

**OBIOMA CHIGOZIE'S *THE FISHERMEN* AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTING,
AND THE PLACE OF MAN IN THE MULTIVERSE**

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Abstract

The Fishermen is a dense narrative that exposed the tragedy and meaninglessness of existence. Issues of human will, sanity, insanity, cosmic forces, and parental neglect were all thematized in the work. This paper aimed at seeing whether there was any correlation between a prophecy uttered about somebody and what became of the person in relation to the prophecy; whether the absence of a father-figure had any effect on children and whether there were forces outside our control, which unleashed their will on us! This it did using Sunwall's *The Suprational Grounds of Rationalism*, Freud's Psychoanalysis as well as systems theory. The method of enquiry was largely inductive and deductive; and finally, the paper recommended the need for us to accept the fact that we live in a multi-verse, no longer a universe with the possible implication of varying cosmic influences.

Keywords: Human Will, Cosmic Forces, Parental Neglect, Prophecy, Universe and Multi-verse

Introduction

We live in the scientific and technological age and therefore we take it for granted that all knowledge does not begin with experience as Kant did posit (Bruder and Moore, 164); but for Kant all knowledge does not necessarily arise from experience. The Problem of studying this text lies in the issues it raises which are essentially metaphysical; the issues thrown up by the text are indeed things we face every day in the world. Yet we are told that these things are either based on superstition or outright phenomena of diseased minds. Therefore, the major problem encountered in the study of this text is that of knowledge that one has, which is the need for things to be proven scientifically. It is pretty difficult to prove or to quantify the capacity of the human mind and will; yet in everything we do we exert our mind and will to it. A case in point is that of Obembe who is blinded by hate and so channels all his power towards avenging the misfortune brought upon his family by Abulu. In planning the vengeance, we are exposed in practical terms to the working of the human mind and will. He demonstrates how what we read, shape us; how they become our vision; how we believe in the visions, and how what we believe often becomes permanent (Obioma, 203). As the narrator puts it, 'because he read somewhere that if someone drew a sketch of any problem and visualized its complex make-up, they could solve that problem, he spent most of the day drawing matchstick men portraits of his plan to avenge our brothers, while I sat and read' (203-204). And indeed this is true of the human will and mind yet there is no parameter for measuring this to prove that it is true. These are the major challenges one encounters in studying the text. For example, we cannot answer questions as why was life so cruel to the Agwu family? How did Abulu know that Ikenna would die in the hands of a Fisherman; that he would be bound like a bird on the day he would die? How did he know that he would be mute; that he would be crippled; that his tongue would stick out of his mouth like a hungry beast and would not return back into his mouth; that he would lift his hands to grasp air, but he would not be able to; that he would open his mouth to speak on that day but word would freeze in his mouth; that he would swim in a river of red but would never rise from it again and that he would die like a cock died (89-92)? And why did the prophecy come to fruition? Is prophecy something we can believe in? Is our lives destined to end in a certain way? How can we be happy in this world that is full of pain and misery?

Obviously the prophecy by Abulu the madman is the fear that ate Ikenna up; a fear that fed on his being until it drove him to paranoia so much so that he believed that his brothers would kill him, hence his

resentment of them. He ensures he sleeps alone in a room he shares with Obembe. He begins to lose faith and even says he has become a scientist and does no longer believe in God (117). When, on one occasion he locks himself inside the room and refuses to open the door, Boja says he probably was dead. Ikenna interprets that to mean that Boja wants him dead. They get into argument and start fighting. Ikenna inflicts wound on Boja. Boja is taken to the hospital. On another occasion they get into a fight that was the fiercest they had had. Ikenna breaks Boja's nose and Boja bleeds. Boja retreats, goes into the house, takes a knife and murders Ikenna: he swam in the river of red and never rose from it as Abulu, the madman had prophesied (144-149).

