

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: A postcolonial reading

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) can be credited as one of the first examples of postcolonial novel. It seems that the issue of Okonkwo's suicide, which makes for the most climactic point of this novel, has got the attention of most critics as it has been studied for times. To be precise, the present article intends to approach this important issue in a new light with regard to the fact that it can be taken as a significant discursive sign in the narration system of the novel, standing for the revolutionary act the colonized would finally perform so as to express his revolt against the oppressive power of the colonizer and the colonial map shattering his precolonial identity and world. This article is then to speak about the idea that as a discursive sign, Okonkwo's suicide has turned into a recurrent symbol in novels produced by the next generation of postcolonial novelists. To this end, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), as a proof, is put into full analysis from the same perspective as *Things Fall Apart* in this study.

Keywords: colonizer, colonized, revolt, suicide, sign

1. Introduction

“However, revolt is the only way out of the colonial situation and the colonized realizes it sooner or later”. (Albert Memmi 171) ^[1]

‘Revolt’ is one of the key terms in ‘Postcolonial Theory’ and many critics up to now have emphasized the necessity of standing against the colonizer with revolutionary actions practiced – by full consciousness about the matter of colonization – from the side of the colonized. One of the manifestations of such revolts or better to say taking an active role in the movements toward decolonization is the field of literature where the possibility of creating an alternative discourse – that can stand against the main lines in the colonial discourse – is provided. As a matter of fact, this alternative discourse is the very element that can break the dominance of the grand-narratives created by the colonizer and the ethic control over the colonized he has always wished to grasp since the age of Enlightenment by trying to block other narratives from forming and emerging” (Said xiii) ^[2]. In other words, those alternative discourses must be able to provide a room for expressing the repressed voice of the colonized man by concentrating on the issue of colonization from a different point of view; what would consequently make for a proper ground for deconstructing the stereotypical picture the colonial discourses have always depicted of the colonized man, his life and identity through creating a “mode of representation of otherness” (q.t.d in Nichols 122) ^[3].

2. Discussion

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), can be claimed to be among one of the first novels which has been able to provide the above-mentioned discursive alternative space as a result of the artistic manipulation of the plot, the characters and the narrative of the novel; what has credited the novelist as the father of modern African literature, and the first one to call attentions to the role of literature “in the making of African

subjects” in the “exciting first decade of decolonization” (Gikandi 4) ^[4]. That is why one can trace at different points in 1960s – which is marked by struggles to resolve the new emerging ontological questions about independent Africans and Africa's national identity – direct references to Achebe and how he has tried to reflect on those questions. It is not then hard to find why he has such an influence on the writing style of the next African- American postcolonial novelists as well as the handling of the story and theme in their novels.

To go on in this discussion and to find why Achebe's novel has been so influential in that context, one needs to investigate it from different perspectives so as to figure out how he has been able to give birth into such a complex net of meaning by the artistic manipulation of the plot, the characters and the narrative of the novel – as it was mentioned above. To do so, actually, many critics up to now have focused on the novel and the result is many different works of criticism whose writers are usually not of the same mind about the significances of the different elements in Achebe's novel. Yet, most critics agree with each other that there lays at the core of the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* the internal conflicts of Okonkwo, the Igbo hero and the protagonist of the novel. These critics add that the novel can be generally taken as a thorough record of how by the arrival of the colonizer and his practices Okonkwo's world and his identity is going to be attacked; what Okonkwo cannot stand at all and the very element that at the end would lead into his suicide. His suicide which happens at the final chapter of the novel and its thematic significance is reinforced or better to say highlighted by the sudden shift that occurs in the narrative of the novel without breaking “the ostensible authenticity” of it (Snyder 178) ^[5] is then in the mind of those critics the most complicated and debatable matter in the criticism of *Things Fall Apart* and what consequently paves the ground for the application of different literary approaches.

One of the approaches that have not been much used in studying *Things Fall Apart* is the hermeneutic approach.

