



The Becoming From Being: Christ Figure Of Okolo In Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the mythical expression of being in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* to find the unity of the Deity who is and who becomes. In line with Plato's philosophy, the paper argues that Okolo, the protagonist, is a substantial form of an invisible Being, a Christ figure, who is the visible image of an invisible God. The paper also argues that literature is as infinite as God and that the thought expressed by the text, though abstract, cannot be separated from the words or language that make it visible as literary object. Therefore, 'the Becoming' and 'Being', as found in the study, are inseparably one.

KEY WORDS: Philosophy, Plato, God, Becoming, Being, Christ Figure, Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of Plato has relevance in the mythical reading of literary texts, which has in the past not at all or little been proven as shall be seen in the present study of Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*. Philosophy is logical in inquiry, but "mythical thought reveals itself functioning alongside logical thought" (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures* 164). According to Derrida, "Literary Criticism has already been determined, knowingly or not, voluntarily or not, as the philosophy of literature," (*Writing and Difference* 39). "In Ricoeur, for instance, it is the functioning of myth in philosophy, its relation to thought, that is the object of inquiry" (qtd in Akwanya, *Verbal Structure* 134). As philosophy relates to myth, it engages the mind in attempt to discover the truth of what is. As it concerns literary criticism, however, attempt to get to the 'truth happening in the work' (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 64), is

made possible with the use of literary theories, referred to by Pope as 'those rules of old discovered, not devised...: laws, principles; concepts that form the bases upon which the literary objects are being judged by the critics' ('An Essay on Criticism' line 88). Among notable philosophers who led way to these discoveries are Plato and Aristotle. Their philosophies, as it is the stand of this reading, are two-legged foundation of literary criticism, one which we cannot do without the other as "There is really no difference in the way Plato or Aristotle...conducts philosophy to warrant the acceptance of one as part of literary criticism but not the other" (Akwanya, *Literature and Aspects* 10). Plato and Aristotle, like every other theorist after them, arrive at the theorization of what they hold to be the nature of art by way of thinking which give them insight into 'those rules of old discovered not devised'. Therefore, "What they all do is to exercise thinking on the question of the nature of art and literary, resulting in deep insights, some which like Plato's and Aristotle's have gone on to be used in constructing theories of literature" (Akwanya, *ibid*). Even though Aristotle seems to refute Plato's idea of absolute reality that can only be conceived by abstract reasoning and not by the work of the poet claimed to be doubly a copy of the real world of form, to establish that literary object on the ground of probability uses language as a medium of its mimesis of action which is whole and complete, and that it is not necessary to look for truth outside it than what it constructs, it can however not be denied that the verbal world of literature is not aware of mythical patterns in the literary tradition that could find their way into the being of the text. Plato by way of thinking was able to arrive at the existence of a



metaphysical being. In essence, if the language-weaved literary text constitutes its own being in a pattern that it still reflects that which primordially exists as myths common among the community of human race as shall be seen this reading, it appears that ‘there is no difference in the way Plato or Aristotle...conducts philosophy to warrant the acceptance of one as part of literary criticism but not the other. Therefore, “the study of the nature of verbal structure we call poetry, or more generally literature, may be pursued philosophically, in terms of the analysis of the conditions essential for its coming into being, and structurally, by analysis of the work as an individual utterance in order to determine its basic elements and establish its form” (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures* 1). Here, the primordial ‘Being’ and ‘Becoming’ is what this study philoso-mythically pursues to see the unity of the Christ figure, Okolo, as being one with the metaphysical Being he is in ‘closest sympathy’ with and embodies. Plato’s conception in his philosophy is that there is an invisible world of form that the visible reflects. This brings the metaphysical and the physical world into bipolar view that reality exists in the former which is not seen, reflected by the latter. It is this reality in the invisible that Okolo, as an abstract thinker sees against the visible which sets him in conflict with his society inclined towards the shadowy materialism of the physical world. This is not to say, however, that the literary text does not construct its own reality, but trying in our argument to show the relevance of Plato’s philosophy as already established, in the mythical reading of Christ figure of Okolo in Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice* as the result of the “primordial images shaped by repeated experiences of our ancestors and expressed in myths, religions, dreams, fantasies and powerfully in Literature” (Holman, qtd in Okoro 34). Here we are concerned with the primordial metaphysical being-God or Woyengi as religiously expressed in the text, not far from Plato’s philosophical conception that in such realm of metaphysical existence is originality. This is similarly what every myth holds, the narrative expression of the incommunicable ‘primary symbol’ which Okolo for example in our present reading is an archetypal figure of Christ, where both, as will be later seen, are physical manifestations of the metaphysical being mentioned.

