

**The Noun Scholar**

**Journal of Arts and Humanities**

**National Open University**

**Vol.1 No. 1**

**pp. 78-89**

## **Rethinking Suicide: Echoes in Soyinka's**

### ***Death and the King's Horseman and Achebe's Things Fall Apart***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Suicide is the wilful, abrupt termination of one's life by oneself. While some people understand it as a negative, depressive phenomenon which requires pity, other people view suicide victims as cowards. Yet many others view them as heroes. In this way, scholars are challenged to properly categorize suicide as negative or as deserving pity. The problem is made more difficult by the way the phenomenon is represented in some literary texts. In Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the deaths of Elesin Oba and Okonkwo respectively, do not do justice to the debate whether suicide is an act which deserves reproach or acclaim. While we can argue that many people who commit suicide in real life do so out of depression, the two characters in the texts mentioned above are not victims of depression, therefore, their deaths deserve reproach and condemnation. Their suicide is a direct act of cowardice. Relying on the theory of psychoanalysis, this paper argues that Elesin Oba and Okonkwo's suicides are inconsiderate, dastard acts of cowardice which should not be blamed on depression. From the texts chosen for this study, both Elesin Oba and Okonkwo were not brave enough to face the consequences of their realities. Therefore, they decided to kill themselves without consideration for the fate of society. Certainly, humanity will love to see the end of suicide in the world. Literary texts, which are generally seen as a reflection of life, should

continuously, portray suicide as a negative practice and those who commit it as cowards. This will help in checkmating the scourge of the phenomenon.

**Key words: Suicide, Psychoanalysis, Phenomenon, Hero, Cowardice.**

## **Introduction**

Humanity subsists in a general consensus that death is an inevitable end for all mortals. There is no contention to the reality of death, at least physical death. Terry Eagleton portends that death is a human condition which only challenges existence, permanently incapacitating the body. In his words “indeed, perhaps we should speak of death as a way of being ‘challenged’, a mode of being which is neither inferior nor superior to breathing or love-making, simply different. Perhaps, the dead are not really dead, just differently capacitated. But we die anyway.” (xiii) Eagleton sees death as a stage in human evolution and insists that it must be understood that way. William Shakespeare, the acclaimed British god of literature, in his eponymous play *Julius Caesar*, in a repeated moment of epiphany through Julius Caesar submits that “cowards die many times before their deaths, the valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come”. (48) Shakespeare’s submission provides one of the most iconic testaments on the inevitability of death in literature. However, it does appear that the concern for many people is not the reality of death but the manner and time of exit from the world. Death, as a cornerstone of tragedy, comes with a magnitude of finality that endlessly grieves the living. It shuts the door to every activity of life and transposes the soul to another indeterminate realm which scholars and researchers are yet to come to terms with. Death could be natural, in which case, an individual dies peacefully at an old, advanced age. It could also be sudden and heart breaking, in which case, an individual dies suddenly at an early age. No matter when a human being exits the world, it leaves much anguish and pain in the hearts of the living. While the ‘when’ of death could be soul wrenching, the ‘how’ of death is significant and may determine, to a great extent, the attitude and psychology of those left behind to mourn the dead.

This study identifies five different types of deaths which border on the ‘how’. The first is patricide – the murder of a person’s father by the person. In many parts of the world, especially in Africa, the murder of a father is seen as a taboo which requires sumptuous propitiation to

appease the land and chthonic gods. Another type of death is matricide – the murder of a person’s mother by the person. Both patricide and matricide attract the same cultural, conciliatory praxis in many parts of the world. There is also genocide – the deliberate and systematic killing of a group of people for political, economic, social or other reasons. Homicide is more of an umbrella term which refers to the killing of someone by another person. Suicide, which is our major concern in this study, is the deliberate termination of someone’s life by the person. In scholarship, suicide enunciates epistemic ruptures where the quest to denominate its hue and idiosyncrasies continue to hold sway. Renowned sociologist, Emile Durkheim conceives suicide as a deliberate act by a conscious individual fully aware of the consequences of his action. According to him “the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result”. (44) Durkheim’s inclusion of “positive or negative act” expands the discourse to include all actions that lead to a person’s death whether such actions were intended for good or for bad. Of all the identified types of death, suicide is the most disdainful and abominable. Death by suicide is variously interpreted by many people in different ways. Hegel vehemently queries the whole essence of suicide by insisting that no one has the right to take his/her own life. For Hegel:

Suicide may at first glance be looked upon as bravery, although it be the poor bravery of tailors and maid-servants. Or it may be regarded as a misfortune, caused by a broken heart. But the point is, Have I any right to kill myself? The answer is that I, as this individual, am not lord over my life since the comprehensive totality of one’s activity, the life, falls within the direct and present personality. To speak of the right of a person over his life is a contradiction, since it implies the right of a person over himself. But no one can stand above and execute himself. (76)

Many countries of the world criminalize attempted suicide and those found guilty are made to face the full wrath of the law. In many parts of the world too, death by suicide is seen as an abomination. In the South-East of Nigeria, those who die by suicide are not buried by their relations but by strangers. This is clearly demonstrated in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* after Okonkwo committed suicide. As the white man arrives in Okonkwo’s compound, Obierika leads him and his men to the small bush where Okonkwo’s body is dangling on a tree. When the District commissioner asked why they couldn’t bring the body down and bury it, a villager responds firmly “It is against our custom...it is an abomination for a man to take his 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. This is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers.” (149) In South-West of Nigeria, the belief is that any house where suicide occurs cannot be inhabited by anybody for a specified period. Suicide also attracts different kinds of cultural and spiritual practices to cleanse the land. In most cases, propitiations are offered to the gods of the land for cleansing and to safeguard the living. Ian Marsh provides a guide in approaching the subject of suicide which gives a clearer direction for this study. According to him “one way to approach the subject of suicide is to examine how the issue is framed in such accounts and the relationship of representations to practices and experiences”. (15) It follows that every case of suicide should be treated in isolation with regards to the circumstances of that particular incident. Elesin Oba and Okonkwo’s suicides and the circumstances that gave birth to them are treated separately in this study with critical attention to their peculiar situations.

Suicide occurs in different disciplines like psychology and sociology but the interest here is how it is represented in the two literary texts chosen for this study. The representation does not help to categorize it either as a heroic act or an act of cowardice. In this paper, through a critical analysis of the events leading to the deaths of Elesin Oba and Okonkwo in *Death and the King’s Horseman* and *Things Fall Apart*, through the circumstances surrounding their deaths, it is revealed that their suicides consist of fear and cowardice and should be understood along those lines. The same thing can also be said of the persona in Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poem “Richard Cory”. In the poem, the poetic persona was seen by everyone as the perfect man. But one night, he puts a gun to his head and pulls the trigger. It is evident that these characters mentioned above committed suicide on their personal volition without prompting from anybody. To what appears to be a direct response to “fear and cowardice” as the underlying causes of suicide, Thomas Toiner, who lost his father to suicide in 1990 observes that “the truth about suicide may prove unsettling – it is not about weakness, it is about the fearless endurance of a certain type of pain” (9). Although Toiner tries hard to exonerate weakness of the mind as a causative factor of suicide, the characters of Elesin Oba and Okonkwo proves otherwise. Their suicides were fear-induced resulting from weakness of the mind.

French sociologist, Emile Durkheim identifies four types of suicide - egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. They will all be analysed within the purview of this paper to situate the identified characters in the selected texts either as heroes or as villains.

## **Types of suicide**

**Egoistic suicide:** This is when an individual takes his/her life due to a rising inability to properly integrate into society and find relevance. People who fall within this category in the suicide bracket feel alienated and lonely from the rest of humanity. Therefore, they reject themselves since they think that society has rejected them. According to Durkheim, people in this category end their lives with the conviction that no matter what they do, the society will always reject them and people will certainly see them as misfits. Money and sundry forms of materialism are not factors for these people. They are always lonely and have the mindset of collective hatred from the rest of the world. Those whose suicides are motivated by their inability to find a place in society are primarily selfish, hence the term egoistic. They feel that society owes them a responsibility of care and pamper. They demand much attention from their friends and relatives and when these do not come, they take their lives.

