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Okonkwo's Suicide: The Aftermath of an Existential Crisis

Anirban Dutta Choudhury

M.A. English 2nd year

University of Delhi.

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Abstract:

“Things Fall Apart” was a novel which brought African postcolonial literature to the fold. As part of the African Trilogy, it questioned all the changes and ideas that the supposed White man’s Burden engaged during their conquering of the African nations. The impact that it creates thereafter left a veritable scar on the nation. “Things Fall Apart” is book about the dangers of culture shock and the questionable ‘superiority’ of imperial conquests. Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, finds himself displaced from all that he believed. His depersonalization and the decentering of his world moved him to commit the act of suicide. This essay attempts to understand, from an existentialist perspective, the act of suicide itself. Taking cues from the stalwarts of existentialist philosophy such as Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre, the essay attempts to dismantle the problematic idea of suicide, and how Okonkwo must have reached this particular conclusion in his life.

Keywords: African, postcolonial, existential crisis, culture shock, depersonalization.

Chinua Achebe’s book “Things Fall Apart” was written in 1958, as an attempt to destroy the misleading conceptions about African culture that books such as Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” had given to the world at large. The dry and inaccurate depictions of Africans as savages by the European Victorian authors were challenged by Achebe’s book and its portrayal of the Igbo society in the heart of Nigeria. The book tackles various themes, such as superstition, religion, culture, tradition and the old versus the new. However, one aspect of the novel which is not as widely discussed as the others is the aspect of existentialism. It is this exact theme that this paper will attempt to discuss, taking into consideration various instances in the life of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel. Most importantly, his act of committing suicide at the end of “Things Fall Apart” shall be solicited to be seen from an existentialist perspective, using the ideas of philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The paper shall try to present the suicide of Okonkwo through existentialist ideas, rather than just through a cultural viewpoint. For this act to be discussed,

however, the idea of chi in the life of the Igbos must be evaluated, through a cultural standpoint, in order to arrive at an existential one.

The Igbo community believed in the notion of chi, which would stand in for one's fate or personal god. Chi, according to Ebeogu, can be manipulated (Friesen 1). This acts as a paradox to the fact that Igbos believed that they could not engage in a task, or life in general, unless their chi consents to it. This could imply that the relationship between a man and his chi can thus be exploited to make ends meet. Okonkwo's chi can be seen from the perspectives of his culture and his existential anxiety, and how he conforms to it or rebels against it. Regardless of how his chi and actions are interpreted, it can be said that they are quite necessary in understanding the reasons for his suicide.

In order to bring these notions into a proper context, various incidents from the life of Okonkwo must be read closely and analysed. At the beginning of the text, we are told that Okonkwo has claimed great name and fame amongst his clan members and the nine villages, especially after his win in a wrestling match against Amalinze the Cat. Achebe states in the very first line that "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (Achebe 1). As Alan R. Friesen points out, this could be indicative of the notion that Okonkwo's chi is quite strong, and gives him an aura of a demigod, or a Greek hero, providing a connection with the establisher of their village. This is similar to how Greek heroes were connected to their Gods, for their mental ability and physical prowess (2). The wrestling match between the Cat and Okonkwo was described as "one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (Achebe 1).

Okonkwo had already decided at a young age that his will and intention to engage in hardship and difficulties would result in the turning point of his life. His father's apathy and inertia had set the wheels of his mind in motion, that to achieve something even remotely resembling greatness, he would have to start anew. His first experience as a farmer was to borrow yam seeds and plant his own harvest, keeping in mind that Unoka had left him close to nothing except his reputation as an agbala. However, a bad harvest resulted in a large loss for Okonkwo. Nonetheless, Okonkwo's determination to break free from his chi's bondage and to master his own destiny took over, and forged a winning mindset in Okonkwo, as he states "...I survived that year, I shall survive anything" (Achebe 27). It is possible that although Okonkwo's conscious mind thought of his future in the context of his culture and

tradition, he needed to be the exact opposite of what his father was so that he could redeem himself and his family, Achebe's narrative could be hinting at Okonkwo's subconscious thought processes as well. This would refer to one of the basic tenets of existentialism, that one's search for meaning in life culminates in the person realizing that their actions in that same life are the determining factors for their formation of meaning. This could act as a precursor to a phase of Okonkwo's disillusionment with life in the later part of the text, echoing what Kierkegaard called "anxiety" or "Angst" (Panza, Gale 60), leading to Heidegger's concept of "Dasein" (Panza, Gale 118) or "authenticity", and further progress to Sartre's idea of "freedom" (Panza, Gale 68) and "responsibility" (Panza, Gale 164), in the face of freedom and an "absurd" world, as proposed by Albert Camus.

