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**Chinua Achebe and Albert Camus: Okonkwo's Suicide in
Things Fall Apart and *The Vision of the Absurd***

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Abstract

This paper discussed Camus' Vision of the Absurd as demonstrated by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* through his Character, Okonkwo. Using sociological and psychological details, it considered the issue of suicide as the absurd outcome of an upsetting effect of the new world order and a contradiction or divorce between man and his setting. This paper also brought to bear the unacceptable terms of life under a treacherous and alien government where the governed would prefer death to a life of compromise and of cowardice.

Introduction

Works of art always have unpredictable destinies. They receive divergent

interpretations from one era to another, and from critics who sometimes stretch their imagination much beyond that of the author during their period of creation. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* falls into such creativity and forms the prime basis of our study in the present article. Our task in this paper which takes both sociological and psychological approaches, considers Albert Camus' works on the notion of absurd as expounded in (*L'Etranger, The Myth of Sisyphus, le Malentendu and Caligula*) with the view of relating how it is equally proven in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* through the character of Okonkwo.

Achebe and Camus

The two writers share noticeable similarities by the use of themes, characterization, conflict, setting and points of view in their works. They also share some common school of philosophical thoughts known as *-Existentialism and Absurdism*: two ideologies that emphasize the role of the individual in the grand realm of existence and the world portrayed as meaningless where the individual is alone and completely responsible for his own actions. Camus, a French-Algerian novelist, is known for his famous authorship of the twin-philosophical concepts of *absurd* and *revolt*: two concepts that represent some attitudes of heroic defiance or resistance to whatever oppresses human beings, and the persistence for order and meaning in life in an essentially meaningless and indifference universe. Achebe, a Nigerian post-colonial writer, is the celebrated stubborn advocate of his culture and tradition. Both authors are known for their classic works: *L'Etranger* and *Things Fall Apart*, and their principal characters in *Meursault* and *Okonkwo* with their absurd and revolt consciousness.

***Things Fall Apart*: Themes and Tales**

Things Fall Apart is a provokingly complex novel which treats many significant themes including compassion, colonialism, success, honour and individualism. Also prominent are the themes of exile, pessimism, resignation, rebellion, sacrifice, vengeance and the Image of the Absurd. As a result of its passionate character, the novel has produced ample critical works and will continue to produce more in the years to come when subjected to new and different perspectives.

In the novel, there are two distinct periods and two opposing and ambivalent themes - *exile and suicide*. These serve as vehicles to identify and to convey some of the author's thoughts and ideas. The first period closes with the accidental murder of Ezeudu's son by Okonkwo and the latter's exile. The second closes with the murder of the Head messenger by Okonkwo and the latter's suicide. In other words, the first period is before Okonkwo's exile, when the clan thought and acted like one, while the second is during and after his exile, when, to use Albert Camus' absurdist terms, "les décors s'écroulent". That is the period of the collapse of values and the alienation of the hero and the attendant despair and crisis which go with them. However, the choice of exile

seems logical as it corresponds to the correct punishment for the "female" crime pattern or action. The choice of suicide for the slaying of the head messenger seems ambiguous.

Okonkwo's Suicide: An Analytical View

The suicide of Okonkwo in TFA has made a good number of critics to be more or less reticent about his final act. In their reticence, especially those for whom Okonkwo is the irrational, unconscious hero, there is an under-current of condemnation. They see Okonkwo's suicide as motiveless, as nothing other than the concomitant of his thoughtlessness, inflexibility and his pathological insistence on masculinity. Brown (1973), for example, felt it is the dramatization of "the dominant impulses of his life or the culmination of a self-destructive pride... the outcome of the demoralizing effects of the new order...." For Moore (1980, p. 64), it is because "Okonkwo cannot reconcile himself to the paralysis of will which he senses around him, while Oladele (1976, p.121), described it as a "tremendous sacrifice and display of heroism". According to Ravenscroft (1969), "Okonkwo hangs himself, not to avoid arrest but out of despair for the future of his people".

