

Re-Reading *Things fall apart*: Unoka's prototype and the absurdist ideology

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Abstract

Absurdism is the idea of nothingness and meaninglessness of life. In tandem with this, absurdist thinkers tend to see human life as lonely, empty and bereft of meaning which man is in constant search for till the end. Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart is one of the best books to have come from the African continent. Regarded as the classics of all time, Achebe created characters which critics continued to identify with over the years. One of such character is Unoka, Oknokwo's father. Described as a weakling and a coward, Unoka was a man Okonkwo never wished to become and he lived all his life avoiding his footprints. Much has been said on the cowardice, lazy and weak nature of Unoka as portrayed by the writer. This paper takes entirely a different approach to the perception and conception of the personality of Unoka. While Unoka is seen as a coward and a never-do-well which is in sharp contrast with the heroism and bravery of Okonkwo, this paper argues that Unoka is the unsung hero against Okonkwo's sheer bravery. From the absurdist view of life, Unoka seems to know his place and accepted the dictates of his society and chi. He understood the absurdist nature of human life and was prepared to face and live it till the end. Little wonder he enjoys every moment of his life with merry making and blows his flute which was the only thing that gives him peace and blessedness in an alien world. How Unoka lived out the absurdist ideology and conformed to its tenets and principles against the bravery, sheer struggle and gallantry of his son, Okonkwo; how

he survived and the implication of the life of Unoka in our contemporary era is the crux of this paper.

Key words: *absurdism, fate, prototype, culture, society, ideology*

Introduction

Absurdism as an ideology is believed to have developed in the theatre of Europe at the wake of the 20th century following the war and post war disillusionment that left people with many unanswered questions about the place of individuals in the world. We recall that the world wars both fought in the 20th century turned the people's outlook and optimistic views of life, and rather brought about a degree of pessimism and cold fear about the unknown future and the uncertainty of life. The philosophy of the theatre of absurd is rooted in the nothingness and meaninglessness nature of life. The absurdist tends to view the world as empty of meaning, order and sense of decorum. They see the world as meaningless and nothing. The world is without any proposed shape or order and from nothing; our journey continues in despair to the very pit of nothingness. In the view of M.H. Abram and Geoffrey Harpham on absurdism as an ideology in literature:

The term is applied to a number of works. In drama and prose fiction which have in common the view that the human condition is essentially absurd and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd... the literature has its roots also in the movements of expressionism and surrealism, as well as in the fiction written

in the 1920s of Franz Kafka (*The Trial*, *Metamorphosis*). The current movement, however, emerged in France after the horrors of World War II (1939-45) as a rebellion against basic beliefs and values in traditional culture and literature. This tradition had included the assumptions that human beings are fairly rational creatures who live in an at least partially intelligible universe, that they are part of an ordered social structure and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity even in defeats. After the 1940s, however, there was a widespread tendency, especial prominent in the existential philosophy of men of letters such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, to view a human being as an isolated existence who is cast into an alien universe;... in its fruitless search for purpose and significance, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end – as an existence which is both anguished and absurd (I).

In other words, absurdism as an ideology is rooted in the meaninglessness and nothingness of life. A clear understanding of the absurdist ideology will go a long way to aid our understanding of some of the plays of Samuel Becket as he recreated on his stages some of real life characters, who exist from nothing, whose journey starts from nothing and ends in

nothing. These characters are always in constant search for a patterned and meaningful way of life which eludes them in the end. It is also from this perspective that we study Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is reputed as one of the best books to have ever come from the African scene. It is one of the pioneering works that laid the foundation for Africa literature. Translated in over 58 languages in the world and recognized as one of the Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20th century, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an 'immortal novel' from an 'immortal writer' that shaped the scene of African literature and created a path trodden by so many talents writers over the years and many more will still trod that path all to the glory of African literature. The novel is a rich socio-cultural diary of the African people in the sense that we can obtain glances of our African past, our way of life, the way we once lived, our culture, our dignity, our pride but above all our literature uniquely set apart from the bulk of literary style and manner of composition the Europeans would have loved to impose on the 'primitive' Africa, as they once termed us, in their claims to salvage us from our "primitive, barbaric, archaic and redundant living." Chinua Achebe sets out in *Things Fall Apart* to write a novel that touches the core of our culture and with that singular artistic gesture, he was able to prove and showcase to the white men that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from them. Achebe was able to prove that we have culture, we have philosophy of great depth and we have poetry too. It is all these that we lost to colonialism and this is what we must collectively strive to regain. This he puts across in these words:

... African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty. That they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period, and it is this that must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect ... (8).

