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ACHEBE AND KAFKA FAILED THEIR PROTAGONISTS

1. Introduction: Parallels in Peculiarities

Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 to a teacher in a mission school in Ogidi. He attended primary school in Ogidi and Government College Umuahia for his secondary school education. In the year 1948, he got scholarship to study medicine in the University of Ibadan. He started with the medical studies then changed to Liberal Arts (English/History/Religion). He got his B.A. in 1953.

His novels and short stories were translated into many languages and he is one of the most widely read authors in Nigeria. He influenced the writings of many Africans. His four novels were translated into German language as the following: *Things Fall Apart* as *Okonkwo oder Das Alte Stürzt*, *No Longer At Ease* as *Obi*, *Arrow of God* as *Der Pfeil Gottes* and *Man of the People* as *Mann des Volkes*. African culture, in particular Igbo culture was introduced to the rest of the world through his works.

In the year 1990, an international symposium "Eagle on Iroko", was organised in honour of Chinua Achebe. This symposium has further proven Achebe's world-wide reception. Achebe became Professor of English in the University of Nigeria in the year 1970. Since 1981, he has become Professor Emeritus of the same University. His writings are great contributions to the studies in the Humanities.

Franz Kafka was born in 1883 in Prag. He spent his entire life in this city. Only shortly before his death in 1924 did he leave this city. He studied first in 1901 Germanistic, then Law. He became a civil servant in 1908 and worked in the Workers' Accident Insurance Department as a jurist. He remained in this service until two years before his death, when he had to retire because of ill-health. His most productive years are between 1912 and 1924.

Kafka is known today all over the world and he is recognised as one of the representative authors of the twentieth century. His works influenced many writers all over the world. One reads his name in books, which discuss the existential situation of man in today's world.

Social backgrounds play a major role in the themes of Achebe and Kafka. Kafka presents the problems of man in a modern, developed industrial society. Achebe presents the problems of the individual in the society, which is changing as a result of colonisation. While Kafka's comments focus mostly on the individualism of modern man, Achebe comments on the demands of the individual as a member of a group. How does the affected individual feel and think about the physical and the social changes in the society? How does one react to the pressures of the changed or changing world? Achebe and Kafka tried in their works to thematise the above and other questions.

As jews in Czech environment, brought up as Germans, Kafka and other jews in Prag felt strange in their social environment. In his essay *Kafka Short Stories,* J.M.S. Pasley commented on the above feeling as follows:

> ... From German point of view they are jews, from Czech viewpoint they are Germans and from their viewpoint, they are like the strange animal in Kafka's short story "Eine Kreuzung" which is half cat and half lamb.[1]

Achebe himself described, how he grew up in the crossroad of cultures:

> On one arm of the cross we sang hymns and read the Bible night and day. On the other my father's brother and his family, blinded by heathenism, offered food to idols ... But I knew, without knowing why, that it was too simple a way to describe what was going on ...[2]

In the family, Kafka sees the father as "superpower". One sees the relationship between father and son in many of his works. The family is also seen as a closed system by Achebe. As a son of a Mission School teacher, who participated in bringing foreign Religion and Regime to their village, Achebe writes from personal experiences and historical perspectives. His themes are social experiences, which are rooted in the tragic conflicts between two cultures (European and African). Achebe's and Kafka's characters are victims of their social environments.

In spite of the different cultural backgrounds and life experiences, both authors have tried in their own ways to thematise the obsessions of modern man. They have presented in their works, the misery, the fear, the yearnings and the despair of man in a changing society. Their themes are full of tragic conflicts; generation-conflict, loneliness and alienation. At the end of serious efforts to draw some

meaning in life, most of Kafka's and Achebe's protagonists failed in their struggles. We are not trying to say that Achebe and Kafka are comparable in all respects. When we first discussed the themes of alienation and conflicts of generations by the two authors in a seminar in Germany in the eighties one of the reactions we received was that Kafka writes out of the subconscious and presents no real situations, whereas Achebe presents real situations. Our reply to the above comment is that every writer, no matter the cultural or other background writes out of some form of experience, personal or other. Kafka himself has explained in 1904, that "ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns". The frozen sea in Kafka has been shown to be nothing but his personal sufferings, longings, questionings and fears.[3] All these are individual experiences. It is true that Achebe's writings are mostly of historical perspectives but they are not devoid of personal experiences.

