which harsh life is a landmark. The continuation of prison shows the distress experienced by Nigerian people from colonial to post-colonial periods. Okri's characters believe in freedom cause in a way if the nationalist movement against the colonial powers won, the continent would have absolute freedom, and citizens would practice their full democracy. However, almost fifty years have passed since African nations first began to earn independence, yet the continent is still struggling to achieve political stability and democracy. The independence has produced nothing but unfulfilled promises. These promises, however, have not been realized. Disillusionment, despair, and rage are all fueled by this deliberate betrayal, especially among Africans. When the injustices were carried out by the same leaders who claimed to have brought freedom to Africa, it hurt more (Ayttey, 1992). Sadly, the expected freedom and reform never came true after independence. Instead of demolishing colonial mechanisms of social injustice and oppression, the new ruling elite nearly keeps them standing for their cynical interest. According to (Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022) politics should be the driving force behind change, determining prosperity, security,

and access to justice. Local political dynamics impact a nation's global status, state fragility, and citizens' ability to engage in development. However, Nigeria's political landscape, following independence, has shifted from regional politics to political patronage systems, leading to a decline in governance quality and a fragile state. This ruling elite has been shaped by colonial powers in post-independent Nigeria in the same way William Graf (1983, 120) argues that the political elites in Nigeria, often known as power elites, have historically been described as a flawed bourgeoisie, as their social status, economic dominance, and even their values and personalities were influenced by colonialism. This is a direct critique of the belief that the ruling elite in postcolonial Nigeria prioritized their interests and gains, disregarding the well-being of the wider population which hindered the advancement of inclusive development and the principles of democratic governance.

Given this postcolonial disillusionment, the novel reflects the reality of Africa after the independence as Ngugi wa Thiong'o obviously puts it: "To the majority of African people in the new state, independence did not bring fundamental changes. It was independence with the ruler holding a begging bowl and the ruler holding a shrinking belly. It was independence with question mark" (Wa Thiong'o, 1993, 65). The political situation and the nation's national security were exploited which resulted in many disputes in Nigeria. Egwu (cited in Ebeh, 2015) argues that a few years after the liberation of Nigeria from colonial rule, the Nigerian national government's security was confined to serving the local rulers and their supporters, a phenomenon that resulted in the domination of the country by security-minded leaders. The testimonials of the novel accurately depict the same conditions; leaders are solely focused on the security protection of the state as a requirement for feeding their version of independence, they exploit the established legacies they have gained through propaganda made in the name of the nation and nationalism. The type of government that is portrayed stimulates the mythical characters of the nation resulting in a lack of freedom since characters instead of living a democratic life, live in so much fear as reading books about old myths is also a crime. The individual's lives are threatened by the terror of the totalitarian government. This terror is to threaten people under the state villainy similar to what Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965, 129) characterize as "Governmental terror seeks to frighten those under its sway into conformity and obedience". Instead of experiencing a democratic way of life, the characters are deprived of their freedom and live in constant fear, with even the act of reading books about old myths being deemed a criminal offence.

The novel portrays a post-independent Nigeria where disillusionment and fear of the truth have escalated to such an extent that the characters have lost faith in what they are told. They even harbor suspicions about any form of praise, and they openly acknowledge their imprisonment. For example, Amalantis, a beautiful lady, in a conversation with Karnak, expresses her silence and estrangement about the truth of life and asks: "Who is the prisoner?". As soon as Karnak hears the question, he shuts the door and replies: "We're not supposed to say that word. It could get us into trouble. We could be put away for it.", the lady then further asks: "Are you afraid of the truth too?". In response, Karnak surprisingly puts it: "Truth? What Truth? You know everyone's asking this question, but they're not asking out loud. Don't say that word again. Don't say anything" (Okri, 2019, 18). This aligns with the arguments put by Hannah Arendt in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, regarding totalitarian governments and the stages in which totalitarianism is created. According to Arendt, a totalitarian regime comes into existence when the connection is lost with reality: "The preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought" (Arendt, 1973, 474). This is what happens in the novel as the nationalist government of Nigeria has cut all the connections and contacts with the past. The individuals are not allowed to think about anything outside the borders of the myths created by the regime and its ideologies. Instead of encouraging creativity and the overall welfare of individuals in a democratic society, the nationalist government actively suppresses narratives that challenge existing norms. Furthermore, they fabricate new myths that align with their ideologies and purposely instill these beliefs in children, as stated by the narrator "New myths were created by the most highly decorated artists of the land...Children were taught the new tales, the new versions" (Okri, 2019, 39). This situation underscores the significant impact of those who control narratives, revealing how manipulation can shape people's perceptions and thoughts. It serves as a cautionary reminder of the risks associated with stifling creativity, diversity, and individuality in the pursuit of a homogeneous society. This may encourage them to rebel against the regime. Therefore, the stages which Arendt discusses in her book about the formation of a totalitarian government are reflected in Okri's novel: the government controls everything through absolute power and spying on people as the narrator points out: "Everyone would be spied upon, that everyone would be placed under surveillance. The most sophisticated devices were spying on people had been deployed" (Ibid, 40).

