

The Impossible Sacrifice: Negotiating Agency and Infanticide in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

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Abstract

Infanticide in postcolonial and African American literature is rarely about individual pathology. Instead, it emerges as a desperate response to the structural violence of “total institutions.” This study explores the impact of the forces of slavery and colonialism on parental responsibility in the realm of what we can call an “impossible sacrifice” in both corpora, namely *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Beloved* (1987). Characters face a ghastly situation where they are condemned to make a decision whose consequences are devastating: taking the life of the very children they are supposed to cherish and protect. This research employs a comparative qualitative analysis of the two novels to trace how these protagonists struggle mightily to reclaim ownership of their identities and families. The environment in which they evolve seeks to strip them of both identities and families. This analysis calls upon trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and existential thought to grasp how systems of domination reshape the psyche and invade the private space of the home. Within these closed structures - where human value is limited, distorted, or erased - infanticide emerges not as a free choice but as a coerced act, a last attempt to assert meaning in a world that refuses to recognize their humanity. While intended to save a soul or an identity, the act leads to irreversible psychological trauma and permanent haunting. It is a pyrrhic victory in a world already in ruins.

Keywords: Colonialism, identity, infanticide, structural violence, trauma

Résumé

L'infanticide dans la littérature postcoloniale et afro-américaine relève rarement de la pathologie individuelle. Il s'impose plutôt comme une réponse désespérée à la violence structurelle des « institutions totales ». Cette étude explore l'impact des forces de l'esclavage et du colonialisme sur la responsabilité parentale dans le cadre de ce que l'on peut appeler un « sacrifice impossible » dans les deux corpus, à savoir *Things Fall Apart* (1958) et *Beloved* (1987). Les personnages se trouvent confrontés à une situation effroyable où ils sont condamnés à prendre une décision aux conséquences dévastatrices : ôter la vie des enfants qu'ils sont censés chérir et protéger. Cette recherche s'appuie sur une analyse qualitative comparative des deux romans afin de retracer la lutte acharnée des protagonistes pour reconquérir leur identité et leur famille. L'environnement dans lequel ils évoluent cherche à les dépouiller de leurs identités et de leurs familles. Cette analyse mobilise les études sur le traumatisme, la théorie postcoloniale et la pensée existentielle pour assimiler comment les systèmes de domination reconfigurent la psyché et envahissent l'espace privé du foyer. Au sein de ces structures closes – où la valeur humaine est limitée, déformée ou effacée – l'infanticide apparaît non comme un choix libre mais comme un acte forcé, une ultime tentative pour donner un sens dans un monde qui refuse de reconnaître leur humanité. Bien qu'il vise à sauver une âme ou une identité, l'acte entraîne un traumatisme psychologique irréversible et une hantise permanente. C'est une victoire à la Pyrrhus dans un monde déjà en ruines.

Mots-clés: Colonialisme, identité, infanticide, violence structurelle, traumatisme

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Introduction

A parent taking their child's life is the ultimate transgression of biological and human law. By transforming the architect of life into the agent of death, it marks a profound collapse of the intimate moral order. Yet, in postcolonial and African American literature, infanticide is rarely about individual pathology, signaling instead the violent infiltration of total institutions into the private home, where the traditional bond of protection is entirely fractured. It is a desperate reaction to the structural violence of "Total Institutions," oppressive architectures like chattel slavery and colonial patriarchy, which violently invade the private space of the home to distort the truest meaning of protection. Bringing Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) into dialogue is essential to understanding how slavery and colonialism shape the protagonists' lives. These two works lay bare how oppression recalibrates the true meaning of "protection" and "parental responsibility."