We have only tried to show that in their attempt to present the struggle for existence of the individual in a changing society, that the two authors have ended in most of their works in letting their protagonists fail in the said struggle. We have also tried to some extent to treat the author Franz Kafka as if he were a fictional character. We did this particularly with his work *Brief an den Vater.* We have treated Kafka in the above respect, because a lot of the biographical and other materials by and on him have shown that the central theme of his life is also the central theme of his works. We do not therefore feel the need to be apologetic, when indeed Kafka's correspondences, including the said letter to his father were made public as an aid to the understanding of his fictions and have been used by critics to that effect.[4]

We would then proceed to discuss the theme of this paper in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease, Arrow of God, Kafka's Brief an den Vater (Letter to the Father), Das Urteil (The Judgement), Die Verwandlung (The Metamorphoses)* among others.

2. Achebe and Kafka leave their Protagonists in the lurch

Achebe and Kafka failed their protagonists in their life struggles. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) is a split personality. He develops waxes and wanes in power and authority. At the end of the story, he ends his life with murder and suicide.

Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "Die Verwandlung", a businessman with

hopes, becomes gradually alienated from his society until he finally dies in loneliness. Kafka has shown himself a split personality (if we may take him as the main character of his *Brief an den Vater*). Kafka's father filled him with a sense of inferiority complex. This feeling has hampered, among other things, his wish for a wife. He died a bachelor. In Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, the protagonist Obi has not fared well either. He ended his bright career as a civil servant in corruption and was jailed.

Georg Bendemann in Kafka's "Das Urteil" was sentenced to death by drowning by his father and he carried out the sentence by drowning himself. Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* waxed and waned as chief priest of Ulu until he was gradually abandoned by his people, who sacrificed to an "alien" God. Ezeulu ended his life insane, when the death of his beloved son struck as the *last straw*. The above are only some examples. Other protagonists of Achebe and Kafka are ruined in their struggle for some meaning in life.

2.1 *Man as a Victim of his Social Environment: Fear, Anxiety, Yearnings and Despair in the Works of Achebe and Kafka*

The heroes of Achebe and Kafka are victims of their social environments. They run aground in the uninterrupted reactions to their fate.

The society creates the norms and manners of behaviour. The individual then prepares personal dispositions for the subjective reactions to the social stipulations.

Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is a typical example to the above reaction to the social norms. His society stipulates the quality of manhood and it is ony an irony of fate that Okonkwo started life as a disadvantaged. As a young man, he had to struggle, because although his father was a good musician, he still was regarded in his society as a failure because of his inability to earn a chieftaincy title and to leave barns as inheritance for his son.[5] Okonkwo lived in continuous fear of being like the father and as a result his whole family suffered. The family suffered, because he no longer showed any other emotions, except that of anger. The entire family feared him.[6] Okonkwo longed to earn the highest title in the town. He was already honoured as a famous wrestler and warrior of the town. He was disdainful of those, who were weak.[7] When his people no longer acted as one, Okonkwo tried in vain to fight the aliens in his

town alone, and as a result he committed suicide in the end.

Okonkwo is but, what his society made of him.

In his essay, Eustace Palmer was of the above view when he maintained that most of Okonkwo's characteristics were a reaction to the demands of his society, which attached so much importance to rank and prestige.[8] The conversion of his son to christianity brought Okonkwo to a final despair. He thought on the said conversion as follows:

> To abandon the gods of one's fathers and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination.[9]

The world depicted by Kafka's works appears chaotic and "turned upside down". In his biographical essay on Kafka, Bert Nagel has painted the following picture of Kafka the author. He said:

> In seinen Aufzeichnungen, also in den Tagebuechern (und Briefen) begegnet uns ein unglucklicher, ja verzweifelter Mensch.[10]

Kafka lived in continuous fear of the father. His *Brief an den Vater* begins with the explanation of the above fear.[11] Kafka's father was very authoritative. Kafka's main problem with the father's method of upbringing was that it made a small child lose the right orientation in life, for the father laid down many rules and regulations, which he himself never observed.

In the entire letter, Kafka showed himself laden with fear. He and the sisters lived in despair as a result of their father's tyranny.[13]

Kafka yearned for a marriage but remained a bachelor till death. Almost a third of *Brief an den Vater* explained the cause of his inability to marry.[14]

A feeling of inadequacy, which the father filled in him was the cause of the said inability.

