

## Representing Suicide as a Cultural Reincarnation in African Literature

A. Annie Christy

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Science  
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research.



‘But in the end, one needs more courage to live than to kill himself’- Albert Camus says on suicide. The term ‘Suicide’ is a term from Latin *suicidium* Sui ‘of oneself’+ cidium ‘Kill’ which means ‘the act of killing oneself intentionally’. Suicide as a fact and in fiction seems to be a most debatable topic and as with other issues of life, it is as old as mortal and its origin in the creation of cave dwellers. It is a prominent action in many important works of literature. Authors use the character to portray defiance, despair, love or honour.

The act of suicide was and is a prevalent action within the context of English literature. Its kind and approach may differ, but humans started resorting to this practice as soon as they realized that suicide is escape from the reality. This very notion of escapism could be visible in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka’s *Death and Kings Horse men* and Ngugi WaThiongo’s *Weep Not Child*. These three works deal with the perplexing issue of suicide within African culture. Each work defies different notion of suicide by placing it within the context of how it is viewed by differing African culture and the way in which colonialism both complicates how social, moral, ethical and rituals are practiced by those cultures.

Though these text shares similar theme such as communal beliefs in African culture but it has different attitude toward suicide. Self – murder is the extreme individualistic act, and given this, suicide by major characters would be considered an aberration. This paper mainly focuses on three works in that two works are totally opposite in their view on suicide. Achebe’s novels give negative notion of suicide as well as Soyinka’s play takes an opposite view in its given context. Both works place suicide within the context of those communal beliefs. Okonkwo, the central figure in *Things Fall Apart* commits suicide after he has lost the cultural belief as well as his belief towards the clansman while submitting political autonomy to colonialism.

Okonkwo’s identity as a great warrior is tested throughout the text, this act of testing particularly done by his own clansman. Even Okonkwo need for self-identification contradicts the interest of the community could be clearly visible in the novel. His fear of being seen weak by his own clansman, a fear born out of his father’s failure as a man, become the basis for most of his violence action like killing Ikemefuna in order to fulfil the oracle and also prove his braveness to their clansman. Though he underwent against his humanity to draw a high place in his clan his life got a turn after he shoots a young boy accidentally during the ceremony. So, Okonkwo is punished with the exile to his motherland Then is change of surroundings doesn’t bring any different in his attitude or behaviour. According to Okonkwo his clan is superior, this childish mindset towards he and his clan’s man has been changed at end. When Okonkwo returns to his land after the exile he happens to meet many changes like his village has come under away of the new religion and so many things established by the colonialists.

Okonkwo fantasizes about war with the white men’ If Umofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself’ Okonkwo greatest concern for his community made him to voice, when he identifies the changes done by the colonialist. War against the white satisfies his vanity about being a great, fearless warrior. Therefore, he feels his identity has

destroyed, when his own clans refuse to join him in the battle. Finally Okonkwo shows his love towards his clan. In another it is also seen as a form of protest to put an end to the colonial changes at the same time it's also seen as a form of aberration in his community. Since suicide considered a sin, the men themselves will not take down his body from the tree on which he has hung himself, delegating this responsibility to the colonialists. As one of the clansmen explains: "Suicide is an offense against the Earth, and man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (207).

According to the clansman Okonkwo suicide is not seen as a sacrifice for the community in the same for them Ikemefuna's death was a sacrifice. But Okonkwo's suicide seems to be cultural rebirth when we put it in current scenario, if the same act of suicide done by a coward doesn't matters. Here self-murder done by a great warrior, he is the person who act based on his wit. So, this uncanny action of Okonkwo makes a sense and it also opens a question to the true essence of cultural belief. As Camus say the person who commits suicide needs more courage than to live, so in that case Okonkwo is not a coward more than that he is the man of power.

Soyinka provides a different notion of suicide in his play by giving an important role to suicide itself. In Death and the King's Horsemen, the Yoruba tradition of the king's Horseman to ritualistically kills himself after the death of his king. This Tradition is seen as a barbaric by the colonialists, so to put an end to this tradition white man arrest Elesin Oba, to prevent him from performing the ritual.

The Elesin's self-sacrifice is therefore an acceptable cultural practice because it honours the perpetuation of the community rather than the perpetuation of individual desires. Elesin duty as an individual is in service to the king and community. In the beginning of the play Elesin raised to level of God for keeping the cultural practices, the community especially the market women tries to protect him by banding together. Elesin's self – sacrifice is therefore an acceptable cultural practice because it honours the perpetuation of the community rather than the perpetuation of individual desires. Elesin duty as an individual is in service to king and community. In the beginning of the play Elesin raised to level of God for keeping the cultural norms, later when the white district officer, tries to put an end to cultural practice, the community especially the market women tries to protect him by banding together.

Elesin own son , Olunde, whom Elesin is owned when the pilkings and his wife sent him off to Europe to be educated as a doctor, defends his people practice with his return to bury his father. But after coming here Olunde comes to know that Elesin is arrested, Olunde kills himself to repair the interruption from his father's duties caused by colonial interference. Here the thing that should be noted is that though Olunde know so called civilized culture he is not against to his culture practices. This shows being a man of letters he knows the value and richness in his culture. Elesin's duties, while considered foreign and barbaric to the colonialists, is a part of the ritual of life that forms the Yoruba belief in reconnecting life, the after life and the unborn. Therefore, Elesin's own death is considered an affirmative act, one that is firmly based within communal beliefs.

When we compare both the text we can see the similarity that is 'voice for cultural norms' but the way they attained was different. Though both commit suicide to save their community in that Okonkwo go against the culture norms and fulfil his wish and also tries get back culture by giving a warning to colonialist. In Death and Kings horsemen Olunde and Elesin fight for community with the cultural norms. Weep Not Child by Thiango totally gives different view on self-murder in this work suicide used as turning point in his life. Suicide is something which brings hope and positive notion towards new life. In

this place the same quotes on suicide by Camus is turned in another way there is beautiful life is there than pitiful death.

In this three works, the so called emotionally stronger gender takes up suicide in there had as a tool to new life. In weep not child Njoroge mother helps him to attain that full essence of life, so but giving hears to his mother word Njoroge changes his mind set and enter into new life with positive vibration. Therefore, these characters die for cause “My sun set to rise again” as Browning says their death brings a change in their own culture that very change would bring them to life through our memories. Finally, this paper validates that ‘No one ever lack a reason for suicide’ if there is a reason there is no end for soul.

#### Work Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1958, Print.
- Thing’o, NgugiWa. *Weep Not child*. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1967, Print.
- Morelle, Henry, adapt. *Death and Kings Horsemen*. Wole Soyinka. 2014. Film.
- Okpala, Judechudi. Igbo Metaphysics in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* *Calloaloo*25.2(2002):559-66 JSTOR. Web. 12 June 2016. Print.
- George, Clakunle. “Cultural criticism in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and king’s Horseman*” *Representation* 67(1999): 67-91. JSTOR. Web. 15 June 2016. Print.
- Vaughan, Megan. *Suicide in Late colonial Africa: The Evidence of Inquests from Nyasaland*. *American Historical Review* 2010. <http://ahr.oxfordjournals.org/>.PDF