Scholarship on *Beloved* and *Things Fall Apart* has largely developed along separate disciplinary tracks. Morrison criticism centres on the psychic afterlife of slavery, drawing on Spillers' theory of "ungendering" - the systematic stripping of gender identity and maternal authority from enslaved women, rendering their bodies sites of labour and reproduction rather than personhood - Patterson's "social death" - the condition of the enslaved as civilly dead, permanently excluded from any legitimate social order and denied the right to claim kin - and Gilroy's (1993) Black Atlantic framework to read Sethe's infanticide as a structurally produced act of desperate maternal sovereignty. Achebe's criticism, meanwhile, operates within postcolonial and anthropological traditions, drawing on Turner's (1969) ritual process theory and Fanonian readings of colonial psychology to frame Ikemefuna's death as both a cosmological necessity and a symptom of Igbo patriarchy's internal contradictions. A modest body of comparative work has begun to bridge these traditions. Scholars such as Craps (2013), Rothberg (2009), and Goyal (2010) offer transcultural trauma frameworks and diaspora-inflected readings that allow the two novels to speak across the Atlantic. Yet this comparative scholarship remains thematically broad, rarely drilling into the shared psychological mechanism at stake.

It is against this backdrop that the specific motives behind these literary sacrifices come into sharpest focus. Barbara Christian (1988), a major critic, presents Sethe's act in *Beloved* (1987) as a "sanctuary" of death. Orlando Patterson's (1982) concepts of "social death" and "natal alienation" - the enforced severance of the enslaved person from all claims of birth, rendering them without heritable ties to either ancestors or descendants - explain how slavery severed legal parenting from biological birth. Victor Turner's (1969) studies on ritual process frame Ikemefuna's death in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a communal "cleansing." However, a gap remains in comparative studies. The gap lies in examining how these two different forms of oppression trigger a shared psychological "fracture," transforming a normal act of parenting into a cruel, desperate assertion of selfhood. It is then crucial to examine how these two forms of violence - one ritualistic and traditional, the other profane and market-driven - converge in the psychological fragmentation of the protagonist.

The gap lies precisely there: no sustained study has examined how chattel slavery's market-driven violence and the Igbo oracle's ritualistic violence converge to produce the same

interior fracture in the parent forced to destroy the child. This study addresses that absence directly.

This study explores the motives behind the complex paradox of the “Impossible Sacrifice.” It asks how the protagonist negotiates agency when the only remaining expression of resistance is “death.” The “necessity of choice” in the face of these two systems of domination lies at the heart of the problem. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Okonkwo finds himself suspended between a dying tradition and colonial invasion. In *Beloved* (1987), Sethe is trapped between the “dirtying” gaze of white supremacy and the finality of death. Okonkwo is trapped between a crumbling tradition and colonial penetration. Sethe is caught between the “dirtying” gaze of white supremacy and the finality of death. As a result, this research raises a crucial question: can an act that destroys lineage truly be a form of reclamation of one’s identity?

This research fundamentally aims to:

- Scrutinize the systemic triggers that condition the protagonists.
- Explore how “Ritual Duty” and “Maternal Resistance” justify infanticide.
- Examine the psychological fragmentation and the haunting legacy distorting the protagonists’ psyche.

This study mobilizes a multidisciplinary lens to bridge the psychological, sociopolitical, and philosophical approaches of infanticide. By synthesizing trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and existential thought, this framework captures the complex intersections where systemic oppression disrupts individual morality. Ultimately, this integrative approach reveals how structural violence forces the domestic sanctuary to fracture, transforming a desperate act of destruction into an agonizing negotiation of parental agency. First, Trauma theory, specifically Caruth’s (1996) “belatedness,” is used to examine how the psyche, unable to process a lethal act, returns to it through dissociation. Second, postcolonial theory delineates the internal fracture where Bhabha’s (1994) “unhomely” - itself a conscious reworking of Freud’s (1919) *Unheimlich*, which literally translates as “unhomely” and describes the uncanny dread that erupts when the familiar becomes strange and threatening - and Fanon’s (1963) “muscular tension” show how colonial violence seeps into the home, making protection impossible. Finally, Jean Paul Sartre’s (1992) Existentialist theory helps frame the “impossible sacrifice” as a resolute affirmation of agency within an absurd world. Here, infanticide is perceived as a desperate response to absolute systemic and oppressive control that tramples on human dignity.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach based on a comparative analysis and close reading of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Beloved* (1987). We observed shared patterns of “negotiated agency” by bringing these narratives in parallel. The analysis synthesizes sociological, historical, and literary criticism. This methodology ensures a robust assessment of how these systems of domination erode individual morality.