J.M.S. Pasley was of the above view where he said:

> His father, a self-made man of tyrannical character, played a decisive role in Kafka's life ... and unwittingly filled him with a strong sense of inadequacy and guilt ... The importance of this unhappy relationship, may be gauged from Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* ... analysis of a neurosis which hampered among other things his natural wish for a wife and family ...[15]

Kafka's *Das Urteil* ("The Judgement") and *Brief an den Vater* are thematically related to one another. Both are an answer to the

disapproval of his marraige engagement by the father. Kafka has therefore anticipated his fate in the fictional story *Das Urteil*. Both in the said story and in real life, Kafka's engagements to marry were but a failure. The protagonist of the story *Das Urteil*, Georg Bendemann suffered like the author Kafka in despair and feeling of guilt. He died without realising the marriage he so much longed for.

Georg and Kafka are victims of their social environment just like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

In *Brief an den Vater*, Kafka has shown how young people expect of their models not only to lay down rules and regulations, but also to keep those regulations they laid down themselves. A young man begins to be very critical, if he is a lot criticised. This was Kafka's experience with the father. In *Das Urteil*, Georg's father also criticised him so much and in the end sentenced him to death. Georg felt guilty.[16]

The problems of Kafka's protagonists are mostly rooted in their families. Achebe's protagonists react to the changes in the society as they affect them as members of a group or groups. This is a major difference between Kafka's and Achebe's criticisms.

2.2 *The Tragic Conflicts: Conflict of Generations and Alienation in the Works of Achebe and Kafka*

Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* and *Das Urteil* deal with father-son-conflict. The conflict between Hermann and Franz Kafka and also that between father Bendemann and his son Georg are based on immense difference in the structure and stature of the characters. Kafka saw this big difference when he commented:

> Jedenfalls waren wir so verschieden, und in dieser Verschiedenheit so gefaehrlich, dass ... man haette annehmen koennen, dass du mich einfach niederstampfen wirst (*Brief* ..., p.9).

The difference between father and son exists in the corporal disparity:

> Ich war ja schon niedergedrueckt durch deine blosse Koerperlichkeit. ich erinnere mich zum Beispiel daran, wie wir uns oefters zusammen in der Kabine auszogen. ich mager, schwach, schmal, Du stark, gross, breit. Schon in der Kabine kam ich mir laecherlich vor ... (*Brief* ..., p.12).

Georg Bendemann felt the same disparity in their size, when he commented that his father was still a giant. *Das Urteil*, p.11).

Kafka also sees intellectua superiority of the father-*Brief* ..., p.13). He wrote:

> Ich stand in allenm meinem Denken unter deinem schweren Druck, und auch in dem Denken, das nicht mit dem Deinen uebereinstimmte, und besonders in diesem ... (*Brief* ..., p.14).

As mentioned earlier, Kafka's father was to him a 'Super Authority'. To this view he commented: "Du bist das Mass aller Dinge", "die letzte Instanz" (*Brief* ..., p.11). The father became almost a god-like authority, that takes decision on issues of life and death.

Kafka lost trust of his own capability, and was overcome by a feeling of 'nothingness'. From this corporal and intellectual superiority of father to son, which was also expressed in *Das Urteil:* "Ich bin noch immer der viel Staerkere" *Urteil,* p.16), came the 'fear' of the father by the son as evident in the expression: "So sieht auch Georg" "Zum Schreckbild seines Vaters auf" *Urteil,* p.15) and also: "er steht in einem Winkel moeglichst weit vom Vater" *Urteil,* p.15). Kafka saw the father also as a 'judge', who sentenced him to death by drowning (p.18). Georg and Kafka are the inferior set in the father-son-conflict. Both could not overcome their dependence on the father, because they had feeling of guilt. The additional effect of this feeling of guilt was the loss of hegemony in the family business by Georg.

Georg and Kafka were ruined in the opposition to a stronger father and as a result they both remained in "infantile dependence" as Emrich put it in the epilogue to the *Brief an den Vater,* p.83. This patriachal 'super power' forms a major part of most of Kafka's stories. In his novels *Das Schloss (The Castle)* and *Der Prozess (The Trial),* this theme of 'Power' is seen in the societal authorities.[17]

In the opinion of Bert Nagel, the *Brief an den Vater* depicts the world of a child engrossed in 'fear', which fear further affected his psychological perception of the adult.[18]

Nagel's opinion summarised the father-son-relationship as presented by Kafka's texts.

