



Research Paper

No Longer at Ease, The Crippled Dancer and the Labour of Sisyphus

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ABSTRACT: Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and T. ObinkaramEchewa's *The Crippled Dancer* are two different narratives from the point of view of their orientations. *No Longer at Ease* is the story of defeat and a fall from respectability to infamy, while *The Crippled Dancer* narrates the success story of a child overcoming odds connected to birth and upbringing on the one hand and hostility from the rich and powerful on the other. In this regard, they seem to have very little in common to warrant a comparative study. But there are important links between them which need to be studied, as they lead to an understanding of the novels beyond the personal histories of defeat and survival and opening them to the wider questions of existence and the modalities of being in the world. These relationships are not just with regard to the temporal parameters of their action, which is late in the colonial era, with their countries at the threshold of independence, but also in terms of their total intelligibility, as the protagonists are faced with a fight for their rights of free existence demanding of them repetitive effort. This shared intelligibility is explained in a hermeneutical reading which connects the narratives to the mythic symbol of the labour of Sisyphus. In this paper, we attempt simultaneously a comparative reading of the two texts and a hermeneutical one that awakens the resonances to the mythic tradition.

Keywords: evil, fiction, myth, solidarity, tradition

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* has been discussed in terms of plot structure and in socio-political terms, as a study of the experiences of an educated colonial subject caught up in the middle ground with his own people on one side and the colonial administration on the other. His moral links to his people have weakened and no longer instinctive; with the help of his education in England and the culture associated with the senior service post he holds, the links to the colonists are being forged, but without a great deal of enthusiasm on his part. The approaches to this narrative based on plot structure have generally found it to be of little consequence⁽¹⁾. One reader thought that it might have had a punch if the hero, Obi Okonkwo had gone ahead with his plans to marry his girlfriend in the teeth of opposition from family and cultural group⁽²⁾. Others have focused on the bribery incident, the trial and conviction of Obi, and thus see the significance of the narrative in terms of what Paul Ricoeur calls 'the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost'⁽³⁾. For its own part, T. ObinkaramEchewa's *The Crippled Dancer*, a story based on similar temporal parameters and studded with a lot more physical dealing and taking of blows, has received hardly any critical attention. This is not by any means uncommon. There are many other significant Nigerian works that similarly languish for lack of critical notice; and it would appear that a main determiner nowadays for which works get discussed, apart from whether or not they are the work of one of the well-known masters, is whether they are politically engaged or tackle contemporary social issues, and – more recently – whether they make a feminist case, with a notable level of iconoclasm and sometimes falsification of cultural facts and history.

Literary art may, of course take place within and by reference to these parameters, but it can also take form within less spectacular settings. Sometimes it is one or more of the ancient mythical symbols that are reconfigured, so that we are strictly dealing with 'symbolic representations'. According to Paul Ricoeur,

What is noteworthy in these symbolic representations is that the meaning proceeds from the end to the beginning, from the future to the past. So the question becomes: What does this chain of symbols, this retrograde movement of meaning, give us to think about?⁽⁴⁾

Readings of *No Longer at Ease* such as that in Robert Wren's *Achebe's World*, where we are told that Achebe 'wished apparently to deal with the alienation such educated young men as himself felt in the new nation moving swiftly to independence' (5), do not analyze the chain of symbols backwards but as a shadow cast by the writing subject. That limits what the text 'gives us to think about' to the writer and his times and ideas.

Our two novels may certainly be read as symbolic representations in Paul Ricoeur's sense. For example, *The Crippled Dancer* which unfolds in terms of a pattern of movement, 'from the beginning of evil to its end' (6), clearly follows the pattern in that the meaning of the struggle he is involved in from as far into the past as his memory can go becomes fully comprehensible to the protagonist, Ajuziogu, in the very last struggle which concludes the sequence. Unlike *No Longer at Ease* which starts with the very last incident of the tale, the third person narrator in *The Crippled Dancer* remains close to the unfolding consciousness of Ajuziogu, allowing itself an occasional flashback or flash-forward. *No Longer at Ease* is still more complicated in having two 'ends', respectively for the Clara and the bribery sequences. Moreover, we do not see the *end* of the evil that has come into being in the unfolding of its logic. It is a kind of evil, therefore, that one does not escape, a kind of hell, by contrast to *The Crippled Dancer's* 'apocalyptic symbolism' of with its associated ordeals (7).