Boja is devastated. He kills himself by diving headlong into the well and drowns. It seems the Agwu-family typified the tragedy that is human life. Adaku, Eme's wife and mother to the Agwu family, becomes demented by the tragedy of losing her children in such a horrific way. She eventually recovers, but the troubles are far from over; for Obembe plans to avenge his brother's death by killing Abulu the madman. He bullies Ben into the plan and they eventually hack Abulu the madman to death with their fishing hooks that they had turned into weapons. They are identified by two soldiers. They manage to escape from them, but Benjamin is eventually arraigned before a court. Obembe runs away to-far-away Benin in order to escape arrest. All this had happened after their father had struggled to see that they left for Canada. By killing Abulu and getting themselves in confrontation with the law, they ruin the opportunity to migrate to Canada, for as the narrator puts it, 'Hope was a tadpole: the thing you caught and brought home with you in a can, but which, despite being kept in the right water, soon died' (245). Obembe runs away to escape justice; Benjamin is going to jail, where he is going to spend eight years. He eventually spends six years in jail.

In fact, one can say that this is a family battered by fate so much so that one would begin to wonder if they had committed any crime apart from the fact that they are just a family full of hope for the future and certain of a wonderful life, but whose hope, like a tadpole, died in spite of being kept in the right water.

Conceptual Framework

The novel *The Fishermen* raises three basic issues that are very germane to life as it is lived in the world and especially in Nigeria: they are the issue of the nature of the existential world we live in which there is too much suffering, pain and misery; the issue of prophecy in a deeply religious or superstitious society as ours and the issue of parenting or bringing up of children.

Therefore, Sunwall's *The Suprarational Grounds of Rationalism: Maimonides and The Criteria of Prophecy* as well as Freud's psychoanalysis provides a theoretical base for studying Obioma's *The Fishermen*. Systems theory helps us to understand issues surrounding parenting, especially single-parenting

The area into which the novel *The Fishermen* delves is far removed from the plane of material reality. It is an area difficult to research into but which possesses the reality of everyday life; otherwise how else could one explain the phenomenon of Abulu's prophecy on Ikenna and the fact that it materialized. It is important to understand the phenomenon of prophecy. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, prophecy is defined in its strict sense as the "foreknowledge of future events, though it may sometimes apply to past events of which there is no memory, and to present hidden things which cannot be known by the natural light of reason" (*Catholic Encyclopaedia* <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12473a.htm>>). However, Mark R. Sunwall in his paper on *The Suprarational Grounds of Rationalism: Maimonides and The Criteria of Prophecy*, throws more light into the phenomenon of prophecy through a critical discourse on the work of Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish Rabbi and Philosopher. Maimonides had defined prophecy as, "an emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect, in the first instance to man's rational faculty, and then to his imaginative faculty" (225). For Sunwall, "this definition encompasses an identification of the source, the medium and finally the receptive faculty of prophecy" (Meru Foundation: Research and Findings). In other words, God, who is divine, gives messages in the form of prophecy and human faculties receive them through a medium, which itself is the "Active Intellect".

To understand what “Active Intellect” is, one must become familiar with the Aristotelian classification of the human mind into active *nous* or thought or intellect or reason and the receptive part. In other words, if human thought or intellect is caused by a divine force, “and the receptive element is constituted among the particular minds of human individuals, it would be accurate to say that while people can have thoughts, that only God can create them” (Sunwall). How true can this be? For even those who commit heinous crimes must have thought them through before the act. If this is so, then according to Maimonides’ and Sunwall’s hypotheses, God created those thoughts of evil which were then received by those who eventually committed the heinous crimes. Or could one suppose that those thoughts of evil, even when they were created by God, had only to serve a karmic purpose and thus the consequence of a previous action in some previous earth-life? Furthermore, Maimonides’s classification or ranking of prophetic modes was also enumerated: In the forty-fifth chapter of the Guide, Maimonides puts forth a ranking of prophetic modes which is outlined below: Inspired actions, Inspired words, Allegorical dream revelations, Auditory dream revelations, Audiovisual dream revelations/human speaker, Audiovisual dream revelations/angelic speaker, Audiovisual dream revelations/Divine speaker, Allegorical waking vision, Auditory waking revelation, Audiovisual waking revelation/human speaker, Audiovisual waking revelation/angelic speaker.