**Altruistic suicide:** Although Durkheim calls it altruistic suicide, it can also be understood as vicarious suicide. It is a situation where an individual lays down his life to save the rest of humanity or to preserve a culture, tradition or religion. The Christian faith is easily associated with this type of suicide following the death of Christ on the cross of Calvary. Altruistic suicide is also called sacrificial death. It was this kind of suicide that Elesin Oba in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* was originally fated to embrace but because of his characteristic inclination to philander, he is involved in an amorous relationship which pollutes his spiritual canvass and stops him from fulfilling his destiny of dying with the king as the horseman. The altruistic suicide is common in Africa but it is viewed as barbaric and fetish by Western audience. However, the Judeo-Christian tradition under which the death of Jesus Christ subsumes accommodates the same type of death but it is not seen as barbaric or fetish. Although Elesin Oba fails to die altruistically, he dies shamelessly without honour to his name. But before Elesin

Oba's shameful death, his refusal to first die altruistically provoked a response from his son Olunde who wilfully committed suicide in his father's place and save their family name.

**Anomic suicide:** Anomic suicide is more prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it is quite popular across the world. It is suicide which arises from a sudden negative change in the circumstances of an individual. These changes could be financial loss, loss of a relative, loss of marriage, or loss of material belongings like cars, houses and so on. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many people across the world who commit suicide fall under the category of anomic suicide. This is because, with the spate of materialism sweeping across the world, most people fail to see the future when they lose material belongings. At such times, they disconnect from society and abandon every counsel with their minds made-up to exit the world. Victims of anomic suicide originally live a peripheral life with a foundation built on the vanishing illusions of life. They do not imagine or consider life without these material illusions. Therefore, when they lose them, they conclude that life has no meaning. Certainly, anomic suiciders can be seen as the most cowardly types out of all the several types mentioned.

**Fatalistic suicide:** This is an offshoot of overt regulation and discipline. In this case, an individual commits suicide when he feels that his freedom is trammelled or checkmated through constant monitoring, discipline, and control which ultimately prevent him/her from achieving hidden potential or living life to its maximum. Many children under the control of their parents and guardian are prone to this kind of suicide and it can be found in all parts of the world. Also, people who commit this type of suicide find themselves under an oppressive, dictatorial government where their rights and privileges are denied them. In many cases, they find their conditions unbearable and consider it better to die than to live. Many Africans who were under slavery committed this type of suicide. Again, it can be argued that those who die through the fatalistic suicide are cowards who are not strong enough or possess the ability to live through a difficult period.

In all the suicide types discussed above, it is easy to situate the death of the two characters Elesin Oba and Okonkwo into anomic and fatalist types of suicide respectively, the two types which attract the negative appellation of cowardice. Elesin Oba's suicide is anomic. After carelessly escaping the dignifying altruistic suicide, Elesin Oba only kills himself after the market women, led by the Iyaloja brought the dead body of his son Olunde to him in prison. Elesin Oba was put

in prison by Mr. Pilkings for attempting to commit suicide by allowing himself to be buried with the king in his capacity as the horseman. Olunde had committed suicide because his father failed to perform his duties as the horseman and preserve tradition. In other words, Olunde committed altruistic suicide because he died to save his family and lineage from shame and preserve the tradition of his people. Elesin Oba's death was motivated by a loss, the loss of his son Olunde who was studying Medicine in the UK. For him, he could not imagine life without his son. He could not see beyond the death of his son. Therefore, he decided to end his life in a clear demonstration of anomic suicide. Okonkwo on the other hand died a fatalistic death. After the invasion and eventual control of his Umuofia by the white man, Okonkwo found himself and the entire village living in fear and trepidation. The white man came with a new religion, new culture, and new ways of life which were inconsistent with the traditional laws of Umuofia. The coming of the white man also abolished the cultural heritage of the local people. They lost their identity, history, and tradition. Okonkwo could not imagine himself and his people living under the emasculating control of the white man. When he killed a messenger sent by the white man to stop Umuofia from holding a meeting, Okonkwo knew what will be his fate in the hands of the white man, and then he took his life.