II. THE PATH OF SISYPHUS

Ajuziogu, the hero of *The Crippled Dancer* is only a child, but has a task he hardly understands, formulated for him by his grandfather, namely 'the generations battle to keep Chigbundu's line going' (p. 60). His grandfather's friend, Odemelam, will bring out the full import of the generations battle as it is specifically configured for himself:

'Your grandfather has had a hard life. Early in life, fate left him a big calabash of the sourest palm wine anyone could be asked to drink down. He has been gulping bravely all his life, but the calabash seems to have no bottom. It seems that the calabash will still be beside him the day he takes his last breath... You are old enough to know that whatever your grandfather does not finish in his own lifetime will be left to you to finish... [Therefore, when] you come back, your calabash will be waiting for you. Yes, Ajuziogu, *your* calabash, for this calabash is really yours' (pp. 93-94).

The task facing him is similar in some respects to that of Edgar Ravenswood in Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (8), in that whether the line continues or closes down forever depends on his instrumentality. In both cases also, inimical social facts are at work, but whereas the love relationship Edgar enters into renders his case utterly hopeless, it is rather the love relationship that saves Ajuziogu. Left to himself alone, the bottomless calabash would probably have outlasted him. Apart from the fact that Ajuziogu's situation is ultimately resolved, the imagery of the bottomless calabash strongly echoes the vision of tragedy Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease* stumbles upon at his interview for a civil service job. This vision is in contrast to the cathartic process he calls conventional tragedy:

Tragedy isn't like that at all. I remember an old man in my village, a Christian convert, who suffered one calamity after another. He said life was like a bowl of wormwood which one sips a little at a time world without end. He understood the nature of tragedy.'

'You think that suicide ruins a tragedy,' said the Chairman.

'Yes. Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly for ever' (p. 36).

Obi's tragedy is not resolved. An attempt by himself to resolve it would have taken him back to the bottom of the valley and to the starting point. His one big defeat is over the choice of a marriage partner Clara, who turns out to be unacceptable to all his people because she is descended from a man who had been dedicated to a deity. He carries this fight through several stages, using bluff and threats against non-family members and casuistry with his father. He believes that having beaten his father to a retreat, victory is already his. The mother he could always count upon as an ally. She, however, kills all the fight in him at one stroke when she recounts to him a nightmare:

'I did not tell anybody about that dream in the morning. I carried it in my heart wondering what it was. I took down my Bible and read the portion for the day. It gave me some strength, but my heart was still not at rest. In the afternoon your father came in with a letter from Joseph to tell us that you were going to marry an *osu*. I saw the meaning of my death in the dream. Then I told your father about it.' She stopped and took a deep breath. 'I have nothing to tell you in this matter except one thing. If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my prayers, you will not wait long.' She stopped again. Obi was terrified by the change that had come over her. She looked strange as if she had suddenly gone off her head.

'Mother!' he called, as if she was going away. She held up her hand for silence.

'But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself.' She sank down completely exhausted.

Obi kept to his room throughout that day (p. 123).

One difference between Obi and Ajuziogu is the latter's capacity to put his setbacks behind him and get on with his life. In any event, he still hasn't come to the stage where he could see his whole life in perspective, where his life or the specific sequence becomes *a whole*, nor has the narrator closely following his life as it is unfolding. This idea of wholeness is something that Paul Ricoeur highlights in his analysis of Aristotle's theory of *muthosas* distinctive to art as opposed to life:

The accent, in the analysis of this idea of a 'whole,' is therefore put on the absence of chance and on conformity to the requirements of necessity or probability governing succession. If succession can be subordinated in this way to some logical connection, it is because the ideas of beginning, middle, and end are not taken from experience. They are not features of some real action but the effects of the ordering of the poem.

The same applies to the magnitude. It is only in the plot that action has a contour, a limit (*horos*) and, as a consequence, a magnitude.... Whatever can be said about the spectator's capacity to take in the work in one view, this external criterion comes to terms with an exigency internal to the work which is the only thing important here. 'If the length is sufficient to permit a change from bad fortune to good or from good fortune to bad to come about in an inevitable or probable sequence of events, this is a satisfactory limit [horos] of magnitude' (9).