The critic who has been the most committal in his interpretation of Okonkwo's suicide is Robert Fraser (1980). And despite a five-page impressive analysis from a sociological perspective, he still concludes on a depreciatory note: "Okonkwo is, in one sense, a victim of colonialism, in another, of himself. Caught between the two, he destroys himself in mere confusion" (p. 37).

Still, from a historical and social outlook, suicide is a theme which imposes itself on our consciousness by a complex of references, whether we consider it from the real human experience or from the perspective of literature where it colors the imaginative world of creative people. When this gesture, which is essentially personal, became a literary theme, it must be remembered, it passed more or less without comment, but certainly without blame. So far as the records go, Homer records self-murder without comment, as something natural and usually heroic.

The first of all literary suicides which seems worthy is that of Jocasta Oedipus' mother in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. It portrays an honorable way out of an insufferable situation. Subsequently and despite its condemnation on religious grounds, death before dishonor and suicide for love became the common place of poets and playwrights. This was no doubt due to the hint of self-dramatization about the act, a certain stylishness in dying. Of all the many suicides in Shakespeare's plays only Ophelia is subject to ecclesiastical disapproval. But with what passion and conviction does Laertes thrust aside the priest who denies her the funeral rites:

I tell thee, churlish priest

A ministering angel shall my sister be,

When thou liest howling. (Alvarez 1972, p.152)

The double suicide of Romeo and Juliet is narrated without a hint of condemnation. That of Othello was considered by a good Venetian Catholic like Cassio as a sign of nobility. What matters is its tragic inevitability, and the degree of his heroic stature.

Okonkwo's suicide must not be seen as an isolated act of a member of a "primitive Umuofia Society" that some have tried to make of it, but as one of those tragic deaths in a line of literary tradition by which many authors have disposed of their characters. Just as the title *Things Fall Apart* draws part of its significance from the poem of Yeats, *The Second Coming*, Okonkwo's suicide must equally draw much of its significance from all the reminiscences of the literary past or tradition because a common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously. As it is explained by Eliot (1932):

Tradition...involves, in the first place, the historical sense and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order...

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone... His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison among the dead (pp..14-15).

Achebe and Camus: Suicide and the Vision of Absurd

From the gamut of interpretations to which Okonkwo's suicide is susceptible, our objective is limited in scope and far less ambitious. In the following pages we will like to show that from evidences available in the book, his suicide is a conscious act which, when compared to the suicides in the works of Albert Camus, confirms the discovery of the *Absurd*. We know that to compare Chinua Achebe to Albert Camus or to say that *Things Fall Apart* has some affinities with the works of the French-Algerian - at least in terms of theme and significance - may appear to some as forced. We are not attempting to raise the polemical theory of influence. Achebe may have read Albert Camus, but to say that he wrote *Things Fall Apart* with the Absurdist theory in mind is not only pure exaggeration but absurdity. However, it is worth noting according to Nnolim (1975) that:

Criticism thrives on certain demonstrable assumptions that have foundation in truth, not in treading the beaten track of palatable critical opinion.

There are some important factors which seem to have contributed to the negative interpretation or wide condemnation of Okonkwo's suicide, besides the persistence of intolerance for suicide due, no doubt, to the primitive prejudice and superstition that make the suicide to be considered in the words of Alvarez (1972), "as low as the lowest criminal and self-destruction among its many other attributes... deeply distasteful ... if, for no other reason than it effortlessly promotes guilt" (p. 46, 88).

First, there are certain incidents in the book which tend to cause some kind of penchant among critics. For example, the unfortunate killing of Ikemefuna by Okonkwo and his disregard of Ezeudu's advice (p. 45). The fact that "he ruled his household with a heavy hand," that "his wives especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper and so did his children" that he "encouraged the boys to sit with him in his "obi" at story telling gatherings rather than sit with the women, and he told them stories of the land - masculine stories of violence and bloodshed; the murder of the head-messenger, it must be pointed out, however, that these incidents cannot in themselves make one a suicide. Psychoanalytic theories on suicide while trying to help untangle the intricacy of the motive and define the deep ambiguity of the wish to die have proved, perhaps, only what was already obvious: the processes which lead a man to take his own life are at least as complex and difficult as those by which he continues to live.