The narrator further reveals the bitter reality when speaking about the authoritarian regime using terror, arresting people without anyone daring to say anything throughout the land:

There were many such arrests throughout the land. They took place at all hours of the day or night.... Certain words became suspicious and vanished from public life. Words like 'hope', 'rights', 'truth'. Anyone who heard uttering those words found empty spaces around them. It wasn't long before anyone using the word 'freedom' was suspected of harboring dangerous intentions... The question which appeared on walls did not go away just because the authorities grew more ruthless (Ibid, 20).

The novel thus showcases how the characters in the novel are unable to express certain words. The government actively engages in the control of people's thoughts and language, suppressing democratic principles to maintain its political dominance. Hannah Arendt describes the distortion of reality by the police who control human thoughts by keeping the individuals under the control of the state through means of terror. Okri's literary imagination is similar to Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), as Arendt argues the major source of controlling the human mind and individual's life is the "Thought Police". For this reason, the observation of *Thought Police* plays a major role in totalitarian regimes to silence the thoughts of people under state power (Swift, 2009, 95). In a conversation between Karnak and Amalantis about the authorities and their tyrannical practice, it becomes clear that the nationalist government uses terror and oppressive methods including "Sleep Police" to restrict dangerous thoughts: "This was how the authorities came upon the method for detecting those harboring thoughts dangerous to the state. The Sleep Police went from house to house in the dead of night listening out for those who did not scream while they slept" (Okri, 2019, 60). The Sleep Police observe and recognize individuals who deviate from the majority's norms, targeting those who challenge oppression. Their primary goal is to identify potential troublemakers or dissenters who could threaten the regime's authority.

The testimonials demonstrate that the nationalist government goes beyond threatening and violence that leads to killing the characters alive and full disillusionment. This demonstrates the practice of totalitarianism as Arendt believes that "the first essential step on the way to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man. ...The aim is to destroy the civil rights of the whole population, who ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and homeless. The destruction of man's rights, the

killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely” (Arendt, 1973, p 447-451). This aligns with the experience of the characters in the novel feeling dead and dead alive in a way that they keep the nightmares in themselves as they cannot practice their democracy to express their suffering. The government even changed the quality of the language among people to restrict any sort of freedom as the narrator states that words like “hope, rights, truth” (Okri, 2019, 20) are completely banned from being expressed in public. This suppression of democracy and freedom has caused psychiatric issues as the narrator notes this reality “They kept nightmares to themselves. They constituted the highest presence in hospital wards and psychiatric clinics” (Ibid, 22).

Karnak further reveals the psychological unrest as a result of violence, injustice, and terror he has experienced in his journey exploring his love and freedom. His psychological suffering has made him feel like a dead man as he states “I feel like I am dead. I feel like a shadow and I want more than anything else to be a living human being. I want to scream, but I don't know how. I know something is wrong in the world, but I don't know what it is” (Ibid, 195). Then he speaks about the violence he has witnessed “He spoke of blood on people's faces, blood in the streets, blood on the mouths of men and women, blood in the eyes of children. He spoke of lovers devouring one another when they kissed. He spoke of the horrors of daylight and the terrors of the night” (Ibid, 196). This demonstrates how the dictatorship exercises its power over the populace through psychological oppression. They wipe off people's histories, languages, and traditions, causing those people to forget who they are and where they came from. The characters have to fight against being stripped of their identities because doing so is a sort of violence. People are afraid of being arrested or having their families taken away because the regime is well-armed. The characters are well aware that they may suffer an injury or maybe meet their death at any time. This physical violence is evident in the streets as witnessed by Okri's characters. For example, Ruslana is one of the female characters who narrates violent scenes she has witnessed “Bodies are being washed up on the shores of the river. Parts of bodies are being found in cellars, on rubbish dumps. People are returning from the grave.” (Ibid, 320). These violent practices by nationalist governments of Nigeria bring us back to Arendt's definition that violence is the use of force to achieve goals. This is how the regimes use force to control the population to keep their political favoritism (Arendt, 1973).