II. THE BECOMING FROM BEING: CHRIST FIGURE OF OKOLO

This mode of reading *The Voice* is in tandem with the myth of Idemili in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah* where both texts show Idemili, an unseen divine being, represented by seen human agents. The Idemili-like being is usually the prototype, foundational or originality of other associated mythical figures. We see Ulu for example as an associate god to Idemili whom Ezeulu, the priest, is the representing human agent, on whom also the people transfer the guilt of their sins to during the yearly festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, depicting the myth of the carrier or what F.U Okoro would call ‘the Archetype of Azazel’, chiefly represented by Christ, among other associated mythical figures in other literary texts, such as Eman in Soyinka’s *Strong Breed*. Even though Ezeulu shares the mythic attribute of the carrier, of the Christ figure, our argument here is that Idemili, like the ‘Being’ in our reading is the prototype, foundational or originality of other associated mythical figures. This is in line with the argument of Akwanya in his *Verbal Structures*:

“As we have seen, however, the myth of Idemili is in no way a secondary strain of myth; it is rather a foundational structure, for it is on the system of meaning it authorizes that the narrative itself rests, a system that will endure beyond the dissolution of the cult of Ulu” (139).

The difference between Idemili and Ulu is that while the former has been from the beginning, the latter physically came to be by necessity whose priest like Christ is the carrier of the sins of the people. We read from the dialogue of Ezidemili with his friend, Nwaka: “Every boy in Umuaro knows that Ulu was made by our fathers long ago. But Idemili was there at the beginning of things. Nobody made it” (*Arrow of God* 41). According to Ezidemili, Idemili means ‘Pillar of Water’ that holds up the ‘Raincloud’ from falling. The metaphor, ‘Pillar of Water’ makes allusion to the Biblical creation story which implicates Idemili to be paradoxically, the Being who has been there from the very beginning and at the same time the becoming from the Being, the Almighty, but not without a human agent, as it is explicitly mentioned in *Anthills of the Savannah*, which Beatrice in the text is seen to represent:



In the beginning power rampaged through our world, naked. So, the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty." (Anthills of *The Savannah*, 102).

The difference between Idemili in *Arrow of God* and in *Anthills of The Savannah* is that while the human agent in the former is a man, being Ezidemili, the latter has Beatrice, a woman as the human agent. As seen from both, Idemili has been there from the very beginning. If, however, Idemili is the daughter of the Almighty who also has been there in the beginning; relatively, it shows that Christ, the example of Okolo, the becoming from Being, though seen in the visible human form has been there in the beginning with the unseen Almighty, who as the 'logos', we learn that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

In Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* we see the structural sequence of power struggle between good and evil in which a metaphysical being comes down in the human form as Okolo, 'to bear witness to the moral nature of authority.' Okolo in bearing his witness, looks for 'it' which is not there as supposed among the human authority of the day. He is being misunderstood for his nonconventional approach towards his quest for 'it', even his ally, Tuere. However, Tuere, his closest companion later comes to understand that Okolo is not an ordinary human being, but a transcendental being, who like Christ, comes from 'Woyengi who all things created' (*The Voice* 54). Therefore, he could not be stopped from his quest for 'it' seeing it is the very essence of his becoming, 'to bear witness to the moral nature of authority...' of metaphysical being. This is made clearer when the cripple that is a secret follower of Okolo comes to advise Tuere to tell Okolo to stop his search for 'it' and not to return to Amatu after being exiled to Sologa, because his returning might bring about the consequence of death by the community and Elders that have exiled him as a result of his search for *it* (considered as nuisance by them). By then Tuere has become an ardent believer in the predestined divine mission of Okolo, refusing to take heed of the advice as seen thus:

'Tell him to search for it no more,' advised the cripple'

'He will not stop. He asked it of Woyengi. Nobody can stop him. No, I will not ask him to stop,' replies Tuere (*The Voice* 74).

