The Symbolism of Pollution in Beloved and Things Fall Apart

Ignatius Chukwumah
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Ignatius Chukwumah
Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract
The author of this paper examines the symbolism of pollution in various modes in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. He explains the symbolism of pollution as a mythic form contained and apprehended in literature. The interpretative procedure he uses is Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. As a probing instrument, it draws upon similar serial structures from these works exploring contrasts and aporias. Hermeneutics fits most because of the valued qualities of authorial distanciation, explication and readings derivable from majority of presences and textual existents. Of these readings, the symbolism of pollution grasped under the aspect of fear is the issue which exercises the characters as they are tethered to activities which demean, abase and humiliate them, and which appear in different shades. Dr Chukwumah locates the root and figure of pollution in Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim from where he inaugurates and articulates every other implicatory reading. Pollution impacts on the consciousness of the individuals, echoing the existential. Though it manifests through various characters, it takes different dimensions as the reading progresses, leaving behind echoes of what pollution could (not) mean and how it matters

Key words: symbolism, pollution, Beloved, Things Fall Apart, hermeneutics,

Introduction
The two works that form the focus of analysis in this paper are pivotal to the corpora of both authors. Beloved (1987) is adjudged the best work of its author, Toni Morrison by which she has won the Nobel Prize. Chinua Achebe, though not having won the prestigious prize, is the most celebrated African novelist, with his Things Fall Apart (1958) having been translated into some seventy languages, including the main indigenous languages of his native Nigeria.

Beloved, like The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974), Song of Solomon (1977) is mostly seen as fictively capturing the experiences of an oppressed people. In the The Bluest Eye and Sula, the issue of class remains a concern. Though this is also present in Song of Solomon, the interpretation of suffering and the repulsive escapist attitude towards it, nonetheless, is more structurally present in all earlier works. This escapism and the exhibition of repulsions to suffering, in the instance of Beloved, has been variously interpreted to mean the African woman’s show of strong will, the presence of the operation
of Freudian pleasure principle, the negative effects of slavery, and all what not, evading such critical concerns of the fact that all imbroglios operate as a façade deeply rooted on how a subject makes sense of his environment. With what Lacanian psychoanalysis has demonstrated, one would agree that this making sense of the environment, densely mythic as it is, is done in and only through language. The language in which these environments are captured is pollution, a term whose further synonyms as desecration, ‘dirtying’, demeaning, mess, and so on, are amply suggestive and existential in the works analysed herein. The reason for these synonyms drag on a further feature of the fact that ‘pollution’ itself, in literary terms, is a symbol.

*Things Fall Apart*, on the other hand, has never exceeded the documentary posture that critics have always placed it – that it places pictorially in a frontal attacking fashion the “culture-contact and culture-conflict” situation where the agitation of an agrarian community’s system that was once sturdy is on the brink of breaking down into shreds (in Okonkwo, 1996: 105). This position is held onto without much regard to what propels the characters’ actions, how their orientating capabilities function and how the consequent naming process is made possible. In this paper, therefore, a shift is made from the somewhat overflooded ethnographic, cultural, and nationalistic postures, or what Appiah calls the “recreation of a usable past” mentality and critical positions to the mythic emblem and orientation of pollution (1995: 120). This emblem or rather, symbol is so fundamental, structural and semantic in several modes and dimensions to the building up of pathos up to the point where the tragic twists in these works become irremediable. The existential sense made of *Beloved* and *Things Fall Apart* in this article is pollution. Rather than slavery and colonialism and their attendant reverberations, and it is by pollution that the characters are exercised. Pollution, synonymous to desecration and sin, is equivalent to what Holcombe terms “social truths” (Holcombe 2007). These truths, verifiable from the text, are social because they are religiously and existentially public through interaction of characters posited only by words, which “mirror objects imperfectly” (Holcombe). There is nothing extra-textual about this pollution because it is only a symbol resulting from a “linguistic productive imagination that generates and regenerates meaning through the power of the metaphoricity to state things in new ways” the resources of which are resident in language (Davenhauer and Pellauer 2011). With these, there is, therefore, need to adopt a critically reflective approach such as hermeneutics – Ricoeur’s (Ramberg 2005).