This paper highlights the collision between systemic oppression and parental agency through a three-stage framework that serves as a roadmap for the investigation: the first section examines how external triggers force lethal choices. The second section analyzes the

ideological frameworks of ritual and resistance. The last section examines the psychological fragmentation that reshapes the sacrificed child's haunting legacy.

Methodology

This research calls on a qualitative methodology grounded in comparative analysis and close reading of two corpora: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). It seeks to examine the "negotiated agency" within "Total Institutions", deconstructing the symbolic resistance and psychological fracture of the protagonists in the grip of systemic domination.

Research Design

The research relies on content analysis and comparative and historical interpretation. The two main texts, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Beloved* (1987), are examined closely to examine how systemic oppression collides with parental agency.

Data Collection

Data is gathered through a synthesis of literary criticism, sociological frameworks, and historical context. It relies on foundational texts regarding structural violence and "total institutions".

Data Analysis Method

The data in this article consists of the main texts of the two novels, carefully chosen excerpts that underscore the systemic triggers, the ideological frameworks of ritual and resistance, and the psychological fragmentation. It also draws on secondary sources such as scholarly articles, novels, literary criticism, historical records, and theoretical works to support the findings.

Results and Discussions

The findings of this research are presented through a comparative analysis of the "impossible choice" in both novels. The discussion revolves around these three key findings: the corrosive systemic triggers resulting in murders, the ritual duty and maternal resistance, and the resulting psychological fragmentation that leaves the protagonists permanently haunted.

Systemic Triggers and the Necessity of Choice

Infanticide in postcolonial and African American literature is rarely an expression of individual pathology. It results from the structural violence of "Total Institutions" – oppressive systems that control the bodies and identities of the people subjected to them. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the protagonists find themselves trapped within social and political architectures – traditional patriarchy, colonial invasion, and chattel slavery. These conditions rob them of normative agency. In a situation where external systems become so corrosive that they control one's life, the act of "sacrifice" appears not as a crime but as a distorted, radical affirmation of ownership over one's lineage.

The principles of slavery, in the American South, have terribly reconfigured the value of human life, moving it from sacred to property. Morrison (1987) captures this ontological theft by illustrating how the biological reality of birth was violently severed from the social and legal reality of parenting, a reality where "birthing children was required, but 'having' them, being responsible for them - being, in other words, their parent - was as out of the question as freedom. Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal" (p. 7).

This passage identifies the primary systemic trigger for Sethe's eventual violence. Under the slave code, the mother's "production" of a child was a gain for the plantation owner, not an extension of the mother's self or family. As Orlando Patterson (1982) famously conceptualized in *Slavery and Social Death*, the enslaved exist in a state of "natal alienation," legally denied

the right to claim ancestry or progeny. When the state criminalizes the bond between mother and child, the mother is forced into a radical "necessity of choice": she must either surrender her child to the commodification of the market - where they will be "dirtied" and broken - or remove the child from that market's reach through the finality of death.

This pitiless systemic violation of maternal bond is further highlighted in the chilling account of the theft of Sethe's milk. This action, ultimately, symbolizes the usurpation of her last remaining maternal function. Sethe recounts this trauma to Paul D as the defining moment of her dehumanization, saying: "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it (Morrison, 1987, p. 24).

The metaphoric description of the theft of the milk highlights the systemic draining of the Black female body in favor of the oppressor. The profound loss of bodily autonomy and the desperate fight to reclaim her identity is underscored by Sethe's reflection; Morrison (1987) notes: "I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left" (p. 193). This image evokes the antebellum South, where enslaved women were forced to wet nurse their enslavers' infants while their own starved. As West and Knight (2017) document, this widespread practice embedded the theft of Black maternal milk into the plantation economy. Sethe's anguish is deeply historical; her milk represents a final, uncommodified frontier of maternal sovereignty. In this context, infanticide is a refusal to let the system "milk" the next generation. As Christian (1988) argues, Sethe creates a "sanctuary" of death beyond the reach of the schoolteacher's "ink" and "measurements." His "ink" encodes racial inferiority in writing - instructing his nephews in the pseudoscientific taxonomy of Blackness - while his "measurements" recall the physical quantification of enslaved bodies during the Middle Passage (2007), reducing persons to cargo. Together, they constitute a system of epistemic violence that Sethe's act, however devastatingly, seeks to defeat. In Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), the triggers are anchored in the "social death," whereas in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), they emerge from the explosive collision between ancestral values and colonial laws. When the white man arrives in the Igbo society, he establishes new systems and principles that render Umuofia's - an ancestral, fiercely structured Igbo clan - traditional sacrifices both out-of-date and criminal. The missionary's initial assault is primarily ideological, aimed at dismantling the spiritual foundation that justifies the clan's actions, famously asserting:

Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm... They are pieces of wood and stone." When this was interpreted to the men of Mbanta they broke into derisive laughter. These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How else could they say that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Ogwugwu too. (Achebe, 1958, p. 132)

This critical confrontation triggers a "necessity of choice" for Okonkwo about identity and survival. If, as the white man puts it, the gods are indeed "wood and stone", then the sacrifice of Ikemefuna emerges not as a sacred duty to shield the clan from spiritual wrath, but as totally absurd murder. Okonkwo appears to be strongly and faithfully attached to the old ways, which is a systemic trigger; he is caught between an ailing tradition that requires blood to prove masculinity and a colonial civilization that punishes that very masculinity.

Achebe (1958) highlights the transition from bloody traditional ritual to colonial policing through the implementation of a new legal system that operates in total disregard of local reality. This government imposes a new "necessity" that bypasses the elders and the Oracle, as pointed out by this passage: "But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial" (p. 157).

The imposition of the District Commissioner signals the death of Umuofian agency. The “necessity of choice” for the villagers becomes a binary between total submission to a “law judged in ignorance” or a violent, futile resistance. The presence of the *kotma* (court messengers) serves as the physical enforcement of this new systemic reality, guarding a “...prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins, and some had molested the Christians” (Achebe, 1958, p. 157).

This passage underscores Achebe's (1958) ultimate illustration of a systemic trigger: the criminalization of cultural values. In the Igbo society, the “throwing away of twins” was perceived as a necessary sacrifice to cleanse the land of abomination. By imprisoning “these men,” the colonial government creates a paradox where the “moral” action of the clansmen – aiming at safeguarding the community – becomes the criminal act of the state. This contradiction is sharpened when we recognize that Umuofia itself already treats children as instruments of communal need. Okonkwo's participation in Ikemefuna's death is his attempt to outrun this colonial “softness,” making the sacrifice a desperate, impossible attempt to anchor a world that is already falling apart.

For both Sethe and Okonkwo, the “necessity of choice” is framed by a terrifying clarity: the desire to prevent a fate worse than death. Sethe's justification is grounded in the “dirtying” power of her oppressor. This invincible and insidious force shatters the soul long before the body, which leads her to this conclusion: “How if I hadn't killed her she would have died, and that is something I could not bear to happen to her” (Morrison, 1987, p. 193). She recognizes that under the “logic of institutional enslavement,” physical death is a form of protection - a way to keep the child “safe” from a reality where: “...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 like yourself anymore” (p. 251). In this light, infanticide is a “merciful” pre-emption. As Frantz Fanon (1963) argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonized subject often finds that the only way to break the cycle of dehumanization is through a counter-violence that reclaims the self. Sethe's sacrifice is her reclaiming her “whole self” and her child's soul from being “dirtied” by the schoolteacher's gaze.

Conversely, Okonkwo's sacrifice is an attempt to avoid the “dirtiness” of being perceived as “Agbala - a man without titles, a womanish man - in a society undergoing a crisis of identity. Both characters are victims of what scholar Homi Bhabha (1994) might call “unhomely” moments - where the domestic space is invaded by the political machine. Whether it is the Schoolteacher entering the shed or the District Commissioner entering the marketplace, the systemic trigger remains the same: the outside world has made the private act of protecting and raising a child an impossibility.

The systemic triggers in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Beloved* (1987) function as a psychological pincer move. For Okonkwo, the trigger is the collapse of a sacred social order that once gave his violence meaning; for Sethe, it is the omnipresence of a profane market that views her children as stock. In both instances, the “Necessity of Choice” forces the protagonist to choose between a biological murder and a spiritual erasure.