'...asked it of Woyengi' as understood from Tuere means the inevitable one is predestined to achieve. So, she agrees with the cripple that she too could end up in the same fate as Okolo if it has been so predestined. "If it's what I asked of Woyengi, it will so happen" (ibid). Okolo returns from his exile and presents himself as a willing sacrificial lamb. Both him and Tuere like Christ are tied to a wood [canoe] and put to the river to be drowned. He happily accepts death knowing he is a transcendental being whose words as a living being will keep existing, even more powerful in his physical absence, for "Spoken words are living things like coca-beans packed with life. And like the cocoa- beans they grow and give life. Okolo... saw that his spoken words will not die. They will enter some insides, remain there and grow like corn blooming on the alluvial soil at the river side" (*The Voice* 110).

III. LITERATURE IN THE NATURE OF GOD: THE PRE-MATERIAL NATURE OF GOD AND LITERATURE

Little or nothing has been said about the pre-material nature of God and Literature which have the shared nature of indeterminacy, slippery to singular interpretation; yielding rather to multiplicity of endless meanings. The need for us to fill this gap is that it will give more understanding to the pre-material form which Christ and Okolo, and the literary object are before they take the material form of human body and of language, respectively. If Christ is God, the implication is that he exists before his material being, so also is Okolo if he is a character figure of Christ as it has been established.

Taking the line of argument of the Christian religion, God is an immaterial being, but became a being with body, made visible in the person of Christ, 'Word made flesh.' Therefore, what gives essence to the material being, Christ, that could be felt and described is 'the Word' that pre-existed the flesh that has in the beginning being with God.

Words have anciently been used in the community of human race, primarily as means of communication, but the ordinary words of



everyday language have been seen not to be the same as those that make up what could be called literature. Literary work of art with composite nature as though a human being, has been argued by Aristotle to have organic unity, using language as its medium of representation. Here, literature as 'a particular language whose mode of being is literary' (Foucault, *The Order* 300), becomes like a verbal universe objectified; whole and complete like every other art form such as sculpture, to mention but one among Aristotle's list of examples given in his *Poetics*.

If the verbal universe can be said to take, metaphorically, a concrete shape through its use of 'a particular language whose mode of being is literary', our argument is that there is pre-existence of words that lead to the formation of this verbally structured art form, which "like the dream, the work takes certain 'raw materials'-language, other literary texts, way of perceiving the world-and transform them into a product" (Eagleton 157), different from the constituent's materials. The literary object 'whole and complete' is what is here referred to as the 'product' the made thing of language, which the "the raw material of literature is words" (Akwanya, *Language and Habits of Thought* 204). The raw nature of the words, perhaps, implies the potentiality that literature as an object of mimesis can be made out of them. When this art form is fully formed, through the medium of word, it assumes the mystic nature of God from immaterial to material nature. What therefore makes literature to share the nature of God is its infinitude of meanings or endlessness.

God is endless. His characteristic of infinitude is the nature He shares with literature which has no determinate meaning. There is no one meaning to what or who God is, that being the reason for different religions with different conceptual beliefs in similarly one God as seen in *The Voice*. Hence, any attempt by a particular religious leaning to give God a determinate meaning from what they hold to be true not regarding the beliefs of others who may have something different will lead to disagreement and division. Okolo, the protagonist of our text understands this and adopts the approach of neutrality to avoid the division(s) inherent in giving God a determinate name or meaning, and therefore like a poet has "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth" (Sidney 1079), even though he knows quite very well there may be just one meaning in life which the people of his society has not come

into consensus agreement and understanding of, but propagating different beliefs about one particular thing as seen below:

"There may be only one meaning in life and everybody is just groping along their various ways to achieve it like religion-Christians, Moslems, Animists-all trying to reach God in their various ways. What is he himself trying to reach? For him it has no name. Names bring divisions and divisions, strife. So let it be without a name; let it be nameless..." (*The Voice*, P112).

It could be seen the different names people of various religious beliefs use when they seek divine intervention from the downpour, lightning and thunder bolt that suddenly struck on the canoe journey to Sologa which Okolo sits among the passengers observing how naming can bring about confusion as they people cry:

"Ee, Woyengi, sorry for us!"

'Things of the soil of the town, for today only save us!

'How is it! How is it! Amadasu will you see us die?'

'Blow it away, blow it open!'

'Things that follow me! This about-to-happening big thing take it away!'

'Kolokumo Egbesu! How?'