Ricoeurian hermeneutics is the art that discerns ‘the discourse in the work’ through interpretation, appropriation, and understanding (Ricoeur, 1981a: 139). Interpretation takes place fully where the notion of textual autonomy is a foremost requirement. Appropriation, on the other hand, is ‘understanding at and through distance’ of the author whose intention as regards the text is totally unnecessary (143). Through the disregarding of the author’s intention, understanding now follows the dynamics of the work from what it says to that about which it speaks, to constitute the
hermeneutic circle, as the textual whole depends on its parts to make meanings. The fusion of both the textual and our horizons (worlds) resulting from this circle discloses and discovers a world of illusion enhanced through a kind of reflection.

The symbol of pollution is amply suggested in Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* when provisional readings of these texts are undertaken. In this case, it is pollution as it is not – an ‘as-if’ or being ‘seen as’ (Ricoeur, 1981b: 243). It is the issue which exercises the characters as they are tethered to activities which demean, abase, and humiliate, and which all appear in different shades to different personages. We see them in Stein’s attempt to compare the butterfly’s resignation to dirt to man:

> This magnificent butterfly finds a little heap of dirt and sits still on it, but man he will never sit on his heap of mud and keep still. He wants to be so, and again he wants to be so . . . He wants to be a saint, and he wants to a devil – and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow – so fine as he can never be . . . in a dream (Conrad, 1935: 155).

By ‘man’, he means himself, Marlow, Jim, Rajah Allang in *Lord Jim*; Beloved, Sethe, the white and black population in *Beloved*; and the people of Umuofia, the white man as the stranger, and so on in *Things Fall Apart*. The butterfly, Stein says, settles for a heap of dirt knowing no better way of moderating its lot. But man does not accept the ‘heap of mud’ as his allotted portion. His claim to civility and sainthood is negated by his actions which render his claim of being ‘a very fine fellow’ to a status only achievable in a dreamland, for ‘he can never be’. He attempts to heed double calls, both of which are opposed to each other.

The white man, more than any character in both works, comes under the sway of stain and pollution as we shall find. Civility and sainthood is what he claims in *Beloved*, but his actions negate this profession. He is always close to his ‘heap of mud.’ All over the textual space of *Beloved*, the sexual exploitation of women and girls is attributable to members of the white group inaugurating the victims’ perception of themselves as pollution. Ella gets locked up by a father and a son for more than a year satisfying their fleshly cravings. But when she is pregnant as a result of this act, she throws the child away possibly because it will continue to remind her of her past ordeal whose burden of guilt she is not ready to bear. Thereafter, the violations the white man visits on her are to serve as models for measuring “all atrocities” (Morrison, 1988: 256). Another circumstance where one can trace emblems of pollution is in the case of Stamp Paid who has to relinquish his wife to his master’s son as a live-in mate. Every character so suffers not only by undergoing the experience through action but by carrying the history of the suffering in form of memory and its consequent service as a prop for the
thriving of guilt. Hence, Ella’s experience distorts her psychology just as the circumstance surrounding Suggs’ death is described as soft as cream, being alive having been the hard part. Baby Suggs, without having lived a fulfilled life, succumbs to the overwhelming power of suffering by recoiling to a peaceful life of meditation on colours the remote cause of all her troubles and the great weight that weighs her until her death. Baby Suggs it is that concludes ‘there is no badluck in the world but whitefolks’ (89), who in an attempt as an abaser, abases himself in his abasement of his victim,

The impact of the white man’s deviation, debasing and pollution of others provokes guilt. Stamp Paid asks Baby Suggs whether she knows the implication of her leaving off preaching after the ‘scandal’ of Sethe’s murdering her child. Sethe’s act of deviation provoked by the white man’s deviation, with Beloved’s coming, now resurrects the guilt, burden and weight that have hitherto been subdued. She struggles to convince Beloved that her action ‘was right because it came from true love’ (251) – to prevent the visitation of her experiences of pollution and stain on her child because, as she puts it,

Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t think it up. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites may dirty her all right, but not her best thing . . . the part of her that was clean. And no one, nobody in this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper (251).