Moreover, the narrator also informs the readers that characters are labeled as question-askers, resulting in the government launching campaigns against them. Such campaigns

involve removing old myths from bookshops and replacing them with their versions of tales and myths that serve to promote the political interests of the ruling regime, as the narrator aptly exemplifies:

The most prominent scholars in the land, who had been given the highest honors, were commissioned to reinterpret the ancient myths. New versions appeared in the state bookshops and libraries. These were the only bookshops and libraries allowed to exist at that time. The old fairy tales were given new glosses and new clothes. The older versions went out of print. They were no longer relevant. The old myths, in the newest version, were made relevant and brought up to date (Okri 2019, 38).

This demonstrates that the totalitarian government started to change old myths into new ones. For example, the novel reveals how the story of the heroes' quest for the golden pelt transformed into a tale about the military of the nation discovering a hidden path to lasting peace. The original story of the emperor's new clothing was retold to make the boy a hero of this work for pointing out how stunning the emperor's new garments were. The government soon vanished the old myths in all libraries and bookshops and children were taught about new versions of myths that served their political ideologies to perpetuate their full power and restrict the freedom and democracy of the individuals. Through the revised versions of the myths including the story of Adam and Eve, the nationalist government conceived people that happened and freedom can only be achieved through obedience and what they are told not what they read from the old myths as the narrator states:

The new ideology is the way. The authorities are the guardians. Obedience is the key. Dedication to the ideals of society is the route by which the original garden will be recovered. But never again must the citizen think of freedom. Never again must they want to be different. The way to paradise lies in being like everyone else. The secret of happiness lies in doing what one is told (Ibid, 44). *The Freedom Artist* depicts art and literature as powerful tools for the regime to colonize the mindsets of the people to erode the liberty of the characters in the novel. Art is the most dangerous tool that the government has the most fear about, for art is used as a form of resistance against tyranny and a tool for promoting freedom and self-expression. Art is also shown as a tool for promoting freedom, democracy, and creativity which ultimately results in revolutions as brilliant minds like artists realize the truth of reality. The novel paints a

picture of storytelling and old myths as an effective means of resistance and self-expression, and it does so through the lens of its main character. Storytelling is a means of resistance through which the protagonists and other characters in the book discuss past events as well as their hopes for a better future, which can be found in the books. This portrayal aligns with the concept of literature as a widely recognized tool for resistance, with various contexts including colonial, cultural, political, feminist, and socioeconomic injustices. Given this context, Barbara Harlow's book, *Resistance Literature* (1987) explores the power of literature in promoting social change, amplifying marginalized voices, and inspiring collective action against oppressive systems (Harlow, 1987). Nigerian and other literature have been used to uplift minority communities and challenge established norms. Ngugi's literary approach involves classifying literature into categories of oppression and the liberation struggle. This approach challenges established norms and encourages a deeper analysis of literature within its wider social and historical contexts. This characterization encourages a deeper exploration of literature's role in addressing societal issues, inspiring resistance, and contributing to the fight for liberation, which signifies that literature has the potential to challenge oppressive systems and contribute to the fight for liberation. Literature plays a powerful role in resistance against oppressors. As Ahmed (2022, p 8-9) examines how literary works actively challenge and defy the dominant narratives enforced by colonial powers and oppressive systems in a way that they function as a platform to resist and confront political, social, and cultural oppression. Ahmed further explores topics such as asserting cultural identity, reclaiming narratives, critiquing political structures, and depicting the hardships faced by communities to depict how authors employ literature as a powerful tool for resistance, empowerment, and reclaiming their narratives within the context of colonial modernity.