According to a critic who has focused on the novel from this perspective, the act of suicide committed by Okonkwo can itself be taken as a central symbol or signal in the discursive space of *Things Fall Apart* (Chukwumah 100) ^[6]; a sign which when read in line with the postcolonial nature of the novel and as a functional element in the framing of the narrative of it can be claimed to be created by Achebe so as to reflect the colonized man's struggle to free himself from the hegemonic or the repressing colonial forces and to represent the revolt that is to take place against the colonizer. Another way, Okonkwo's suicide is a key sign in the postcolonial discourse provided by Achebe and what would give the critic some clues to find much more than the 'District Commissioner', visiting the suicide scene at Okonkwo's compound in the final chapter (Achebe 143) ^[7], about the significance of the act of suicide as well as the nature of the relation between the colonizer and colonized in general. As a matter of fact, the District Commissioner's point of view is meant to stand for the colonizers' limitedness and wrong understanding of the colonized. Therefore, it is quite ironic that this event or better to say this central sign – which not only represents the tragic destiny of Okonkwo but also of the victimization of the next Igbo generations (Campu 49) ^[8] – is only to provide him rich materials to write one or two paragraphs in completing his ethnographic book (Achebe 145) ^[7]. Looking differently, this can be claimed to be the strongest irony used by Achebe in this novel; what aims at criticizing the dehumanizing attitude of the white colonizers towards the black people through "looking at the process of colonization from inside" (q.t.d in VanZanten 87) ^[9]. Achebe is the first African novelist who has used 'suicide' – as a sign – with such a discursive significance in his *Things Fall Apart* and his successful experimentation since the time of the publishing of the novel has turned into a recurrent pattern or mode for the next generation of the black postcolonial novelists so as to highlight the tensions or conflicts emerging in the colonized subjects because of the hegemony of the colonizer. Put differently, it can be asserted that those novelists regardless of the time of writing and the cultural as well as ethnic differences that exists between them more or less have adopted themselves with the main line in Achebe's writing style and his intended themes: what *Things Fall Apart* as his first and also his most outstanding novel represents to a great extent. Thus, the sign of 'suicide' as a revolutionary action is what has been by analogy repeated very much in novels composed after *Things Fall Apart* concerning the people in black communities and other minorities around the world. One of these novels is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which was written in 1987. To study the 'suicide sign' – as mentioned above – in Morrison's *Beloved* or better to say in order to find how the novelist is able to depict the issue of 'revolt' in her novel in the same manner as *Things Fall Apart*, a critic must have in mind that the act of killing her little daughter that is done by Seth – the protagonist – as the most climactic point in the novel must be put in center. Doing so, many clues would be found. Seth does not kill the child because she is a cruel and carefree mother. In opposite, her motives for committing filicide is to avoid her child to become a slave to Schoolteacher and not to live a life of misery like herself, her husband Halle and other black people as Paul D at Sweet Home. Actually, there exists two completely different layers of meaning in the novel: what the critic may understand of Seth's action and what as a symbol or sign it connotes based

on the textual evidences in the novel and the way it is to elaborate on Seth's motives is quite contrary to what may be understood when committing filicide is seen out of context. As a matter of fact, it can be claimed that these two layers of meaning are what Morrison intentionally creates and what she has done in order to highlight the existing distance between what Seth herself intends by her action and what the other characters in the novel think of it and the way they judge her. To be precise, the black people in 124 does not understand that what she has done is out of motherly love and protection and the white people like Schoolteacher consider her action the result of the savageness of her character and compare her to a wild horse (Morrison 142) ^[10]. Therefore, none of the characters in *Beloved* figure out the fact that the act of filicide committed by Seth is equal to a gradual suicide as by doing so she has actually put aside the maternal love bond and has scarified part of her soul in sake of rescuing her child from a life of misery. She does not commit suicide physically, but such a life is only like an inferno and for fifteen years she is to face a strong feeling of guilt and the trauma of that action plus doubts, internal conflicts as well as unresolved questions about her decision for committing such an action: what would not let her alone even for a second.