Sethe’s ‘clean’ is the opposite of ‘dirtying,’ pollution. ‘Clean’ here is synonymous to innocence while ‘dirtying’ or ‘pollution’ is synonymous to experience. They echo William Blake’s ‘Songs of Innocence’ and ‘Songs of Experience.’ To substantiate the fact that her deviation is rooted in the Other, her instinct to kill returns when Mr. Bodwin, the benevolent white landlord comes to finalize negotiations concerning Denver’s new job in his house. This indicates that not even the prison experience nor the guilt that currently weighs her down is sufficiently able to destroy her hatred for the visitation of her unpleasant sexual abuse on her children about whom she says: ‘I’ll protect her while I’m alive and I’ll protect her when I ain’t’ (45).

The mythic structure of pollution is evident too in the pre-Sweet Home era. Before coming to Sweet Home, the whites ‘dirty’ or defile Sethe before she is of age. The Sweet Home men running out of patience of waiting for her, go for cows. If the Sweet Home men's sexual engagement with the cows is bestial, it could also be extended to schoolteacher’s nephews stealing of Sethe’s breast-milk after holding her to the ground. The act is synonymous to the milking of cows. Sethe is hereby polluted, as she says ‘dirty you’ when she narrates it with shame to Paul D. Even Sethe’s mother, as narrated to Sethe by Nan, is severally sexually exploited by the white officers of the ship that conveys her
and her kind across the seas to a land where they would be slaves. She throws away the children that result from such relations having morally judged that they are fruits from unholy union. Nan says:

She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never (62).

So Sethe, the living, is the fruit of an unpolluted union because she is fathered by a man whom she puts “her arms around”, a sign of love and wilful admittance. What she is not by birth, she is to become by her intercourse with fellow humans. Sethe’s mother’s action of throwing away babies sensing desecration and pollution recalls the throwing away of twins because the “Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed” in Things Fall Apart where offence and pollution have similar semantic indications before the white man’s arrival (Achebe, 1958: 87). But while Sethe’s mother’s is done by herself, the cases of Obierika’s wife, Uchendu’s daughter and Nneka are carried by the community they belong, and most times, by their kin. A similar case is Okonkwo’s, in the discharge of the Earth goddess’ decrees where even his closest friend, Obierika joins in the ‘cleansing’ exercise, only to brood over it afterwards. Their friends, neighbours, and so on are “merely her messengers” (87). While Obierika could be termed an archetypal husband sympathizer with wives who are victims of snatched twins, Uchendu appears to be the father counterpart. These are instances of the symbolism of pollution where the living are material actors and the white man, the source of pollution’s ripple.

Another instance takes a different dimension as a once dead and revived being partakes of it. Beloved, the ghost in bodily form, engages Paul D who stays with them, in 124 in a sexual union. After having sex with her severally, Paul D doubts his being a man. He traces the origin of the word ‘man,’ links it to how he comes to be identified with it and the burden of history that it constantly provokes using his life as a case. If he identifies with the word, then what schoolteacher said – that they are not men and thus should not be so treated – is wrong. But along with his being a man, should be his ability to direct his will which is not the case. This is the primitive breakdown of resistance at work. Here, we hear echoes of Everyman in Everyman where the soul already dead because of the pleasures of the world is in captivity of the body as a result of pollution as sin. But if he (schoolteacher) is right, then their being allowed by the former slave-master to enjoy petty privileges like owning guns, learning to read, choosing a horse or a wife, and the like are serious aberrations. The indices of his present state of captivity are that he is now a “ragdoll – picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter, [. . .] placed where she wanted him, . . . and there was nothing he was able to do about it”
Morrison, 1988: 126). He is filled with the repulsion and confusion as to how and why his will has been led captive by a force he cannot understand but which emanates from Beloved. He is unable to live out his boast of being a man who had eaten raw meat barely dead, stood still for six hours in a dry well, fought raccoons with his hands and won, and watched a man beloved more than a brother roast to death without a tear.