The second is the fact that action, which was for the Umuofians one of the fundamental societal values, has completely been stripped off. A critical study of actions in the novel will reveal a pattern which suggests reflection. In response to the oracle and because he was acting in consonance with an "a priori" code, Okonkwo killed Ikemefuna, the boy he loved. When he broke the convention of the clan, he recognized what he had done, and accepted the sanction without protest. On return from exile he strove, always arguing his cause for the courses of action he advocated. As he lay on his bed, after the humiliation received with other leaders, the divorce between the past and the present staring him in the face, he sighed and drew his conclusion: "worthy men are no more" and swore revenge on both personal and collective levels: "if Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself". On thinking of Egonwanne, he monologued:

Tomorrow he will tell them that our fathers never fought a "war of blame", if they listen to him I shall leave them and plan my own revenge (pp. 159-160).

His answer to Obierika's question whether he was afraid of Egonwanne at first as an interrogation of surprise "Afraid?" then "I... shall fight alone if I, choose" (p. 160).

Well, those are the words of a conscious man, a man struggling to safe-guard the values of his people. It is therefore untrue that his "actions allow no room for reflection." When the time comes he will ignore the forces that seek his collaboration with absurd destiny or the District Commissioner's call for "co-operation" and consciously reject an "absurd universe" by committing suicide.

The third factor is the seeming spontaneity with which Okonkwo committed the act, and the way the author handled his material by withdrawing details that could have given sufficient insight to motives and significance, a style of which Gerald Moore writes:

Achebe's brief, almost laconic style, his refusal to justify, explain or condemn are responsible for a good deal of the book's success. (1980: 125)

Since artists are by vocation more aware of their motives than most people and better able to express themselves through commentary, character's monologues or dialogues, can also offer illuminations to character's acts in order to suggest significance, some explanation by the author would have thrown more light on this ambivalent act. Is it also, as we have argued, a conscious act? For example, in Malraux's *La Condition Humaine* when the revolutionaries contemplated on suicide in order to avoid torture and indignity, the author uses commentary to explain and justify their act:

Kyo shut his eyes...He had witnessed death on many occasions and, aided in this by his Japanese upbringing, he had always felt that it would be beautiful to die a death that is one's own, a death appropriate to the life it closes. And to die is passive, but to kill oneself is to turn passivity into action. As soon as they came to fetch the first of his lot, he would kill himself in full consciousness of what he was doing (p. 225).

It will also be remembered that Kirilov, the hero of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, justifies his logical suicide with the following plangent argument stripped to its essentials:

I will not and cannot be happy on the condition of being threatened with tomorrow's zero... (It) is profoundly insulting... Now, therefore, in my unmistakable role of a plaintiff and of a defendant, of a judge and of an accused, I sentence this nature, which has so unceremoniously and impudently brought me into existence for suffering, to annihilation together with myself... And because I am unable to destroy nature, I am destroying only myself, weary of enduring a tyranny in which there is no guilty one (p. 179).

Okonkwo's suicide in *Things Fall Apart*, seems to have come out of nowhere like an act of God, a thunderbolt striking its unwitting victim suddenly and without warning

while the balance of mind was disturbed. The last sentence and last paragraph of Chapter Twenty-Four leaves the reader without the vaguest impression that Okonkwo will commit suicide as: He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away (TFA.p.163).

The only insight into reasons, in fact, is Obierika's ambivalent outcry - a quasi-vindication of Okonkwo and, at the same time, a rejection of his act:

That man was one of the greatest men in
Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself
and now he will be buried like a dog... (TFA: p.165)
(Emphasis ours)

In those two sentences, Chinua Achebe suggests more than he has written. According to Fraser (1980, p.34), the first suicide in his book teaches us that "suicide, in itself disgraceful, is often a reaction to a different sort of disgrace. Thus the individual will only commit it; should the social disgrace he suffers outweighs the ignominy of the act itself". We are thus reminded of Arthur Schopenhauer's comment on suicide:

It will generally be found that as soon as the terms of life reach the point where they outweigh the terrors of death, a man will put an end to his life. But the terrors of death offer considerable resistance; they stand like a sentinel at the gate leading out of this world. . .