In the same manner as the characters in *Beloved*, who are not aware of what had been going on in Seth's mind before committing filicide, most characters in *Things Fall Apart* have much difficulty in understanding Okonkwo's motives for suicide. The Igbo people based on their understanding of Igbo religion and culture take it as "an offense against the Earth" (Achebe 144) ^[7], and the District Commissioner as a sign of savagery and uncivility and the unripe action of an barbaric mind. Accordingly, based on what was asserted above, the critic would now be sure that the act of filicide committed by Seth can by analogy be said to connote the same thing as the act of suicide by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* because of the fact that they both reflect the two protagonists to be revolutionary characters who move against the currents of their community and revolt against the repressing power and authority of the white men by trying to break his yoke even at the price dying or killing a daughter. Therefore, as discursive symbols or signs they can both be asserted to be structured by the two novelists in order to have the same function or role in the complication of the story of the two postcolonial novels. This similarity can be a proof to what was claimed above about how variant versions or stories of suicide as signs of revolt in postcolonial terms are to emerge in postcolonial novels produced later under the effect of Achebe and his novel *Things Fall Apart*.

To bring much more proofs to that claim, what can be done is to study in depth the existing correspondences between the motives of Seth and Okonkwo for filicide and suicide; what as a result sheds light on how the theme of revolt developed through committing filicide in *Beloved* can be taken similar to the revolutionary action of suicide in *Things Fall Apart*.

To speak in detail about the protagonists of the two novels and the similarity of their motives the critic shall focus on how correspondingly these two characters' knowledge of the white man's hegemony and his ability to shatter the black people's identity and world is depicted to be increasing in the process of the story development in the two novels. In case of *Things Fall Apart* the critic is to monitor that Okonkwo is quite conscious of the fact that his people are gradually converting into the new religion and that the new built church's increasing power is giving it much more courage to

attack the Igbo religion and rituals. Even his own son Nwoye is attracted to the new religion (Achebe 101)^[7], and he cannot do anything to hold him from that. He is also to witness that his own people have gradually become apathetic to their own cultural values and when Enoch who has been trained by Mr. Brown “unmask [s] an egwugwu in public” (129) he makes sure about that change. Besides, the difference between the policies of Mr. Smith and Mr. Brown is to give Okonkwo much more hints about the shift that is occurring; something which becomes vivid when the six leaders of Umuofia are put into jail.

In the same manner in *Beloved*, Seth is to become much more conscious about the cruelties of the white man when Mr. Garner dies and his brother in law Schoolteacher “arrive [s] to put things in order” (Morrison 5)^[10]. Seth would be sexually exploited and what Schoolteacher’s nephew is to do with her would make Halle so mad because he cannot do anything to keep his wife away from that man. Halle who is much shocked runs away from that horrifying scene and is no more seen (69) and no one knows if he is alive or not. Actually, the white man’s attitude toward them is so dehumanizing that even the memory of it would give Seth and Paul D much agony. They have been deprived of their self-hood and identity and the white man has behaved like an animal to them. So, how could Seth remain silent and avoid the idea of escaping from that taunting context which according to Paul D would make a man like him “less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub”? (72). In fact, what has happened gives Seth much consciousness about the truth of her life and how the white man has ruined her identity and her choice of a happy free life. It is, then at this point and after all those miserable events that the necessary mental syntheses happen to Seth and make her ready to decide to run away with her children. Precisely, these events are to give Seth strong motives and what she decides to do in the novel – first escaping and then committing filicide – is to depict her as a character busily dealing with many ontological and existential questions quite aware of the negative consequences her decisions might have because of the limited choices she has in the dark world the white man has made for her and other black people. In other words, the novel is going to highlight the “unthinkable choices between bad alternatives” (Daniels 19)^[11], and how a black subject is forced to choose between the bad and worse as the white man has provided him or her no better ground.

