The Quitclaim of Okonkwo and Lord Jim

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A great work survives by always engendering new interpretations simply because the mere fact that those interpretations exist makes it seem beyond the grasp of any one interpretation.[1] Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is today acknowledged as a classic of African literature, and Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* is a rich classic in English literature and scholarly discussion of both works is immense. When Lewis Nkosi asked Achebe in 1964 the main influences on his life, from the point of view of literature and whom he admired most amongst writers, Achebe in his reply confessed *liking Conrad particularly*[2] (emphasis added). This confession glaringly reflects Achebe's profound admiration for Conrad – an admiration which can tempt one to speculate that his fastidious character portrayal of Okonkwo owes something to Conrad's character portrayal of Jim. It is the towering character of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* that incides entitling the German edition of this work, Okonkwo – an entitling which is squarely similar to the entitling of Conrad's work *Lord Jim.*

Lord Jim opens with Jim and *Thins Fall Apart* opens with Okonkwo describing their physical appearances and emotions and delving into their careers from young adulthood through their deaths. The deaths of both characters have been a subject of complex discussion. To Arnold Davidson, Lord Jim's death in Patusan has frequently been regarded as final proof that this character at last achieves heroic status and thereby vindicates his earlier failures to conform to his own high ideasl.[3] Robert Haugh maintains that when Jim chooses "honor and death," "he redeems himself magnificently."[4] Ted Boyle suggests that Jim "gains immortality by his last unselfish act".[5] Ian Wyatt concludes his analysis of the conclusion of Lord Jim by seeing Jim as "the only hero of a great twentieth century novel" who achieves "nobility" by dying, in best aristocratic fashion for "his honor".[6] Paul Bruss's observation summarises many critics' perceptions of Jim's demise: "it is clear that a majority of Conrad scholars have enthusiastically subscribed to the view that Jim in Patusan does enjoy a triumph. Thus interpreted, according Davidson, "*Lord Jim* is an account of how a hero's preliminary falterings end in final victory."[8] Unlike Jim, Okonkwo had no preliminary falterings. At the age of eighteen he had achieved tremendously – "his fame rested on solid personal achievement"[9] and this strongly underlies his pride. But he commits suicide at the end of the novel. Lord Jim virtually commits suicide by going single-handedly in spite of Jamb Itam's and jewel's frantic attempts at dissuading him from going to a certain death in the hands of Doramin. There is a tendency for one to easily conclude that Jim is a hero in death after a superficial reading of the novel. But when one closely looks at the text and painstakingly unravels the knots, subtleties, and intricacies in it, Jim would appear as a

charming fraud. Herein lies the complexity and richness of *Lord Jim*.

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem," says Albert Camus "and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."[10] Inherent in the word life is vitality. Although there might be mishaps from time to time, the continuity of life as a habit is there. "Life is a habit that one continues unthinkingly until weariness sets in and the mind suddenly asks *why*. Why continue."[11] It is at this point according to Camus that "the chain of daily gestures is broken. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of awakening comes, in time, the consequence, suicide or recovery."[12]

For Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it is suicide and not recovery. Was Okonkwo's "Chain of Daily Gestures" broken shortly before his suicide and was it the killing of the Whiteman's head messenger and its inevitable consequence that finally spurred Okonkwo to take his life? Was it Jim's desperation to regain his honor which he lost when he abandoned the pilgrims in the Patna or was his "Chain of Daily Gestures" broken before he courageously goes to his death in the hands of Doramin? These are complex questions whose answers are not readily easy to come by.

> Critics who seek reasons for the suicide of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are faced with two problems. The first is the cultural enigma the suicide presents to critics who are foreign to the pre-colonial Igbo culture that Achebe presents. The second is literary: how to deal with the event the irony presents, for it is baffling and most unexpected that Okonkwo who, in the past, has demonstrated an incredible amount of courage and determination in facing his enemies (including himself) would consider suicide as a viable solution to the problems of the final moments of his life.[13]

Kalu Ogbaa only attempts to demonstrate how the Igbo cultural beliefs could help a careful reader to find motives for Okonkwo's shocking suicide. In his attempt he asserts:

> It is not the fear of what 'the white man whose power you know too well' might do that makes him commit suicide. Rather it is the recognition of the truth of the statement, 'it is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone' (p. 23) – words of wisdom his father, who is considered an agbala, left with him before dying.[14]

Such assertion should be taken with a grain of salt. Robert Fraser in his own way seeks an explanation in the works of social scientists as a way of dealing with Okonkwo's suicide.[15]

A character like Okonkwo who has the mien and resilient spirit to endure misfortunes such as the loss of his yams during the drought that hit Umuofia (note that one committed suicide as a result of this), the trauma of his seven years in exile which he alone essentially

went through, and the humiliation of imprisonment, it is not the type who will decide on a cowardly act – committing suicide because he fails *alone*. Looking at Okonkwo's actions reflectively, one can indeed conclude that Okonkwo's suicide crowns his catalogue of impulsive actions and his catalogue of neglect of his duties.

Excessively impulsive, Okonkwo shoots at his wife Ekwefi for making fun of his gun and indirectly his hunting ability and mises by inches. Jim jumps out of impulse from the patna when he thinks it is sinking. Okonkwo and Jim have a common tendency to act an impulse. For fear of being thought weak, dazed with fear, Okonkwo cuts down Ikemefuna with his matchet. Does his fatherly touch instantly disappear at that moment in spite of Oghuefi Ezeudu's warning to him not to have a hand in the boy's death? Ironically it is Oghuefi Ezeudu's sixteen year old son that Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills; when he deliberately shoots at Ekwefi, he misses but at an unguarded moment, his gun explodes to kill. He kills the whiteman's messenger with his matchet and finally kills himself. His self is his last sacrificial victim. Okonkwo's suicide is a special impulsive act! It takes a lot of courage in the abstract to take one's life. There is not indication on the *ilo* that he had a rope to hang himself. His cutlass and gun which had given him fame are now useless and he leaves Umuofia earth to hang lifelessly from a tree. The ring, the talisman which unlocks fame to Jim in Patusan falls from Jim and rolls to Doramin's feet when he falls dead after Doramin's shot. Like Okonkwo's cutlass and gun, Jim's talisman is now useless.

Among the burials in *Things Fall Apart*, that of Okonkwo stands out significantly though in a negative way. Perhaps Jim's would not have been different. Unlike Okonkwo who took his life, Unoka was helped at least to his death by his Umuofia Kinsmen. He was taken to the evil forest to die of the dreaded swelling disease. Unlike Unoka, Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan was at his funeral. Like Ezeude, Okonkwo was a great man but he committed suicide and therefore gets a burial opposite that of Ezeudu. The whole Umuofia buried Ezeudu with all pomp and gaiety – the ancient beat of death drums, firing of guns and canon, men dashing about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they see, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. "It was a great funeral, such as befitted a noble warrior" (p. 85). According to old Uchendu in his story in Mbanta: "Your (Okonkwo's) mother was brought home to me and buried with my people" (p. 94). Ezeudu and Okonkwo's mother received burial according to their respective stations in life.

Although Unoka dies of the swelling disease, he was taken by his people to the evil forest. But Umuofia people cannot even touch the body of Okonkwo. Apparently then, in this one aspect of death and burial, Unoka was more accepted than Okonkwo by examining indeed the manner in which the visions of himself are finally extinguished, we see that in dying by suicide, Okonkwo fails to be the man he would die to be. Obierika's epitaph – "that man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia", (p. 147) recalls Mark Anthony's epitaph about Brutus – "This was the noblest Roman of them all." Both Brutus and Okonkwo commit suicide. But while Brutus would be accorded a burial befitting a noble man by his fellow Romans, Okonkwo would be buried like a dog by strangers – a personal tragedy

indeed for Okonkwo:

> 'Will you bury him like any other man?' asked the Commissioner. 'We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the *desecrated land.*" (p. 147) (emphasis added)

