SUICIDE PARALLAX IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND GOETHE'S *SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OKONKWO AND WERTHER AND THEIR UNTRAGIC HEROISM

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Abstract
Since the beginning of time, man seems to be trapped in an existential quagmire in which life is marked by pains, suffering and apparent meaninglessness and from which there seems to be no escape. All efforts at achieving fulfilment slide into illusion. Philosophers have burdened themselves with the task of finding answers to questions about happiness and fulfilment in a world full of suffering, pain and meaninglessness. The great German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, who was considered a pessimist had posited that human beings have only dragged more people into the that gridlock of pain and suffering, which is the world through procreation. For Sartre we must live passionately, but on our own terms and take responsibility for our choices. For Camus, we must unleash revenge on life by consistently doing good; perhaps through that we may yet achieve fulfilment and be happy. Kierkegaard, on the other hand advocates a leap of faith at the limit of our struggles and hand our worries over to the Almighty God. The aim of this paper was to examine life as lived by Werther in Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther* and Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and see whether there was tragic necessity in Werther's and Okonkwo's suicide in the face of glaring hopelessness. The study was enabled by existentialist theoretical positions, while the method of approach was largely inductive and deductive.
Keywords: *Suffering, Pains, Suicide, Meaninglessness, Existential Quagmire*

Introduction

According to Stedman's (2006) medical dictionary, suicide is the act of deliberately causing one's death. The history of suicide goes as far back as ancient Athens. According to Szasz (1999: p11), persons who died through suicide, in ancient Athens, were denied the honour of normal burial: they were usually buried alone in the outskirts of the city without any headstone or marker. Dickson (2010: p.290), for his part, posits that, in ancient Rome, suicide was initially permitted, but was later deemed a crime against the state owing to its economic costs. Minois (2001) argues that while Aristotle was totally against suicide, Plato was ambivalent about it. Furthermore, Minois (2001) posited that people naturally died through suicide, in ancient Rome,

once they decided to volunteer in a gladiator combat or they had murdered someone to save the life of another and were, as such, plagued by guilt or as a result of mourning or from shame from being raped or as an escape from intolerable situations like physical suffering, military defeat, or criminal pursuit.

By the late 17th century, suicide was criminalized in Europe through the criminal ordinance of Louis XIV of France. In fact, the body of the person, who died through suicide, was always dragged through the streets, face down, and then hung or thrown on a garbage heap. Furthermore, all the property of the dead person was confiscated (Pickering, 2000: p. 69; Maris, 2000: p. 540).

During the Renaissance, views and attitudes towards suicide, slowly, changed. This is evident in the work of John Donne, entitled *Biathanatos* (1982). As society became more secularized in the Enlightenment period, traditional religious values, which included views on suicide, were questioned. Philosophers like David Hume refused to believe that suicide was a crime. Nietzsche (1988) had posited that it was an inestimable deed of courage for a man to do away with oneself.

Before suicide became a subject of interest to psychology, it was first engaged by philosophers. The reason for the seemingly desolate state of existence in the world has been the major preoccupation of philosophers from time immemorial. From Descartes through Kiekergaard to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus and Sartre, ways to live in the world to mitigate suffering and attain some measure of happiness have been issues of discursive engagement.

Descartes had to be certain of his existence first through knowing that he was a thinking thing. Kiekergaard's only hope of comfort in the midst of the suffering and seeming meaninglessness of existence was a willing leap of faith onto God, the author and finisher of faith. Nietzsche was willing to dismantle values and erect his in his pursuit of fulfilment. Heidegger advocated a

willing submission to being in order to be taught by it; for that alone could bring man the elusive succour. For Camus, there was no need to give up on life: by continuing doing what is good in spite of suffering, happiness and fulfilment could be achieved. For Sartre, it is important to live passionately on one's own terms and deliberately love humanity; for that is humankind's responsibility.