Given the importance of literature as a powerful tool for resistance, the characters in the novel can recover their identities and put an end to the regime's efforts to obliterate their histories and cultures by using storytelling as a weapon against them. However, the tyrannical government restricts literature exemplified by banning bookshops and old myths and changing the stories to reflect their political ideologies, people were terrified to read books, and education was controlled to teach only new stories and myths. Therefore, characters lost interest in books and education which directly impacted their basic rights for practicing democracy. This is depicted through the character Karnak when he speaks

about the hope of Amalantis to become a teacher but refuses due to the change of the nature of education by the tyranny as he states:

Amalantis had wanted to be a teacher, but she refused to teach because she said that everything they were made to teach was designed to kill the souls of children, designed to render them stupid before they had begun to live ... in our world, she said, teaching does all the damage. I would like to unteach (Okri 2019, 102).

This demonstrates the perils of censorship as well as the need of upholding creative freedom as a central value. The government in the novel imposes strict censorship on fiction and art that are represented by education. As a result, cultural diversity is virtually eradicated, and uniformity is encouraged by the nationalists. Therefore, the novel shows this reality as a warning about the dangers of censorship as well as the need of preserving creative freedom. Karnak is depicted as a revealer of the true reality of the postcolonial Nigerian under the nationalist government that has banned freedom of education to erosion the creativity:

People had stopped reading books. With the changing myths, reading had begun to be perceived as a suspicious activity. Those who wanted to know more than others were thought of as pariahs) The modern idea was to be more ignorant than your neighbor. To be less well-read than your neighbor was thought the greatest politeness. To say, in conversation, 'Does such a book exist?' was the height of good manners. To read books was considered dangerous (Ibid, 93).

With the domination of education as a means of erosion of democracy, the government filled the minds of people with their ideologies not the true essence of education as Karnak points out:

The true self was supposed to emerge with education, People were not meant to fill their heads with facts. but only to re-learn what they already knew. And what they already knew was that the state was good and everything they did was leading them back to the garden of origins (Ibid 94).

Nationalist education is therefore used as a tool for control and conformity rather than liberation and enlightenment. True education should be based on facts and promoting creativity along with questioning reality but in the novel, education – as designed by the oppressive nationalists – is portrayed as being manipulative to serve the interests of

tyranny and the rulers' narrow-minded interpretations of the world. Education serves to teach lies instead of truth. Karnak in a conversation with a boy reveals that even children no longer like education and refuse to attend school as the boy tells Karnak: "I don't like school. I don't like the stories they tell us. My father says the stories are all lies. I like the old ones" (Ibid, 150). Terror and lies thus replace the liberal education in postcolonial Nigeria that even makes a kid reject it. Given the harsh postcolonial reality experienced by the literary characters, the revolution and rebellion against the tyrannical government as portrayed at the end of the novel is similar to the nationalist movements against the colonial rulers to become free and independent. As the Nigerian nationalist government used similar and worse colonial legacies, after independence, it made it harder for people to live a democratic life despite other social and economic issues. Therefore, the characters in Okri's works demonstrate both resistance and a willingness to risk their lives through rebellion and revolution in their pursuit of liberation from tyranny. This portrayal, observed in the literary works of Nigerian writers like Okri, subtly implies an implied call for recolonization by the previous ruling power. Through the comparison of the post-independence era to colonization, Okri's characters depict a harsh reality where life not only stagnated but deteriorated for the people. The characters' primary goal and aspiration in the novel center around the liberation from tyranny, emphasizing their yearning to overcome oppressive rule. For example, this is evident in the character of Ruslana's statement:

There was only one goal in life. There was only one great goal worth living for, to overthrow the Hierarchy, destroying that tyranny. She wanted more than anything to rid the world of their omnipotent control... Overthrowing the powers that tyrannize the lives of all people, was her dream (Ibid, 209).

Such portrayals of the literary characters' dissatisfaction with the ruling elite government are rooted in their experiences facing greater challenges and oppressive issues compared to the colonial period. This dissatisfaction leads to a yearning for recolonization as an alternative to the oppressive nationalist government. The concept of nation and nationalism in post-independent Nigeria is portrayed as a failure, with the political climate and national security being manipulated for malicious purposes. The Nigerian state's security strategy neglected crucial aspects of national and social development, such as essential social infrastructure. The failure of leadership and broken promises of newly established nationalist governments shattered dreams of national unity and nationalism, demonstrating that nationalism is a myth manipulated and exploited for political gain. This led to a failed system of leadership that could not adhere to the promises of a democratic