'O God deliver us! O, Christ, sorry for us, O.'

... everybody so prayed and invoked according to his or her religion" (*The Voice* 62)

As the different religions are 'groping along their various ways...trying to reach God in their various ways', there is also 'groping' along with theories in attempt to answer the question: 'what is literature?' which is endless and has no determinate meaning with one theory. It has no fixity. Rather "literature is...a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression" (Deleuze, etal, *Anti-Oedipus* 133). This establishes the



endlessness of literature like God. It is an ongoing 'process' and not an ended 'goal', neither is it a mere certain 'expression' but a production, whole and complete that sustains "inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries" (Frye, *Anatomy* 17), which its infinitude of meanings requires critical tolerance for continuous unveiling of the 'truth happening in the work' that "is eternally non-apparent and therefore invisible" (Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking* 19). It is therefore the submission of this reading that Okolo's 'it' as carefully used in his quest is a neutral perception of what God means for him which could likely not bring strife and division among people of other different beliefs with him. He takes the posture of a religious tolerant in his quest in order not to arrive at a determinate meaning, knowing there is no end to what God could be thought to be. His dying father for example has advised him,

"I wanted you to know book because of the changing world. But whiteman's book is not everything. Now listen son, believe in what you believe. Argue with no one about whiteman's god and Woyengi, our goddess. What your inside tells you to believe, you believe, and always the straight thing do and the straight thing talk and your spoken words will have power and you will live in this world even when you are dead" (*The Voice*, 106).

In essence, Okolo chooses the word 'it' in order to be neutral amidst the conflicting beliefs about God, hence calling an idea or belief to its name causes division. Besides his neutrality, Okolo is still being opposed in his meddling in the affairs of the governance of the masses to bring about changes as the injunction of his father to, 'always the straight thing do and the straight thing talk', who like Christ whose coming as prophesized by the priest, Simeon, is said to bring about the fall and rise of many. So, Okolo's returning to Amatu from his schooling "stopped the Elders from slapping their thighs in joy" (*The Voice* 23). Though being dissuaded by his ally (Tuere) to desist from his search for 'it', Okolo believes that the 'it' is something in him that needs to be manifested for the people's liberation; something locked up in his inside which the Elders wishes to silence in order not to let him be heard.

"How do you expect to find it when fear has locked up the insides of the low and insides of the high are filled up with nothing but yam? Stop looking for it. Stop suffering yourself"

'I cannot stop,' Okolo with whisper whisper spoke. I cannot stop this thing. I

must find it. It is there. I am the voice from the locked-up insides which the Elders, not wanting the people to hear, want to stop me."

It is seen from the above that while Okolo is concerned with the metaphysical ideal which is invisible, materialism, however, such as yam which the Elders present to the people has blocked their conscience that they become the Elders puppets-wanting to stop Okolo from letting the masses know the ideal (truth). Here, we see Okolo as the Idemili personified [Beatrice] sent by the Almighty 'to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty' (*Anthills of The Savannah*, 102), but which the Elders like the Pharisees to Christ, are ready to oppose. The two characters: Christ and Okolo are economical with word. Christ, sometimes, adopts the approach of arriving at intended meaning with the use of parable instead of being explicit. Parable as a figurative language gives the words of Christ the tendency of yielding to multiplicity of meanings on interpretations that are not determinate as Okolo's 'it.'

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has philosophically explored the becoming from Being of the Christ figure, Okolo, in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*, against the backdrop of Plato's philosophical conception of the metaphysical and physical worlds. We have seen how Okolo, like Christ, embodies the invisible Being, Woyengi, and how both figures share the attribute of the carrier of the sins of the people. Though Okolo's quest for 'it', we have also seen the struggle between good and evil, and how the material world, represented by the Elders, tries to silence the voice of the metaphysical ideal. This study has further shown that literature, like God, is infinite and has no determinate meaning, and that the verbal universe objectified through language has the potential to yield to multiplicity of meanings. Therefore, we argued that the pre-material nature of God and literature shares the attribute of indeterminacy, and that Okolo's 'it' represents the neutral perception of what God means, avoiding strife and division. Finally, this study submits that Okolo's character figure of Christ, like the priest, Simeon, foretells the rise and fall of many, and that that his quest for 'it' is a call to moral nature of authority, echoing the voice of the locked-up inside of the people.



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