



Reflections on Death and Upsurgeing Suicide Phenomenon: A Reading of Clement Odi's Bekekele

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ABSTRACT

Overtime, issues pertaining to dying and death are often thought of to be more appropriate for consideration within the folds of religion, medicine, anthropology and psychology, while its place in literature, often times, downplayed. Notwithstanding, literature has proved to be a potent tool in the reconstruction of life and death and in the shaping of man's understanding of both phenomenon. To this end, this paper examines Clement Odi's underlying perception of death and suicide in his play, Bekekele, as against the proliferate and upsurgeing view of suicide as escape route from existential doldrums in recent times. This is with a view to establishing the link between arts and social realities and the artist's commitment in enthroning value for life in spite of the suffocating hurdles that characterise man's journey through life. The play is subjected to critical and literary analyses in order to pinpoint characters instinctual attitude to life and death, suicides, and the playwright's stances on the need to soar above limiting circumstances of life. Odi therefore uses death and suicide in the play as metaphors to comment and right negative views about life, death and social relations.

Keywords: Clement Odi, Bekekele, Suicide, Death,

Introduction

Unless criticism springs out of the genuine analyses of the real world, and in its turn affects it (and in the world "real" I include the self that lives out and in history as well as writers) then it inhabits the realm of fantasy- (Nicole Ward Jouve, 8).

To die is the human condition, and reflection concerning death exists practically among all peoples- (Herman Feifel, 537).

Issues pertaining to dying and death are often thought of to be more appropriate for consideration within the folds of religion, medicine, anthropology and psychology, while its place in literature, often times, downplayed. Of course, this seems very much on point; however, the place of literature in addressing and doing justice to such issues cannot be downplayed. Trilling echoes this idea when he avers that, "the study of literature has been found to have a unique effectiveness in opening the mind and illuminating it, in purging the mind of prejudices and received ideas, in making the mind free and active" (50). Emmanuel Obiechina equally share this view when he submits that Literature, the product of the literary artist, is one of the most reliable guides into an understanding of people and their time and way; the writer in our life is a central figure, not only in the defining of the quality-of our life and realities of our time, but more importantly, in the cure of the multiple infirmities which affects us. (2)

Trilling and Obiechina's stance show that literary works have the capacity to examine people's experiences, values, and attitudes, irrespective of the issue, in a much deeper and extensive manner. Charles Glicksberg succinctly captures this view when he remarks that "the creative power inherent in literature provides literary artists the license to present even that which cannot be openly discerned by individuals. Thus, medicine, anthropology, and religion may not offer as much insight about the responses to death and dying as much as literature would (6).

Death is one ideology that has shaped literature from time immemorial. Recent observations about how people see and respond to death have created the need to engage death from a literary perspective in order to save modern man from the growing consciousness that to die is gain and to live is pain, thereby deliberately and wilfully embracing suicide because of existential limitations. Of course, we live to die and we die to live but the manner we live and how we die determine our celestial positioning and existence. Today, in the world over, there are diverse views on death. While some can be termed good death (divine), others are seen as self-inflicted and probably motivated by circumstances around us (bad death). The later view is term so because it is not fulfilling to the person involved in it nor dignifying to people connected to the individual. Even though death is a call that everyman must answer, how we answer it matters. If the call of death must be answered, it must be properly answered. And if life must be lived, it must be well spent. This reminds us of Lawrence Durrell's postulation that "if time is, as I believe, the measure of our death-consciousness, you cannot revise your concept of it without affecting your ideas of death and life" (qtd. in Glicksberg 42) What emerges from this in the words of Charles Glicksberg is not a philosophy of time but a revelation of the death of consciousness that dominates the *lebensanschauung* of modern man" (42) This germane truth can be realized depending on how we react and respond to limiting and depressing situations within and around us. Sometimes, it could be by living an untainted life that we become guaranteed of hopeful and promising end. At other times, it could be by fighting against oppressing tides of the mind. This is basically not a question of religion, but an empirical pattern of thought to man's journey through life to the other world.