Likewise, Okonkwo as a self-made hero of Umuofia is to deal with identical ontological and existential questions by the arrival of the colonizer. Unlike his father, he has been able to rely on his personal abilities and the economic and cultural capacities of his own society to go forward and to improve his life condition. Going through the novel, the reader is then to trace a strong sense of anxiety in him at different points in the novel so as to make sure that nothing is to threaten the socio-economic status he has tried to grasp. It is true that the Igbo precolonial society is not devoid of deficiencies, problems and useless restricting roles, yet the way Achebe depicts it is to reflect the fact that this society was to a great extent a well-working system and within that system a person like Okonkwo was able to live a dynamic life so as to at least achieve some levels of development and success in order to construct a well-formed personality and identity for himself; what would be a far cry from that of his father as he hated it and by an existential would always try to get far from. Thus, it can be put this way that by focusing on the life of Okonkwo

in precolonial and colonial context, Achebe is going to depict how by the arrival of the colonizer and the imposing of the new system by him the existing orders, on the basis of which Okonkwo had built his life, was fully shattered. In fact, Okonkwo represents in the best way how a subject formed within the boundary of Igbo system is to lose the ultimate existential goals he has been fighting for by the arrival of the colonizer. It is now then clear why Okonkwo revolts against the new system and what his motives are for such an action. Yet, one must not make a mistake by concluding that his suicide is only interpretable based on his personal existential excuses. Actually, when taken as representative, his action on a higher level is to reflect on what happens when the collective identity of a group of people and its logic is questioned by an ‘other’: the colonizer. It is also the same in case of *Beloved* as what Seth does is to represent the way the black enslaved people may act in order to stand against the white men whose attitude toward them is much inhumane.

Now at this point, after focusing on the motives of Okonkwo and Seth in order to investigate how as a revolt sign – in discursive terms – Morrison’s story of Seth’s filicide can be taken as a variant of the story of Okonkwo’s suicide, this questions may come to one’s mind: why at all in postcolonial novels – initiated by Achebe and his *Things Fall Apart* and followed later by novelists like Morrison – are such revolutionary acts depicted and what is the reason for the popularity or prevalence of the ‘suicide sign’ invented by Achebe that is too ultimate or better to say so extremist an action? In other words, could not a milder way of revolt be chosen by figures like Okonkwo? Referring to Frantz Fanon and his theories in *Black Skin, White Masks* can be claimed to be much helpful in finding the answer. According to him in this book, one’s sense of humanity depends on the extent to which he can impose his existence on “the other” in order to be identified by that other as a human being. Thus, it is that other being which defines the meaning of his life (Fanon 216)^[12] and gives shape to his identity. In other words, when the colonizer’s domination goes beyond the economic and social matters and enters the realm of the colonized man’s psyche and alienates him from his true identity and true self through cruel and dehumanizing policies, and interpolation of the idea that the colonized man is nothing more than a savage beast, he must expect such responses. Actually, the self-alienated colonized man who asks himself repeatedly “Who am I in reality?” (182), “will turn inward and commit destructive acts” (56) so as to break the hateful image the colonizer has mirrored of him for a long time.

3. Conclusion

Based on Fanon’s theory, it is not then hard to justify what Okonkwo and Seth do and the significance of their actions in postcolonial terms. What they do can actually be taken as existential or ontological struggles done by two oppressed subjects so as to recollect their true identity or selfhood in a struggle to regain their freedom. From this perspectives, *Things Fall Apart* and *Beloved* can stand for giant mirrors hold up to the colonizer and his practices so as to clearly depict how the shattered image of the identity of the colonized man in the fake mirror of the policy of the colonizer is to give him enough motives to find a way for wiping out that image: If he is not powerful enough to break that mirror he looks for an alternative solution and breaks that shattered image instead of the mirror – which is himself. It is so extremist a solution, yet a working one.

4. References

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