By analyzing these narratives in tandem, it becomes clear that infanticide in these contexts is a symptom of a world where the “Total Institution” has left no room for the “Human.” The sacrifice is “impossible” because it destroys the very thing it seeks to save. Yet, it remains “necessary” because, within the logic of their respective systems, no other form of agency remains. The protagonists find themselves resorting to violence because the system has closed every other door to freedom.

Ritual Duty and Maternal Resistance in the Act of Violence

The act of infanticide in these narratives is never a simple choice; it is a collision of irreconcilable forces. In Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart*, violence is driven by the rigid weight of ritual duty and the preservation of a communal identity. In Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, it is deeply linked to strong maternal love, which functions as a form of resistance against a system that treats the child like a commodity. To trace these sacrifices and understand them, it is necessary to study how the "sacred" and the "maternal" are utilized as weapons against the protagonists. The system weaponizes these intrinsic devotions, converting ritual duty and maternal love into instruments of psychological coercion. This distortion forces the characters into an impossible space where taking a life becomes the ultimate assertion of protection. This horrible situation forces them into a space where death is the only remaining alternative to express one's resistance against a stifling system.

In Umuofia, the clan holds a very important place in the Igbo society. It is above the individual and controls his life because, when the Oracle speaks, no one dares to contradict its will. In the eyes of those attached to tradition, the death of Ikemefuna cannot be regarded as a personal murder, but as a secular ritual ordained by the cosmic order. Achebe (1958) narrates this cold and heartrending sequence through the voice of the elders, who announce the verdict with harrowing formality: "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there" (p. 55).

This ritualization serves to distance the perpetrator from the victim, using "custom" as a psychological buffer to scrub the blood from the hands of the individuals involved. However, the tragedy is preordained long before the machete is drawn, as the boy is identified as a "doomed lad" - a piece of social collateral used to settle a debt between villages. Achebe (1958) writes: "And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbors to avoid war and bloodshed. The ill-fated lad was called Ikemefuna" (p. 9).

As Victor Turner (1969) suggests in his study of ritual process, such sacrifices are intended to "cleanse" the community and restore a fractured order. Yet for Okonkwo, the duty is more than spiritual; it is a shield against an intimate, driving fear that overrules his human bond with the boy - a fear of appearing as a failure in the eyes of his ancestors. Achebe (1958) depicts:

But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. (p. 14)

Sethe resorts to this "killerlove" to express her only form of agency, rebelling against the logic of a market that treats her daughter as cattle. To Sethe, motherhood embodies an ontological bond that goes beyond the physical world and is out of reach of time, leading her to declare:

I don't care what she is. Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing... If I have to choose—well, it's not even a choice. That's the way it is, Paul D. I'll protect her while I'm live and I'll protect her when I ain't (Morrison, 1987, p. 50).

By killing her daughter, Sethe "protects" her from the spiritual "dirtiness" of slavery in a form of maternal resistance that operates outside the white man's law. However, this killing leaves an indelible psychological mark - a "venom" that haunts the house - as Denver grimly relates:

There sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own... Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too (p. 198).

Sethe's resistance is a "maternal infanticide" that attempts to snatch the soul from the clutches of the oppressor. As bell hooks (1981) argues in *Ain't I a Woman*, the struggle for motherhood under slavery was a battle to define the "human" against the "legal." The sacrifice thus becomes an ironic, tragic form of salvation - a refusal to let the institution reclaim the child.

When Okonkwo's ritual duty and Sethe's maternal resistance are closely examined, it becomes clear that they share a common truth about the "impossible sacrifice." Both characters are driven to the wall by an institution that demands more of them than they can provide. For Okonkwo, the demand of the Oracle is the only way to prove his masculine worth; for Sethe, the bond of motherhood is the only way to prove her humanity.

In both cases, the act of violence is a final, desperate attempt to anchor a reality that is already falling apart. They do not choose violence because they are violent; they choose it because the architectures of their worlds have left them no other way to be heard.