Literary representations of death, dying and bereavement are of especial significance to human existence and co-existence with forces around man. Ray Bradbury had this in mind when he observes that "our talk about death has a very real impact on how we die, what we do with our dead and how we experience our bereavements" (2). The significance of this paper, therefore, is to shape our attitude towards death and suicide. In doing this, emphasis will be placed on the significance of life, its meaning in relations to our dealings with others, circumstances that hinder one's smooth sail and harmony with the three essential dimensions of human life as reflected and refracted in Odia's *Bekekele*. This goes to show that literature, irrespective of its forms, remain a veritable tool for instilling morals and virtues in human being and society on issues that relates to death and suicide. It is in the light of the foregoing that this study pays attention to the issue death, dying and suicide in Odia's *Bekekele*. In doing this, the study employs the reader-response and psychoanalytical theories.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs the reader-response and psychoanalytical theories for analysis. These theories are deemed appropriate for this study because they enhance instinctual reading of the characters in-out. The reader-response theory emphasizes a mutual relationship between the text and the reader in terms of meaning. In this case, whatever the reader sees as the meaning of a text, so long as it can be substantiated and situated within the ambits of the work becomes valid. In effect, the meaning of a text is influenced by the reader's understanding and perceptions of what he assumes as the writer's intent. In this regard, Anthony Carlisle describes the reader-response theory as a theory which "emphasizes the creative role of the reader" (12). Amer Anwar corroborates Carlisle position when he submits on the theory thus:

It [reader-response theory] views the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this transaction. Thus, reading, in this approach, is a reflective and creative process and meaning is self-contracted. (68)

In the light of the aforementioned, one can deduced the fact that the reader-response theory creates an avenue for the reader and critic to unravel meaning in a literary text the way he or she deems it appropriate in relation to his personal and societal experiences, so long as it is within the boundary of the ideas examined in the text.

Another theory employed for this study is Freud's psychoanalytical theory. Psychoanalytic approach is used in this paper, firstly, because the subject matter death and suicide, both products of the human instinct, are closely related to the field of psychology. The psychoanalytical theory was developed by Sigmund Freud and it focuses on what transpires in the mind of everyman. According to Freud, the human mind is essentially dual in nature. It has two fundamental instincts that are inherent in it. They are the life instinct or Eros and the death instinct or Thanatos (43). While Eros (life instinct) is the source of self-preservation, thanatos is the origin of self-destruction or the death instinct. It is this instinct that drive living creatures to strive for an inorganic state. Freud introduced the concept of the death drive as a negative term in opposition to the life drive (55). These instincts are manifest in everyman and the personality of the characters in the play. When the first instinct is prominent in a being, he craves for self-preservation, but when the latter is dominant, he loses value for life. This study will employ this theory in weighing the actions, thought and reactions of the characters to ascertain how they manage the two instincts present in man, in dealing with life in relation to death. This is in line with Monte's remark that "Psychoanalytic theories assume the existence of unconscious internal states that motivate an individual's overt actions". (Beneath the Mask, 8)

Death and Upsurgeing Suicide Phenomenon in *Bekekele*

Odia Clement is a relatively new voice in the Nigerian literary scene, who has impacted the literary world with novel content and styles. Though his works have gained little critical attention, they have come to stay in the fast spreading literary landscape in Nigeria. His literary works, just like those of exemplary Nigerian writers, aptly expose the social ambience of the nation. His plays especially, reveal great truth about man and the consequence of untamed quest for materialism. They reflect the moment of dying, living, death, crave for materialism and caution on the need to live life with some sense of decency and purpose for the now and the yet to come. The play therefore becomes a metaphor of life and death instincts.

In *Bekekele*, Odia gives a detailed illustration of how untamed struggle for vain things, affluence, pleasure and mammon can lead to degeneration and affliction. The playwright uses the protagonist, Dr James Ode to convey this message. Dr Ode in the play is an example of dubious, crafty, greedy, heartless and inhuman fellow, who cares only about himself and how to make more money. Despite the fact that he works in a reputable oil company, he still swindles people for money. His misuse of the positions that he holds as evidenced in his dubious dealings with people that come in contact with him is an indication of the moral decay and a form of death depicted in the play. In this context, Odia establishes the idea that wrong behaviour leads to moral death. Dr Ode's actions and inactions leads to the death of all the characters in the text, who supposedly are his friends, associates, and relatives and further leads to his ruin as he is afflicted with incurable ailment. While this reality is part of the concerns of this study, the focus is more on the attitude of the characters toward life and death. The playwright however creates characters that embody the connection between the living and the dead. Dr Ode's affliction by those he pushed into taking their lives reaffirms belief in the interconnectedness of the living and the dead. The affliction can be interpreted as punishment for breaking the moral laws of life. His ailment and the search for cure, begins the play.