The temporality of existential implications of pollution as sin is present in the above musings. Beloved holds Paul D’s will under her firm control acquiring the same status as other white men in Beloved in this respect of pollution and bondage, a far cry from the common and the reverse of what is conventional. He feels he is a transgressor. Hence, why should he make up his mind to report his failings to Sethe, his dwell-in lover, ‘the nature of the sin behind him’ (117) and the ‘shame’ (126). There is a parallel in Epidicus. Some of the wrongs in the world of his play are slavery, sexual exploitation, and abandonment of the defenceless to their fates. At the centre of this is the bondman Epidicus himself, who in the end is released from his bondage, and becomes a free man.

The subtle background agent of this pollution behind the white man is the law as the offended the sacred code of which the offender ‘pollutes’. This instance is found in Beloved where the law is a respecter of some persons who offends it: the white man. Unlike it is amongst the people of Umuofia in Things Fall Apart before the white man’s arrival where whoever contravenes the decrees of the earth goddess is punished. Okonkwo’s occasional ‘desecration,’ ‘pollution’ of the land and the sanctions meted out to him are examples. The impartiality of the sacred code in Beloved is responsible for Sethe’s act of murder because, in preventing the third generation in her lineage from pollution, she deviates and pollutes herself through her murder. Sethe is ‘a property that reproduced itself without cost’ (228), to be taken back to Sweet Home to do the work it desperately needed. By ‘the breeding one,’ and ‘the property that reproduced itself without cost,’ By this, the narrator and indeed schoolteacher and his group of slaveholders immerse themselves in the mythology of slavery reducing biological reproduction which is noble and glorified in Umuofia and the surrounding communities evidenced in the care and pains given to Ezinma and prayers offered during marriage ceremonies in Things Fall Apart to a low, debased and reduced to a mere capability of appreciating in monetary value or of multiplying its kind with minimal or at no cost at all like usury. We hear the modulations of his thought through the narrator:

The main one – the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he like besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she’d gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think – just think – what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of
education . . . suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway. Never again could you trust them You'd be feeding them maybe . . . in your hand, and the animal would revert – bite your hand clean off. . . . See what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of – the trouble it was, and the loss. The whole lot was lost now. Five. He could claim the baby struggling in the arms . . . but who'd tend her? Because the woman something was wrong with her . . . you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success. What she go and do that for? (149-150).

Schoolteacher compares Sethe’s killing to that of a domesticated animal that turns wild at the instance of an overbearing torture. He refuses to empathise with anyone as a result of the loss of lives involved. Instead, he thinks and assesses the loss Sweet Home makes by the slaves’ escape. Schoolteacher mourns his loss rather than the dead. While the two boys survive, the crawling already? baby dies returning as Beloved, the ghost and Sethe is sent to prison to suffer. This is not her only act, she steals matches, a little salt, and butter from Sawyer’s restaurant where she cooks giving as a reason that because of racial discrimination, she is not able to stay endlessly on long queue where people of her group stay. As a consequence, she experiences the shame which Paul D also feels even when nobody finds her out.

Remorse could be for Paul D, but not for Okonkwo though he commits suicide due to the provocation of the white man whose law determines pollution as sin or crime. But could we not see Okonkwo’s suicide already having its origin in the events that prompt his exile? It is almost like a case of breaking two codes neither of which is superior to the other but both of which intend, prescribe and stipulate what consists of pollution and when it is committed. He kills a kinsman during the burial of Ogbuefi Ezeudu and as a result, renders the land ‘desecrated’ (147). To placate the goddess and cleanse the land, he is to proceed on exile, his being a noble notwithstanding. But he does not just become one of the tails (prominent men) which the lizard (the clan Umuofia) grows by chance, that is, of having his palm kernels cracked by a benevolent spirit. He works for it, for:

among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly out for great things. . . . he had begun even in his father’s lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one possessed. And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father’s contemptible life and shameful death (6,13).

