

Conflicts, Their Resolution and Social Development in Cornel Ujowundu's *Nemesis*

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Abstract

In literary parlance, conflicts exist between protagonists and antagonists when their relationship is built on mutual hatred, suspicion, distrust, opposition, and rivalry. And the resolution of such conflicts is achieved when either the protagonist or antagonist surrenders, is defeated, disappears, or dies. In this premise in Cornel Ujowundu's *Nemesis*, these conflicts are identified: Okoli and his native doctors, the native doctors and members of the community, Uzoma and Okoli. While some of these conflicts were positively resolved, others got a negative resolution. For instance, the conflict between Okoli and his family was resolved by Uzoma through Okoli's truthful confession against his initial act and the abandonment of the imbecile in the bush behind his house to die, which brought countless deaths to his household. The conflict between Mike and his father over the annual sacrifice to the gods as a means of survival, which does not conform to Mike's beliefs, and finally, the conflict between Okoli and the Christian religion, which exposed his past crime that led to the salvation of his entire family in the limelight. Uzoma's conversion to Christianity made these possible. On the whole, conflict acts as a challenge to human intellect, and its resolution catalyzes peace and social development, as evidently demonstrated in *Nemesis*.

Keywords: Conflicts, Resolution, Social Development, Education, Belief.

Introduction

According to the New Webster Dictionary, conflict involves a situation of opposition, quarrels, inconsistency, struggling, violent disputes, aggression, discontentment, and clash of interest. In other words, conflict entails a condition of incompatibility, where there is a strong desire on the part of one party, group of persons, individual, religion, or political association to determine and implement ends, ideas, programmes, and objectives which are unacceptable and incompatible with those of the opposition. To this extent, conflict exists between persons, groups, or associations when there is mutual distrust, disagreement, and misunderstanding as regards interest, ends, objectives, and philosophies between the opposition and the proposition. In effect, mutual suspicion and violent or subtle opposition is the heart of the matter in conflicts. On the above premise, a profound and critical reading of Cornel Ujowundu's first novel, *Nemesis* (2018) reveals the existence of conflicts at various levels and dimensions. Sylvanus Onyachulam, a renowned critic of African Literature, agrees that "Nemesis is built on conflicts." According to him, because of the psychological problems that Ujowundu poses

through the relationship between Okoli, his daughter-in-law Uzoma, and his community, *Nemesis* is his most ambitious novel. The author attempts to remain detached from the forces in conflict (). The important point to note from the above excerpt is that all the conflicts revolve around Okoli, directly or indirectly.

The major conflicts identified in the novel include: The killing of his own child, an imbecile, because he could not stand the shame. He abandoned it at the back of his compound, in a little bush, to die. A conflict that eventually culminated in full-scale war in the family, with death around his extended family. This particular conflict gives rise to the conflict between Okoli and Ajuonuma in particular. There is yet a terrible conflict between Okoli and his family as the two seem to be working in diametrically opposing directions and cross purposes. In addition, the seeming misunderstanding between Okoli and other native doctors gives rise to yet another conflict between tradition and culture, which Okoli stands for and protects, and the Christian religion, which comes as a total opposition to the traditional religious belief. There is also a conflict between Okoli and Uzoma, a case that exposes the ordeal

that eventually crushes him. It is important to note as one reads this essay, that while some conflicts were resolved in favour of the protagonist, Okoli was indeed resolved to his detriment. The subsequent part of this essay gives a panoramic exploration, exposition, and critical discussion of the various conflicts and their eventual resolution.

The expositions and discussions would reveal the relevance of **Nemesis** as a novel that contains a universal truth of conflicts in the individual, homes, states, churches, and nations as the bane of modern society and a hydra-headed monster that dwarf's growth and development and sometimes ironically leads to development.

In addition, a profound and critical reading of Chinua Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God* (1964) reveals the existence of conflicts at various levels and dimensions. The greatest conflict in *Arrow of God* is between Ezeulu and Ulu, the god he served as its priest. It is not clear whether Ulu was on the side of the people or on the side of Ezeulu. It, however, appears that Ulu was not on the side of Ezeulu. Otherwise, why was Ezeulu abandoned by the people of Umuara during his detention at Okperi prisons, and Ulu did nothing to protect him? Why did Ulu allow the untimely, sudden, and painful death of

Obika, a son so dear to Ezeulu? Why did Ulu allow Ezeulu to suffer madness following the traumatic effects of Obika's death? It would appear that the "arrow of the god Ulu" was totally used against Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu without any justification. The resolution of the conflict between Ezeulu and Ulu came, when Ulu advertently or inadvertently destroyed Ezeulu by allowing his very dear son Obika to die during the Ogbazulu Ogbodo episode.