The play opens in the village of Azelu with Dr Ode sick and bedridden. Prior to his being sick, he lived in Lagos where he works, but since he can no longer afford the luxury of city life and has exhausted everything he stole, acquired forcefully and falsely, he relocates to the village with his wife. His going back to the village is embraced after several attempts have been made to see him get back on his feet. When the ailment started, the company intervened and quickly sent him abroad for treatment, yet his condition worsened. The company having spent so much lays him off. This is how the Ode's find themselves in the village.

On one occasion, while in the village, Mrs Ode, Dr Ode's wife, encounters an old friend, Mrs Adisa, who is surprised to see her in the village. Being that they have not seen for a very long time, Mrs Adisa inquires about her welfare and life in the city. Mrs Ode, who is already tired of covering the pathetic state of her husband's health, opens up to her. As a friend who values friendship, she requests to see him and possibly make her input. On seeing the man she perceives and deciphers that the ailment is not ordinary, but an affliction from extraterrestrial beings that the husband has possibly offended and dealt unfairly to, when everything was working well for him. She therefore suggests a visit by Mrs Ode to extraterrestrial world to find solution to the husband's lingering ailment. But before she embarks on the journey, Mrs Adisa accessed Mrs Ode to know if she is fit to embark on the journey as the journey is one meant for the untainted and pure in heart. Mrs Adisa accesses Mrs Ode's palms and confirms her suitability for the journey. The personality of Mrs Ode and qualification to visit the sacred groove

(extraterrestrial world) reemphasises the place of decent living in realizing a fulfilling and rewarding life. The playwright uses Ode's personality to advocate for living an unsoiled life as ticket to piloting a peaceful existence. Here, Mrs Ode's pure life qualifies her to visit different domains, both in the world of the living and that of the dead. Having ascertained that she is untainted, she informs her that the journey will commence immediately as they have little or no time on their side to reach out to those who have afflicted her husband with ailment for his misdeeds to them. The search for cure and possible forgiveness for Dr Ode for his atrocities exposes the reader, in form of flashback, to the catalogue of atrocities that has accumulated into his being bedridden. The idea of death in the text is projected through the way and manner the characters exit the world. It is unravelled when Mrs Ode encounters one after the other the victims of her husband's misdeeds in plea for forgiveness and restoration of his health.

In her first visit to the Groove of the Untainted, she is told that her husband has offended six people that she needs to appease. During the visit, the playwright unearths the theme of death and upsurging suicide Phenomenon. In effects, her encounters with the aggrieved characters in the play afford us the opportunity to come to term with suicide as an upsurging form of death in our world today. For instance, Mrs Ode on her first visit to the aggrieved, in this case, at the market square, she meets a widow who the husband dealt badly to. The widow has a shop besides the husband's office. The shop is her only hope of survival and source of livelihood. According to her, on a fateful day, Dr Ode summons her and informs her that the board of the company has decided to demolish her shop and assume ownership of the land but assures her of handsome compensation in the ton of twenty million naira. She receives the news with great joy, but never got anything. She lost everything. In the midst of the pathetic situation and struggle for survival, her two children fell ill and she couldn't pay for their treatment in the hospital because her only means of survival has been ruined. While in the terrible state, she makes attempt to reach Dr Ode, but she is sent out by him. In the end, she loses her two children because of lack of money to sponsor their treatment. Overwhelmed with their loss and the oppression that pervade the world, death instinct sets in and she takes her life by drinking poison (17-26). The death of the widow explains how the way one is treated can activate the death instinct thereby giving birth to suicide. However, the playwright condemns taking one's life. According to him, there is basically no reason why someone should take his/ her life. He expresses this view in the voice of Mrs Ode thus:

Do you know that suicide is forbidden in our culture? No matter the provocation by anyone, you are not the owner of your life and as such, you have no right to take the life that was given to. My husband did not kill you, you took your own life. I am not here to defend his actions but as a fellow woman, I speak the truth to correct you. You did not explore all other options. Osanobua, our creator, is the one who gives and takes life. So you should not blame another person for your fault (27)