But behind this pollution-evoking law, there is the handiwork of the ineluctable fate working underneath Okonkwo’s life. This is because despite the earnest pursuits of these ideals, other indices of greatness, and the
absence of ‘the start in life’ (12) which other young men have, he does not have a son who can raise his head amongst his mates. At his death, which is a repeat of his father’s because of shame and ‘desecration’ that surround both deaths, there is the likelihood of meeting that which he fought relentlessly throughout his lifetime to put away permanently. And it overcomes him in a manner that insistently and inexhaustibly provokes thought. The indices that lead him to greatness and all the offices and capacities in which he operates as one of the nobles of Umuofia, also prepares the ground for his doom. He, as a warrior has to pay his last respect to one who is about the oldest man and the oldest warrior and titled man alive. Thereupon, he kills a kinsman. He is punished for it and the erstwhile speed of progress is retarded in spite of his chi saying ‘yes’ to good things, honour, and noble achievements. The narrator states the dispatch of Earth’s justice thus:

A large crowd of men . . . set fire on to his houses, demolished his red walls; killed his animals and destroyed his barn.

It was the justice of the Earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. They were cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend’s calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender (87).

To her, the pollution-stipulating code acts in consonance with the ineluctable. Once Umuofia sees Okonkwo’s near kill of his wife as a serious act of desecration of the Week of Peace and of the land for which he is punished. But if Okonkwo’s beating of Ekwefi and the resultant ‘desecration’ of the Week of Peace is serious deviation, then, so also are Okoli’s killing of a sacred python in Mbanta and Enoch’s unmasking, ‘killing of an ancestral spirit.’ While the last two attract disastrous penalties both do not possess equal magnitudes of heightening these tragedies. The first has its desecration remedied in material terms fundamental to the tragic twist of Things Fall Apart.

The improper apprehension of the concept of pollution and the ‘warped’ perception of this by the Other contributes mainly to both tragedies. Throughout the textual space of Things Fall Apart, law, order and peace reign until the coming of the white man – the stranger. Even when there are
instances of tension, like that of Mbaîno and Umuofia, conciliatory moves are, first of all, explored. The prompt welcome of the way of peace by Mbaîno and the granting of the requests Umuofia makes returns their relationship to status quo ante. Pollution, desecration, or any act which is sinful is subject to the interpreter and the agent of it. The missionary party that comes to Mbanta preaches about Jesu Kristi, the Son of God. Okonkwo discovering a chaotic dimension to this religion, reasonably asks: ‘You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then’ (103). The defence proffered by the interpreter that God does not have a wife falls on deaf ears because it is devoid of logic, the logic of family-hood and biology. By this question, Okonkwo proves himself wise where others have been foolish. The missionaries, it appears, are only attempting to supplant and substitute the prevailing irrationality that may have been reigning in Umuofia for another. Little wonder then that the same religious text which Mr. Brown explores for peace and good neighbourliness, as he quotes: ‘Everything was possible . . . but everything was not expedient’ (126) is the same text that Rev. James Smith uses in stirring some overzealous members of his flock to foment trouble. Rev. Smith believes in the biblical slaying of ‘the prophets of Baal’ (130). As a result, the overzealous members of the flock who hitherto have been under control let loose all decency with Enoch being the harbinger. The result of Enoch’s unmasking of an egwugwu during the annual worship is tantamount to desecration, of the highest gravity. The narrator captures it thus:

One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an egwugwu in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did (131).