## **Psychoanalysis**

Psychoanalysis is attributed to Sigmund Freud, the famous Australian neurologist widely acclaimed to have propounded psychoanalysis as a theory. It is founded and established on the premise that everyone possesses innate, unconscious mind-set, feelings, desires, and longings which they unconsciously react to without realizing it. For Freud, the individual psychology is constituted of three different categories, the id, the super-ego, and the ego. Freud notes that "for all their fundamental differences, the id and the super-ego have one thing in common: they both represent the influences of the past - the id, the influence of heredity, the super-ego, the influence, essentially, of what is taken over from other people - whereas the ego is principally determined by the individual's own experiences that is, by accident and contemporary experience". (16) When Freud's observations are critically applied in the analysis of Elesin Oba and Okonkwo, the id and the super-ego do not play any role in their eventual suicide. This is because their tendencies did not betray any form of inheritance, not of Elesin Oba or Okonkwo. In their separate cases, the ego is immediately applicable because their contemporary

experiences are basically responsible for their eventual suicide. Although Lois Tyson infers that through psychoanalysis, adult behaviours and idiosyncrasies can be traced to their childhood experiences, it is not seen from the texts how the childhood experiences of Elesin Oba resulted or contributed to his eventual suicide. According to Tyson, “when we look at the world through a psychoanalytic lens, we see that it is comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experience and each with patterns of adolescent and adult behaviour that are the direct result of that early experience”. (14)

As a literary theory, psychoanalysis can be understood in two different ways. First, a literary text reveals the sub-conscious mind of the author, his anxieties, fears, foibles, and subsequently psychological state of mind which the author may not be aware of. Secondly, that a literary text reveals the inner workings of the characters, the reasons behind their actions, their subconscious state of mind and general, hidden psychological attributes which motivate them to carry out certain actions and behave in a particular way. With regards to psychoanalysis, characters in a text ultimately manifest tendencies which are linked to their dormant, unconscious state of mind. When this theory is applied to investigate the actions of characters, it is revealed that the characters were merely responding to their subconscious state of mind. Every individual has a subconscious state of mind which serves as a store house of his/her daily experiences. Literary texts contain characters that also possess these attributes and unconsciously respond to them. Those who commit suicide do not do so as a spontaneous reaction or a knee-jerk approach to issues. Suicide is primarily caused by an individual’s sustained, contemporary experiences over a period of time.

In the texts the two characters Elesin Oba and Okonkwo both commit suicide owing to a series of events which predisposed them to considering death as the remedy to their immediate circumstances. Through the prism of psychoanalysis, it can be gleaned that Elesin Oba was aware that he will ultimately die through suicide as the horseman to the king. From the day he became a horseman to the king, this reality consumed his subconscious mind and immediately the king died, he did not hesitate to accept his fate of dying through suicide. So, all along, he lived with suicide, it formed a part of his daily thinking. He accepted the reality that it is only he dies through suicide or he will not die at all. For him, suicide was easy, will be easy. Therefore, when he missed the opportunity to die as a horseman, the reality of suicide was already



engrained in his subconscious mind. The opportunity came after his son Olunde committed suicide. Having been predisposed to constant thoughts of suicide, it was easy for him to embrace it as a reaction to Olunde's death. Although Mr Pilkings and the women see his death as a huge surprise, Eleshin Oba was already a victim of suicide which consumed his subconscious faculties.

Also, Okonkwo's eventual death by suicide is a culmination of his inner fears which can be traced to his father Unoka. Although Okonkwo presented a façade of bravery and courage, inwardly, he was consumed by fear, the fear of failing like his father, the fear that people will think he is weak and the fear that his son Nwoye will not succeed in life. Given all the foregoing, fear sat comfortably in Okonkwo's subconscious mind. The fear of failure is a confirmation that an individual lacks courage given that life or human existence is a combination of success and failure, good and bad, planting and harvesting and so on and so forth. Human existence is a combination of innumerable opposites which must necessarily require each other for advancement and purpose. So, for Okonkwo to continually live in fear of failure means that he lived in denial of a definite reality. It was his fear of being thought weak by his clansmen that made him kill Ikemefuna, his foster son. Okonkwo's life was an outward manifestation of fear which grew daily in his subconscious mind. Therefore, when he murdered the messenger sent by the white man to stop the meeting of all Umuofia, he was scared of facing the consequences of his actions. He was mortally scared of the white man.