Much later, psychology began to dig deeper into the possible reasons people commit suicide. Psychologists and Psychiatrists alike have identified some risk factors associated with suicide. These factors include, according to Zalsman, et al. (2016) and Hawton, et al. (2012,) mental disorders, drug addiction and misuse, cultural, social and family situations as well as genetics, trauma and the condition of regarding existence as meaningless or amounting to nothing, that is, nihilism. According to Qin, P, Agerbo, E, Mortensen, P.B. Socio-economic problems such as unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, discrimination, divorce, separation or even unrequited love could trigger suicidal thoughts.

In the pre-colonial Igbo world, it was an abomination to commit suicide. Those who died through suicide were usually carried to "ajo" ofia or the "evil" forest and dumped there. "Ajo" Ofia or "evil" forest does not necessarily mean that the forest is evil. In the Igbo language, 'ajo' is an adjective that qualifies a noun or thing. Sometimes it connotes bad in an awe-inspiring way. For example, when someone is very good at something, the one may be addressed as bad, which connotes a certain expertise that borders on genius. So when the forest is termed evil or ajo, it is in expression of the awe felt by the people at the cosmic forces at work there, rather than in the forest being evil in the real sense of evil.

Those who committed homicide or female "ochu" were made to go on exile for a number of years as stated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, while those who committed murder or male

"ochu" had to die by hanging; they were usually given a rope to hang themselves, which is another form of suicide, but this time as punishment for murder. As Green (1964: p.100) puts it,

> Legal rules are of two main classes and are recognized as such. There are those which might be called ordinary human laws and those whose breach is held to be not only illegal but also an offence against a supernatural power and particularly against Ala, the land. Of the perpetrator of such an offence it would be said: "Omeruru ala" –"he polluted the land". Such offences are usually distinguished from merely natural offences.

As Okafor (1992: p. 34) further puts it, "The first category of laws that are easily discernible in the multifarious spectrum of Igbo body of laws are the divine laws. Divine here means pertaining to God, originating from God, tending towards God".

In view of all the above, it is important to raise the following questions: why did Werther and Okonkwo commit suicide? What are the socio-cultural situations that triggered suicidal thoughts in them? Are those situations bad enough to cause them to become suicidal? In other words, is there tragic necessity in their deaths? Even when they are tragic heroes in the context of Aristotelian tragedy, is their death necessary? Why is Werther in love with a married woman to the extent that he takes his life? Did Okonkwo have to kill the messenger of the White district officer? Does he not understand the consequences of doing that? Does he not know that it is an abomination to take his life? Does he not know doing that will make a mess of all his achievements in Umuofia? Any attempt to answer these questions will, definitely, bring about deep critical engagement with the texts and their various imports.

The Discourse

***Sorrows of Young Werther* as a text situated within German Romanticism**

The rational culture had become established during the age of enlightenment. Not only had it become established, but a concomitant scientific culture was also evolving. This enabled industrialization and increased urbanization. The implication of this was the suppression of the emotional and intuitive life as well as the destruction of the natural environment. Therefore, Romanticism was, as Isaiah Berlin (1999: p. 92) puts it:

> A new and restless spirit, seeking violently to burst through old and cramping forms, a nervous preoccupation with perpetually changing inner states of consciousness, a longing for the unbounded and the indefinable, for perpetual movement and change, an effort to return to the forgotten sources of life, a passionate effort at self-assertion both individual and collective, a search after means of expressing an unappeasable yearning for unattainable goals

In fact, the movement started in Germany between 1760s and 1780s with what was regarded as *Sturm und Drang*/Storm and Stress. This storm and stress is what describes the situation of giving vent to extreme emotions against the perceived constraint of rationalism. Berlin (1999: p.57-58) further argues that the sincerity and authenticity in the pursuit of inner goals matter more in the realm of ethics, politics and aesthetics, regardless of whether the pursuit is by individuals, groups, states, nations or movements.

As Berlin puts it:

> The painter, the poet, the composer do not hold up a mirror to nature, however ideal, but invent; they do not imitate (the doctrine of mimesis), but create not merely the means but the goals that they pursue; these goals represent the self-expression of the artist's own unique, inner vision, to set aside which in response to the demands of some "external" voice—church, state, public opinion, family

> friends, arbiters of taste| - is an act of betrayal of what alone justifies their existence for those who are in any sense creative (57-58).