When Enoch’s action is completed, ‘the other egwugwu immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children’ (131). This incidence seems to provide a link between desecration and pollution as the former’s meaning consequently collapses into the latter. This is the ‘killing’ which Enoch carries out and the whole clan and its custodians – the spirit and physical beings – react to this cosmic pollution:

That night the Mother of the Spirit walked the length and breadth or the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming – its own death (132).

With the mood and atmosphere thus heated up, the number of incidents leading to the fall of Okonkwo comes in sporadic manner. The element of pollution is instrumental and, in fact, characterizes the fall of another Okonkwo in No Longer at Ease. Obi Okonkwo’s purging through the whiteman’s education he gets could not prevent him, the protégé that he is,
from terminating the glow of excellence that he brings from abroad in *No Longer at Ease*. No one knows, not even Mr Green knows either, how come Obi descends into this depth of corruption. The guilt that has always warned him of the magnitude of his action like it did to Jim in Conrad’s *Lord Jim* has eventually lead him into a state of apparent denigration and disdain synonymous to any sacrilegious and criminal aberration and pollution.

Given the chaotic element present in the stranger’s and Umuofia’s religions upon which pollution hinges and from which their codes emanate, does this chaotic feature not disqualify the pre-eminence of either religion as both parties hold? There are occasions when the narrator even shares in the confusion and chaos of *Things Fall Apart*. He once says that ‘when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes strongly; so his chi agreed’ (Achebe, 1958: 19). But is this always so? The narrator says of Okonkwo as he tries to start life afresh in Mbanta:

> His life had been ruled by a great passion to become one of the lords of his clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had been broken. . . . 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 yea his chi also affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation (92).

From these apparent cases of self-negation, we infer that the narrator can, or does not even understand himself much less the events he is narrating. It is perceptible that his consciousness is facing an imminent disintegration. The events are clearly out hand, out of his grasp. There appears to be some interference by some indescribable force in the unfolding events. This force could be chaos itself, but we cannot name it. The absence of any leads makes us retreat from saying so. This ‘force’ represses more than it reveals – a bad omen for the macabre circumstances that results. Besides all these, Okonkwo’s steady rise to nobility portend that he would have contributed to the nipping of the missionary question in the bud were he in Umuofia judging from his reactions, question to the missionaries and comment that they are mad.

The pre-eminence of religion, belief system and worldview is unwarranted in that ‘there is no one for whom it is well’. Within the Ibo group, in the cryptic mythic view of the Umuofians, is found the irrational and the chaotic from where emanates the conflictual concept of good and bad upon which rests desecration, pollution, and ultimately, the macabre tale. For instance, it is undecidable as to the wrongness and rightness of the killing and the gravity of the punishment meted out to Okonkwo if the motives behind his act are to be really ‘actively committed’ and are closely related to how their consequences on Obierika and his wife, Nwoye, Nneka, Uchendu and his daughter, Akueni, and Okonkwo and his family probed. There is a connection between Okonkwo’s killing of kinsman, Ikemefuna and the
throwing away of twins in terms of their undecidability whether it is pollution or not. Even Obierika’s thought systematically and logically lumps them together detailing how these are ‘passively endured’ (Ricoeur, 1974: 315). The abominable, and by extension, pollution are given shifting definitions as Uchendu says,

There is no story that is not true. . . . the world has no end, and what is good amongst one people is an abomination with others.

. . . In many other clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. Here we say he cannot climb the tall trees but he can tap the short ones standing on the ground. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting up dog-meat because the dog was a taboo to him but offered to use his teeth (99,48).

Through this gossip of the unskilful method of tapping by young tappers, the Ozo title restraint on its holders, and the Dimaragana anecdote, we notice the consistent play of that which is abominable, chaotic and paradoxical amongst the clans. A consideration of this is hinted when Obierika’s elder brother says that ‘what is good in one place is bad in another’ (51). The people of Umuofia see the coming of the white man as abominable, tantamount to desecration. But this does not dawn on them until the wiping off of Abame. As there is a growing acceptance of the new religion, so is there a growing differential shades of what is abominable by virtue of their further rejection of traditional ways which they term ‘desecration.’