Obi reaches his 'limit' in the passage with his mother. After that he is only a shadow of himself. His inability to go on beyond this point is not just by reason of the nature of the setback; there are character issues involved – that is to say, 'an exigency internal to the work' itself. For instance, he is all but thunderstruck when Clara first makes disclosure about her descent:

'Why can't you marry me?' He succeeded in sounding unruffled. For answer she threw herself at him and began to weep violently on his shoulder.

'What's the matter, Clara? Tell me.' He was no longer unruffled. There was a hint of tears in his voice.

'I am an *osu*,' she wept. Silence. She stopped weeping and quietly disengaged herself from him. Still he said nothing.

'So you see we cannot get married,' she said, quite firmly, almost gaily – a terrible kind of gaiety. Only the tears showed she had wept.

'Nonsense!' said Obi. He shouted it almost, as if by shouting it now he could wipe away those seconds of silence, when everything had seemed to stop, waiting in vain for him to speak (*No Longer at Ease* p.64).

He does understand what *osum* means to his people. Under 'the fictions[which] are socially in force' (10), a relationship with Clara is forbidden love. His sudden silence at the moment of disclosure means that with respect to marriage, and in all things, really, he is attitudinally under 'responsibility to act in the world in a justifiable way' to his society (11). He is not and does not want to be a reformer or a revolutionary. Clara's revelation has created a serious stumbling block for him, but he seems to have resolved that he has already gone too far to retrace his steps. So recovering himself, he prepares to do battle with his father by deploying 'new fictions' from the theology of the Bible to which the father is wholly committed. But he has nothing to say to the mother who assails his proposal from the old fictions of tradition. Clearly, he does not believe in the very fictions with which he has trounced his father. Ajuziogu, on the other hand, who has a dogged spirit, draws further strength from having close solidarity with his relatives, few though they are. Thus he is able to sharpen and strengthen his purpose. For his own part, what solidarity Obi had shared with anybody completely disintegrates over the passage with his mother. It recalls Coriolanus's struggle with his mother, which she wins. Coriolanus, however, is aware of the consequences of this:

O my mother, mother! O!

You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son,—believe it, O, believe it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,
If not most mortal to him (Act V, Scene iv). (12)

Obi does not show that he has worked out the full implications of his mother prevailing against him. But not only has he no more fight in him, from now on he is alone.

Too often criticism of *No Longer at Ease* has focused on what the protagonist has done or ought to have done. For instance, Wilson complains that the protagonist 'fails to bring back any fresh imaginative synthesis from his western education, any new vision to take the place of the old' (13). He pays no regard whatever to his personal history and psychology. Obi is not in any shape or form a Promethean character; and from his conversations with his friend Christopher, it appears that he has not worked out any social beliefs he could firmly commit himself to or propagate. The impact of his detachment from his people for several years during which he is studying in England must also be factored in. These years are of crucial importance and have left a huge gap in his socialization. For his community has been adjusting to the changes taking place in the

wider society, creating new networks and relationships, evolving new rules of operation, adopting new ways here, shielding other aspects of their culture from contact with the forces of change, and moving on. As Kearney puts it, rather than a *fait accompli* tradition is 'to be understood as an ongoing dialectic between our being-effected by the past and our projection of a history yet-to-be-made' (14). Those living in the midst of these adjustments are aware that change is occurring, although they are usually hard put to explain exactly what has happened. In *The Crippled Dancer*, for instance, the people are obviously uncomfortable with the changes, but they do not even know how to characterize these:

'Youth, youth.' Amadi said. 'Youth in this village nowadays seems to be a curse. To me youth is not what is wrong with this village . . .'

'What then, if not youth?' Izhima asked. 'Is it we elders?'

'What ails a tree is more often at its root than at its branches. The elders are the roots of this village. Young people are to their fathers mere branches.'

The discussion spread from Amadi and Izhima to others.

'Me, I say it is the White Man that has spoiled everything for all of us, young and old alike,' one man said.

'It is the White Man and the youth together,' another man said. 'It is what the White Man has done to our youth.'