Through a psychoanalytic interpretation, it is revealed that they are not aware of the fear which saturated their subconscious minds. Psychoanalysis encourages us to look beyond the physical behaviour or manifestation of individuals but study progressively their history, influences, and circumstances in the past which may have formed a part of their subconscious mind without their being aware. These subconscious constitutive elements and influences can find outlets in speeches, reactions and even dreams. Sometimes, they happen functionally in which case they can become a sum total of a character's experiences over a period of time. Sometimes too, they can happen chronologically in which case they can be isolated as they happen sequentially or in a particular order. The relevance of psychoanalysis as a literary theory has helped in uncovering the attitude of many characters found in literary texts. It answers the frequent question "why did he/she/they do it"? Sometimes too, studying the life of the author or a peep into his/her

experiences through life could help uncover the mystery of a text's obvious characterization. It is not known if Soyinka, the author of *Death and the King's Horseman* at any time toyed with the idea of suicide. So it cannot be said that by writing the play, he was only living out a subconscious feeling. Also, research has not revealed if Chinua Achebe at any time, considered suicide which made him ventilate the feeling in Okonkwo's character. In this study, psychoanalysis investigates the psychological, emotional, and historical experiences of the chosen characters which may have forced them to embrace suicide as the best option to exit the world.

### **Suicide as a non-mental phenomenon in *Death and the King's Horseman***

The historical substratum of *Death and the King's Horseman* derives from actual events which took place in parts of Oyo in South-West of Nigeria during the pre-colonial period. Osofisan however dramatises these events in his play to re-enact an old tradition which required a horseman to the king to die through ritual suicide, first to ensure that the soul of the late king makes unhindered, safe journey in the afterlife and second, to ensure that the tradition is upheld which will safeguard the people. For the people, ritual suicide is an honourable practice through which the community is preserved and regenerated. Therefore the horseman to the king was seen as a hero, a courageous man who will give up his life for the good of everyone. In the play, Elesin Oba is the horseman who accepts his fate upon the death of the king. As discussed above, his impending, voluntary death is altruistic suicide because he is determined to end his life to conserve and lubricate the local tradition. Perhaps, if Elesin Oba had gone ahead to die altruistically, his death would have been a celebration rather than the ignominy it became eventually. On the appointed date of his ritual death, Elesin Oba, horseman to the king is in a convivial, positive spirit. He does not dither or waver. He does not cry or remonstrate with anyone. He is not scared of his fate. Rather, he is in a happy mood, and there is nothing to suggest that his mental state is questionable. Voluntarily, he decides to visit the market place to have a final touch with the people before his inevitable demise.

ELESIN: This night, I'll lay my head upon their tap and go to sleep.

This night, I'll touch feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth.

But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their doth,  
this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears. (10)

At this point, it is evident that his mental state is in order, having accepted his fate. At the market square, while he was waving to the women including the Iyaloja, the leader of all market women and receiving their cheers, the women chant his praises, calling him a man of integrity. Elesin Oba feigns annoyance and asks them to dress him in a more honourable attire because his clothes were not befitting of his person. The women promptly dress him in more glamorous clothes befitting of his personality. However, as Elesin boasts and assures the women that he is not afraid to die, he sees a very beautiful young girl and indicates interest to have her. The market women explain to him that she is betrothed to the son of the Iyaloja but Elesin Oba insists to have her. His insistence to have an amorous relationship with the girl does not portray him as a victim of mental disorder. Rather, it proves that he is in a right frame of mind and reveals him as a rather weak man who does not understand the essence of embarking on a spiritual journey. His insistence to be sexually entangled with the opposite sex could be said to be the beginning of his cowardice and eventual shameful death. In a previous work (Adiele, 2015) I submitted that “the horseman’s argument to be amorously intertwined with a virgin hinges on the perceived opportunity to unburden his physical and carnal desire and make him appear lighter in his onward journey in the spiritual realm”. (95) Among humanity, it is generally believed that those who embark on a spiritual journey are expected to exercise a degree of continence because sex is believed to hinder free, spiritual ascent. But Elesin Oba was adamant. After a brief argument with him, after failing to convince him to leave the young lady alone, the women, including Iyaloja accede to his demands and let him have the young lady. However, the Iyaloja warns him seriously to remember the task at hand and not to leave any seed inside the young lady.