Proceeding further into the life events of Okonkwo, it can be shown that his life has changed from that of "great poverty and misfortune" (Achebe 28) to that of being respected and nigh revered. Although some critics have stated that chi can almost act as an impediment in Okonkwo's path to success, providing the protagonist with nothing but shame, resentment and disappointment (Friesen 1), his chi so far as conformed to Ebeogu's statement of consenting to Okonkwo's wishes (74). His luck, or "personal diety" according to Ebeogu (Friesen 1) has so far been a companion to Okonkwo's hidden desires to find life's meaning. However, all is not well in Okonkwo's life as a village great, as he had to partake in the killing of his adopted son, Ikemefuna; landing the killing blow. The Oracle of the village had desired the death of Ikemefuna, in order to allay the gods of the Umuofia clan. Okonkwo, for fear of being known as a weakling, decided to go against his friend OgbuefiEzeudu's advice, in which the latter stated that it would be a wise decision by Okonkwo in refraining from this heinous activity. After Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo's questioning of his faith, and his disenchantment with life and the meaning he created through spiritual faith begins to take shape. What harm could a humble boy such as Ikemefuna have done, that he had to pay the ultimate price? It is possible that at this point, Okonkwo's questioning of his clan's traditions would not stand well with his chi and his culture's attitude towards it. However, it begins the process of "Angst", leading to the realization "freedom" and "responsibility" that Sartre espouses.

The next incident to be considered when looking closely at Okonkwo's life is one that occurs much before Ikemefuna's death. The Igbo community followed a tradition called the Week of Peace, during which the clan honours its earth goddess, by the name of Ani, and prays for a bountiful harvest. As the name suggests, no violent acts can be conducted during

this time. Okonkwo raises his hand on Ojiugo, his youngest wife, as punishment for her negligence in cooking dinner. Okonkwo pays a severe punishment for this transgression, which the Igbos referred to as “nso-ani” (Achebe 14). Due to this, his reputation in the Igbo society is slightly tainted. It forms the first in a series of events which lead to Okonkwo's chi being compromised, according to the customs of the clan. However, if we consider an existentialist point of view, which takes into deliberations the actions of the protagonist, and not his chi (which, somewhat ironically, is affected by Okonkwo's actions), then we tend to notice that Okonkwo's antics severely tarnish his reputation in the clan. Sartre's idea of freedom and responsibility take precedence here, as Okonkwo's subconscious may have realized that he does have the freedom to do as he pleases, to satisfy his whims. However, he must take responsibility for those same actions, and pay their price. When Okonkwo strikes his wife, it seems like he no longer cares about the repercussions his conduct might have. He, at that moment, decided not to give importance to the customs of his clan. He thus fails to consider his behaviour in the context of his clan's customs and the belief of chi.

The discussion of the episode in which Okonkwo's gun explodes and accidentally kills Ogbuefi Ezeudu's son, however, is somewhat complicated. When looking at this incident from an Igbo outlook, one would argue that this incident occurred because Okonkwo had angered the gods, such as Chukwu, and the ancestors known as “ndichie” (Shelton 36). With actions like this, his manipulation of his chi has led him to such a state. However, a counterpoint from an existentialist view could be made by keeping the idea of the meaninglessness and absurdity of the world in the background. As such, the world does not have any order to the events which occur in it. Thus, the randomness of the gun's explosion is magnified in the face of absurdity. As Albert Camus states in his essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus”, “The world in itself is not reasonable...what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (7). This echoes what Friedrich Nietzsche marked about the longing for meaning in life's insignificant events, “...that the desire for order seems to markedly increase to the degree in which it's painful to believe otherwise” (Panzer and Gale 79). Bearing these sayings in mind, Okonkwo's unfortunate incident can be considered as a random event. If there is no reason which can be attributed to the killing of Ezeudu's son, then the Igbo population would not have to come to terms with the absurdity of the situation, and thus become anxious due to their faltering faith. There would be a marked discrepancy in the order of Igbo traditions, with a total loss of meaning which was cemented on spiritual beliefs. This is a situation not

unlike the one faced by Mersault in Albert Camus' "The Stranger", in which Mersault was convicted of killing the Arab, but could not provide a proper reason for doing so, blaming the sunlight on his eyes as a catalyst for the action, thereby baffling the entire courtroom later on (Camus VI). Okonkwo, on the other hand, has been banished to his mother's village, Mbanta, for seven years. His titles have also been reclaimed. In order to wash away his sins, the villagers belonging to Ezeudu's family decide to burn Okonkwo's quarters and kill his livestock. Thus, Okonkwo loses everything that he had so tirelessly worked for his entire life. This makes the protagonist question his faith and beliefs once again. Moreover, after the slaying of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's relationship with his biological son, Nwoye was acutely damaged. After the death of Ezeudu's son and their consequent banishment from the village, Nwoye had lost the opportunity to inherit his father's land and wealth. This estranges their dynamics even further, and Nwoye relinquishes his Igbo roots. As for Okonkwo, he questions the decisions made by his village in banishing him for an incident which he did not have any control over. The intense sense of loss of property and a sense of belonging, along with the ruin of his efforts in becoming a legend of the Umuofia clan was accompanied by a serious re-evaluation of Okonkwo's principles of spiritual concepts. More often than not, when one begins to ask questions about the doctrines of their faith, it follows that their ideas about a sense of belonging and meaning in the world is questioned as well. This exact feeling began to trouble Okonkwo.