If this is the case, then Goethe as a writer creates his own unique inner vision against the precepts of church, state, public opinion, family, friends and arbiters of taste, to justify his existence as a creative individual.

In the text, *Sorrows of Young Werther (2013)*, Werther is obviously a very sensitive young man. The way nature appeals to him and the way falsehood and hypocrisy in human nature make him uncomfortable are all proofs of how original a man he is. As he writes to his dear friend on MAY 10,

> When, while the lovely valley teems with vapour around me, and the meridian sun strikes the upper surface of the impenetrable foliage of my trees, and but a few stray gleams steal into the inner sanctuary, I throw myself down among the tall grass by the trickling stream; and, as I lie close to the earth, a thousand unknown plants are noticed by me: when I hear the buzz of the little world among the stalks, and grow familiar with the countless indescribable forms of the insects and flies, then I feel the presence of the Almighty, who formed us in his own image, and the breath of that universal love which bears and sustains us, as it floats around us in an eternity of bliss; and then, my friend, when darkness overspreads my eyes, and heaven and earth seem to dwell in my soul and absorb its power, like the form of a beloved mistress, then I often think with longing, Oh, would I could describe these conceptions, could impress upon paper all that is living so full and warm within me, that it

> might be the mirror of my soul, as my soul is the mirror of the infinite God!
>
> O my friend—but it is too much for my strength—I sink under the weight
>
> of the splendour of these visions (Goethe, p. 4)!

The novel is in the form of letters written by Werther to his friend Wilhelm. He describes events in the letters as they happen from month to month. He seems happy to have escaped the drudgery of a romantic relationship with a lady known as Leonora. He settles in a rural area and is determined to be a painter or artist. He does not achieve much as an artist. He spends time, instead, admiring the simple lifestyle of the ordinary people there. The simple lives of these ordinary country people remind him of the simple lives of people as described in the Bible. He strikes up friendship with local people of the town, especially the two brothers, Hans and Philip as well as a country chap, who happens to be in love with the widow that employs him.

Werther meets a lady at a dance in the village of Wahlheim, which is a short distance away from his own town. He thinks that the town is the most charming place in the countryside, and this is even more so because of the lady, who is the daughter of a retired district judge of the village, who had invited him to his ball party. Her name is Charlotte.

Werther and Charlotte share common interests: they are both enthusiasts of the new sentimental style of literature, represented by Goldsmith and Klopstock, as well as ancient writers like Homer and Ossian. Charlotte, however, is engaged to a man of means, Albert. This means that Werther can only be a friend to her and nothing more.

In the coming weeks, Werther grows fonder of Charlotte, loving her unique charm and insight as she, without complaints, carries the burden of being a mother. She is the eldest of eight children, and is responsible for taking care of her siblings after her mother's death.

When Albert returns his business trip, Werther meets him and it becomes obvious to him that Albert and Charlotte are in love. He decides to leave but changes his mind and instead prefers to forge a friendship with Albert, who he finds to be both intelligent and open-minded. This is a contrast to him Werther, who is rather intuitive and emotional.

Werther becomes more and more infatuated with Charlotte and begins to entertain the thoughts that he and Charlotte share a common nature and that she certainly would be happier with him. He is very certain about this because Charlotte is also a very intuitive and emotional person, unlike her fiancé Charlotte's aunt warns him not to invest too much of his heart in Charlotte because she is already engaged to a worthy man, Albert, who had gone to take care of matters concerning his father's death. She tells Werther that Albert is going to inherit great wealth from his late father. Werther does not give heed to this advice. However, Charlotte seems to be faithful to her fiancé as society expects her to be. She has no intention of leaving Albert. He leaves Wahlheim without informing Albert or Charlotte of his plan. He decides to concentrate on his official work in order to take his mind away from Charlotte and her partner. But before he leaves Wahlheim, he engages Albert on the topic of suicide. Albert finds it an act of cowardice. Werther tries to paint scenarios that ought to warrant that a man takes his own life. He is, all the same, unable to persuade Albert to admit that suicide is an act of courage.