The act of infanticide in the works of Chinua Achebe (1958) and Toni Morrison (1987) is never a product of singular impulse; it is the collision of the individual with the overwhelming gravity of systemic mandates. To understand these 'impossible sacrifices,' one must examine the specific ideological frameworks - ritual duty and maternal resistance - that convert a lethal act into a perceived necessity. While Okonkwo's violence is a submission to a communal sacred order, Sethe's is a radical defiance of a profane institution. In both instances, the protagonists are forced into a space where the death of the child becomes the only remaining articulation of parental agency.

In the social architecture of Umuofia, the individual exists only as a fragment of the collective. When the communal peace is threatened, the preservation of the clan requires a "sacred" blood debt. This is the context into which Ikemefuna is thrust - not as a human being with inherent rights, but as a form of political currency.

The ideological frameworks of ritual duty in Umuofia and maternal resistance in the antebellum South converge to strip the protagonists' domestic spaces of any normative safety, converting children into symbolic casualties of systemic survival. Achebe (1958) describes the boy as devoid of a future before he even enters Okonkwo's "Obi" (household) by portraying him as a "doomed lad" and "ill-fated." He is a sacrificial object in a high-stakes diplomatic exchange. In this context, the "duty" of the clan is to appease the gods of the land to prevent a wider catastrophe. The tension builds up when the Oracle demands the boy's execution, which contributes to transforming a political hostage into a ritual victim.

In *Beloved* (1987), the threat is not a local Oracle, but the "Schoolteacher" and the machinery of chattel slavery. Morrison (1987) presents Sethe's act as a violent resistance, not a submission. For an enslaved woman, claiming the right to protect her child is a revolutionary act that carries a lethal weight. Sethe concludes that in an environment where children are treated like subhuman, the mother cannot passively stand still and quiet. She has to stand up and take strong protective actions to challenge this murderous institution, as illustrated in this passage: "Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, that caring - again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (p. 131).

This passage serves as the emotional pivot of Sethe's maternal resistance. The word "enough" is repeated many times - being alert enough, strong enough - underscoring that

motherhood in the grip of slavery is not a natural state of being but a grueling and high-stakes struggle for survival. Morrison (1987) suggests that when a woman is denied the legal right to protect her children, her love must expand to fill that void, often reaching a point of "lethal" intensity. Within this pressure, Sethe's act becomes part of a tragic moral bind. Quayson (2021) argues that the only agency left to her is one that "reproduces the violence it resists" (p. 252). Her infanticide emerges as a coerced form of ethical action shaped entirely by enslavement's constraints. This expression, "motherlove was a killer," is the paroxysm of this resistance, which suggests that in a "dirty" world, the only way to protect a child is to take him out of this world.

Sethe radically reclaims ownership through fierce resistance. She refuses to accept the market principle that considers her daughter a product. Sethe has an ontological view of motherhood that transcends the physical world. She explains this lack of choice to Paul D, asserting that her protection extends beyond the boundary of life:

There sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own... Maybe it was getting that close to dying made them want to fight the War... Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too (p. 198).

Denver's words prove that the sacrifice was a reaction to an external "War" - the predatory nature of slavery. As bell hooks (1981) noted, the Black woman's struggle for motherhood was a fight for the "human" against the "legal." Sethe's resistance declares that her child belongs to her heart, not a master's ledger. The "yard" is no longer a safe space because the system has made the home itself a battlefield. The total institution breaches the private domain, transforming the domestic sanctuary into an extension of an oppressive outer world. Within this space, external systemic pressures dictate the terms of survival, forcing parents to wage defensive battles at their own hearths.

Both Okonkwo and Sethe are victims of "Total Institutions" that leave no room for real parenting. The first kills to anchor a failing cultural identity; the latter kills to save a soul from a "dirty" system. In both cases, the sacrifice is "impossible" because it destroys the future to save it. They do not choose violence because they are violent; they choose it because every other door to freedom has been slammed shut. The legacy of the sacrificed child is not peace, but a permanent state of haunting that renders the parent a stranger to their own history.