As Okonkwo was banished to Mbanta, his village's belief system was being questioned in a more literal manner, by the colonials. Their decision to establish their Christian faith in the heart of Nigeria and the Igbo society was not met well. As Okonkwo returned to the village after seven years, he noticed that none of the villagers met him with any sort of reverence or respect; something that he was habituated to in his life prior to the banishment. Instead, in retaliation to the burning down of the established missionary church, Okonkwo, along with a few of the other villagers, is locked up in jail, whipped, and has to pay a large bail amount. Due to the shame of such a situation, Okonkwo kills the two Igbo messengers of the missionary and proceeds to hang himself, thereby committing suicide. Before doing so, however, he realizes that the small glimpse of community pride that he had witnessed in the burning down of the church was little more than a small demonstration. He understands that his society is on the brink of change; its traditions and place in the world shall be hotly contested by newer and more resourceful religions. His entire life's work and efforts will ultimately mean nothing in the greater scheme of things.

It is at this point that an analysis of the Okonkwo's suicide can be done with reference to Albert Camus' ideas of the absurd and his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus". Camus, in his essay, states that "[T]here is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus 1). Camus posits that once one encounters the reality of the world, the sheer absurdity of life, and faces anxiety, they have two options: either to commit suicide, or to live on, knowing that every action in their life will ultimately be tackled by the absurd. His belief is that suicide does not remain viable on the same levels as that of the second option. According to Camus, one must continue to face the rigours of life and take solace from the process. He takes the example of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the Gods for cheating death. Sisyphus would have to push a large rock up a hill. Upon reaching the top, the rock would roll down the hill and Sisyphus would have to start the entire process again, for all eternity (Camus 23). Camus postulates that every human being is similar to Sisyphus, and must push their own boulders (problems) up the hill of life, and in turn appreciate the process of doing so; they must find their own meanings through the act of living life, and not their results. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 24). When relating this with the state of Okonkwo, it can be interpreted that his ideals and notions of the meaning of life were thus greatly challenged by the events that took place. If a cultural frame of reference takes the lead in this situation, one could state that Okonkwo committed suicide due to the fact that he either wanted to rouse his clan members to take action against the white invaders, or in order to make a statement that he was ashamed of what his clan had been reduced to. However, when considering an existentialist standpoint, it can be stated that through the impending death of his culture, Okonkwo's stance on life and its meaning has reached its peak hour of questioning. He had thus identified with the state of living life in which he was facing the absurdity of the world, and had confronted Angst, realizing that all of his life's decisions had brought him to this stage. His epiphany of freedom and the fact that he was responsible for his own fate, that chi did not play a part in this, the weight of all the choices bearing down on his shoulders drove him to commit suicide. He could not bring himself to understand the process of living, and only interpreted the consequences through his cultural and traditional vision.

"Things Fall Apart" can be analysed from multiple viewpoints, as shown here. Although Okonkwo's suicide does not play a large part in the colonial world, or even that of his own community, it stands as a testament to the power of interpretation of personal angst. His death marks as a reminder of why actions could take pre-eminence over a fatalistic life

view. The Igbo society's ultimate fate can thus be evaluated as an aftermath of their lack of desire to question their customs and regimes, with Okonkwo's downfall bearing down on their mind-sets as a prime example of such an outlook. A thorough look at Okonkwo's actions and their interpretations might lead to even further insights. His suicide stands as a pillar to the wrongs of colonialism and the effect that it had on the colonized. The White Man's Burden with all its connotations actually proved to be otherwise. The Burden rested less on the shoulders of a privileged white man, who siphoned off the riches and destroyed communities and cultures. Instead, the burden fell more on the colonized, and dethroned their ideas of the world. The inferiority complex induced by the West, including the brainwashing of future generations (as in the tragic case of Nwoye) led to a sense of decentering and depersonalization of Okonkwo, and his community as a whole. Though his suicide will always remain as a question of identity politics or communal pride, there is no question of Okonkwo's world being shattered from different aspects. His life's work reduced to ashes, and his respect changed to absolute humiliation in the eyes of the Igbo gods and faithful. Tragic his death may be, but raise questions, it must.

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