If prophecy is divine, must the medium of transmission be a depraved mad man? It could be claimed that prophecy is simply energy. However, once the energy is connected into by a medium and the message transmitted, what happens thereafter will depend completely on the person for whom the message was meant. Through fear, joy, hate and all such energies, which inhabit the ‘unconscious’, the prophetic energy finds anchorage and begins to germinate in the host. It becomes a leech as the narrator in *The Fishermen* articulates; for as the narrator, Benjamin, articulates, ‘I had never thought the madman could be blamed directly even when I could see signs that it was he who planted the fear in my brother’ (202). Just as fear leeches on Ikenna and eats him up, hate for Abulu leeches on Obembe and eats him up too. These energies are what Freud thought inhabited the area he called the ‘unconscious’ the expression of which is symptomatic of neurotic disorder: a disorder that results from the conscious ego’s inability to control the inordinate drives of the *Id* or the ‘unconscious’ so much so that the *Id* begins to express itself directly in spite of the ego (Rivkin & Ryan, 119-123). Indeed such was also the case with Abulu the madman, who had become the conduit of evil expressed not only in his prophetic utterances, but also in the despicable acts of perversion he orchestrates: acts that express themselves directly from the unconscious after he had been involved in an accident that impacted on his brain and made him lose his conscious control of his *Id*.

However, this can be explained differently in the Igbo cosmological view: once a *chi*, or guardian spirit leaves the body of their hosts, maybe when the hosts are asleep, or in an unconscious state, as the case with Abulu during his accident, “some of these disincarnate beings, especially the evil spirits, try to overpower a present *chi* or ones who have gone out on a consultation on behalf of their hosts. “This is why”, according to the *chi*-character in Obioma Chigozie’s *An Orchestra of Minorities*, “you, Chukwu, warn us against such journeys, especially at night! For when a foreign spirit embodies a person, it is difficult to get it out! This is why we have the mentally ill, the epileptic, men with abominable passions, murderers of their own parents and other!” (15)

Just recently, the social media was awash with the story of a young man who beheaded a young lady in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, because a mad woman had told him that he needed to throw a human head into a river to avoid running mad: (see <http://www.mediaissuesng.com/2016/10/29/i-behead-her-because-i-dont-want-to-run-mad-suspect-2/>). While the one is fiction, the other is a real life situation. Therefore, it is not out of place to be studying this particular text in order to understand this particular situation. The belief is that this sacrifice will change their lives from poverty to a life of wealth. Another young man was caught for killing a young girl, severing her head and intending to use it for ritual. When he was apprehended by the police, he said that a mad woman had walked up to him and told him that he must sacrifice a human head or risk running mad (Punch Newspaper, Wednesday, October 26, 2016: odili.net/news/source/2016/oct/26/831.html).

Furthermore, we understand that the problem of the Agwu family starts immediately their father is transferred to the Kano office of the Central Bank of Nigeria. This particular incident brings to our attention the issue of single parenting. The fact that Mrs Agwu would sit by her husband “on the big lounge in the sitting room and detail how the house had fared in his absence” (33), shows that Mr Agwu’s role as the head of the family is unquestionable. It seems everything about the care of the house revolves around him. He is the one the children fear because he is also the one that enforces discipline in the house (39-40). That lopsidedness of influence with regard to parenting by Mr and Mrs Agwu could be blamed on the patriarchal nature of the society the couple belongs to.

In traditional patriarchal societies, the man wields the authority with regard to the family, because he is the one who provides for the family: that leaves the woman with a passive role in the family and of course at a disadvantaged position. Therefore, leaving now for Yola and making his wife the sole guardian of the children makes her, in that particular situation a single parent, however temporary.

The phenomenon of single parenting is better understood with systems theory. Systems theory is the social science theory found comprehensive in understanding the issues of single-parenting. According to the theory as articulated by Scanzoni, et al quoted in Richards and Schmiede, “families are changing entities, exhibiting continual morphogenesis, rather than working towards equilibrium or a morphostatic state” (277). Furthermore, according to Ahrons & Rogers & Gongla, “families change over time as a consequence of the development of individual members, interactions with expanding and contracting kinship networks, and forces within the larger social environment” (277). And this is exactly the case with the Agwu family, because the change in the Agwu family started immediately Mr Agwu was transferred to the Yola branch of CBN, which is good for his career development, but bad for his family. Furthermore, the inability of Mrs Agwu to be in charge once the husband is no longer there seems to be more of a personality issue rather than the condition of being disadvantaged as a woman with lesser power or influence in a patriarchal society. This is so because there are numerous women in Nigerian society and the Igbo society particularly who are single parents but are in total control of their household –quite unlike Mrs Agwu who is portrayed in the novel as weak and passive in the issues of the family.