However, great mental suffering makes us insensible to bodily pain; we despise it, nay, if it should outweigh the other, it distracts our thoughts (Alvarez, 72. p.138).

Although the tone and reverberations of Obierika's speech, and comments that follow, in no way condone the act, they render it at least understandable; and they link it implicitly too to the society's ambivalent attitude towards the suicide.

It is true that Okonkwo is hot-tempered, but he cannot be considered a "chronic suicide" who has been killing himself slowly and piecemeal - like the alcoholic and drug addicts - all the while protesting that he is merely taking the necessary steps to make tolerable an intolerable life. Throughout his life, he did not give out any feelers of being one. Early in the novel, for example, the reader is informed of how he did not despair "that year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. "One man tied his cloth to a tree and hanged himself". His inflexible will to live is translated in this resolution.

Since I survived that year... I shall survive anything. (p. 19)

It is a resolution of optimism which is one of Okonkwo's principal traits. And Okonkwo did survive most things. When he inadvertently killed another villager at a feast and was "cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach panting" (p96), he did not

commit suicide despite the mental stress he had to go through in exile. In his seven years in Mbanta, he reflected on his life and thought of the future. He knew he had lost his place as a leader in Umuofia, but this fiery fighter still hoped that "some of those losses were not irreparable" and that he would "regain the seven wasted years". The present on the other hand was nowhere comparable to the future. His return would be marked by his people, his new compound built "on a more magnificent scale, his barn bigger than he had before, and his wives increased by two. Much more, his sons would be initiated in the 'Ozo' society while he would be taking the highest title in the land. He was also able to overcome the sorrow that the "tragedy of his first son could have caused him" (p. 121).

Even on his return to Umuofia, there was always in his life a sunny place for hope that all was not lost, that something could still be done, that his people were still with him. Nevertheless, Okonkwo decides to commit suicide. Is it a purely motiveless act? We strongly believe along with Cesare Pavese in *The Savage God* that, excepting some suicides that are motiveless and entirely the affair of the specialist in mental diseases, "no one ever lacks the reason for suicide." Moreover, Alvarez (1972) argued that:

Suicide is, after all, the result of a choice. However impulsive the action and confused the motives, the moment when a man finally decides to take his own life, he achieves a certain temporary clarity. Suicide may be a declaration of bankruptcy which passes judgment on a life as one long history of failures. But it is a history which also amounts at least to this one decision which by its very finality, is not wholly a failure. Some kind of minimal freedom - the freedom to die in one's own way and in one's own time - has been salvaged from the wreck of all those unwanted necessities. Perhaps this is why totalitarian states feel cheated when their victims take their own lives (p. 87).

That this choice sometimes is gratuitous, sterile or proof of pride, whatever it may be, it is significant. Suicide is an act; tolerable or intolerable in some cultures or traditions depending on circumstances. It can be seen as a frivolous act whose terms are not of this world but of the world to come. Death is both inevitable and relatively unimportant. One sacrifices a few days or years on this earth in order to feast with the gods eternally in the next. In this classification, suicide seems "a magical act of vengeance" which finds its origin in a primitive superstition. That the suicide himself would not really die but instead "he is performing a magical act which will initiate a complex but equally magic ritual ending in the death of his enemy." So simple are the mechanics of such a revenge.

Either the suicide's ghost will destroy his persecutor for him or his act will force his relatives to carry out the task, or the iron laws of the tribe will compel the suicide's enemy to kill himself in the same manner (Alvarez: pp. 49-50).