Leaving Wahlheim, in order to concentrate on his official work, Werther finds his work boring and useless. He clashes with his employer, the ambassador, who he thinks is too meticulous and intellectual. He also hates the social scene of his new job, in which the aristocratic class rules over all, though he cultivates rewarding friendships with two aristocrats, Count C and Fräulein von B. The positive aspect of his job crumbles, however, when the aristocratic class, including Fräulein von B, snubs Werther at one of Count C's parties. Humiliated, Werther resigns from his

position, moving with another friend, Prince, to the Prince's country estates. This situation, too, is short-lived, as Werther finds himself irrevocably drawn back to Wahlheim and Charlotte.

When Werther returns to Wahlheim, he discovers that he still loves Charlotte very passionately, maybe because of the short separation of the two. Charlotte hints to him that it is possible that the impossibility of his possessing her is what feeds his obsession. Albert and Werther become increasingly estranged because of Werther's unrelenting desire to have Charlotte. Furthermore, because of the death of Han and the country lad's tale of love that ends in murder as well as the sorry state of Heinrich, a former employee of Charlotte's father, who was driven mad by his unrequited love of Charlotte, the idyllic ambience of the countryside so beloved and appealing to Werther is shattered. Werther becomes despondent.

Three days before Christmas of 1772, in an apparent effort to save their relationship, Charlotte instructs Werther not to visit her until Christmas Eve, so that by then whatever burning flame of passion in Werther will have abated, but Werther decides that he cannot accept such terms with Charlotte. He chose instead to kill himself. He decides to visit Charlotte for the last time and while at her place which he forces a kiss and is, therefore, instructed never to see her again.

At home, alone, Werther writes a letter to Charlotte. He asks her for Albert's hunting pistols, and she sends them to him. He shoots himself in the head with the pistol. He does not die immediately. In the morning, Charlotte, Albert and Charlotte's brothers and sisters watch him die. At the novel's end, Werther is buried without a church service. Charlotte becomes a shadow of herself: she is driven to desperate grief by Werther's death through suicide.

According to Hans-Erich Struck (1998: p.7), the historical distance of the reader to the text is the major reason for lack of comprehension and misunderstanding. In other words, one must understand the romantic period and the ideas behind it in order to appreciate why Werther

committed suicide in Goethe's work, *Sorrows of Young Werther*. It is the *Zeitgeist* of the period that Goethe tries to capture.

It was a period during which human intuition and emotions were valued over intellect and reason. The simple life of the countryside is preferred to the hustle and bustle of the big cities, and this is exactly why Werther dislikes people like his employer the Ambassador, and Albert, his rivalry in the desire for Charlotte, who are methodical and meticulous and who indulge the intellect more than they would their spiritual, intuitive and emotional lives. To Werther, Albert and Charlotte are a mismatch; for as he posits she would have been happier with him than with Albert; for he is not the man to satisfy the wishes of such a heart. He wants a certain sensibility; besides, their hearts do not beat in unison, unlike his, which beats in unison with hers because of their similar interest in reading and enjoying fiction and sharing the same sentiments about the works they read. In spite of all this, he feels that Albert loves Charlotte with all his soul (p. 48). Although Albert loves Charlotte with all his soul, yet Werther does not think they are soul mates. Werther thinks that Albert's love for Charlotte is reasoned and as such in tune with worldly procedures and standards and supported by the worldly institution of marriage for which his meddlesomeness would be considered as a sin. As he puts it,

> …in this world it is a sin to love you, to wish to tear you from his embrace. Yes, it is a crime; and I suffer the punishment, but I have enjoyed the full delight of my sin. I have inhaled a balm that has revived my soul. From this hour you are mine; yes, Charlotte, you are mine! I go before you. I go to my Father and to your Father. I will pour out my sorrows before him, and he will give me comfort till you arrive. Then will I fly to meet you. I will claim you, and remain your eternal embrace, in the

presence of the Almighty. (p.76)

The ideal Werther desires is articulated by Oskar Bernhardt (2009: p. 84), a German late 19th Century writer in his volumes entitled *In The Light of Truth, The Grail Message*. As he puts it:

> Marriages are made in heaven indicates in the first place that already at birth
>
> Every human being brings along certain qualities, the harmonious development
>
> Of which can only be achieved through those with matching qualities. These
>
> Matching qualities are not identical, however, but complementary to the others,
>
> And in completing each other they obtain their full value.