Elesin Oba’s journey to altruistic suicide which would have saved his community and ensure an unhindered journey for the soul of the dead king to the great beyond suffer a still birth due to his sexual involvement with a young lady. This sudden development in his mental constitution does not portray or betray any form of disorder. He is consciously aware of what he was getting into. He was not pushed, deceived, cajoled or seduced into the act. It was a conscious, deliberate act from a reasonable mind devoid of intrigue. However, due to this action by Elesin Oba, the ritual suicide is delayed and the District Officer administrating the community, Mr Pilkings gets information about Elesin’s impending death. He promptly arrests him for attempting to commit suicide branding the practice as barbaric and primitive. Elesin’s arrest marks the end of his

commitment to embrace the honourable, altruistic suicide which would have saved his community and opens a new chapter of ignominy on the way to his dishonourable anomic suicide which condemns his soul and confers anguish on his community. Mr. Pilkings intervention at this point and Elesin Oba's immediate arrest can be termed a *deus ex machina* because it saves an otherwise hopeless and tensed situation. While Elesin Oba is busy with the young lady, the time of the ritual suicide passes and the whole community is thrown into confusion as to what will be the eventual outcome and consequences on the community. It is this tensed atmosphere that underscores the importance of Mr Pilkings intervention as *deus ex machina*. This deliberate device by Soyinka marks the end of the road for altruistic suicide and opens a new road for anomic suicide. We can agree with Kole Omotoso that "Soyinka would expect the hero-king to lead and sacrifice for the community" (17). Elesin Oba does not 'lead and sacrifice for the community', therefore he is not a true hero.

Elesin Oba's son, Olunde returns home from England where he is studying Medicine. His return is motivated by his desire to witness what was an epoch event, the death of his father by ritual suicide to honour the departed king, preserve the family heritage and protect the community. To Olunde's utter disgust and disappointment, his father fails to honour his mandate thereby exposing the family and the community to peril. Moved by a vicarious desire to honour the dead king, save the community, and preserve the family name, Olunde commits suicide. Because Elesin Oba is the protagonist in the play and his death is the focus of this study, the critical searchlight here will remain faithful to his fateful journey to the great beyond. Upon Olunde's death, the market women carry his body wrapped up in a cloth and head to the cell where the philandering Elesin Oba is detained by Mr Pilkings. On arriving at the cell, the women dump Olunde's body for Elesin Oba. Overcome by grief, Elesin Oba strangles himself to death in spite of Mr Pilkings feeble interventions. A critical study of the text does not at any time reveal that Elesin Oba, horseman to the dead king, was mentally challenged. His mentality was never in question. His acts of spiritual subversion were intentional and voluntary. However, he did not have the courage to withstand the death of his son Olunde nor could he imagine life without the young boy. In this case, he is emotionally deficient, lacking courage and the required strong will to face the consequences of his actions. His anomic suicide is a disgrace to his family and the entire community and in this, his cowardice is established.

## **Suicide as a non-depressive phenomenon in *Things Fall Apart***

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* bestrides world literature as a remarkable Nigerian novel which provides a critical insight into two different eras. First is the highlight of the serene enclave of South-East Nigeria dominated by the Igbo ethnic group before the advent of colonialism. Second is the period of colonial invasion by Europeans which saw to the decimation of the culture and tradition of that Nigerian region. At the centre of the compelling narrative is Okonkwo, the protagonist who commits fatalistic suicide at the end of the novel. Achebe models Okonkwo's character after the fashion of classical tragic heroes with tragic flaws which inexorably leads to his downfall. He commits suicide at the end of the novel but his immediate reason for doing so is not depression. Although he suffered depression after participating in the death of Ikemefuna his foster son, he didn't consider suicide as a result of his depressive mental state. His suicide is fatalistic because after he murdered the messenger sent by the white man to stop a meeting by all Umuofia people, he lacked the courage to face the consequences of his actions under the administrative authority of the colonial masters. Fatalistic suicide emphasizes self-death by those who are not able to cope or live under a strict, controlling and castrating social order. To those who embrace fatalistic suicide, it shows an innate lack of determination and longsuffering to endure and overcome. It is this type of suicide Okonkwo succumbs to owing to his lack of courage and fortitude.