Achebe was able to prove our African culture by looking into our cultural past and selected various elements of our culture, our heritage and tradition and manifested it to the world. Achebe was not a selfish and romantic writer. He was not interesting in romanticizing African culture and having an 'unreal' sense of nostalgia for 'one glorious past' but Achebe as a faithful artist, recorded the experiences of his society with all its imperfection to show that Africa, like the Europeans in their primitive past also is in the journey of metamorphosis to a refined and civilized way of life. He was deeply interested in giving his African people there voices and reclaiming their pride of culture that was almost lost in the era of colonialism. It is in line with the above that Mpalive – Hangson Msiska explains about the novel *Things Fall Apart* thus:

Conceived as a response to the denigration of Africa in colonist novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), *Things Fall Apart* stretches the novel form

to create a space for the authentic African subject and his or her world. It seeks to go beyond the colonial depiction of grunting ‘savages’ and ‘cannibals’ with no language or cultural and historical links to their physical environment and, as such, it reverses her colonial gaze in order to reveal an essential humanity that the colonial novel either deliberately aided or repressed or was incapable of articulating (1).

In the opinions of Isidore Okpewho:

Things Fall Apart is an unusual novel not only for the “strange” world it portrays but equally for the unfamiliar touch Achebe brings to the English medium of his writing. Indeed, with this novel, Achebe initiated a vogue in post colonial African literature whereby writers, while representing their societies in a European language, endeavored to create a space for their indigenous sensibilities in both sound (African world inserted here and here) and sense (peculiar way of meaning) in “The African writer and the English language,” Achebe explains and defends the logic of the choices he had to make in his peculiar use of English. This early (1964) essay, which establishes Achebe’s mission as champion of an integral African cultural

sensibility, has influenced a good deal of assessment of the content and style of *Things Fall Apart* and other Achebe fiction.
(39)

So many things have been written and said about Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that a researcher will have a great difficulty selecting what to review as pertinent and what to exclude. We shall resist that temptation here and say only few vital things as our aim in this study is not on the reputation of Achebe and his *Things Fall Apart* but on the absurdist leanings in his novel.

The portrait of Unoka vis-à-vis Okonkwo: A comparative discourse

Absurdism is the idea of the meaningless and nothingness of life. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe created memorable characters, characters that over these years, critics have identified with and continue to maintain a common link with in our real world of flesh and blood. Okonkwo is one of such characters. Then, we have Unoka, his father among other memorable and appealing characters in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo was a renowned brave man. He was renowned in his special skills in wrestling, farming, war and other areas of life that demand manly attack apart from hunting. But the same cannot be said of his father, Unoka. Though held by that family bond of a father and a son, both men were like repelling poles. They were like contrastive parallel lines that never met. Both men lived a lifetime of conflicting desires as what seemed the best in Okonkwo was the worst in Unoka. Just like Okonkwo thrived and delighted in war, war was a subject Unoka never discussed in his lifetime and

obviously never engaged in. On the other hand, hard work was something which eluded him till his death, yet Okonkwo was renowned for his hardworking nature and warrior-like disposition. Okonkwo hated music, which was what his father lived for and he had no patience with weak men, the only reason he fired and attacked his son, Nwoye at all times, an attack that finally took the boy away from him. Unoka was described as a weakling, a lazy man and a coward. In many critical essays, many eyes have been cast on the foolish and cowardly nature of Unoka, which is in sharp contrast with that of his father. Just at the very opening of the novel, we are made familiar with the bravery and heroism of the character of Okonkwo even at a very tender age. According to Achebe in the opening of the novel:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even 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. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights ... (3)

This was only an aspect of the true personality of Okonkwo but such bravery and enviable personality is not ascribed to his father

Unoka. Unoka, Okonkwo's father was rather described as a very weak man. He was a lazy and carefree man who would not attempt anything heroic. He lived for nothing and had taken no title. He rarely bothered about tomorrow, confident that tomorrow with bother about itself. He borrowed and never paid back. While people went about their farming business, Unoka lazied around all day enjoying palm-wine and other merry making events. The writer had described him thus:

...in his day he way lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said their whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka, was of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts. (4)

