Can Okonkwo Speak?: Re-Reading Okonkwo’s Suicide as a Silent Speech through Body

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I. Introduction: Can the Subaltern Speak?

Many postcolonial critics have grappled with the question over voice/representation: who can have voice or who can speak (for others)? Arguably, at the very beginning of these endless discussions sits Gayatri Spivak’s provoking article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In fact, Spivak’s ultimate answer to the question is negative: “The subaltern cannot speak” (308). However, Spivak’s argument should not be taken wrongfully; her article does not simply mean the subaltern’s voice cannot be heard or no one can speak for them at any event. Instead, Spivak argues that it is not merely possible but also necessary for writers and critics to listen for and thus speak for the subaltern’s lost voice. As an effort to translate such a theoretical assertion into practice, a keen analysis of a literary text this essay intends to carry out could shed some light on how to restore the subaltern’s whisperings neglected and suffocated in the big cries of meta-narrative called postcolonialism.
Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can be taken as an appropriate template for such a literary analysis. Although many critics have written quite a few critical essays about *Things Fall Apart*, not many of them deal with Okonkwo's suicide *per se*.\(^1\) Okonkwo's death is glossed over in the glut of criticisms about *Things Fall Apart* as a writing back against Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Here, I would like to reread Okonkwo's murder and suicide as a highly subversive yet silent speech of the subaltern,\(^2\) reconsidering Spivak's famous (or infamous) manifesto that "the subaltern cannot speak."

II. Breaking the Myth of Colonialism

Spivak's article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is remarkable in some other sense, too. It effectively epitomizes the myth of colonialism in one sentence: "White men are saving brown women from brown men." As Spivak explains, a good example of this myth is the abolition of *sati*, the rite of widow sacrifice by the British. To the eyes of the British, this rite is nothing but an absurd performance of India's "primitive" barbarity to be corrected or even eliminated. Here, this abolition works as a double-edged sword of colonialism: on the one hand, it suppresses aboriginal

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1) See Abiola Irele and Jonathan Greenberg. For example, Greenberg analyzes Okonkwo's death from several perspectives: 'First is a 'tragic' or heroic ending, seen from an African point of view, in which Okonkwo's demise is identified with that of his people; second, an 'ironized' ending, from the point of view of the British District Commissioner, who sees in the death a valuable example of how to pacify resistant natives; and third, a 'metahistorical' revision of the narrative that occurs not on *Things Fall Apart* but in the 'sequel,' *No Longer at Ease*, from the point of view of Okonkwo's grandson" (Greenberg 437).

2) In this paper, I use the term "subaltern" as a figurative term, signifying the group of people who cannot represent themselves using the "normative" tool of discourse. Although Okonkwo brandishes masculine power in the patriarchal society of Umuofia, he still could be embraced as a subaltern in the changed society of Umuofia where whites seize hegemony in terms of government and administration.