In addition, there are instances in Things Fall Apart, where pollution, as desecration, as perceived by a group, assumes the structure of a paradox. The giving birth to twin children is seen as a direct pollution of the land that could be remedied promptly by throwing them away. In Mbanta, Nneka and Uchendu’s daughter are exemplary sufferers of this. Obierika does same in Umuofia which he recalls again at the exilic destruction of Okonkwo’s property. The question that arises in Obierika’s mind and the ‘persistent questions’ that haunts Nwoye’s soul are parallel (104), only they do not elicit the same response from both. Nwoye is not, thereafter, captivated by ‘the mad logic’ or ‘the Trinity’ (104), but by the poetry of the new religion from where ensues intersubjective interaction. We read that:

The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul . . . Nwoye’s callow mind was greatly puzzled (104).
The implication of this circumstance is that the traditional Umuofia is unable to answer some basic existential questions. However, its failure does not mean the immediate success of the strange and the foreign, let alone an ideal substitute for the latter. For, what else could be said of Okonkwo, who, in wanting to prevent the white man from continual meting out of what Okika calls ‘shameful sacrilege’ (143) and, the rooting out ‘this evil’ (144), ends up dying like a dog, less than a clansman, and much less a noble. His body being ‘evil’ is to require ‘sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land’ (147). In this paradox of desecration as it affects Okonkwo, and the twins who offend in their innocence (89), could we not glimpse at the remote and the immediate reasons why Nwoye rejects the traditional ways his father dies protecting?

Taking into consideration all these, there is little wonder why the people of Umuofia would not hold for too long in their resistance to the new religion. The narrator concludes, in the end, that even ‘in the matter of religion there was a growing feeling that there might be something in it after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness’ (126). The result is that Okonkwo ends up, immediately after his arrival from exile, during the crisis and before his death, becoming the remnant of the old Umuofia still lurking in the transitional colonial Umuofia. There is a clash and one must prevail over the other to avoid a stalemate. Okonkwo yields by taking his life and consequently, separates himself from the community he tries so hard to belong just as Sethe, in *Beloved*, in trying so hard to get freedom and belong to the class of the free, not minding the means of getting it, whether it is through murder or suicide, ends up not having it as she is jailed for eighteen years. Of Okonkwo, one of the men says:

> It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his kinsmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. . . . When he has been buried we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land (147).

Okonkwo, through ‘a sad miscalculation’ (36) like it is in the wrestling bout between Ikezue and Okafor, is sadly rewarded for it in the contest between Umuofia and the white man. He kills himself to prevent himself from further violations by the white man and his agents. A connection holds between Okonkwo in this particular sequence and Sethe in *Beloved*. Sethe would only be termed different in the sense that it is her children that she endeavours to prevent from the encroaching forces of multiple and continual violations by resorting to infanticide. The people of Umuofia, like Sethe in *Beloved*, endure whatever circumstance that troubles their beings which they could not put a stop to. They passively endure it knowing full well that ‘there is no one for whom it is well’ (95). It makes the men of Umuofia to merge ‘into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting’ (144) for the outcome of Okonkwo/court messenger confrontation instead of supporting Okonkwo.
When Okonkwo’s matchet descends twice and the messenger is murdered, and it is apparent Umuofia would not go to war, he commits suicide sending signals to the white man that further violations might be borne by the group but not himself.

A thin line separates murder from suicide and the latter is an aberration because the code of pollution as sin prohibits it. Suicide itself is an act and a manifestation of the plenitude of the individual in an existential border situation. As an act traceable to its archetype in Judas Iscariot in Judaeo-Christian discourse, it is done as a direct or indirect consequence of suffering. Either the individual has sinned against himself, an Other, or he has been offended. In Umuofia, although it is forbidden, it is subtly contradicted in their folk tradition, embodied in their myth. The consequences of ‘how leaves become smaller after cooking’ suggest the presence of suicide in the Umuofia’s worldview (59). The lizard kills his mother when he finds only three baskets of vegetables after giving her seven to cook. He commits suicide too, after similar number of baskets is left after cooking them himself. His suicide is a direct consequence of his mother’s death. The instance of a man who ties his cloth to a tree branch and hangs himself because seed yams are destroyed after a spell of sunshine does appear as an example of a proto-Okonkwo’s suicide. He has been sinned against, this time by nature. Suicide, here, is the end chain of a sequence of interlocking sin, leaving the thought-provoking question of whether desecration must be resorted to stave off desecration, to generate unanswerable aporias.

