

POSTCOLONIAL READINGS OF SUICIDE IN GEORGE ORWELL AND CHINUA ACHEBE¹

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«(...) [P]ostcolonial narrative enables us to work through our *relation* to history;
it is not a communal act so much as an act of creating community.»

(Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, p. 11)

RESUMO:

Ao transformar o suicídio num parâmetro ético, semântico e político, pretendo, neste ensaio, reflectir sobre os défices do processo de colonização através da análise comparada dos romances *Burmese Days* de George Orwell e de *Things Fall Apart* de Chinua Achebe. O meu objectivo é examinar como os escritores, através do texto literário, problematizam histórias esquecidas, ao mesmo tempo que discutem a história do esquecimento.

ABSTRACT:

By transforming suicide into an ethical, semantic and political parameter, in this essay I reflect on the deficits of colonization through the comparative analysis of two novels *Burmese Days* by George Orwell and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. My aim is to examine how writers address forgotten histories and simultaneously discuss the history of a forgetting.

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Suicide has always been a delicate and controversial issue that has, along history, disturbed people in general, no matter their cultural and social backgrounds. In various fields, from literature to sociology, from philosophy to psychology, several reasons have been invoked to explain the act of committing suicide: suffering, despair, fear, courage, weakness of character, need to perform a ritual, among many others. No matter the suicides' motivations, the fact is that there has been a permanent and unavoidable social stigma attached to them, which has ethical, semantic and political implications that deserve consideration.

In this paper I do not aim at analysing suicide from a psychological or a sociological perspective. In fact, I want to use suicide as a parameter to reflect on the process of colonization and its deficits through the analysis of two novels: George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1935) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). These novels end tragically with their protagonists' suicides. Moreover, since the former was written during the colonial period, despite Orwell's well-known critical position towards the British colonial enterprise, and since the latter was written in a post-colonial epoch, it is worth examining how both writers use suicide not only to address the ambiguities and frailties of the civilizing mission, but also to work through history, thus questioning the certainties of official historiography and retrieving the forgotten histories and the histories of a forgetting².

The first issue to be taken into account is the fact that Orwell's and Achebe's protagonists differ in several aspects, which makes the comparison and contrast of the novels even more stimulating. Flory is a white European who is in Burma to become rich. Despite his negative feelings towards his European fellows who composed the Club and that I will comment on afterwards in this paper, Flory was a colonizer. Okonkwo, on the other hand, is from the beginning of Achebe's narrative, characterized as someone who respects the traditions of his own people and who is considered a courageous hero

² Cf. Sam Durrant's analysis of the work of mourning in J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison (2004). Although Durrant centres his attention on the work of mourning as a privileged way of making the writer and the reader relate to history, I believe the same principle can be applied to the way through which Orwell and Achebe address suicide in *Burmese Days* and in *Things Fall Apart*, respectively.

I am borrowing the expressions «forgotten histories» and «histories of a Forgetting» from Sam Durrant (2004).

by the members of his tribe. The curious aspect that connects both characters is the fact that both can be seen as «figures of alterity» (Sam Durrant, 2004) within the framework of their communities.

Flory's distinctive physical characteristic is his birthmark that makes him feel different from the other whites living in Burma, and that he tries to disguise or hide whenever he can. The problem is that a birthmark is something you cannot deny or forget, mainly when it is on your face, being thus visible to everyone. Okonkwo did not have any visible birthmark, but he felt dishonoured by his father's behaviour, who was considered someone only concerned with the pleasures of life, having being unable to have a social and economic stable position in his community. Okonkwo makes all the efforts to be the best in all domains, as if, by doing so, he could erase the paternal metaphorical stain from his character. However, by exaggerating his attitudes, he quite frequently becomes violent and disrespects the religious basic tenets of his clan, which obliges him and his family to exile in his mother's original land.

Apart from the afore-mentioned visible/physical or invisible/metaphorical birthmarks, Flory and Okonkwo can also be considered «figures of alterity» when their positions towards the colonial enterprise are considered. Flory, contrary to the code that should rule the pukka sahib's behaviour, openly associates the civilizing mission to a *lie*, thus deconstructing the justifications for colonization, as in the excerpt below:

[Dr. Veraswami] 'But, my dear friend, what lie are you living?'