And the same magical thinking still prevails in modern political suicides by which suicide is transformed into an act of protest. Although the suicide prejudice has continued, the emphasis on and perspective of it has since changed. The modern preoccupation is with death without an after-life. How people die no longer decides how they will spend eternity, instead it sums up and somehow passes judgment on how they have lived. Let us examine the great tirade of the hero of Camus' *L'Etranger*, Meursault who achieves a bleak and thankless revelation when the priest comes to solace him in his condemned cell:

From the dark horizon of my future during all that absurd life that I had led a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze that levelled out all the ideas that people had tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I then was living though (p. 131).

Despite what critics may think, Okonkwo's suicide is a conscious, rational choice, from which there are many interpretations, to create value for himself, or as a carefully considered and chosen validation of the way he has lived and the principles he has lived by. When he killed the head messenger and no one raised a hand in support, he could still have decided to go back into exile, although the events of the last few days were still fresh in his memory: six leaders of the clan held hostages and ransom demanded. However, to go into exile for the slaying of the head messenger, an act that can be considered as "normal", would mean a flight which would reduce the heroic stature of the hero. Or, besides being hunted like an animal while his household and the leaders would be taken as hostages, if he "is now pushed outside his society he cannot return. He cannot begin again." To live unhumiliated also means to die unhumiliated, and at the right moment. Everything depends on the dominant will and a rational choice. Nnolim (1975) identified this type of suicide as an Igbo trait when he writes:

In committing suicide, Okonkwo displays another Igbo characteristic - a characteristic that slave traders discovered to their chagrin - that of resorting to suicide as a way out of difficulties in which every other alternative leads to personal humiliation and defeat (p. 60).

Okonkwo's suicide equally reminds us of a characteristic Malraux expression "réussir sa mort" (to be successful in one's death) which reverberates throughout all Malraux's novels. It is an expression which also underscores the importance and significance of suicide in the lives of Malraux's heroes who through the act, strive to create a value for themselves. La Voix royale, Perken said:

We all almost miss our death: the first aim or at least the sign of a great life is to be successful in one's death, to make one's death a death which resembles one's life, and as to live is to live great, die as great as possible.

And those heroes who succeed in dying "a death appropriate to the life it closes" extract the beauty and coherence from the chaos of life. Most of these suicides have one quality in common. They are acts of self-consciousness proceeding from a philosophy of life which judges what is bearable and what is not. Okonkwo's suicide appears as a measure of high consciousness without which his death would seem less an apotheosis of strength and courage. Okonkwo's suicide is a logical necessity, of which according to Albert Camus, the logic, inevitably, is absurd - that is the sudden awareness of the vacuity of man's existence, the futility of his acts, in fact, the opposite of reason to live.

Things Fall Apart records man's struggle with the external world as well as his conflict with society. It is a concrete image of what Camus terms the absurd confrontation between man's desires and the indifference of the universe acting through a social order. It presents a dramatic example of man in Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, a man with a desire for life and a desire for truth. A man who believes himself to be following a course of action which is true and courageous, only to be awakened to the absurdity of the world as he encounters some limitations that are paced upon his desires. He struggles against it and is finally defeated by it. According to Albert Camus, before contact with the absurd:

The quotidian man lives with some goals, the care for the future or for justification, he evaluates his chances, he counts on a later date, on his retirement or the job of his children. He still believes that something in his life can be directed. In fact, he acts as if he were free, even if all the facts tend to contradict this liberty. After the absurd all is found shaken (p. 140).

Okonkwo also has his goals: Before his exiles he dreams of becoming "Successful, powerful, rich...and one of the lords of the clan of Umuofia". In exile he dreams of a return with a flourish, of regaining past glories. Caligula, the hero of Camus' play *Caligula*, dreams of the impossible - subversion without form, a world where the sun sets in the East, where white is black:

But I am not mad, in fact I have never been so reasonable. All of a sudden, I simply felt a need for the impossible. Things as they are don't seem satisfactory to me... I didn't know it before. Now I know. This world, as it is made, is not bearable. Hence, I need the moon, or happiness of immortality, something which perhaps is crazy, but which is not of this world (p.110).