Similarly, Ndubuisi George's first novel, *Woes of Ikenga*, exposed the existence of conflicts at different points with various characters, like Ikenga the main characters like Ikenga the main character, who chose to work against the gods of his land. Little did he understand the force and power behind his name "Ikenga". This conflict between Ikenga and the gods, however, was resolved as all his trials for a successful life were in vain. He returned after spending years with no gain in his host and hostile country.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in her *Trafficked* buttresses conflict in her heart-rending novel, using Nneoma's craving for a better life anywhere to inform the readers of what life elsewhere means. Nneoma, the major character, needs to give hope to her poor family. She wants to eradicate the poverty

story of her lineage. This, she feels, must happen by hook or crook; hence, she attended an interview without informing any members of her family, not even Ofomata to whom she was betrothed to. She stood the pains of oath-taking to remain obedient to those who trafficked her. She was kept as a slave in London from one hand to another, serving to pay off all the money spent by her so-called boss to bring her abroad. Even on her return after years of sexual exploitation and abuse, she encounters another conflict in Chief Amadi's sewing company. Nneoma resolved to remain firm. Finally, she successfully graduated, became a free woman that she had wanted and elevated her family above poverty line.

In addition, conflicts, Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* exposes this sane issue where Niger Delta women are exploited by local and foreign men. This is also demonstrated in homes where the head of the family (father) oppresses and exploits the wives. In addition to worrying about the crazy whiteys, the girls had to worry about the local boys who also exploit them. Occasionally, the local boys would remind the girls that they still had power in town. They would attack the shack where the girls lived, beat them up, steal their money, and if their minds had been taken over by the evil spirits and hard drugs, they

would destroy all the property that had gotten in the way of their mission. Agary exposes this conflict between Admiral and Zilayefa. In an iconic trust, Zilayefa allows herself to be infatuated by Admiral, a sixty-year-old man. In her naivety, she recalls, "I was hoping that the relationship would give me a taste of close paternal affection that I had never had."

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Trauma Theory. The term trauma is used to describe emotionally painful feelings, which in turn, impede one's ability to face challenges. Some scholars defined trauma as abnormal human experiences. While some state that trauma can frequently feature and become part of human knowledge. It is adopted as a literary tool to unravel the meaning of a text by looking beyond the text and assessing the psychology of its author. The literary text is seen as a subconscious reflection of the author's mind and feelings. An understanding of the author's mind could reveal the meaning of a text. This study reveals the traumatic level of some individuals saddled with the cultural activities of their people and their belief system, with illusory circumstances that marred their existence in their own land.

Trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. Trauma Theory emerged in the 1990s when a group of critics began to study the cultural effects of trauma. A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory by Sigmund Freud asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity, as seen in the life of some individuals in the novel under study. This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests that identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

The concept of trauma, itself a source of critique, is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organisation and perception of the external world. Trauma explores the impact in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. Trauma as represented in literature has been analysed by many scholars aside from scientists and psychologists. This first theoretical work on trauma as propounded in the 1990s by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and lately Michelle Balaev has failed to take into consideration the significant impact of the environment or

culture on the trauma victims, and possibly the context without which trauma would not rise. Therefore, in analysing the novel, *Nemesis*, Trauma Theory is used to bring out the points in this research.

Conflicts and Their Resolutions in *Nemesis*

The first notable conflict in the novel was between the protagonist Okoli and his dibia. For example, when Okoli considered the immensity of his power over the family and his influence in the choice of dibia, he suddenly and painfully realized that the power did not truly belong to him to decide the life and death of his family members:

Death! How did you walk into our family again? She asked and began to cry. It was at this point in time that her father-in-law, Okoli came in, in his right hand was his machete while his left hand carried a sizeable bunch of fodder for his goats. It was these goats that announced his return, they began to bleat from their pen at one corner of the compound (21).

Through this statement, one discovers that Okoli does not see himself as a strong man. He quickly observes that all is not well. The atmosphere is sombre and funeral. He also observes the faces of the people around, "Death, who have you come to take this time?"