It is this full value that Werther thinks is missing in the union between Albert and Charlotte; it is this full value that he believes would be achieved if he and Charlotte were to be married; for as Bernhardt (2009: p.85) further puts it,

> Up till now many imagined that "what God hath joined" referred to the marriage.
>
> But this, however, had so far nothing to do with the meaning of the words. That
>
> which God has joined is a union where the conditions required for complete harmony
>
> are fulfilled, and it is thus made in heaven. Whether or not the permission of the State
>
> and the Church has been given for this union makes no essential difference.

***Things Fall Apart* as a text situated within the Colonial and Post-colonial Period**

In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said (2000) articulates how the West through their narratives invented an Eastern personality shaped by their prejudices and biases. It was not only the Eastern

personality that was invented by western intellectuals, but also the African personality. From the *Whiteman's Burden* by Kipling (1899), through *Mr Johnson* (1939) by John Cary to *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1899), and many more, the African personality was invented, and largely through biases and prejudices. These narratives, one way or the other, portray the African as less human and Africa as bereft of history and culture. Chinua Achebe's responses to all the falsehood spread about Africa are in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* and some of his essays. As Msiska puts it in his introductory note in Achebe's classic edition of *Things Fall Apart* (2008: p iii),

> Here through the revelatory technique of the stream of consciousness, Achebe allows us to enter the mind of an African subject, showing, unlike Conrad's and Cary's cardboard characters, a complex mental space. He does not plead the case for the humanity of the African, he dramatizes it as a natural feature of verisimilitude of being true to life, recovering a believable personality in its milieu. He suggests that the problem with colonialist writers is not that they were racist, but that they did not imitate reality sufficiently, discarding Aristotle's doctrine of mimesis.

In fact, Achebe in his essay "The Novelist as Teacher" edited by Olaniyan and Quayson (2007: p.105) writes about helping his society regain belief in herself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement by countering racism with and deconstructing the logic that sustains it. However, the implications of *Things Fall Apart*, according to Irele (2001: p.

117), extends much farther than an anti-colonial stance and yields to issues that are of greater import with regard to the African becoming. This fact is evident in the universe of the text: from Okonkwo's bravado, through Obierika's wisdom to Unoka's free and convivial spirit.

In the text, it is evident that Umuofia is an Igbo community living out its being, which is not independent of the people who make history through their existence in the being of that community –the same history some European philosophers said Africa did not have; for how else is history made if not from the activities of men as Okonkwo, Obierika, Ezeudu and Unoka and the events that shape their existence?

The protagonist, Okonkwo, dreading the life of failure, for which his father is known, works too hard to become one of his community's greatest men; he is a custodian of the cultural values of his people: he shows this when he beats his wife in in the week of peace for going to make her hair and thereby not preparing his meal: his society is patriarchal and a woman has her place in it, but usually below the man. However, Okonkwo commits suicide when it becomes obvious to him that the rampaging foreign culture, along with its religion, has vanquished his people. His suicide is the climax of the tragedies that dog his life: it is tragic that he kills a boy that calls him father all in an attempt to do the bidding of tradition; it is tragic that he mistakenly kills Ezeudu's son during Ezeudu's funeral passage. He faces the law which prescribes banishment into exile for a man or woman that commits murder of a lesser king, the female "ochu" or manslaughter; it is, equally, tragic that he angrily kills the messenger from the white district officer and has to face the law. He commits suicide rather than face the wrath of the law.

