



Research Paper

Exploring the ‘Negative Capability’ in Ben Okri’s Infinite Riches

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ABSTRACT: One of the most famous writers of Nigerian origin, Ben Okri is a visionary and a philosopher in his own right. A Man Booker Prize winner, Okri is regarded in the likes of authors such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, for the similar stylistics, treatment of subject-matter, use of magic-realism, and the arguments put forward that he shares with them. *Infinite Riches* (1998) is the final instalment of his abiku trilogy. The primary subject of the trilogy is decolonisation—of the birth of an unspecified African nation. As Okri charts this journey, informed readers will find uncanny resemblances to Keats’ philosophy and formulation of ‘negative capability’ that has been expressed in his letters. A poet of the Romantic tradition, Keats was anti-foundationalist in many ways. This paper reads the similar strain that is observed in Okri’s novel—the sentiments especially akin to ‘negative capability’ and everything that it holds. It looks at how Okri’s version of ‘negative capability’—inspired and anticipated by his own culture, helps him challenge many fossilized structures of thought.

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I. DECONSTRUCTING WITH NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

Negative capability, as John Keats wrote in one of his letters to his brothers George and Thomas Keats, dated, December 22, 1817, is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” [Keats, Letters 193]. He identifies this state as the source of true inspiration and creative genius, as instanced in Shakespeare. Its opposite is when a man is bound to his quest for definitive answers—a characteristic feature of modern-day reductionism. So negative capability for Keats, is the hallmark of a “Man of Achievement”, who swims guided by intuition against the tide of puny reason. Wayne Glusser in his “Limbo, Pluto, Soprano: Negative Capability in Three Underworlds” writes about the “paradoxical virtue” of Keats’ definition of Negative Capability; that “Negative Capability amounts to a willingness to remain in doubt. Negative Capability is evidently a rare sort of quality and, on the face of it, not something to brag about: what Keats appreciates as achievement must strike others as a lazy abdication of intellectual or moral responsibilities. For Keats, though, this noble resistance to conclusion and conviction allows access to a richer, more mysterious world” [Glusser, Mosaic 55]. Ben Okri, a much-hailed postcolonial writer from Nigeria, writes about a similar line of thought or mode of living, being and becoming in his novel, *Infinite Riches*. Okri is known for incorporating many elements of traditional African philosophy in his works and a majority of those can be easily identified as something akin to ‘negative capability’. A passage for instance, about the peculiar African nature in his novel can help clarify this:

their myth-making natures, their praise-singing souls...their trusting natures...their unscientific thinking,their explosive laughter, their preference for myth over reality, for story over fact, for mystification over clarification, for dance over stillness, for ecstasy over contemplation, for metaphysics over logic,for the many over the one...their polygamous thinking...their unholy abundance of feeling...their excessive interpretation of things, their penetrating directness...their philosophical fatalism, their transcendent optimism...their childlike sense of wonder...their oblique and magic-working art.

[Okri, *Infinite Riches* 183]

The passage above says a handful. Okri embraces and empowers the stereotypes about the typical African in the eyes of the coloniser and turns the table around—a very deconstructive action. It serves him in challenging the narrow contours of general thought and reasoning, established and exalted by the coloniser. This approach analogous to Keats’ ‘negative capability’, with preference for the mysterious and plurality over the urge for explanation/categorisation, is thus of a profoundly anti-establishment sort.

As apparent, Okri is all up for imagination and intuition, as advocated by his culture. This attitude towards life, with all the implications of negative capability, is reflected again in Keats’ letter to Benjamin Bailey, dated November 22, 1817, where he writes that he was “ never able to perceive how anything can be

known for truth by consecutive reasoning”, and yearns for “a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts” [Keats, Letters 185]. Walter Jackson Bate, in his, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (originally published in 1939), writes regarding the matter, that Keats prized the imaginative and intuitive faculty over the intellect. The poet according to him, insists that Imagination is not only the “more efficacious means of arriving at truth, but actually the only way by which truth can be grasped” [Bate, *Negative Capability* 9]. He elucidates that “‘consecutive reasoning’ is the power of categorizing and representing objects as externally related to one another. It is almost quantitative...it is mediate...in contrast to the Imagination, which is intuitive and immediate; it analyses rather than synthesises, and it dissects rather than creates. It is essentially an outward view of phenomena, and never succeeds in grasping the reality within. The Imagination is the direct opposite: it looks inward, grasping by an effort of sympathy and intuition the hidden intention and reality of life” [Bate, *Negative Capability* 9]. The “consecutive man” is thus, incapable of remaining “content with half-knowledge”. And Okri is basically saying the same thing when talking about the coloniser, who is the “consecutive man” in his novel. What is to be noted here is that a full or complete knowledge of anything is impossible to reach anyway; the premise of ‘negative capability’ recognises and accepts this and that is why, it endorses contentment with “half-knowledge”.