Okoli asked (21). He walks to the goats whose bleating is now at top gear. He throws the fodder into the pen with less caution, shakes his head sorrowfully, and gnashes his teeth. He tries to control his emotions. But he cannot refuse to perform his statutory duties because, as the old one in the house, death cannot run over the family and keep everyone down. This particular conflict was eventually resolved when Okoli, in his stubbornness, pride, and bid to avenge being tormented by the gods after all sacrifices:

Shut up! I say shut up, all of you! Okoli thundered. There will be no more mourning this time. I want to make it clear to everybody. Have we not mourned enough? The gods have pleased themselves once again. This time, I will please myself. Listen to what I have to say, it is either you obey me, or I will deal with you. It was an order. How and why should the gods decide to punish me in this way? He asked, staring into space (23).

Uzoma and Ugochi pulled themselves together while Okoli turned to the son, Ibeneme, and asked him to pull himself together as a man, and carried the dead boy, Ikenna to the forest for burial. Not quite long Okomma, the priest of Nwangene confirms that the gods of the land are now happy with Okoli's family. They carried out several

cleansing exercises to avert numerous deaths. Ugochi wonders why and thinks of whom they offended:

Ugochi could vividly recall that it was only the previous market day that Ibeneme, her husband, slaughtered a white ram and a cock as a sacrifice to the gods of the land. On another occasion, he had also offered three cocks to Ogwugwu, the god of the Hills and Valleys, and Urama, the goddess of abundance. And was not Okomma, the priest of Nwangene, here himself to confirm that the gods of our land are now happy and pleased with us (12).

Everyone in Okoli's family believes something has gone wrong somewhere that allows such mischief to befall them and wonders who could be behind it. Ibeneme is such a nice man that could not hurt a fly. He has no evil that can harm another. The narrator puts the thoughts of Ugochi to rest as what comes as a resolution of the confusion and conflict, this:

What about Okoli, our father-in-law? How clean are his hands? Did they not say that he was among the very best men alive? In the present, what about in the past? Is it Uzoma? Or even myself, Ugochi asked herself and went into the past with a lamp in her hand to search her past. She found

nothing dirty all through. She knew that one's past mistake or misdeed could visit one's present (14).

Okoli thinks of another wife for his son Ibeneme, a third one to prevent his family from going into extinction. This he informs his close friend Uwadineke during their chats, thus, "I do not know whether I have told you that I am contemplating getting a third wife for my son"(25). With his friend's response to his request and advice, their voice agreed that another wife would solve the problem of no male child in Ibeneme's household, as against the known and standing tradition that a man must give birth to a male child who takes over his name after his demise. It is a known cultural standard. In such situations where there is no male child, one of the girls would be made to stay back in the father's house, to bear children that would retain the name of her father. This convinced Okoli that the gods may want to favour him through the third wife. His friend agreed and supported his view:

Maybe the gods may want to favour me through the woman. There was a great deal of conviction in his voice. It even showed in his face. His visitor was beginning to see reason with him from what he read in his face. He

was right. A man in difficulty hardly knows how to help himself (27).

With the response from Uwadineke to this call and advice, their previous confusion, misunderstanding, and frustration came to an end as his guest saw reasons with his idea of a third wife for the son. With this resolution in favour of Okoli, they both settled for their usual gist, eating and drinking.

The conflict between Mike and his father is notable, fundamental, and interesting because it generated other conflicts. The reader would recall that Uzoma's journey to Port Hacourt was initiated and facilitated by Mike his brother who is a medical doctor. Before then, Mike had quarreled with his father over what he tagged embarrassment. Mike's father informed him of his intention to get a new wife, "Mike, my son, I want you to give me some money to marry a new wife"(93). Both of them engaged in a quarrel, bandying hot, angry words with each other as Mike felt angry at his father's thought, "I know that you are a wise man, but your wisdom has gone stale, no longer useful in this modern time. It is by showing antiquated, archaic, and unproductive" (93). The father accused him of being greedy and selfish and further registered his sense of disappointment, "And I know too, that you

are an educated man and a medical doctor living in the city, but that does not mean that you harbour any particle of sense in your head" (93). Mike's father maintained that the white man and his education have destroyed his son. He blamed himself for allowing his son to travel out for education, "You now reason upside down for I know that your head is no longer correct and that is the price I have to pay for allowing you to go to the whiteman's land" (95). This argument did not end here. Mike's father went further to ask him to remember to make the yearly sacrifices to the gods of their land, who made his journey to overseas possible. This, he said, requires only a white ram and a white cock. At this point, Mike informed the father that he should look away from those crooked, carved images covered with dirt and dust, that they are even the cause of all problems in their family. He personally thanked God he chose Jesus Christ against deaf and mute gods and asked the father to embrace Jesus as his personal saviour, gather and burn those woods he serves as gods as this will only save him a lot of confusions:

All you can do to be free from all this rubbish is for you to gather all of them and set them on fire. After that, you give your whole life to Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Without Him, your life

would remain ever so empty and meaningless - as it's beginning to appear (97).

Mike cleared the air to make his father see the need to think smart and straight and avoid blind thoughts that create a blue mood around him. This resolution would, for sure, bring social development.

Similarly, the conflict between Okoli and his family was resolved through Uzoma's courageous invitation of a new religion to her family, witnessing against her father-in-law, his belief, and the intervention by Pastor Ikeogu, who employed superior power to expose and savage death and other serious issues that threaten human existence in Okoli's extended family, especially as regards Uzoma's health. Various known native doctors within and across the community had, in one form or the other, been invited to cleanse Okoli's family of all evils of sickness and death which persisted despite all promises from each of these dibias. They extorted life out of the family in the name of healing. At some occasions, mix various liquids for Uzoma to drink, echo various incantations, all to stop the evil forces in the family. Rather than improving, the situation became worse. Ikenna's death brought Okoli's household to a calm disposition:

Why would the little boy's death bring so much sorrow upon the entire family? What could have been responsible for his death? Are the gods no longer interested in the affairs of men? Or were the sacrifices not enough to appease them? Who will die next? These and similar other questions had found their way into many people's thoughts. Fear was the root of it all, the fear of the unknown (57).

It is important to note that Okoli's act of bringing dibias to stop terrible things happening in his family was seen as an effort of a caring and loving man. Okoli has so much respect for Nnadi and his work. There are other powerful native doctors in the community, but Okoli chose Nnadi. He trusted him and his services. He also believes that his fees were the cheapest, even though he often demands live animals like goats for sacrifices. Okoli would pay for dues whenever he needed to do that, then wait to be reminded. After Okoli had performed the ritual to appease the gods, "Okoli was sure that his household would have peace" (87). Such was his trust in Nnadi, whom he saw as a representative of the gods. His word was law unto men like Okoli. It is his confusion over Uzoma's sickness that brought Mike's attention to her sister's sickness, which led to Uzoma's relocation to Port Harcourt. She was

transformed, drifted from her belief and trust in wooden iron gods. She joined Christianity, invited them to her family, at which point, the father-in-law, Okoli, opened up to his son in the bush to die, which has been the obstacle and reason behind all the problems of sickness and death in the family. The pastor voiced:

Someone committed a heinous evil here. A baby was killed deliberately; life was snuffed out. The baby is still crying. What was the baby's crime? Who did it offend? Someone must confess. Or else, there will be more deaths, more deaths - beginning with the perpetrator of this evil. He must confess - whoever it is (190).

It is his confession of this act that resolved the conflict in Okoli's family. Okoli willingly accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour, thanked Uzoma for bringing life into his life and chasing darkness. This particular conflict was resolved in favour of Christianity over tradition as Okoli abandoned his gods without complaint or gnashing.

Conclusion

Among Cornel Ujowundu's critical novels, *Nemesis* is without doubt a compendium of intra and inter-family, deity, personal, and communal conflicts that culminated not only

in the decline of the influence and devastation of the tradition but also in the demystification of the power and role of the gods and indeed, the erosion of the ancestral belief system and religious backbone of the Obuohia people. So, in a society where the gods conflict with one another, the seers of these gods do not see eye to eye, the head of the family, an authority, is in disagreement with the representatives of the traditional belief system. It is, however, significant to note that, like the people of Obuohia, Okoli clearly saw the futility in fighting and preventing positive change that comes with development. Uzoma demonstrated this understanding by collectively abandoning their embattled deaf mute gods to embrace Christianity that seemed to offer hope for freedom, literacy, physical development, and spiritual salvation from darkness.

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