Cleansing the desecrated land recalls Achebe's earlier statement about Umuofia people's action after Okonkwo's gun mistakenly explodes to kill Ezedu's sixteen year old son. They were merely *cleansing* (emphasis added) the land which Okonkwo had polluted (p. 87). Before this incident he has also desecrated the land by beating his wife Ojiugo in the week of peace. Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody halfway through, not even for fear of a goddess" (p. 21). Is Okonkwo then a polluter of Umuofia traditions when he is expected to uphold and protect them? Or is he just a victim of price and his major fear of being thought weak? G.D. Killam contends:

> At the centre of the community is Okonkwo a character of intense individuality, yet one in whom the values most admired by Ibo peoples are consolidated. He is both an individual and a type. The first paragraphs of the book indicate the deftness and certainty with which Achebe establishes not only the character but the ethical and moral basis of his life and, by extension the ethical and morel basis of the clan.[16]

Such contention should be taken with a grain of salt.

As a true traditionalist, and as one of the nine judges of Umuofia, Okonkwo definitely has commitments to uphold the laws of the land but sadly he destroys the week of peace by beating his wife. He kills Ezeudu's sixteen year old son accidentally – a "female" ochu, and he must be exiled from his clan for seven years. As a traditionalist, he knows fully well that committing suicide is an unacceptable action in Umuofia. Yet he deliberately does it. When one considers the events leading to this final act, one sees that the Roaring Flame steadily degenerates into a flickering flame and finally blots out insignificantly.

With Nwoye, Okonkwo had commitment to honour. He is Nwoye's father. Similarly, with the Bugis Malays and Jewel, Jim had commitment to honor. He is the Lord of Patusan and he is Jewel's husband. He assures Marlow that Jewel is the centre of his new life in Patusan: "You take a different view of your actions when you come to understand, when you are *made* to understand every day that your existence is necessary – you see absolutely necessary to another person." Yet he abandons Jewel.

Similarly Okonkwo disowns his son for following the Christians. Reacting to Obierika's story of the wiping out of Abame, he castigates Abame people for unpreparedness: "They were fools ... They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their matchets event when they went to market" (p. 99). But back in Umuofia, he looks very unprepared in the midst of the white administration.

When the District Commissioner summons the elders of Umuofia as a result of the demolition of the church, Okonkwo's misjudging of the call as reflected in his "An Umuofia man does not refuse a call " is almost the converse of his earlier accusation of Abame for unpreparedness. Popularly called "Roaring Flame", he should have been more prepared for any call especially any from the white administration, in view of what they had just done – destruction of the church. Instead, he goes armed with a matchet but without vigilance. The District Commissioner successfully plays on Okonkwo's intelligence and Okonkwo's miscalculation of the District Commissoner's call results in his subjection to a disgraceful torture by the court messengers.

Like Okonkwo, Lord Jim also miscalculates: Brown successfully plays upon Jim's guilty conscience at a time when he should have been very alert. He should have speculated strongly that Brown is an ominous evil capable of shattering his peace tranquility, home, and honor in Patusan which hitherto had been elusive.

Jim persuades the Bugis Malays that it is best to allow Brown and his men a free and safe passage back to their ship and he pledges to answer with his life for any harm that may befall them if the "white men with beards" are allowed to go. The old chief Doramin is unconvinced and Dain Waris his son leads the Bugis to destroy Brown and his men. By his blunt refusal to lead the Bugis against the Brown party, Jim virtually allies himself with the robbers. The respective miscalculation of Okonkwo and Jim undermine their strength of character. The plots of both novels move swiftly to the end after their miscalculations. Released after a collective fine has been extorted from Umuofia people, they summon a war meeting on the *Ilo*. Okonkwo's beheading of the court messengers' leader when they come to stop the meeting is "a flicker, not flame, and it instantly vanishes in dismay".[17] Okonkwo's killing of the messenger and his subsequent suicide reflect his dedication to his own exalted image of himself. Excessively proud, he does not believe he is the type to be hanged by a white man when he himself can do it. By sacrificing his physical body to his concept of himself, Okonkwo finally escapes for good from the whiteman's retaliation but at the same time he abandons Umuofia whose culture he should defend especially at a time when the new religion and administration were engulfing it. Similarly Jim abandons the Bugis and Malays who call him Lord (Tuan) when Brown and his men pose a serious threat to their security.