This is only a little insight on the character of Unoka who lives a rather lazier-faire life. He does not believe in tomorrow as if he had an inner conviction that tomorrow will not come, that was why he lives only for today. A very lazy and unproductive man, he dines and wines with any little penny in his pocket. One will wonder how such an effeminate and never –do-well, as he was described in the novel, managed to sire a son as brave and noble as Okonkwo. Unoka shares no resemblance with his son. While Okonkwo is tall and huge, with bush eyebrows and wide nose

that gives a very severe look of a man who means business and was cut out for heroism and greatness, Unoka is tall and thin and had a slight stoop. He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He always wears a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing his flute, a craft he was very good at. (4)

Unoka was described as a borrower. He borrows without paying back and the realization that he achieves nothing significant with the money he borrowed except perhaps drinking palm-wine and celebrating with neighbours in merriment of nothing speaks volume of his careless personality. He borrows with impunity and takes pride in it. He is never in a hurry to pay back and does not hide his face from his debtors. From his personality, it seems borrowing adds a degree of pride to his personality. He obviously found joy in borrowing if not what could make him to speak to Okoye, one of his debtors, on the realities of his debt which he will pay at will and in the order of the amount owed any particular debtor. Larger debts will be returned first before others. He laughed almost to stupor at his friend, Okoye, who came to collect his money. There is no trace of shame or regret but pride and satisfaction in his enterprise of borrowing. The scene is vividly painted out thus:

He had laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the *ogene*, and tears stood in his eyes. His visitor was amazed, and sat speechless. At the end, Unoka was able to give an answer but was fresh outbursts of mirth. 'Look at that wall; he said, pointing at the wall of his but which was rubbed with red earth so that it shone. 'Look of

those lines of chalk; ... each group of these represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe the man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun while shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first.' And he took another pinch of snuff, as if that was paying the big debts first. Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed (6).

That was his device of shunning debts. Okoye understood the foolishness of arguing with a man who could offer nothing and may have nothing to lose. He had departed and obviously none of the debts were paid before Unoka died as he made no effort to pay them. He died without a title and heavily in debt. Unoka was the total picture of a failed man. He was so poor that his wife and children barely have enough to eat. Yet, it was a society where the god of harvest was always willing and ready to bless hard work. There were farmlands for one to plant to his saturation and people were always willing to lend farmlands to any serious farmer, yet Unoka made no use of such opportunity; rather with his skills and sweet tongue he continued to succeed in borrowing more money and accumulating huge debts which he carried with him to the evil forest, his final resting place. Once Unoka had made a rather caricature of himself when he visited the shrine of Agbala to consult the great deity about the failures of his farm produce and poor harvest. With sheer dignity but rather a

mockery, he stood before the priestess of Agbala to complain thus:

‘Every year,’ he said sadly, ‘before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cook at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yam; I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear. I weed... (14)

It was not surprising that the priestess never allowed him to finish his speech which could be seen as mockery and insult to the gods. The gods, especially Ani, the great goddess, are known for rewarding hard work but before them was a lazy and weak man who would wish to transfer his blame to the gods. The priestess had discharged him angrily thus:

Hold your peace!’ screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void. ‘You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear.

They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man... (14)

Indeed, Unoka had gone home but made no effort to improve on his effort or better the lot of his family. He continued on his careless and lazy ways as if aware of the end that awaited him.

Unoka and the absurdist ideology: A critical insight

Much has been said on the cowardly, lazy and weak nature of Unoka. At this juncture, we shall adopt entirely a different approach to the perception and conception of the personality of Unoka which is the crux of this paper. Unoka may be a coward and a foolish man, but a closer look at his personality reveals a man who seemed to have earlier understood the meaninglessness and nothingness, of life. From an absurdist view point life seems to be meaningless. There is no apparent meaning, form or order in life. We all are in an alien world, groping in darkness and searching for meaning in our various ways. Many do not survive to see it. Absurdist thinkers view the world as a place of struggle from the darkness of the womb to the darkness of the grave. A man's journey from the absurdist view point is a journey in darkness and nothingness. Nothing holds any apparent meaning and nothing last forever. It is a world where vanity terminates in vanity, a brief life that will end someday in sheer shame, a defeat and mockery of a life time of struggle. From this viewpoint one may tend to look again at the character of Unoka as his foolishness tends to give way to a fuller understanding of life. Unoka seems to have understood that man's struggle on earth was simply a journey in nothingness that will one day end in death,