Or Martha and her mother, in another play of Camus, *Le Malentendu* who dream of "iles merveilleuse". But they are all disappointed.

It was against all expectations that Okonkwo returns to an apathetic and strange Umuofia, feeling like an actor exiled from his "decor". First, it is the coldness of his people who "had undergone such a profound change during his exile" that greets his return. New values and realities have superseded the old that characterized Umuofia as a clan, for apart from the church

The white man had also brought a government.

They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial... These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high-handed...They guarded the prison which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law (TFA: p.123).

Then it is the desecration of the land and uncanny happenings. An "egwugwu" is unmasked in public. For the first time, the sacred bull roar is heard in broad day light. This strangeness is further narrated in this passage that presages both Okonkwo's death and that of the clan:

That night the mother of the spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming - its own death. (TFA: p.149)

Just as the simple truth that "men die and are not happy" of Caligula is not obvious to the Roman patricians, who like the bourgeoisie of Algiers in *L'Etranger*, have interposed a set of masks between themselves and reality, so also is the truth in the prediction of the oracle not obvious to many Umuofians that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them, or the accurate assessment of the situation by Obierika that the white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion:

We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he had won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (TFA: p141).

Caligula embarks on an educational mission that will force the patricians to recognize absurdity by acting in a manner as absurd as that of the universe. He destroys the moral value of the patricians, their personal integrity, and their belief in reason. He hopes that by acting freely and amorally, he can overcome the power of the hostile universe. The

characters in *La Peste* pursue their daily but humble combat against the plague. Okonkwo, on his return, still full of hope that things could be set right, tries to rouse his clan to take concrete action against these foreigners and their institutions:

After the desecration of an egwugwu by Enoch, he had spoken violently to his clansmen when they had met in the market-place to decide on their action. And they had listened to him with respect... Although they had not agreed to kill the missionary or drive away the Christians, they had agreed to do something substantial. And they had done it (TFA: p149-152).

Although Okonkwo's pedagogy is a form of illusion like that of the others, it is evocative of the sustenance of hope. But the strange and the unexpected continue to happen. The world he knew continues to disintegrate. Tremors of fear appear as the plague in Oran, in *La Peste*, as an interminable and dreary trampling on the psyche of the inhabitants. Everyone in Umuofia goes about with a gun or a matchet. The ordinary men and women listen from the safety of their huts. Age-long traditions cease as it is manifest in this passage:

It was the time of the full moon. But that night the voice of children was not heard. The village 'ilo' where they always gathered for a moon-play was empty.

The women of Iguedo did not meet in their secret enclosure to learn a new dance to be displayed later....

Young men who were always abroad in the moonlight kept their huts that night (TFA: p.156)

Since some still feel the necessity for a firm action against the white man, although ignorant that all liberties have been lost, a meeting is summoned. Okika, who had suffered the same humiliation as Okonkwo is the first to speak:

We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger, we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing. They never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done. Eneke the bird was asked why he was always on the wing and he replied: "men have learnt to shoot without missing their mark and I have learnt to fly without perching on a twig." We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil we must root them out too. And we must do it now. We must bale this water now that it is only ankle-deep... (TFA: p.162)

Okika does not end his speech because the white man, determined to suppress all dissensions, all opposition, has sent his messengers to stop the meeting. And Okonkwo, believing that his people are still with him and that he can still act as a leader does not need to go far to begin to "root out this evil" to "bale this water" that is a threat to the collective security of Umuofia:

He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was.
He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate,
unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood...
(p. 163).

That brief moment when the world, to Okonkwo, seems to stand still, waiting, and "the men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers waiting," (p163) is surely that of consciousness. For killing a clansman, he had gone into exile, but the man who comes to stop the meeting is not a clansman; even if he were, Okonkwo would be guided by Okika's reasoning still fresh in his memory to do what his forefathers would never have done. At the end of a brief confrontation of questions and taunting answers, the head-messenger's head lies beside his uniformed body. But, in spite of the strength of numbers, in spite of "greater valor," in spite of the emotional and encouraging speech of Okika, there at the very minute, everything loses its illusory meaning.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking "Why did he do it?" (p.163).