'The youth did not invite the White Man here. He was already here when I was born.'

'No one invited the White Man here. He came on his own.'

'But is it not the elders who made him welcome and gave him a place to stay?'

'We did not welcome him. We fought him!'

'Where?' (p. 23)

There is much greater awareness of the changes among the people physically detached from the community for stretches of time together when these changes are taking place. It may be extreme as in the case of Obi whose outlook has grown markedly divergent from that of the Umuofia people settled in Lagos. When he comes to the village itself, he is full of admiration for their ways. But to some extent it is like admiration by an outsider.

Ajuziogu also experiences some measure of disconnection as a result of spending time in boarding school in a town far from the village. He is driven by the injustices and cruelties he and his family experience among their kin and to the reflection that 'his skills in Latin conjugations, in proving the theorems of Euclid, his knowledge ... of the production of annular rings by cambium in dicotyledons, none of these had prepared him for effective living with UmuNjikara. A native son, how could he be so unfit?' (p. 133). This disconnect is also the reason he is unable to work out for himself a traditional remedy put in place by his grandfather for the purpose of raising children for the family. He has married a young girl to grow up in his house with Ajuziogu with the expectation that as soon as they are of age they would begin having children. Ajuziogu does not understand that the grandfather is only a putative husband, and that he is the intended husband, a fact the young woman matures into and understands. He never makes out the hints that the grandparents have been laying out. It takes the girl explaining things herself to him and Odemelam amply reinforcing her effort to reconcile him to that state of affairs. Having become reconciled to the assignment, however, he finds that he has to woo and win the young woman:

Nwanyiaku was still there, but he had resolved that the obligation he owed by her he would discharge without grumbling, in fact with relish. He felt neither pressure nor anxiety over her, only the merest hint of nostalgia, wistfulness for occasions past, opportunities lost, things that might have been smooth but weren't. But he was gladly biding the most opportune time in the future to redress that past.

He teased her. When she was in his presence, he let his eyes play lecherously on her features. When they were apart, he dwelled even more actively on her body, and excited himself to a height of erotic emotion about her. But not yet. Not yet. He would wait a few days and give his feelings time to mature, and hers an opportunity to wax, for she was not being as responsive to his overtures as he would have wished. This latter, however, he understood. She was playing hard-to-get, filling his passions by restraining hers. He gave her a bracelet for a gift on one occasion and on another an expensive scarf (p. 111).

It is possible that she has begun to reconsider her position, since it has fallen out from him in the course of an intimate conversation earlier that he has never thought of her as a marriage partner. Before he attains his purpose, however, Radio swoops in and carries off his prize. With this also the hope of raising offspring to the apparently dying house is put in abeyance. For offspring, a wholly new platform is required.

The forces opposed to Ajuziogu are wholly external. Internally, his purpose is firm, his support network intact, the solidarity among the few individuals in this network growing in intensity all the time. This is far from the case with Obi Okonkwo. In the passage with his mother above, her defeat of his plans to marry Clara is total, not only in nullifying his efforts so far in the search for a bride and sending him back to the starting line

but also because she at the same time destroys something deep in him. She is able to do this because of the special bond between them:

There was a special bond between Obi and his mother. Of all her eight children Obi was nearest her heart. Her neighbours used to call her 'Janet's mother' until Obi was born, and then she immediately became 'Obi's mother'. Neighbours have an unfailing instinct in such matters. As a child Obi took this special relationship very much for granted. But when he was about ten something happened which gave it concrete form in his young mind. He had a rusty razor-blade with which he sharpened his pencil or sometimes cut up a grasshopper. One day he forgot this implement in his pocket and it cut his mother's hand very badly when she was washing his clothes on a stone in the stream.... whenever Obi thought affectionately of his mother, his mind went back to that shedding of her blood. It bound him very firmly to her (p. 68).