land as Chinua Achebe in his book *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983) states “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership” (Achebe, 1983, 1). Moreover, according to Ayittey (2006), in his book *Indigenous African Institutions*, postcolonial national governments preserved the unlikely policies once practiced by Western colonialism because most of the African countries and many of their leaders, who once declared their opposition to colonialism and imperialism, failed to recognize that they are utilizing a new form of imperialism practiced by their nationalist governments (Ayittey, 2006). This statement demonstrates that the period between colonialism to postcolonialism marked by independence is only the shift of power with the same colonial practice by the local and nationalist governments as reflected in Okri’s novel. Therefore, the newly established “postcolonial” state is nothing but a mere myth mirroring a fake reality representing the life of the nation and unlikely nationalism in postcolonial Nigeria, for it has distorted the previously hailed objective of nationalism. According to Anthony Smith, the original goal of nationalism was to consolidate different localisms of regions, dialects, traditions, and clans into a unified nation-state. It stood against feudalism and imperial tyranny, claiming popular sovereignty and the freedom of all peoples to choose their destiny within independent states. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalists' job was to oppose imperial and colonial administrations, which, he points out, sometimes looked like popular democracy. On the other hand, Smith argues that nationalists often turned into tyrants because imperial and colonial powers were able to drain support for nationalism from its democratic roots (Ahmed, 2022, 87). In this respect, *The Freedom Artist* holds the same message that the same nationalism that was utilized as a resistant tool against colonial rule, turned into tyranny in post-colonial Nigeria represented by the Nigerian nationalist government.

Conclusion

This study has examined the appearance of recolonization as a consequence of postcolonial nationalist practices in Ben Okri’s *The Freedom Artist*. It investigated *The Freedom Artist* the complexities and contradictions surrounding the conceptual understanding of nationhood and nationalism in postcolonial Nigeria as reflected in the confiscation of democracy under the nationalist government marked by tyranny that challenges the idealized slogans of these concepts. The study demonstrated that the nationalist government in Nigeria utilizes nationalism to make false promises and myths about the promised land, leading to disillusionment and unfulfilled expectations of Okri’s literary character. As a result of this, the failure of the political system and the pattern of

corrupt tyranny – being replaced by another – resulted in a fragmented nation and a disillusioned populace.

Ben Okri's novel, *The Freedom Artist*, exposed the Nigerian nationalist government as a tyrannical regime and revealed the erosion of democracy in postcolonial Nigeria. The novel drew parallels between the oppressive strategies employed by the Nigerian nationalist government and those used by white colonial powers during colonization, highlighting the continuation of colonial legacies in the postcolonial era. As a result of these neo-colonial legacies, the confiscation of democracy in African countries, as examined in the novel, has profound social, economic, and political consequences. These include the occurrence of repression and human rights violations, a lack of transparency leading to the perpetuation of inequality, the entrenchment of authoritarian rule or one-party systems, and the detrimental effects of a non-functioning democracy on stability, violence, and the rule of law. Thus, the failure of nation and nationalism in Nigeria is attributed to political manipulation and exploitation by leaders who used these concepts for personal gains.

The study also explored the way the nationalist government utilized nationalism, as illustrated through testimonies from the novel, which contradicts the anticipated ideals of independence as a departure from colonial oppression. Therefore, the novel served as a powerful tool for criticizing the nationalist government and its detrimental impacts on Nigerian society in the post-independence era; the characters suffer from censorship, political persecution, and lack of free expression. Through Karnak's journey, the protagonist, the truth is discovered behind a missing artist and his lost love. This, thus, explored in the novel the tools of suppressing creativity and the importance of art in the struggle for freedom. The only target of nationalism is therefore maintaining power to feed the egoist interests of the nationalist elite. The novel emphasized the significance of creative thinking, imagination, and storytelling as tools of resistance against the totalitarian regime – symbolized through the character of the old man – and warning against the spread of totalitarianism and the importance of preserving individual rights and values. Moreover, the role of art and literature, as this study explored in the novel, is that they serve as powerful tools for resistance and self-expression. However Nationalist education in Nigeria serves as a tool for control and conformity, replacing truth with lies. The oppressive nationalists manipulate the education system, replacing truth with lies, leading to a state of terror and misinformation in postcolonial Nigeria. This distorted form of education undermines the importance of true education and encourages critical thinking and creativity.

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