The above passage conveys the feelings of absurdity, revealing the foreign and inhuman aspects of other men when their "movements and actions" are abruptly deprived of it meaning. There is no shocking or repulsive description in the last episode, only an emphasis on consciousness and control. For the absurd man, it is no longer a question of explaining or resolving but of feeling and describing. All is said to begin with a clear vision indifference. To describe is the ultimate ambition of absurd thinking. It must be remembered that the birth of the feeling of absurdity is simple and sudden. It may happen to any man when the habitual chain of his daily movements is broken. Then the "why" begins and gradually generates weariness that in turn, awakens consciousness. The weariness, Camus explains, is at the terminus of the acts of a machine-like life, but at the same time it inaugurates the movement of consciousness. It awakens it and it provokes to the chain or it is a definite awakening at the end of which, with time, comes the consequence: suicide or readjustment.

So with Okonkwo. As the weariness gradually appears, inaugurating his consciousness, he understands that the chain of custom, or what Stock (1979) will call:

Those positive qualities of the African, the coherence and order that make life one long ceremonial, the intense warmth of personal relationships, and the passionate energy of the religious life, have been broken (89).

Throughout his life, he had understood in his people nothing but solidarity, understanding, and the care to safe-guard the values that characterized the clan. Now the meaning of his act "falls apart" with its content of values; he is confronted with an absurd world of contradiction, antinomies, anguish and powerlessness. The people's proverb that when a man says yes his 'chi' and his clan says yes too no longer holds. As he is, according to David Carrol (1980p.p, 60)"rejected by the tribe and the Earth Mother he has defended with such loyalty." It is divorce between man and his life, the actor ends his setting that truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. This feeling, Ionesco (1961) who is considered as the grand Master of the "Theatre of the Absurd, expresses it in an essay on Kafka:

Cut off from his religious, metaphysical transcendental roots, man is lost; and his actions become senseless, absurd, useless (p. 27).

Okonkwo, like Kirilov, can now be seen in the role of a plaintiff as well as a defendant, of a judge and of an accused. "Why did he do it? We could pick up in the silent accusing voices of Umuofians, the echo of the interior voice of the author and follow his echo into the eternity of the novel, into our World where experience seems to teach in advance, the attitude of a people at the supreme moment of reality. It will be recalled that Mr. Smith, affected by the chilling sound of the mother spirits wailing for her son, had also asked an "absurd" question: "What are they planning to do"? The initial and provisional answer comes from the author:

"No one knew because such a thing had never happened before" (p.132).

But a complementary and more philosophical explanation comes from Camus as an attempt to explain the sudden strangeness:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the contrary in a universe suddenly deprived of illusions and light, man feels like a stranger (p.101)

Meursault in *L'Etranger* will give as his reason for shooting an Arab he did not even know "because of the sun," while in *Le Malentendu* it is "for both mother and daughter" to be able to leave this land without horizon, this inn and this rainy town, and forget this shadowy country that they had to rob and kill innocent travellers (p. 16).

As for the young emperor, Caligula, "all men are the same, all acts are the same;" therefore he can kill any time, any one and that is the only way for him to be natural.

Why did he do it? Okonkwo need not explain; neither does the author, since as the reader already knows, Okonkwo has acted in conformity with an 'a priori' code. Stock notes:

When Okonkwo killed the messenger, he knew he was right. He acted without hesitation like the embodiment of all the forefathers, but not a hand was raised in his support. He had too much courage to know or care to know what had dawned on all the others, that they confronted something too big for them and could not but submit (p. 90).

It will be remembered that by implication, the question of Mr. Smith becomes: What are we to do? Ironically, however, a military choice was uppermost in Mr. Smith's mind, but having lost the opportunity the District Commissioner and his court messengers would have provided had they not gone on tour, he took refuge in religion as "they knelt down together and prayed to God for delivery" (p. 132).