At the beginning of the novel, Achebe presents Okonkwo as a young, strong, and popular man who achieved fame and glamour following his wrestling prowess. He had defeated the wrestling champion of the village Amalinze the cat whose back, it was believed, never touched the ground. The first lines of the novel capture Okonkwo's personality "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat". (3) After defeating Amalinze, Okonkwo's popularity soared even beyond Umuofia his native town. He was a strong and able bodied farmer who loathed laziness and feminine attitude. He was impatient with indolent men but his father Unoka was lazy and a habitual debtor. Unoka planted no yams, had no farms but embraced hedonism believing that pleasure and merrymaking were the chief most important things in life. Unoka played flute all day to the disappointment of his son Okonkwo. Unoka's economic failure constituted a log in Okonkwo's subconscious mind

which made him become mortally fearful and afraid of failure. This innate fear in Okonkwo's subconscious mind manifested itself in aggression, quick temperament, and unnecessary demonstration of brawn. His life was ruled by fear, the fear of failing the way his father failed. He was afraid that his son Nwoye would fail given his juvenile laxity and disinteresting approach to farming. Out of fear, he ruled his household with a heavy hand and persistently tried to cover his inner fears with braggadocio attitude. His life was defined by his psychology. He believed in the power and authority of the man, the supremacy of culture and tradition and the ultimate voice and will of the ancestors.

When a nearby village killed the wife of an Umuofia native, it was agreed that Umuofia will go to war with the village. But the village fearing Umuofia's renowned capacity to execute wars and defeat their enemies, sues for peace and offers Umuofia a virgin girl and a fifteen-year-old boy named Ikemefuna. It was agreed that the virgin girl should be given to the man whose wife was killed while Ikemefuna was given to Okonkwo for safe upbringing. Okonkwo saw it as a personal victory and a sign of his manliness that Ikemefuna was given to him for proper upbringing. His compromised psychology narrowed his thinking to believe that life was all about him. On daily basis, he unconsciously ventilated egocentric neurosis by always insisting to be heard and have his way. For Okonkwo, manliness constituted in being heard and seen at all times. He wanted to be the first, to be noticed and valorised. When the oracle of the hills and caves decided that Ikemefuna must be killed, Okonkwo volunteered to accompany those selected for the assignment. He wanted to be identified with acts of heroism. During the procession into the bush on the way to kill Ikemefuna, Okonkwo eventually draws his machete and kills a boy who called him 'father'. According to the novel, Okonkwo didn't want the rest of the men to think that he is weak. From these accounts, it is clear that Okonkwo was running away from a psychological reality which he consistently failed to accept. His psychological debasement, bothering on compulsive demonstration of strength, also leads him to accidentally kill a fellow clansman during the burial of Ogbuefi Ezeudo which further leads to his expulsion from the village for seven years.

In Okonkwo's absence, Umuofia is invaded by Europeans who bring a new religion, politics and general way of life while condemning the local religion as barbaric and fetish. With the coming of the Europeans, Umuofia was never the same again. Their culture, sacred spiritual system and

traditions were all abolished. On his return to Umuofia, Okonkwo, who didn't know any other way of resistance beyond physical power, galvanized his people to drive away the European intruders. Unfortunately, Umuofia had changed a lot with many people converting to the new Christian religion. The people could no longer speak with one voice and things were no longer the way they use to be. They had fallen apart in Okonkwo's absence. It is during the final meeting to resist the Europeans and their foreign religion that Okonkwo's psychological frustrations betray him as he draws his knife and kills a messenger sent by the colonial administrators. Okonkwo's fatalistic suicide is not heroic but cowardly. He committed suicide because he lacked the determination and tenacity to face the consequences of his actions which is what fatalistic suicide committers do. Even if the colonial administrators were going to find him guilty and kill him for murder, as a hero, he would have faced it with courage and grit. Given all of these circumstances, Okonkwo died out of fear of the power of the colonial administrators and not out of depression.