Achebe also presented the father-son-relationship in his novel *Things Fall Apart* as one between a 'super power' and a subordinate, and between a superior and an inferior being. The hero of *Things Fall Apart* felt like Hermann Kafka and father Bendemann as 'Super Power' and also was disdainful of those, who were weak. *(Things*

Fall Apart, p.21). Even as a young man Okonkwo struggled in order not to be like his father Unoka, who was regarded as weak (*Things Fall Apart*, p.17ff). Because he was disdainful of weak people, Okonkwo met tragic conflicts in life. One such conflict was experienced with his son Nwoye. On page 34 of the book stays the following remarks:

> Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him.

At another time, Okonkwo yelled out at the son:

> I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands. And if you stand staring at me like that, Amadi ora will break your head for you (p.34).

The conflict between father and son was marked in the gradual breakdown of normal relationship between father and son and Nwoye's final alienation from the father allowed no resolution or reconciliation (pp. 166-177). Nwoye was shown in the entire story as a young and sensitive man, who reacted to certain customs of his society, especially the throwing away of newly-born twins and the murder of the war-victim Ikemefuna (pp. 71-72).[19]

The conflict of generations by Achebe has two levels namely: father-son-conflict and conflict of cultures. The meaning of Nwoye's conversion to christianity is two-fold. First, it is a revolt against the father and secondly, it is a rejection of the society, which the father represents.

Okonkwo's reactions to Nwoye's conversion tend towards the above view as the following presentation of his inner monologue indicates:

> Why he cried in his heart, should he, Okonkwo, of all people be cursed with such a son? He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or 'chi'. For how else could be explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behaviour? Now that he had time to think of it, his sons crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father ... was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors... (Things Fall Apart, p.142).

After the murder of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo usually called Nwoye in his "Obi" to keep him company. But the boy, already fearful of the father would sneak out as soon as the father dozed off (p. 61). This

was the beginning of the break-up of normal relationship between father and son, until the son, finally embraced christianity. Okonkwo's friend Obierika visited him in exile on seeing Nwoye among the christians. When he saw Nwoye, he entered into the following dialogue with him:

> "What are you doing here?", he asked Nwoye.
> "I belong to them", answered Nwoye.
> "How is your father?"
> "I don't know. He is no longer my father". (pp. 159-160)

Okonkwo rejected the son as he cursed him and from then on Nwoye no longer existed for him and he never returned to the father. At the end of the struggle to avenge the wrongs done to him by 'aliens', Okonkwo committed suicide. Death often resolves conflicts in Achebe's and Kafka's works.

Very often, conflicts in the works of both authors lead to alienation or are linked with the problem of alienation. Inwardly, Kafka lived in isolation and in exile, although in reality, he could not detach himself from his family. Alienation and loneliness are felt everywhere in many of his works. The entire *Brief an den Vater* has the above as one main theme. J.M.S. Pasley is also of the above view, when he said:

> The central theme of Kafka's work is also the central theme of his life: the emotional and spiritual isolation or estrangement of the individual. His heroes feel themselves estranged from the objects of sensory experience, or from the family...[20]

Achebe's protagonists are also alienated from the society. Although Nwoye's alienation finally led to the break-up of relationship between father and son, Achebe is first and foremost presenting, what William Nwaegbe in his dissertation called culture-alienation.[21] Culture-alienation is the result of conflict between two cultures (here the European and African).

In Kafka's story *Die Verwandlung (The metamorphoses)* alienation is presented as isolation of the individual from the family and society as a whole. The chief protagonist Gregor Samsa is a travelling salesman. Before his transformation, he took off very early on this business and he had to sacrifice a lot because the family was dependent on him. The occupation gradually became uninteresting to him, when he appeared to be only "someone that worked for the family" and not a member of the family. He had however to remain in the business in order to pay off the debts of the family. Then one

morning, he found himself transformed into a giant insect. This is how Kafka shows us Gregor's inner feeling. Rather than tell us that he woke up and felt changed to an insect, he let us believe that Gregor really saw himself transformed to an insect. This story, like some others by Kafka appears like a dream presentation, but is Kafka's way of depicting the innermost framework of a being. Gregor simply got gradually alienated from the family and the society at large and when he finally died, his corpse was swept out with a broom, as if it had not been a human being.