[Flory] 'Why, of course, the lie that we're here to uplift our poor black brothers instead of to rob them. I suppose it's a natural enough lie. But it corrupts us, it corrupts us in ways you can't imagine. There's an everlasting sense of being a sneak and a liar that torments us and drives us to justify ourselves night and day. It's at the bottom of half our beastliness to the natives. We Anglo-Indians could be almost bearable if we'd only admit that we're thieves and go on thieving without any humbug.' (George Orwell, 1983: 94)

If I had enough time and space, I would like to quote at length, for Dr Veraswami contradicts all Flory's points concerning the true nature of the British colonial enterprise. It is interesting to observe how Orwell takes profit from the educated native to stress the success of the imperial policies' implementation, since Dr Veraswami truly believes Orientals are unable to govern themselves. In his eyes, the British presence is a true blessing and colonizers self-sacrifice to bring

peace, justice, progress and development to the colony. It is worth remembering that it is this great defender of colonialist policies that will have his reputation irremediably ruined by U Po Kyin, a native who played the role of Sub-divisional Magistrate of Kyauktada, and whose power, despite his corrupt character, was fully endorsed by the British. Orwell's ironical subtlety resides in the fact that Flory denounces a reality no colonizer would be allowed and/or expected to comment in such terms in the 1930s when the novel was published.

Okonkwo's characterization as a «figure of alterity» is not as evident as Flory's characterization is at a first sight. If Okonkwo did everything he could to be considered an example by the members of his clan, how could he represent alterity? I have already pointed out Okonkwo's father's influence on his behaviour and the need he had to prove to himself he was different from the father who had ashamed him³. Besides that, Achebe's protagonist underwent the experience of a forced exile in his motherland, which made him not only face the painful loss of his prominent position in his clan for several years, but also idealize, to some extent, his native place and his return after the punishment. A return he wished stupendous, what was reflected on his plans to marry his daughters in his own land and to initiate his sons into the *ozo* society. The problem is that Okonkwo's plans are frustrated by the white man's increasing influence on Umuofia. Besides introducing his faith, the white man also brought his government and education system and the unity of the clan was seriously undermined. As someone who lived far from his community for several years, Okonkwo is forced to learn about the new reality after his return. It is Obierika, his loyal friend, who, in a dialogue with Okonkwo, first refers to the clan's fracture as a consequence of the white man's action: «'The white man is very clever. (...) He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.'» in a clear reference to the title of Achebe's novel (Chinua Achebe, 2001: 129)⁴.

³ Okonkwo's problematic relationship with his father is projected into his own relationship with his son, Nwoye, who does not show Okonkwo's prowess and virility. The protagonist's relationship with Nwoye becomes even worse when the white men arrive and the young man feels attracted to their faith, converting into Christianity and, in Okonkwo's eyes, betraying his father and his clan.

⁴ Edward Said (2003: 173) reminds us that exile «is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. (...) The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.»

Okonkwo can also be considered a figure of alterity because, after his return to Umuofia, he is able to predict the future of his clan, over which he grieves deeply. He cannot understand how the elder members of the tribe can tolerate the white man's presence among them and he struggles to act as a true warrior, which leads him to kill one of the court messengers. After killing him and observing his own people's reactions, Okonkwo is sure Umuofia would not go to war. His body is found, afterwards, dangling from a tree located in a small bush behind his compound.

At the moment of his death, Okonkwo definitely assumes himself as a figure of alterity. Despite knowing that committing suicide was an abomination among his people, Okonkwo decides his own fate. After having killed the court messenger, he knew he would be hanged and he decided to put an end to his own life, contrary to the customs of his clan. His suicide, thus, should not be read as a sign of cowardice. On the contrary, it should be interpreted as a sign of courage and of personal assertiveness. Instead of being killed by the white man's representatives that he hated, and/or of living under the white man's rule, seeing all the values he praised being corrupted, he decided to keep loyal to himself, even if it represented an assault on his own life. Okonkwo's suicide can also be read as an attempt to call his people's attention to what they were doing to themselves, bearing in mind their submissive attitude towards the white man's government. In this sense, his suicide assumes an ethical and political stance, which is illustrated by Obierika's reaction when he asks the District Commissioner to take down Okonkwo's body, since the clansmen were not allowed to touch the remains of a suicide: «“That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog...”» (Chinua Achebe, 2001: 151). Obierika was truly moved by the loss of a friend and the loss of a warrior. In fact, Okonkwo's suicide symbolizes the overwhelming catastrophe represented by the white man's arrival in Umuofia.

Flory's suicide, in Orwell's novel, is particularly striking, for he succumbs to an act of defamation engendered by U Po Kyin, whose main target was not Flory himself, but Dr. Veraswami, who might be elected to the Club due to his bonds of friendship with Flory, thus preventing U Po Kyin from climbing the colonial native social ladder. Flory is a victim of events, since he had a native lover whom he wanted to get rid of from the moment he falls in love with Elizabeth.