Now he could never feel the same again towards her – or towards anybody else, for she seems to have been his point of connection to the home and whatever home entailed. He does continue to fulfil his filial duties towards her as best as he could, but there is with this a sense of going through the motions. Part of what she destroys is in fact his self-esteem. He cannot be a hero after this. In other words, this defeat costs him his place as the hero of his own story. Coriolanus, who has come to a similar pass, redeems himself as the hero of his own sequence by directly forcing the consequences of yielding to his mother, which he has foreseen, to come to full realization. Here he urges the Volscians to action:

Cut me to pieces, Volscies; men and lads,
Stain all your edges on me. Boy! false hound!
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,
That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli:
Alone I did it. Boy! (V.iv)(15)

Since he had promised to lead them to conquer and sack Rome and has been dissuaded by his mother from what he has pledged, he gives them his life in exchange, urging them to take it with all violence. They kill him, but on his own strong incitement.

Obi, on the other hand, remains dazed in his defeat, while other people and the circumstances of work and existence – 'the conclave of events, people, and institutions' (*The Crippled Dancer* p. 132) – take over and drive the happenings around him. Here he is clearly a victim of circumstances:

Obi's plan to pay fifty pounds into her account had come to nothing for various reasons. One day he had received a registered parcel slip. He wondered who could be sending him a registered parcel. It turned out to have been the Commissioner of Income Tax.

Marie advised him to arrange in future to pay by monthly instalments through his bank. 'That way you don't notice it,' she said.

That was, of course, useful advice for the next tax year. As for the present, he had to find thirty-two pounds pretty soon.

On top of it all came his mother's death. He sent all he could find for her funeral, but it was already being said to his eternal shame that a woman who had borne so many children, one of whom was in a European post, deserved a better funeral than she got (*No Longer at Ease* p. 144).

At the same time, his debacle has crystalized as lack of money for his basic needs. Loss of self-esteem has much to do with his succumbing ultimately to the taking of bribes and to infamy in the social space.

Whereas old man Odogwu who welcomes him back to Umuofia in heroic terms imagines that he has placed himself on the path to greatness in successfully completing his studies in England, Obi seems to have been courting infamy all along as he has found himself drawn from time to time to behaviours that are objectionable to some of the publics he is affiliated to. Umuofia is one such public. He falls out with them especially over the engagement to Clara, taking the view that marriage is a private matter. For Umuofia people, however, it is so public a matter that it is an issue of discussion at their union meeting. The chairman of the Union himself introduces it:

I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry, and even thinking of marrying her....'

Obi leapt to his feet trembling with rage. At such times words always deserted him.

'Please sit down, Mr Okonkwo,' said the President calmly.

'Sit down, my foot!' Obi shouted in English. 'This is preposterous! I could take you to court for that ... for that ... for that. ...'

'You may take me to court when I have finished.'

'I am not going to listen to you any more. I take back my request. I shall start paying you back at the end of this month. Now, this minute! But don't you dare interfere in my affairs again. And if this

is what you meet about,' he said in Ibo, 'you may cut off my two legs if you ever find them here again' (p. 78).

In storming out and refusing to have anything further to do with his townsmen in Lagos who had provided him the loan for his studies abroad, Obi is asserting his right to privacy and independence of action in an area that may well be his own private domain in another culture. But it reflects the extent to which he is out of touch with the way his people conduct their affairs. The public nature of the receptions they give him both in Lagos and Umuofia at his return from England, which he accepts gladly, suggests that his idea of private affairs is quite different from theirs. Here, however, instead of staying out of what he calls *his* affairs, they ensure that the story of his engagement to Clara gets to his parents in the village well before his planned visit home, getting them fully prepared for him when he comes.

As Edward Said maintains, there are always 'worldly affiliations and interests'; there may be even 'affiliations with a sordid history' (16). This lesson on affiliation had been taught Obi much earlier on in primary school. He does not forget the event itself, but fails to pick up its meaning. The lesson is in connection with a letter he had written to Adolf Hitler during the Second World War. 'The headmaster at the time had pointed out, almost in tears, that he was a disgrace to the British Empire' (p. 7). Obi is eleven years of age at this time. In his adult life, with national independence within sight, there could be no question of taking pride as the headmaster here does in membership in the British Empire. But even now there is affiliation to that entity.