shame and defeat. He seemed to have understood this and lived a rather care-free life. He rarely worries about tomorrow because he knew it may never come, even when he does, it may be filled with more sorrow and gnashing of teeth. He could be described as a pessimistic character who sees only evil and destruction approaching. That was why he does not worry about tomorrow. He only spends his time doing whatever makes him happy. He spends the little money he gathered or better still borrows drinking and making merry for to him; it is always sad whenever he sees a dead man's mouth and sees the folly of not eating what one had in one's life time. (4) Unoka might not be far from the truth about the realities of our existence in life. Many people toil and labour day and night under the sun. They gather, accumulate barns of yam, heap bags of cowries and wealth at all corners of the house but end up dying in misery, sorrow and wretchedness, with little or no taste of the wealth and fame they had worked for and accumulated all their lives. This is the true case of Okonkwo who never lived to enjoy his wealth. This is what Unoka would not wish to see happen to him. That is why he often invites his neighbours and makes merry at any little opportunity to do so, aware that he may never have another chance to do so in an unpredictable world. He sees no need of accumulating wealth he may never live to enjoy.

Another aspect of Unoka worthy of note is in the fact that he was never a violent man, perhaps because of his cowardly nature. He broke no laws, took no man's wife. There was no record of him stealing anybody's item or property. Even the money he borrowed was gotten with his skills and honey-coated tongue which aided him to convince his creditors to lend him more money even when his debts are well known throughout the land.

He lives in peace. He covets no man's property. He is contented with his life unlike his son, Okonkwo who continued to set targets and heights which he failed to accomplish in many ways and could not attain some desired heights before his ill-fated death. Unoka was a peaceful man and played with the rules of the community. He never desecrated any of the traditional rules, unlike Okonkwo who was always, at a logger head with his community and the gods. First was his breaking the week of peace to demonstrate his bravery. On another occasion, he almost shot his wife during one of the New Yam festivals. Again was the rather unfortunate killing of the son the Ezeudu which earned him seven years of exile to his mother's people. On coming back he had killed one of the messengers of the white man and this proved to be the last straw that broke his back. What an eventful life of many ups and downs. Even his wife, Ekwefi, was taken from another man among several other areas where Okonkwo proved a non-conformist. These are situations that conspired and destroyed the warrior. This paper is not making any attempt to castigate Okonkwo but to draw some parallels with his character and that of his father, Unoka, from where we could begin to see Unoka from other dimensions rather than the coward and a weakling that seemed to have become a general opinion and consensus about him. Unoka may have been a failure but he was not a failure in every aspect of his life. He may be a failure in the business of farming but he had his areas of specialization, areas even warriors may fail. He dislikes the drums of war, maybe he was a coward, but a great and appealing reason may emanate from the fact that he hates violence and would wish a peaceful world devoid of war and conflict. His hatred for war, one can argue, may be inherent in his sheer respect for the value of human

life. War only begets killing and destruction as Okonkwo takes pride in drinking palm-wine with the skulls of his war victims, his fellow humans. Such may be the mindset of Unoka that made him avoid war. Some people might term him weak and cowardly just as the author had described that: “Unoka was never happy when it comes to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed” (5). As the case may be, on a deeper level, it may be the fear of taking the life of another, the sanctity of human lives, the foolishness and destructive nature of war and his fuller understanding of the fate of man in his alien environment that may have conspired together to give him that personality we have termed cowardly.

Unoka may not have been one of the greatest wrestlers in Umuofia and beyond. He may never be a great warrior but he is one of the greatest flutists Umuofia had ever known. As long as music is to be reckoned with in Umuofia, Unoka will rank among one of the best musicians who delighted the people and gave them inner peace, joy and satisfaction after much travails and toils to survive in a meaningless environment. This is something a lifetime of war may never offer. We need warriors and musicians for an ideal society and Unoka is identified at the softer part of life. He was good at the flute and music in the unique way his son, Okonkwo, can never boast of. In other words, Unoka is good at something. Music gives him inner peace. Playing the flute is what he was good at and he played it to perfection. He makes music to soothe his aching nerves on the realities of man’s existence on earth. Music obviously helps him to come to terms with the loneliness, short and meaningless nature of man’s existence on earth. Such realities he knows and

also heals in others while blowing the flute. Through music, he became part of the dancing *egwugwu* even with that of other communities. Both were part of the *egwugwu* in different pedigrees. Music was his passion and he lived for it. The writer captured him thus:

He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fire place. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fire and the good fellowship and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty....(4)

Unoka lived as one of the best flutists Umuofia had even known, an achievement one ought to be proud of in any little capacity. As he becomes older, he continues to resign to fate and accept the inevitability of the things he could not change. He had no inner fears or doubts. He was not driven by any passion apart from the

passion to live, eat, survive and die when it is time. Unlike his son, Okonkwo, Unoka was at peace with himself. A comparative analysis of father and son will reveal that Unoka, perhaps to an extent, is the unsung hero, while Okonkwo is the celebrated coward. Okonkwo was full of fears. He was in constant battle with his inner self and to overcome it he continues to exhibit manly and brave actions, even in situations they were uncalled for. Okonkwo never lived his life, he lived in fears and was always running a very from the shadows of his father, a shadow he later embraced at the end of the novel. His fears made him to rule his household with a heavy hand and that made him cruel in the eyes of his family and others. As a result of this fear he took many drastic decisions that destroyed him in the end. The author described his inner-most personality thus:

.... Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest and of the force of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not extended but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father... and so Okonkwo was ruled by own passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.... (11)

Unoka had no such fears but lived in happiness and contentment of any new day while his son lived in total regret and anguish of task unaccomplished; these were tasks he never fully accomplished before his untimely death. It was this fear that affected the joy and peace of his household in many occasions and it was this same fear that made him raise his son, Nwoye, as almost a man of dual personality. Nwoye was a boy who loves his mother's hut and her folktales better than the tales of heroism, violence and war in his father's *obi* but was forced to always be in the *obi* with his father just to please him while his heart was in his mother's hut. Thanks to the Whiteman's religion that saved him from the edge of insanity and Okonkwo's constant drives and condemnation that he was not a man. All men are not born heroes. Some are destined to be great palm-wine tappers, hunters, musicians, entertainers among other areas men could still fulfill their dreams, but all these do not go down well with Okonkwo. Little wonder Nwoye found the peace he sought for all his life in the hands of the missionary, a place he was to spend the rest of his life in. One can argue that Okonkwo is the celebrated coward when placed on a scale with his father, Unoka and his son, Nwoye. Even his killing of Ikemefuna was sheer cowardice, foolishness and not bravery and heroism as his friend, Obierika, took time to make him understand. Obierika, his friend, was one character who understands the dynamism of life and tried to impact same on his friend but Okonkwo never bought his ideas. He refuses to change his fixed thoughts and perception of life. Unoka may be weak and foolish but Okonkwo seems to be more foolish and weak in the inside which he covers up with heroic deeds in the outward shows. Unoka was also capable of wisdom as he tried to counsel Okonkwo towards his ending days. That

was during the terrible harvest month Okonkwo almost took his life. Unoka counseled him in these words:

Do not despair. I know you will not despair.
You have a manly and proud heart. A proud
heart can survive a general failure because
such a failure does not prick its pride. It is
more difficult and more bitter when a man
falls alone... (20)

Okonkwo may have hated his father's advice and shun whatever wisdom inherent in them but towards the end of his life, while in exile, the realities of them all begin to dawn on him. Unoka in his absurdist pose accepted the dictates of his *Chi*. He was never caught grumbling or mourning his existence. He understood fully the foolishness of such act. He accepted his ill-fate from the gods and lived with the little happiness he could find. Even when he developed a swelling stomach, Unoka accepted his fate. He allowed himself to be carried gently without sigh or regret to the evil forest. One can argue that he has always known such a sad end to characterize an absurd world. He seemed to have looked forward to such fate and was prepared. Story had it that a man was once carried to the evil forest as a result of swollen stomach and the man managed to stagger home. He was bundled back and tied to a tree in the evil forest where he later died. Unoka never wished to be such a man. He gave his carriers no trouble. He accepted his fate like the fate of many others in his alien environment. When they came for him, he never struggled. He took nothing with him except his flute. With that he would continue to enjoy some days of joy, peace and blessedness which only the flute can give till he will breathe his last. With the music

of the flute he obviously hoped to die a fulfilled man who played his part and accepted his fate in his meaningless world. The writer described his end thus:

Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to his grave or rather his death for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was affected with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil forest and left there to die... such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away, he took with him his flute (14).