After surviving the drought in which an Umuofia man committed suicide because of his extra-ordinarily sad harvest, Okonkwo's resolution is impulsive: "Since I survived that year," he always said, I shall survive *anything*.' (emphasis added). He put it down to his inflexible will. (p. 18) But he could not survive the courage to wait for the consequences of his killing the head messenger. Perhaps Okonkwo should have remembered his father and his words in his last days:

> Unoka, who was then an ailing man, had said to him during that terrible harvest month: ... You have a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can

survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its price. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone. (p. 18)

The juxtaposition of the statement of fiery Okonkwo and the statement of the agbala and philosophic Unoka "in his last days' is to *highlight the big gulf between their temperaments and their maturity levels*. Obviously old Unoka loves his fiery son at least by giving him such words of wisdom. But Okonkwo left no word of advice for Nwoye or his Community. Is this not a neglect on Okonkwo's part: Like Okonkwo Jim abandons his wife Jewel and the Malays of Patusan to answer the call of his exalted egoism. Unlike Okonkwo and Jim, Captain Big Brierly in *Lord Jim* plotted the journey of his ship, took care of his dog and did a "handover" before he committed suicide. When Jim goes steadily to a certain death, Jewel in an agony of despair, pleads with him to remember his promise that he will not leave her:

> You shall go? ... Do you remember the night I prayed you to leave me, and you said that you could not? That it was impossible! Impossible! Do you remember you said you would never leave me? ...I asked you for no promise. You promised unasked – remember" (*Lord Jim* London: Deut, 1924 p. 304. Other references are to this edition. In his reply, Jim condemns himself: "I should not be worth having" (p. 304).

In spite of this reply Jewel physically holds on to Him. But Jim calles on Tamb'ltam to help and he looses the girl's hold on him and runs away. This is a deliberate desertion and Jewel screams at him, "you are false!" (p. 305). Is Jim's desertion of Jewel not a negation of his earlier statement to Marlow: "You take a different view of your actions when your come to understand, when you are *made* to understand every day that *your existence* is necessary ... absolutely necessary to another person." Seen in this light, Ted Boyle's observation of Jim's final act as "unselfish" is hardly tenable. Jim's last act is strongly a selfish one indeed.

These characters of Okonkwo and Lord Jim all too human victims of pride, and fear of being thought weak, can merit our sympathy but as honourable men they were quite shams.

Notes

[1] Perry Nodelman, "The Art of the Children's Novel", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly,* Vol. II, No. 1 (1986) p. 3.

[2] Dennis Duerden & Cosmo Pieterse, *African Writers Talking,* London: Heinneman, 1972.

[3] Arnold E. Davidson, "The Abdication of Lord Jim", *Conradiana.* Vol. XIII, No. 1 (1981) p. 19.

[4] Robert Haugh, "The Structure of *Lord Jim,*" *College English,* 13 (1951), p. 141.

[5] Ted Boyle, *Symbol and Meaning in the fiction of Joseph Conrad,* The Hauge: Mouton, (1965) p. 80.

[6] Ian Wyatt "The Ending of *Lord Jim*", *Conradiana,* 11 (1979).

[7] Paul Bruss, "Lord Jim and the Metaphor of Awakening" *Studies in Twentieth Century*, No. 14 (1974), p. 70.

[8] Davidson, 1981, p. 19.

[9] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London: Heinemaina (1958) p. 1. Other page references are to this edition.

[10] Albert Camus, *The Muth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* trans.Justin O'Brien(New York:Vintage,1959)p.3.

[11] Ethel Cornwell, "Bratleby the Absurb" *International Fiction Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1982), p. 93.

[12] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 3.

[13] Kala Ogbaa, "A Cultural Note on Okonkwo's Suicide," *Kunapipi*, Vol. III, No. 2 (1981) p. 126.

[14] Ogbaa, 1981, p. 134.

[15] See Robert Fraser, "A Note on Okonkwo's Suicide" *Kunapipi*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1979), pp. 108-113.

[16] G.D. Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*, (London: Heinemann, 1969) p. 16.

[17] Gerald Moore, *Seven African Writers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) p. 64.

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