Achebe shows that the Umuofia society is a complex one, where, in spite of the prevalence of tradition, people question the rationale behind things, as Obierika does when he tells Okonkwo

that he had better things to do and that was why he could not follow them to kill Ikemefuna as ordered by the oracle. Okonkwo asked him if he questioned the authority of the oracle but he said he didn't but that the oracle didn't say he Obierika should go and kill an innocent child.(p.52-53).

Do Young Werther and Okonkwo have Suicidal Disposition? Conclusion

From psychological perspective, there is no doubt that Okonkwo has anxiety disorder, because of his fear of being a failure like his father. He also lacks the capacity for finding solutions to problem as well as poor impulse control (Kutscher, S/Chehill, S, 2012) and Joiner, T. E., Brown, J. S., Wingate, L. R. (2005). He is also depressed. This is evident from his dissatisfaction with what his son, Nwoye, has turned out to become; for as he sits in his hut at a certain night, and gazes into a log fire, he ponders over the matter. A sudden fury rises within him and he feels a strong urge to take up his matchete, go to the church and kill the entire despicable and useless gang of white men and their African stooges. But on a second thought, which is quite unusual for a man that acts on impulse, he tells himself that his son, Nwoye is not worth fighting for, "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 he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behaviour?" (Achebe 2008, p.122) Apparently his frustration deepens and takes a new turn to depression, a morbid mental condition. In his depression, he loses his capacity to control his impulses and the consequence is the slaying of the district officer's messenger and becoming suicidal.

Young Werther, for his part, becomes suicidal owing to social situations whereby his love for Charlotte is unrequited. Apparently, like Okonkwo, Werther suffers depression too, a form of

mental disorder (Sartorious, et al 2022). Evidently, Werther withdraws from society shortly before his death, and withdrawing from society may be a sign of depression and must not be taken for granted. Not being able to win the love of Charlotte can make him feel worthless. The fact that some people committed suicide by copying Goethe's Young Werther –what is known as the Werther-effect (Stack 2005) -shows that there is definitely something to be learned from the tragic deaths of Okonkwo and Young Werther even when the deaths lack tragic necessity: that is, the obvious fact that the hero just has to die for tragedy to come full circle; but Werther gets all the signs that Charlotte will never leave her husband for him; still he continues passionately desiring Charlotte to the point of depression. One can say that Werther's fault of character –in this case mad obsession –leads to his tragic end, while Okonkwo's hubris is responsible for his tragic end..

Indeed, there is no doubt that the deaths of both Okonkwo and Werther are tragic; there is also no doubt that they are the tragic heroes of the narrative; their deaths are avoidable: Werther knows that Charlotte is engaged to be married to Albert, but he remains persistent in trying to make her appreciate how much he, Werther loves her. He encourages himself that they share similar natures and have similar tastes; he deludes himself that Albert rarely has time for Charlotte. Even when they eventually get intimate by kissing passionately, Charlotte feels sorry for herself and feels she has committed adultery against her husband, Albert. Werther feels even more devastated that she feels that way. He kills himself.

Okonkwo is a custodian of the tradition of his people; so he clearly understands that committing suicide would remove from his being as hero. Therefore, the tragic heroism of Werther and Okonkwo does not elicit pathos to make one feel sad at their deaths and thereby signalling tragic necessity: they could actually decide not to kill themselves; but the novels, in

seeking catharsis, end in such a way that the heroes die. Okonkwo's death results from his own personal miscalculation because he believes the men of Umuofia would not let the other messengers escape when he cuts off the head of the head messenger: "they had broken into tumult instead of action" (Achebe 2008: p. 163). Still one cannot insist that Okonkwo must die for the tragedy to be fully realized. It is already tragic that the Umuofia fell apart, whereby the greatness of Okonkwo makes no sense any longer because his people are more concerned with the new phenomena driven by money; but he is a man driven by rage, which is a fault of character, and he beheads a messenger in that moment of rage, where the ego is broken down by such rage and the unconscious unleashes itself directly so that Okonkwo is able to kill. Werther himself has to even ask for the tools by which he will die. Perhaps that is the weakest link in the tale Goethe had to tell

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