The flute was symbolic of all his achievement, his true worth, and what he lived for. That was why he took it alongside with him; in other words, he died with his achievement lying next to him. He rots with all he has lived for. One would not blame Unoka for his fate, for no man can live above the dictates of his *chi*. The gods are to be blamed for giving him a bad *chi* and evil fortune. If they had given him otherwise, Unoka would have fared better. The fault lies with the gods not Unoka for his failure. Rather than criticism and condemnation, Unoka deserves to be applauded for heroically accepting his fate and managing to turn his evil fortune to some moments of happiness, all thanks to his flute and musical career. As for his son, Okonkwo, it took him some years while in exile to begin to come to terms with the realities of the life of the human in his lonely world. Life is vanity, man is lonely. Nothing

lasts forever except misery, pains, sorrow and loneliness which culminate to death afterwards. This Okonkwo realized too late. The writer unveils his innermost thoughts thus:

Work no longer had for him the pleasure it used to have, and when there was no work to do he sat in a silent half-sleep. His life had been ruled by a great passion – to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring and he had all but achieved it. Then everything had broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true-that if a man said yes his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation (104).

Okonkwo begins to express some absurdist views in the years of exile. Even when he returned seven years later, he realized that Umuofia had moved on without him. He was never missed. The white men were winning their ways into the hearts of the people. But here is the part where the bravery of Unoka will be seen alongside the foolishness of Okonkwo. While Unoka accepted bravely his fate, Okonkwo refused to do so. Despite his realizations, he was still willing to challenge his *chi* and attain the heights that were almost eluding him. Unlike Unoka, Okonkwo refused to accept his fate and the confinements of his *chi*. He

wanted to change the things beyond him; he wanted to continue to be famous. It was after the killing of the Whiteman's messenger that he realized that Umuofia was no longer the Umuofia he used to know. The true Umuofia was gone, what exist was the Umuofia that was gradually accepting the disintegration and assimilation of new way of life that was obviously beyond their control. That was when the meaninglessness of life dawned at Okonkwo. There was nothing to live for anymore. Life has become meaningless and worthless. It was not so much surprising when he was discovered dangling lifeless on a tree. He hanged himself and was taken to the evil forest. He was to share a portion of the forest with his father who earlier knew his fate and the fate of all men and accepted it, unlike Okonkwo who was never prepared. He had no grave just like his father, irrespective of all his struggles, titles, barns of yam, and bags of cowries, heroism and valour. They made no sense in his final stage of life. His father, Unoka, obviously would laugh at him but might not express much surprise in seeing him in the evil forest. He would become his father again. Unoka would once again dictate the rules and regulations for him if both of them will cope comfortably in the evil forest where they have all the time to share their various view points about life and how they have both ended up. Okonkwo too, lying in the evil forest, may be forced to begin to enjoy the music of the flute, perhaps learn to play it too and enjoy it as that is a way to look at and laugh at lonely world from an absurdist perspective.

Conclusion

What this paper has done is to take another cursory look at the character of Unoka vis-à-vis the heroism of Okonkwo. This paper tried to show that Unoka is not entirely the coward and a

weaking the writer had portrayed him to be. Unoka was a man who knew his place, who understood the meaningless, pains and worthlessness of life and lived out its philosophy. Unoka had a bad *chi*, a fate he had no hand in deciding. He was destined not to do well but to always have misfortune. He realized this and played by the societal rules and regulations. He saw vanity in sheer struggle for wealth and that was why he enjoyed the little money that came his way. He lived for his flute which gave him peace and blessedness in a world full of sorrow, despair and sheer struggle. Unoka invariably can be seen as an unsung hero who accepted the things he could not change. This is unlike Okonkwo who thought he could change the world but ended just like his father in the evil forest. Driven by inner-fears of failure and cowardice, Okonkwo lived a rather artificial life. Despite Okonkwo's wealth, one can argue that he enjoyed life very little, unlike his father who made everyday count in his merriment and celebration. In our contemporary world, the life of Unoka, to an extent, serves as yardstick to model our lives in our sheer struggle for wealth and vanity. All around us are untold stories of evils in the rat-race to survive in an alien environment. The life and fate of Unoka comes handy in several ways to help us realize the futility of life and the need to enjoy and be happy and help others achieve the same. Finally, the life of Unoka may help us to be fully prepared to accept whatever fate has in stock for us. We shall always wait for the end which will come when it wills, and just like Unoka who took his flute, we may take with us our own level of achievement, which fate, our *chi*, allowed us in our lifetime.

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