The playwright further condemns suicide through the voice of Ekowiro, the keeper of the market. Like Mrs Ode, he sees taking one's life as unnecessary irrespective of the situation. He comments thus: "suicide is the highest manifestation of moral weakness. Only the truly weak swirl in the tide of suicide... There is no justification for suicide. You can never throw away what does not belong to you in a fit of rage and demand justice" (29). What this exemplifies is that suicide is basically not a good way to die as it is carried out by the weak who lack courage to face the ups and downs of life. Man must strive to outsoar his physical limitation. The woman having listened to Mrs Ode and Ekoriro's positions on her death, forgives Dr Ode and grants Mrs Ode access to the sacred water which is the recommended cure for the husband's ailment. She gets water from the market square, but on applying it to the husband's body, the situation worsened instead of getting better. When she informs her friend about it, she is requested to go on another journey to the Groove of the Ancient knowledge.

On arrival at the Groove of Ancient knowledge, she is told to visit the six streams in Azelu by the Wise Mother and that in each of the stream, she will meet the souls of those her husband has offended. Her first visit is to the stream by the fish market. Here she meets Tina. Tina is a corp member posted from Port Harcourt to Lagos on a compulsory national service for graduates. Before her posting, she is engaged to be married to her fiancé. On completion of her service, she applies to Adolf Oil Company, the company where Dr Ode works, for a job. Dr Ode promised her heaven on earth all in a bid to lure her to bed. He tells her so many lies. He even promised to sponsor her marriage to her fiancé. Having lured her to bed, he starts avoiding her. Weeks later, Tina discovers she is pregnant and relays the information to Dr Ode. He still does not change his attitude towards her. Tina's fiancé gets to know about the situation and called off their proposed marriage. Not just that, her parents, on getting to know that she is pregnant and her supposed marriage has been called off, commit suicide in order to avoid the shame that will accompany the news when it spreads to public domain. Tina, on her part, takes her life as she

cannot possibly stand the shame and reproach of losing her fiancé and parents because of her error (38). She allows her life instinct to be overwhelmed by death instinct. Again, we are exposed to suicide as a way of escaping from the problems of life. However, the playwright also bemoans Tina's death. He does this in the voice of Mrs Ode when she tries to respond to Tina calling her husband the murderer of parents and her:

Oh no, he is not. Yes, he deceived you to sleep with you but he did not force your parents to take their lives; neither did he take yours. You people merely acted on impulse. You were rash in your decision. If you had thought it through, you would have known better to stay alive (38-39).

Subsequently, she proceeds to the Groove of Conscience. Here she meets with Chief, another character her husband has treated badly and resulted in his death. Chief Akilo, a business man, initiates a bid for an oil and gas contract with Dr Ode's company. Dr Ode collects thirty percent up front to approve the contract and forward it to the government, but the contract never sees the light of day. It is cancelled. When the contract is cancelled, Akilo meets Dr Ode for the thirty percent bribe he has given him as the contract never scale through, but he refuses. He even goes as far as throwing him out from his office. Akilo loses everything he has saved and worked for to the deal. Out of frustration, he ends his life. He captures it in his words to Mrs Ode thus, "your husband drove me to my early grave... I begged him in tears but he threw me out of his office. That was the day I took my life" (44-45). The playwright condemns his decision to take his life. He sees suicide as no option out of an unpalatable situation. He decries at suicide as response to unbearable pains, frustration and life challenges. On the need to place premium and value on life, the Judge between Chief Akilo and Mrs Ode emphasises the need to treat life with sanctity as man does not have the power to create nor give life. Olga, one of the elders who presided over the matter condemns suicide irrespective of the situation one is faced with and emphasises the need to forgive in spite of the offence. He puts it thus:

My brother you have to forgive him. Suicide cannot be defended before the Great White Throne of Osanobua. A man who kills himself does not understand the worth of life. The human life is more precious than gold and diamond. There is nothing in the world that can equal the greatness of a soul. Every blood shed will be required from the hand of the one who shed it Human beings must know that whatever they do on earth echoes in eternity. If you kill a man or take your own life in a fit of rage, you will never be guiltless... Our lives are like rivers which flow from one mighty source-the everlasting king. He alone is the greatest and wise judge of our actions. Therefore, all judgment must be left for him to decide. No matter anybody does to you, it is expected of you to be patient for the Grand Master of Retribution to decide our fate. Chief Akilo, as I have said, suicide has no place in spiritual jurisprudence (45-47).