The concept of ‘negative capability’ thus holds tremendous deconstructive power and we see its demonstrations in Okri’s novel. The writer applies the strains of ‘negative capability’ inherent in his culture to contest the hegemony of the forms of knowledge imposed by the coloniser. He speaks for a poststructural open-endedness that is reflected in the encouragement of mysteries, in that there is no search for closure of meaning or wish for totalisation, or the consolidation of a particular centre, on the part of the colonised natives. Instead of the demystification of the world in the tradition of the Enlightenment philosophy, Okri re-enchants the world that he presents to his readers—full of spirits and angels—without trying to explain them away. Okri thus defies the epistemological tyranny of the coloniser and argues for a decentering of knowledge by upholding other forms of knowledge that cannot be pinned down by the statutes and standards of mere reason. His choice of a magic-realist mode also reflects the spirit of negative capability, in that he does not go for an “irritable” explanation of the various phenomena that he represents; as the form allows, he simply lets them be. Negative capability is thus a mentality that is at ease with ambiguity. As can be seen in the passage cited from the novel, the people that Okri depicts are attuned and open to multi-layered realities which are behind their willingness to remain in doubt and uncertainties. They prefer myths over hardcore facts, since they are aware of the shifting nature of all paradigms of thought. The negative capability evidenced in their way of living, does not privilege one epistemological stream—hence “for the many over the one...their polygamous thinking”; it stands for relativism, perspectivism and tolerance, with no claims to superiority of one thought over another. It brings to mind the idea of Nietzschean perspectivism (Nietzsche being one of the triad influencing Derrida’s formulation of deconstruction) which holds that all theories are ongoing interpretations—it can be never final, that all knowledge is provisional and that there is no absolute truth. Okri looks at the way all these serve to unsettle and disrupt the analytical appetite characteristic of the typical coloniser with his insistence on dogma. The insights of A. D. Hope, an Australian writer, is strikingly similar and quite pertinent to what Keats and Okri have to say regarding the matter. Resembling and reiterating the emphasis of negative capability on plurality and uncertainty, he writes that, “the type of mind which can be content to recognise the hypotheses on both sides without demanding certainty in either seems comparatively rare. A continual exercise of suspended judgement on matters which admit of no proof seems almost impossible to most temperaments and an attempt to keep it up seems to produce a corruption of intellectual fibre or a relapse into indifference. To such minds the contemplation of the limits of human knowledge is gruesome...the exceptional minds are marked out by joy, the exhilaration with which they are able to contemplate the hypothetical nature of all explanations of the world” [Hope, *Book VII* 128]. He further writes in detail, affirming his stand for ‘negative capability’ like Okri, saying that, “the greatest problem is that morally, socially, artistically we are brought up and adapted to deal with a world of a definite and definable kind...but now, we live in a world which offers us a choice of possible cosmologies and keeps on changing the choices so fast that we have no time to build a permanent belief on any. The same is true of biology, psychology, social theory, ethics. All our knowledge is provisional and we are trying to live by ‘permanent’ or ‘reliable’ beliefs and principles in what is and from now on promises to be a purely ‘provisional’ world. The **New Men** will be people with an immense store of **negative capability**, taking a provisional world for granted and not asking for permanent assurances or faiths anchored in fixed systems” [Hope, *Book X* 19-20]. The people that Okri describes, with “their polygamous thinking...their unholy abundance of feeling...their excessive interpretation of things”, thus form a part of this circle of ‘New Men’ that Hope talks about. They are against a set reading of the world and are therefore able to thwart and threaten homogeneous and hegemonic discourses. In the manner of deconstruction then, Okri, by highlighting the negative capability immanent in his culture, exposes the fallacy of the epistemological and ontological codification of the world as done by the coloniser. We see in the novel that the coloniser studies and deduces the natives based on his limited understanding with a narrowed scope, thereby truncating everything associated with

the colonised; hence, the rightful and inevitable allegation of misrepresentation upon the coloniser--as done by Said in his *Orientalism*. Fine with “half-knowledge”, people possessing negative capability do not lay any claims to omniscience or any authoritative ground to order knowledge--which the coloniser--as can be seen in Okri’s novel, does. While on the matter of colonial misrepresentation, it is important to say that the indigenes operating on negative capability, with “their unscientific thinking” are proved right, however unwillingly, by the scientific community itself, as they are able to grasp the fundamental instability of all things in this universe. We can look at what Glausser has to say on this as he writes that, “most scientists would likely shun Negative Capability...it might be said that the whole purpose of science is to resist Keats’ willingness to remain in doubt. But this premise needs qualification. Scientific facts—unlike certain truths established by the Catholic magisterium—always remain open cases: no claim of natural truth can ever be sealed and preserved against further observations. Science both disdains Negative Capability and builds it as an enabling condition” [Glausser, *Mosaic* 60]. We therefore see in Okri’s novel, that the colonial observations of the natives as a set of irrational people with inferior intellect and low cognitive ability, lose all ground.

As evident, Okri, who is aware of the potency of the idea of negative capability, puts it to good use--his postcolonial enterprise being aided by it. With it he comes heavily against institutional knowledge which results in the establishment of institutional power, and shatters all the unfair claims to authority and dogmatic confidence.

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