## **CONCLUSION**

The fate of Elesin Oba and Okonkwo fits into Jennifer Ann Bates view that "a character's fate lies within the development of his or her own character." (185) The eventual suicide by the two characters was a culmination of their individual developments in the texts. Their deaths follow the classical notion of tragedy where the victim falls from grace to grass with obvious tragic flaws. Their tragic flaws originate from their dysfunctional experiences and influences which subliminally affect their every action. While Elesin Oba's tragic flaw is his obsession with sex, Okonkwo's tragic flaw is his innate fear which manifested in unguided temperament. The mind is a store house of emotions and these emotions manifest in different ways without the victim's awareness. The victims are not exempted or exonerated from the actions of their negligent emotions because they act consciously, therefore, are responsible for their actions. If however, certified mentally deranged people commit suicide, they can be exonerated as cowards because they do not act consciously and deliberately. Their mental stability is compromised. But if people, out of fear for the consequences of their deliberate actions, commit suicide, then it follows that they lack the fortitude to persevere. Life embodies the principle of unity of opposites. It follows that the life of an individual can undulate from happiness and sadness, good fortune and bad fortune and so on. If humanity appreciates this fact, then it will be easy to

balance the inevitable vagaries of life. No life is totally full of misery and no life is also totally full of content and satisfaction. Given the foregoing, it is totally irresponsible for humanity to only embrace and accept the happy moments without readiness to accept the sad moments of life. Writers of novels, plays and poetry owe a duty to society to continuously denounce suicide as a negative trend. To relive suicide in a literary work without taking a position is a great disservice to humanity in the way Soyinka and Achebe have done in their works selected for this study. If those who commit suicide are celebrated, if they are seen as heroes, young people who read literature are likely to replicate what they have read.

Elesin Oba enjoyed all the perks and advantages of office as a horseman. During those days, he frolicked on the side of happiness. He was feared, respected, and revered in his capacity as a horseman. While these days of happiness and celebration lasted, he was aware that one day, he would be required to die with the king in line with laid down traditions. By accepting to become the horseman, he was wittingly accepting to commit suicide and die with the king. According to the provisions of the land, the procedure for committing suicide is spiritual and spiritual activities require steadfastness, single-mindedness, mental preparation and astuteness. Elesin Oba had many years to prepare for this eventuality but his coward tendencies manifested on sighting a young, beautiful lady. If we juxtapose his eventual suicide with his sexual escapade, it will deeply implicate him more as a coward whose sense of tenacity and commitment are suspect. If writers sustain the narrative that depression easily leads to suicide, it follows that every individual will commit suicide because depression is an inevitable ingredient of human existence.

Okonkwo's circumstances are not too far away from Elesin Oba's situation although the two characters are separate in influences, experiences, and background. While Elesin Oba's flaws are directly obvious, Okonkwo's flaws are not so obvious but they exist. Fear became the controlling, single factor in Okonkwo's life and it was the same fear for the repercussions of the murder he committed at the end of the novel that led him to commit suicide. Within a short time and in the prime of his youth, Okonkwo had achieved what most people far older than him could only dream about. Yet, he was afraid of failure, afraid of being thought weak, afraid of not being recognized. Fear is an inexorable, constituent part of cowardice. Beyond Okonkwo's braggadocio laid a dormant fear factor which gradually but steadily ate into his subconscious



mind. Those who commit suicide are primordial cowards and to that extent, it can be said that Okonkwo is a primordial coward. Bravery does not constitute in regular, continuous, uninterrupted success. Heroism does not also establish itself in consistent victory. Both phenomenon bravery and heroism within themselves find fulfilment through a combination of abasement and abounding realities. By finding a balance between the two inescapable conditions, by existing and pulling through the two different conditions and emerge successful, then the accolade of bravery and heroism are enunciated.

While Okonkwo abounded in fame and economy, while the whole Umuofia and beyond celebrated him, as a warrior, he would have known that life will throw the opposite side of the coin at any time. He demonstrated such courage and stability of mind when he had a poor harvest. Yet, fear grew within him. Heroes are marked by their abilities to show courage at all times. Okonkwo lacked courage to face the white man. He took his life out of fear. Some people have argued that he took his life because he knew the fate that awaited him in the hands of the white man, therefore, he presumptuously killed himself. If he knew his fate after committing murder, it was a wonderful opportunity for him to demonstrate his war spirit by accepting to face the same fate which he already knew. Okonkwo is a coward and fits perfectly into Shakespeare's description of a coward, those who die many times before their actual death. Okonkwo and Elesin Oba died many times before they died, therefore are cowards and not heroes.

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