In fact, he only becomes concerned about his own community and about the opinion his fellows could have after being interested in Elizabeth. Hence, the scandal created by his lover during the religious service, but that had been planned by U Po Kyin, makes him aware that Elizabeth, the woman with whom he believed he could endure life in Burma, would never accept him. The scandal transformed him into an outcast within his own community and from Elizabeth's perspective, which was unbearable to him.

But Flory's suicide in Orwell's narrative represents much more than the failure of a man in love. It addresses the empty life colonizers led in the colony and the apparent social bonds among them. By killing himself, Flory was consciously refusing that way of life and, in indirect terms, the lie that fed the colonial enterprise and that affected both colonizers and colonized. Flory is caught in the middle of a dispute between natives, whose main aim is to have access to the Club. Orwell's skill resides in the fact that he takes profit from Flory's unhappy life in Burma to denounce that life in the colony is not easy and that the colonizers' sense of belonging to the «herd» is artificial. In other words, it is a myth that makes people tolerate one another under the power of alcohol. Moreover, Orwell calls the reader's attention to the white man's greed, illustrating how colonizers were not moved by altruistic reasons. If, on the one hand, it is true that the writer reinforces the stereotypes that characterize the Oriental people as corrupt, not reliable and false, on the other hand, he shows how some natives were supported by colonizers, who believed they were defending imperial interests. As far as justice is concerned, U Po Kyin's fictional modelling deconstructs the image of justice and order represented by British justice in the colony, since as a representative of imperial interests, he did not hesitate to harm both colonizers and colonized in his own profit⁵.

It is time to confront Orwell's and Achebe's use of suicide in the studied novels. Despite the temporal distance that marks the publication of both books and the inexorable fact that the former writer wrote in a colonial time and the latter in a post-colonial period, both novelists aim at debunking the myth that the civilizing mission was philanthropic from the colonizer's and from the colonized people's points of view. If Orwell stresses the sordid mechanisms triggered by U Po Kyin, and the colonizers' deep-rooted prejudices

⁵ On the role played by imperial magistrates, see Adriana Martins (forthcoming).

against the colonized in *Burmese Days*, Achebe vividly depicts the impact the missionaries' arrival had in Nigeria, showing that religious missions were followed by administrative and political control of indigenous people.

The protagonists' suicides in the studied novels can be considered an ethical, semantic and political parameter that allows writers politically committed to work through the history of the British colonial enterprise in Asia and in Africa, and to address, even if in fictional terms, the need to retrieve the forgotten histories of all those who, moved by different reasons, have decided to refuse the lie of empire. Moreover, both novels, even if at considerable different levels, problematize the need to make the history of a forgetting, when unsympathetic voices to political regimes tend to be silenced. The end of Orwell's novel is quite ironic, since after Flory's suicide nothing really changed in the colony, despite Dr. Veraswami's efforts to save his friend's face in Kyauktada. In other words, the lie of empire, despite Flory's death, was perpetuated as well as the schemes of corruption and slander, what can be understood, to some extent, bearing in mind that Orwell wrote under the empire.

The need to make the history of a forgetting is more refined in Achebe's novel. This may be explained by the fact that Achebe wrote in a post-colonial time. On the one hand, Achebe wanted to remind the Nigerian people and the Europeans of the richness of Igbo traditions. In other words, it was necessary to stress that, contrary to what Conrad had suggested in *Heart of Darkness*, Africa was not the continent of cultural darkness or emptiness. Achebe's criticism of the colonial enterprise is mainly political, for it focuses on the tendency most white men had of reducing the natives to *tabula rasa*. The very brief reference to Okonkwo's suicide at the end of the novel does not seem gratuitous to me. Its brevity is closely related to the reference to the book the Commissioner planned to write, since he believed the episode of Okonkwo's suicide could make «interesting reading» (Chinua Achebe, 2001: 152). He starts considering the possibility of writing a chapter on the event, but, due to the huge amount of material he had gathered so far, a «reasonable paragraph, at any rate» (152) seemed enough. Achebe's criticism becomes sharper when the title of the book is mentioned on the last lines of the novel, «The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger». This title ironically emphasizes how the history of a forgetting was given shape. The life of Okonkwo, once an intrepid warrior (it is worth remembering that

Okonkwo's heroic acts are depicted in the narrative frame), would be reduced to a paragraph of a book that made the natives devoid of a rich cultural past. In sum, the depiction of the colonizer's and of the native's suicides in novels written in colonial and post-colonial times illustrates not only how history has sometimes been torn apart by the colonial enterprise, but also how novelists such as Orwell and Achebe have been able to bear witness of this attempt to manipulate the representation of the civilizing mission.

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