Obi will not cultivate affiliation to the Empire nor be the champion of Umuofia as old man Odogwu demands. He is not even the free, independent individual he seems to have settled for in accepting to fight for Clara. So what does he want to live for; what is he good for? This is an absurd situation. In Camus's terms, Obi is an 'absurd hero' (17). He clearly finds himself in an extremely uncomfortable situation, and does not seem to find life worth living anymore. After returning to Lagos and getting Clara to abort their baby since the marriage would not now come off, we read that he 'nowadays spent all his time in bed' (p. 142). No longer is his selfhood 'attested'; at most it is only 'posited' (18). The word 'suicide', according to Camus, the 'one truly serious philosophical problem', which naturally stares 'the absurd man' in the face, does crop up in the narrative at this point, but only in a manner of speaking, as he is considering available alternatives for solving his urgent money troubles: 'The simplest thing would be to go to a money-lender, borrow thirty pounds and sign that he had received sixty. But he would commit suicide before he went to a money-lender' (p. 133).

Ajuziogu, on the other hand, cultivates all affiliative networks she has access to, including the affiliation to the Empire. When he writes his letter at a similar age as Obi, he is using this medium to bring the colonial District Officer to review a case of gross perversion of justice against his grandfather by his old foe Chief Orji who is also the head of the local native court. A few years later, probably in his late teens, he tries to locate himself in time and space, and finds that he is in a network with people as reference points:

Was he no more than he remembered? Merely the dim and transparent shadows of fleeting moments, marching by without footprints, swirling and dissolving, forming and reforming without substance? Was he no more than the faceless dancer of his frequent dreams, imprisoned in a circle of village people, doing a solo whirl, out of step with the group, whose members were out of step with one another. Where was his locus, as the Geometry teacher would ask. Nwanyiaku, Adakurudiya, Orji, Enoch, Radio, Odemelam, his grandfather and grandmother – were they the fixed points, the points of reference, which determined his locus? (*The Crippled Dancer* p. 100)

The list here includes friends and relatives as well as the foes. By reference to all these, he asserts his selfhood; he is connected: he has a history. Not only is the 'relation between self and other ... both contained by and expressed in interpersonal and societal interaction' (19), but it is also clear from the smallness of this list that his existence is circumscribed in an extremely narrow world. He finds that he needs to go beyond this circle in order to get rid of Orji. He also traces his ancestry and concludes that he is connected by blood as well (p. 101). The problem, which he discovers quite early, is that he is not enjoying free existence, like everyone else that he knows. He takes for granted that he is entitled to it and that it is worth all effort. But free existence will depend on being able to break out of his narrow world. The first constraint to his enjoyment of free existence that he identifies is Elewachi, also known as Radio, who is older than him by some years, precocious, and a bully. The other is a man with a family of many wives, and head of the Icheke Native Court, Chief Orji. Later still he will discover that in his capacity as the head of the Native Court, Chief Orji has an ally, Enoch, at whose hands he will also suffer humiliation and heartless extortion. In relation to Orji, however, Enoch is no more than a *parasiti persona* (literally 'a guest player; one acting in the *persona* – mask – of another' (20)), so that he drops out of sight when Orji is defeated.

III. ORDEALS AND APOCALYPSIS

Ajuziogu's experiences at the hand of Radio are in terms of physical violence. So he fantasizes the final struggle in which he will knock out this opponent in terms of a physical fight. They do have a physical engagement before he has developed the muscles he had so counted on in his fantasies, and is worsted. Through

his own precipitate action in seeking redress in Orji's court, he gives his opponents the opportunity to form into a solid bloc against him. Physical strength is Radio's advantage over Ajuziogu, but Ajuziogu has been making steady progress with his education and the gap in this sector had been widening. With Orji, on the other hand, the physical violence is an expression of something deeper. It is at a circus in the village square while he is still a small child that he is given to understand by Chief Orji that he is not welcome to such an enjoyment. He will learn from his grandmother in the aftermath of this incident that the exclusion is arbitrarily imposed by Chief Orji. He has been having a good time at the circus, visiting all the places of amusement:

Late in the afternoon, Ajuzia had come around once again to the big tent. Parliament had been in a sort of recess but the tent was nevertheless full of people milling about – friends relatives, and children of the members. Because he saw so many other children there, he had taken the liberty to enter the tent and had dared to reach into one of the bowls for a boiled egg. He had just peeled the shell off the egg, and had just taken his first bite into it, when he felt a stinging slap across his face.

The mouthful of egg flew across the floor. He looked up and Orji was towering over him.