Indeed we seem to live in a world full of suffering and pain and so much arbitrariness. In fact, Arthur Schopenhauer, the great German pessimist of philosophy, had proposed that we are driven by a will to live, which in itself is a blind and purposeless impelling force among other forces; in fact, according to him, it is this Will that determines human behavior, not reason. As we are able to see in the text, Ikenna’s will to live, in spite of Abulu’s prophecies, makes him suspicious of his siblings. Still he is not bound by that blind and purposeless impelling force among other forces, which invariably determined his behavior, which is paranoia.

Consequently, the suffering and endless strife in the world is as a result of the conflict between individual wills, which is manifest between Ikenna and Boja. As he puts it, “the world is torment, and people are driven in endless pursuit of unattainable goals, or goals that, if attained, bring only temporary satisfaction” (Schopenhauer in Moore and Bruder, 98), as is manifest in the ordeal of Emeh, the father of the family: getting a posting to the Central Bank of Nigeria’s branch in Yola is sign of progressive move up the ladder of public service; still that seems to be only a temporary satisfaction as Schopenhauer puts it; for, eventually, his family pays heavily for it.

Furthermore, as Schopenhauer argues “through sex and ‘love’ we succeed only in introducing more people to this grim rock, and it is for this reason we think of sex as shameful” (Schopenhauer in Moore and Bruder); in other words, by bringing their children into the world, Emeh and his wife, Adaku, have only succeeded in introducing their children to the grim rock of a meaningless existence that will be marred by great suffering and pain; and it is likely that what happened to them is as a result of how they had lived in their previous existences as Chigozie Obioma had articulated in his *An Orchestra of Minorities*, which mirrors the Igbo cosmological view: as Nonso’s chi or guardian spirit says in the novel: “I have come to understand that the life of a man is a race from one end to the other. That which came before is a corollary to that which follows.” (22)

Besides, there seems to be a symbolic connection between the name the family of Emeh bears and the trouble that bugs their existence: Emeh's surname is Agwu and in the Igbo cosmological view, Agwu is a kind of nature force that bestows on human beings multiple gifts of talent, genius, pain and even madness. As such, the Agwu of pain can afflict one night and day and make the one an empty house in which traumatic memories of the one's family can lurk like a rodent (Obioma, 23). As Opata puts it:

Agwu has a certain ambivalent conceptualization in traditional Igbo Scholarship. Some see it as evil whereas others argue that it has nothing to do with evil. This ambivalence is best captured by Umeh who on the one hand argues that it is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit of Christianity, and on the other lists its aspect. *Nde Olusi Agwu*, as one of the 127 evil spirits among Igbo. (12)

It could then be argued that the Agwu family is indeed afflicted by the Agwu of pain, representing evil. However, why they were so afflicted cannot be known except it is attributed to their previous incarnation as is obvious in the Igbo cosmological view. That being the case, how then should we live in spite of the tragedy that living is and in view of the experiences of the Agwu family?

Conclusion and Recommendations

The tragedy of living is part of the experience of being human and alive. There will always be strange and inexplicable occurrences which we may never be able to come to terms with rationally. Life will present us with its good, bad and ugly sides; but not giving up on life may be the best option; for Boja gave up on life when he committed suicide by jumping into the well after killing his brother, Ikenna in a moment of rage. Ikenna became paranoid the moment he allowed fear to feed on him like a leech and drove him mad; Obembe got fixated on revenge when he allowed hate to take over his being like fungus. Indeed, fear, rage and hate are all forces, which if not managed properly can lead to such tragedy as we witnessed in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*, and as we can witness in the life we live on a daily basis.

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