Apart from the killing of the court messenger and without invoking logic and ethics to weigh Okonkwo’s actions in the killing of Ikemefuna, the burden of guilt that weighs him down in the case of the latter is a pointer to the destiny of aloofness that he is to suffer at the end. The state of mind that afflicts Okonkwo is equally encountered in Beloved in the characters of Jim and Sethe respectively. A stroke of difference would be that when Okonkwo’s guilt is for three days, fading away with time, only to be renewed at the announcement of the death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu. Jim and Sethe endure till the very end of the textual space. Notwithstanding, the intensity of Okonkwo’s guilt is itself a good dose of suffering, however punctual.

It does appear that guilt, obsession, and fear are wrapped up in a skein of complex relationships. Frye posits that the ‘analysis of obsession belongs more naturally to prose-fiction’ where we have to study it in ‘terms of fear instead of pity: that is, the obsession takes the form of an unconditioned will that drives its victims beyond the normal limits of humanity’ (1957:40). We see the three concepts in Okonkwo-Ikemefuna scene. While Okonkwo’s obsession leads him, in all intensity Ikemefuna cut down, a child that calls him ‘father,’ it makes Sethe in Beloved to kill her own children with a handsaw because the best thing she is, is her children and no white man would be tolerated to dirty ‘her best thing . . . the part of her that was clean’ (Morrison, 1988: 251). Again, ‘no one, nobody in this earth, would list her daughters’ characteristics on the animal side of the paper’ (251). But it is
this obsession is always directed to some object, a kind of trying to maintain, or align oneself to some sort of privileged unity of an idea, a calling or a principle. A veering off of such unities is the metaphoric connotation of pollution and desecration because its disruption is the disruption of selfhood, its constitution and the universe that gives it life. This unity is the prop of all of Okonkwo’s actions in *Things Fall Apart* and Sethe’s in *Beloved*.

Above all, in the community of *Beloved* and the characters of *Things Fall Apart*, we find reminiscences of our entire literary traditions. The characters are all armed in various ways, true to hermeneutics, with the potency of speaking to all through the back door. In whichever way this is done, there is no gainsaying that they owe their elucidation of meaning, as have been illustrated so far in these narratives, to pollution as symbol and as ‘pure, unstructured perceptions’ where it has become literature’s sole function ‘to try and apprehend’ it ‘in some form’ (Akwanya, 2004:223). This ‘some form’ are Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Morrison’s *Beloved* – both of which exceed and fall short at the same time every representation of pollution itself, and in some sense, echoes Holderlin’s opening lines in ‘Patmos’ that ‘Near is/But difficult to grasp is God’ (Westling, et al, 1999: 2039).

Going through the architectonics of these works and their analysis in this essay, it is possible to recollect how the characters react through the interpretation of the environment in as pollution. Pollution as a mythic phenomenon and as a symbol is a purely an existential issue that sprouts from the cradle of subjectivity from where these characters are held bound to the issues and actions which abase and demean them. This position raises further problems for those who wish to see *Beloved* as an epic tale of love, bravery and a chronology of slavery; and others who see *Things Fall Apart* as an ethnographic choreography and as a record of a late 19th century effects of colonialism. The mythic turn, that is, the symbol of pollution, as analysed in these works from a different slant has always never been the preserve of those who hold the above thoughts. At any rate, this may not be the last essay attempting a symbolic reading of these texts; we wait for more.

**References**