Okonkwo must now be turning over in his mind the speech of Okika exhorting the people to concrete action, and, like Meursault, "all the ideas that people had tried to foist on him in the equally unreal years he was then living through" especially those of his father that year the harvest was bad:

Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and proud heart; a proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride.

It is more difficult and most bitter when a man fails alone (p. 20).

His consciousness now parallels that of other absurd heroes at the moment when the "stage-sets collapse," at that point where a man must make a choice, because the discovery of the absurd is only the commencement, it is not an end in itself. In fact, for an absurd man there is always the necessity to choose, although, according to Adele King, any choice in an absurd world is ambiguous.

For Sisyphus, symbol of an absurd hero, the answer is 'yes'. Because of his consciousness, he chooses to live in absurdity, and unlearns to hope. He finds his Kingdom where death would be the supreme scandal. The non-sense of life on earth becomes the condition of a happy life. Caligula, unable to surmount absurdity by flight, pursues in act, an absurd dialectic analogous to that which the Myth pursues in thought before he (Caligula) is killed in an uprising. Meursault on the eve of his execution accepts death as the culminate of his own individuality; he reaches that peace of which Camus sometimes speaks, a point at which the tension of the rebel is no longer felt,

"tranquil homeland where death itself is a happy silence." This homeland is beyond the grasp of a man who is in revolt against the universe.

Also, by implication, "Why did he do it?" becomes "What am I going to do? In the light of the absurd revelation, freedom is one of the essential gifts which the absurd brings to light - an infinitely greater freedom than that which man had before. From the clues given of Okonkwo's past, it appears that he will choose to live while setting aside suicide as a solution to an absurd world, as he had earlier done. But the absurd revelation has brought him a greater freedom. His life, the only link with the world, is his; his destiny belongs to him. Neither his "chi" nor the weeping gods - Idemili, Ogugwu, Agbala, and the other gods of the clan - nor the dead fathers of the land have anything whatsoever to offer him now. Seeing that the "world he belonged to was dead," and discerning his horrible future without hope, irrevocably "absurdified" by indignity and death, he will kill himself in order to affirm his new and terrible freedom. "He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away" to commit suicide. Already Malraux (1949) speaking of the human condition has said in his *Conquerants*: "that aspect no one, no one can bear it. One can live while accepting the absurd, one cannot live in the absurd." Thus Okonkwo, having chosen first to say yes to life, now says no to it, and like Martha and her mother in *Le Malentendu*, he precipitates the end in death.

Conclusion

From the foregoing therefore, we would like to conclude that the Vision of the Absurd which Albert Camus expounded in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and demonstrated in his other works has sufficiently been demonstrated by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, consciously or unconsciously, through his Character, Okonkwo. Our approach has the advantage of cutting across sociological and even psychological explanations. For instance, that his suicide be viewed as "general deprivation or loss of bearing which characterizes egoistic and anomic suicides of which Fraser speaks in his article, or as inability "to reconcile himself to the paralysis of will which he senses around him," as the outcome of the demoralizing effect of the new order," it is all as a result of an awakening" to a contradiction or divorce between man and his setting - that is Absurd. Okonkwo's extraordinary realism resides in his clairvoyance and courage to judge the unacceptable terms of life under a treacherous and alien government, and his refusal to take refuge in the delusions of his clansmen who, having turned round resigned themselves to an absurd world. He prefers death to a life of compromise and of cowardice. His last act is as much an affirmation of self as the measure of his victory over and against the missionaries who "were anarchy loose on the Umuofia world".

Achebe is a post-colonial African writer "with some kind of commitment, some kind of protest who must agree with Camus in the words of Stock that:

The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by

showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost (p. 90).

And he must also agree with Camus who once said that works of art are the only means for men to support and sustain their consciousness, because they bring out the personal awareness of the author. Although he will not let go his traditional beliefs as he made one of his characters say:

It is against our custom. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it (p. 165).

He has created a character who in full consciousness, chooses to die in dignity than live in indignity.

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