Psychological Fragmentation and the Legacy of the Sacrificed Child

The restoration of communal order or the preservation of familial safety is far from being the consequence of the "impossible sacrifice." The real consequence is the shattering of the self. The protagonists, in both *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Beloved* (1987), find it difficult to emotionally own the murder they perpetrated, which results in a deep state of dissociation. The children they sacrificed refuse to disappear from the world from which they have been lethally rejected. Instead, the victims return to haunt the parents' logic, the house, and the very fabric of time. This section uncovers how infanticide distorts the psyche and makes the linear progression of life practically impossible.

The sacrifice of Ikemefuna, for Okonkwo, triggers a profound internal schism between emotions and his masculinity in the eyes of the public. He must fragment his mind to survive the guilt of his own machete strike because his entire identity is constructed upon the ruthless repression of "feminine" tenderness - a trait he associates with his father's failure. Achebe (1958) establishes this emotional suppression long before the execution, noting the precarious

balance Okonkwo maintains within his household to hide the “human” from the “warrior.” This is how he puts it:

Even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy—inwardly of course. Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness—the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else—with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy (p. 29).

This internal “fondness” is the very thing Okonkwo must murder to remain a “man,” a masculine one, in the eyes of Umuofia. The psychological cost of this repression is a state of dazed, reflexive existence. When the moment of execution arrives, Okonkwo does not act out of a clear-eyed conviction in the law, but out of a dissociative terror that bypasses his conscious will. He was “Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak” (Achebe, 1958, p. 58).

The word “dazed” is the clinical marker of his fragmentation. It suggests a mind that has temporarily checked out of reality to perform a task it finds morally or emotionally abhorrent. This fracture manifests physically in the aftermath of the killing, as Okonkwo’s body rebels against the act that his intellect tried to justify as “custom.” This rebellion takes the form of a hollow, predatory silence and a total failure of the physical self to sustain life. Achebe (1958) writes:

Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor (p. 61).

The metaphor of the trapped rat illustrates the claustrophobia of his guilt. As Cathy Caruth (1996) notes in *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma is characterized by a “belatedness” - the mind cannot process the event as it happens, so it returns later as a physical or psychological disruption. Okonkwo’s inability to eat or sleep is the “belated” realization that in killing Ikemefuna, he has dashed his own soul against the floor of his *obi*. The legacy of the child is this permanent internal hunger that no amount of palm-wine or social status can ever satisfy.

In *Beloved* (1987), the fragmentation is even more explicit, as Sethe’s trauma literally takes the form of a ghost that occupies the physical space of her freedom. Because the act of killing her daughter was a response to the “Total Institution” of slavery, her mind cannot integrate the memory into a linear, “past” history. Instead, she experiences what Morrison (1987) calls “rememory” - the idea that traumatic events exist as physical places that one can stumble into regardless of time. *Beloved*’s return amplifies this collapse of time through a deeper diasporic logic. Newgas (2020) reads her as a spirit-child figure whose presence dissolves linear memory (p. 38). In this frame, Sethe’s trauma is both psychological and cosmological, forcing her to relive the act rather than recall it. Sethe describes this folding of time and space as a landscape of inescapable pictures:

What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened (Morrison, 1987, p. 42).

This fragmentation implies that for the survivor of such a sacrifice, the linear progression of life is broken. Sethe is not “remembering” the past; she is co-existing with it. This spatial haunting is not merely psychological but domestic; the child’s presence remains in the house as a vengeful force, a “venom” that drives away the living and traps the mother in a perpetual state of 1873. Morrison (1987) portrays:

124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims (p. 11) .

The legacy of the sacrificed child in Morrison's (1987) work is a circling of trauma. Sethe is stuck in a loop of justification, trying to explain the "impossible" to a ghost that lacks the capacity for forgiveness. When the ghost eventually takes human form as *Beloved*, Sethe's fragmentation reaches its peak. She no longer seeks a future; she only seeks to reclaim the "mine-ness" of the child she lost to the shed, surrendering her sanity to the absolute demand of the victim:

BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. (p. 193)

The repetition of "quick" and "mine" signals a mind that has collapsed entirely into the moment of the trauma. As Homi Bhabha (1994) argues, this is the "unhomely" moment where the domestic space is invaded by the political history of slavery. Sethe's agency is fragmented because she is now a slave to the ghost of her own resistance.