'Get out!' Orji shouted. 'Is this your mother's kitchen? Whassamatter? Whassamatter? Huh? Huh...?'

One of the soldiers hustled him out amidst the titters of several other children. He was angry and ashamed and flung the uneaten fraction of the egg fiercely to the ground (pp. 46-47).

By reference to this incident, Ajuziogu comes to understand that the right of enjoyment of free existence, which seems to cost the other members of his community no effort at all has to be fought for and secured. To secure it, he has to get around Orji somehow, either by coopting him as an ally or by compelling him to yield him his right. The latter option is also pictured as a physical struggle; and he would need to grow into a giant himself to be able to deal with Orji in that arena (p. 51). This seems quite impracticable.

His early effort to coopt Orji, at a time he has not yet grasped the nature of Orji's hostility towards him fails dismally:

This was his earliest memory of Orji, a day at OkpualaNgwa when he had won the sack race but no one had acknowledged him. It was on the 24th of May, Empire Day. First there were the parades in which formations of school children, drilled for weeks by their teachers for this occasion, their uniforms at their cleanest ever, marched past the Resident, who stood on a platform in a pith helmet, white tunic, dark trousers with gold stripes, moustache, fingers over his brows in salute...

He had not been much of an athlete in school, but in those days no one his age could beat him in the sack race. He was the smallest person competing that day, and he had won – at least he had crossed the finish line yards ahead of everyone else. But none of the judges had come to grab his hand to register his name for the prize. Chiefs and other eminences had appointed themselves judges in all the races, and each grabbed whom he pleased with no regard to how the race was actually run or won.

He now saw himself crying shamelessly that day in front of all the people. Crying, however, had not given proper vent to the anger which had swelled in his chest. He had wanted to kick someone, punch or bite someone. He had waved his hand in the air, shouting: 'I was the first! I was first! Everyone saw it!' But no one had paid any attention to him as he shoved his way among the crowd of prize seekers and their sponsors...

And then he had seen Chief Orji, one man he knew among all the strange faces, a man from his own compound, his own blood kin.... Orji, however, had rolled his eyes at him and shrugged off his grasping hand, muttering a curse as he walked away. Ajuzia had stood on the spot motionless and mystified, his heart so deeply wounded and his mind so confused by this betrayal that his tears stopped flowing (pp. 52-53)

The child hero has run this particular race to the finish, beating everybody else into the bargain. In the failure to acknowledge him, however, his effort has been rendered null. Sisyphus has rolled his stone to the top of the hill, but the triumph is stolen from him and he is sent back to the starting line. He has then appealed to Chief Orji to reverse this injustice.

In his absurdity, Obi Okonkwo has no single adversary to focus his energy on. The disintegration of his affiliative network means that he stands alone against an indifferent world. There are neither points of contact nor of attack. Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* knows the bitter irony of this situation very well. It comes to this:

that no one is touching my free will, that all they are concerned with is that my will should of itself, of its own free will, coincide with my own normal interests, with the laws of nature and arithmetic.

Therefore, as to what has happened to him,

no one is to blame, and consequently there is only the same outlet left again—that is, to beat the wall as hard as you can.(21)

By contrast, Ajuziogu is guided by Orji's hostility to a clear definition and articulation of his purpose. Again and again he gets into scrapes involving Chief Orji. Each time he is subjected to the man's brutish and unjust heavy-

handedness. On the occasion of the sack race he remembers on Empire Day, Orji is not the cause of the original injustice against him, only the target of his appeal against public ill-usage, in the misplaced hope that the man would stand by him as a protective kinsman. But he is brusquely shrugged off. What now becomes clear is the conspiracy of the whole social system against him. Increasingly, Orji will become the point of articulation and protagonist of that conspiracy and hostile social environment turning its back firmly against him and refusing him solidarity. He is the one who would personally nullify his efforts, humiliate and deny him recognition, and usher him off the scene, or else back to the starting line.