On another occasion, this time around, at the stream by the cloth market, Mrs Ode meets with Edosa, her only sister. Dr Ode had an affair with her, right under their roof. He hides under the covering of his wife's inability to conceive to persuade her. Edosa accepts his proposal because she wants to save her sister's home. She feels that Dr Ode getting married to a strange woman because of her sister's inability to bear a child for him will ruin her sister's marriage, happiness and home. She eventually gets pregnant for him and Dr Ode receives the news with great excitement. Because of the pregnancy, Dr Ode buys her a car. Subsequently, she has accident with the car which leads to her losing the pregnancy. The complication also leads to the damage of her womb. When he informs Ode of the situation, he abandons her in the hospital. He equally ended the relationship. He puts it thus: "this pregnancy is what connects you and me. If you have lost it, then you have lost me too. I don't want to see you or have anything to do with you(52). Even when she tries to reach him to restore the relationship, he deliberately frustrates her efforts. Because of the shame and the fact that she has lost her womb and further neglected by Dr Ode, she takes her life(53). Mrs Ode frowns at her sister's action in taking her life, but expose one antidote in overcoming instinct for death when it surfaces on the mind. The antidote she recommended at this point is that of discussing the problem with people who can offer meaningful counsel. She puts in this manner to her sister: "You ought to have told me my sister...How could you take a decision that concerned me without my knowledge?(53). Of course, this revelation is enough for Mrs Ode to abandon her husband to his fate, but she never did. Rather she pleads with her sister to forgive the husband: "Edosa, please have mercy on my husband. He has suffered enough, please. Do it for my sake. Please, my sister (53). She never allows her instinct for life dwindle and her love turns hate. Even when she is hurt deep down, she summons courage and encourages herself with that fact that no man is infallible, hence she forgives and moves on with the pursuit of cure for her husband's ailment (56). She therefore becomes an example of how to activate the life instinct to suppress the consciousness for evil and suicide.

In the last journey, Mrs Ode goes with her husband. The journey is to the Groove of Sacrifice. Here, he encounters his mother, a woman who bore so many bullets to ensure Dr Ode amounts to somebody. In spite of the mother's good-hearted dispositions to him, he accuses her of witchcraft and abandons her. According to the mother, it is the witch that he calls her that leads to her death. The demeaning name suppresses her will to live. For the mother, death comes when one is annihilated. Seen from a Freudian perspective of interpretation, death can be said to begin from the mind. The mother out of anger places a curse on him. Even in death, he refuses to give the mother a befitting burial because he sees her as a witch but comes to his senses in his deathbed. What this implies is that man realizes himself when death comes knocking or he escapes death. At this point, he apologises to the mother and promises to do the burial as soon as he bounces back to health. At the end he makes peace with all he has offended and reconciles with the forces that controls human activities, thereafter, he is restored to health and stability. What this implies is that peaceful co-existence with forces that controls our world and existence-both human and non-human agents are catalyst for stable living. The sacred water needed for his restoration is the forgiveness by all that he has offended at the different phases of his life. In effect, the tide and shape one's life is determined by his or her relationship with people around him and the forces that control the extraterrestrial world and that of the living.

Conclusion

The different characters' reactions signify that there is a whole gamut of human emotions and responses to death and dying. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Odia uses his art to talk about ills in society such as death, dying, illness, suicide, oppressive attitudes of some persons to others in a bid to maintain certain status and accumulate more wealth. However, the playwright believes that man must confront limiting situations with positive dispositions and embrace conversation as antidote to depressing situations and never see suicide as the way out of the unfriendly conditions of life. This is exemplified in the disposition of Mrs Ode to circumstances that should have derailed her mind and compels her to discontinue with the search for cure to her husband's ailment. The writer analyzes the life and death instincts within Mr Ode's personality to that of other characters. While others could not face their challenges, she refuses to be depressed with the cruel, evil, and immoral lifestyle of the husband. In the end they surmount the pressure and limitation they are faced with and the husband eventually adopts a new lifestyle devoid of evil to people around him.

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