While Sethe is haunted by a literal spirit, Okonkwo is haunted by a figurative one - the "question" of Ikemefuna that takes root in the soul of his son, Nwoye. The legacy of the sacrificed child in *Things Fall Apart* is the eventual collapse of the very culture Okonkwo tried to save through his violence. The cold execution of Ikemefuna becomes the "vague and persistent question" that leads Nwoye directly into the arms of the Christian missionaries because he was looking for a grounding that does not require shedding the blood of innocent people. Achebe (1958) recounts:

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. (pp. 132-133)

In this sense, Ikemefuna "haunts" the novel through the erosion of the clan's future. The sacrifice is synonymous with the shattering of a cultural era and the opening of a new and revolutionary one – the colonial reign. It is the obvious proof that most of the traditions and customs – the sacrificial killing of Ikemefuna, the innocent, to appease the land – are no longer up-to-date in a world where a new systemic order provides a logic "answer" to the blood debt. The fragmentation of the family mirrors the fragmentation of the clan. The fragmentation of the family mirrors the fragmentation of the clan. As Okonkwo's domestic sanctuary crumbles following Ikemefuna's sacrifice, the unified social fabric of Umuofia simultaneously fractures under colonial pressure. This dual collapse demonstrates how external forces violently dismantle both private kinship and public ancestral authority.

The psychological fragmentation of Okonkwo and Sethe proves that the "Impossible Sacrifice" is a pyrrhic victory. Whether through the "hollow silence" of Umuofia or the "baby's venom" of 124 Bluestone Rd, the sacrificed child becomes the central architecture of the parent's betrayal. The act intended to preserve a cultural ideal or a soul ends by shattering the very psyche of the actor.

The legacy of these children is the realization that when agency is negotiated through the death of the progeny, time itself becomes "broken." Sethe remains circling her trauma, and Okonkwo remains trapped in a world that is falling apart as the title of the novel indicates.

Conclusion

This study began by addressing the paradox of the “impossible sacrifice.” This situation frames infanticide not as an individual pathology, but as the only available articulation of agency under total oppression. The central problem involves negotiating human will within the “Total Institution.” This is explored through the machinery of chattel slavery in *Beloved* (1987) and the weight of colonial patriarchy in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). We sought to understand how parents arrive at a desperate conclusion. Trapped by systems that negate their humanity, they decide that destroying their lineage is the only way to save it from a fate worse than death.

The comparative analysis reveals that these acts of violence are not free choices. They are reactions dictated by profound systemic triggers. Textual evidence shows that in Morrison’s (1987) work, the trigger is a profane market that treats children as livestock. This forces Sethe into a radical maternal resistance to protect her daughter’s soul. In Achebe’s (1958) narrative, the trigger is the collapse of a sacred social order. This pushes Okonkwo to use ritual duty as a shield against the fear of ontological erasure.

A significant result of this research is the identification of irreversible psychological fragmentation. Textual proofs justify the conclusion that the sacrifice never restores order. We see this in Sethe’s “rememory” and Okonkwo’s “dazed” state after the murder of Ikemefuna. Instead of peace and liberation, this murderous act breaks the linearity of time, transforming the house into a crucible of haunting.

This study is a welcome addition to the body of work on comparative literature as it mobilizes trauma theory, postcolonialism, and existentialism. These lenses are used to deconstruct infanticide. By calling upon concepts like “social death” and “unhomely space,” this research unveils that these acts are desperate attempts to reclaim and assert selfhood and ownership. It also underscores how power structures transform “moral and traditional” communal acts into “criminal” state offenses. It proudly pioneered a new framework for understanding the dreadful experience of the colonized and enslaved subject.

Finally, this paper offers several perspectives for further studies. The focus of future work could be oriented towards these systemic pressures, examining how they affect and impact subsequent generations through an analysis of intergenerational trauma transmission. It would also be pertinent to expand this comparative framework to contemporary works of the African diaspora. This could reveal if infanticide remains a central symbol of negotiated agency in modern fiction. Such a perspective would help determine if healing is possible in a history where the past refuses to remain in the past.

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