The chief character in Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease,* Obi Okonkwo, a grandson of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart,* presents the fate of many 'elites' of Africa after study sojourn in Europe or America. On his return from Europe, Obi found out that he could no longer accept certain aspects of the traditional Igbo culture like the 'osu' cult. He became gradually alienated from his people, who contributed to train him overseas. Destroyed by the conflicts of two worlds, his life ended in tragedy. Omalara sees in Obi an isolated, alienated individual.[22] Obi is the only character of Achebe, who like Kafka's characters was presented as individualist. Like many African 'elites' after stay in Europe or America, Obi withdrew from his culture. His individualism led him into more complicated problems and he finally ended up in prison for the crime of corruption.

Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* was gradually abandoned by his people. He waxed and waned as priest of a powerful god Ulu. At the end of the story, he was left insane.

We have tried to show that the world is in conflict in the works of Achebe and Kafka. Both authors have chosen characters who are in continuous reaction to the changes as affect them in their society. At the end of their struggle to find some meaning in life, most of their characters failed.

3. Concluding Remarks

Achebe and Kafka failed their protagonists in their life struggle. The protagonists, whom we discussed did not all merit the punishments they faced. Many of them arouse pity and not indictment, because they were reacting to the societal pressures, which at times were harsh, that only the fittest could survive. Why did Kafka have to treat the theme of marriage in a third of his *Brief an den Vater?* Why

could he not marry? Both in *Brief ...* and *Das Urteil*, the father was a barrier to the marriage engagements. Franz Kafka saw marriage as a possibility of equalling his father or becoming independent of him. He said:

> Die Heirat ist gewiss die Buergschaft fuer die schaerfste Selbstbefreiung und Unabhaengigkeit. Ich haette eine Familie, ich waere Dir ebenbuertig. *(Brief ...*, p.66).

Still Kafka was not able to marry inspite of the wish to do so. The normal thing in life is that parents would love to see their children grown up, independent, married and successful. Among adults, the father-son-rivalry as well as mother-daughter-rivalry is supposed to be over. That a man still sees his father as a rival shows some psychological problem which should move pity in others. Only in writing did Kafka feel himself independent of the father. He explained so in his *Brief ...*, where he wrote:

> ... im Schreiben und in dem, was damit zusammenhaengt, habe ich kleine Selbstaendigkeitsversuche gemacht (p.69).

It is pathetic, that a man should have such self-reflection. Hermann Kafka failed in his method of upbringing.

From our discussions one could say, that the fathers in the stories only succeeded unconsciously in alienating the dynasties they were trying to ensure.

Okonkwo did not, however, deserve the suicide he was pushed to commit. He should have struggled in vain without ending with the type of death he died. Many remained heathens in those days of first encounter with christianity, while their children got converted. Even today, christians and heathens still live together in many parts of our land. The said conflicts as presented by Achebe and Kafka appeared rather too disastrous to allow fair resolution.

Notes & References

1. J.M.S. Pasley, (ed.).: *Franz Kafka's Short Stories*, Oxford University Press, 1963, p.9.
2. Chinua Achebe: Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays, London Heinemann, 1975, pp. 65ff.
3. Binder, Hartmut (editor): Kafka Handbuch in zwei Baenden. Stuttgart & Kroenen, 1979, p.50ff. Cf. also Kafka's letters to Ottla and the family; his letters to Felice and Milena and even his *Brief an den Vater*. All these show how Kafka's writings reflect his personal experiences. Cf. also J.M.S. Pasley, Ibid., p.13.

4. Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* and his novella *Das Urteil* have been shown to be interrelated to a great extent. In the letters to Felice Bauer which he wrote almost daily in late autumn and winter 1912/13, there are hints as to the origin and circumstances of the stories he wrote during the same period. See: Kafka Handbuch in zwei Baenden, loc cit.

5. Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*, Fawcett Publications, Greenwich: 1959, p.8: see German translation: *Okonkwo oder Das Alte stuerzt* Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1983 edition, p.26f.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, p.21.

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12. Ibid., p. 17.

13. Ibid., p. 38ff.

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15. J.M.S. Pasley, loc. cit., p. 7.

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22. Omalara Leslie: "Nigeria, Alienation and the Novels of Achebe" in *Présence Africaine*, Bd. 84 1972, p. 99ff.