Chief Orji is discussed in Akwanya and Anohu, *Fifty Years of the Nigerian Novel*, as one of the most notorious and brutish figures of the Yeatsian rough beast in the Nigerian novel. (22) He is also a mock king and an Abbot of Unreason. In the above, the young boy makes suit to him for the protection of his rights, but does not know that he is appealing to the protagonist of all that is unjust and evil and particularly that this man has him specially in his sights. At the time of the race, however, he seems not to have picked up the little boy clearly in his sights. And so Ajuziogu has only felt the heat of the man's 'evil constitution', as Paul Ricoeur would say, which afflicts all and sundry, whoever comes near or stands in the way to something Orji might be interested in. From the time of the circus, he has been finally picked out, and becomes the sufferer of the chief's harsh and irrational treatment.

Securing his right, or in our terms rolling the stone over the crest to earn his freedom is a task Ajuziogu is not allowed the tranquility to mature into because of an extremely harsh experience of growing up in a transitional society which had lost its traditional character, particularly the values that had sustained it for centuries before re-ordering by the colonists. As well as this there are deeply entrenched hatreds and individuals who incessantly bully and harass the unprotected child. Thus he is introduced to the labour of Sisyphus quite early in life under the crushing supervision of Orji, the goliath whose overcoming at last will usher him into the world of freedom and simultaneously mark his coming of age. Orji has taken advantage of the presence of the colonists to entrench himself in a position of influence in the community and, using what the text calls the 'strong eye', he has exploited his position as the head chief of the Icheku Native Court to expropriate lands and extort and pauperize the people who then came back to take unrepayable loans, pledging away more lands in return. He attains the status of a potentate by successfully intimidating and cowering the people, corrupting the traditional system of justice and protection of rights, and through his position as the head chief of a native court blocks access to the white man who might redress the wrongs he is perpetrating.

The first major setback he has is by Ajuziogu by-passing him and writing directly to the District Officer for redress when he uses his position as head chief of the native court to try and subjugate Ajuziogu's grandfather, almost the only elder that has remained uncowed, and to swindle him out of a large sum of money and land as well. The decision to take this course comes about in the manner of a brainwave; for he does not seem to have consciousness of the advantage his education and exposure, limited as it is, confer on him with respect to the struggle for the right to free existence. In the lead up to his last struggle with Orji in which outside contacts he has gained play the decisive role, he comes to full realization of the meaning of Orji's antagonism towards him:

Ajuzia was bothered or perhaps even nagged by the notion that the allegations Orji had made in his case had more fundamental implications than his grandfather realised. This was not merely an effort to disinherit them, but to disinvent them, to declare their past fake, the past which justified their present and their future, the past, with all its customs and traditions out of which his grandfather had built his personal authenticity (pp. 213-214).

IV. CONCLUSION

What Orji stands to gain from 'disinventing' Ajuziogu's tiny branch of the Njikara community is presumably their land in which he has shown more than a passing interest. He has similarly been taking over the land holdings of his neighbours and other townsmen, some by commendation, others by instigating suits against them in his court, arresting and setting unaffordable bails, for which he provides loans in exchange for lands. In human terms, however, his effort is to nullify their social existence. The only thing that stands on his way is Ajuziogu. But Ajuziogu has spirit, and refuses to be swept out of the way despite repeated abuse, humiliation, and physical violence visited on him for the purpose of subduing him. In this capacity to come back, he differs from Obi Okonkwo. In *No Longer at Ease* as in *The Crippled Dancer*, the right to free existence is fundamentally in question, even though it is not as sharply defined in one as in the other. For Obi, however, his self-image and self-respect are tied up with his self-engagement to Clara, possibly because of the emotion already expended in fighting off his other friends for her. But there is no doubt that his poor performance is partly accounted for by the nature of the defender of the old social fictions and their shared relationship. Obi does show a lot of spirit in his struggles with people who interfere in his private affairs, even the Umuofia Union to whom he owes the loan that had paid for his education in England. But it is his dying mother who personally enforces the demand that his free will choose of its own accord the break with Clara as

acting responsibly, and threatens to hasten her own death if he fails to act in accordance with *his own normal interests*. Given the bond between him and his mother, he does not seem to be able to define his marriage as a private affair which excludes her. Obi's getting caught up in a bribery scam and imprisoned objectifies and renders permanent his loss of the struggle for free existence, thus tying up the two 'ends' of the novel into a unity; while the achievement of the right to free existence coincides for Ajuziogu with his coming of age and entry into social life as a free player.

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