

# Portraying a Tragic Hero in Ben Okri's *Flowers and Shadows*: The Case of Jonan Okwe

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This essay analyses the tragic downfall of the main protagonist, Jonan Okwe, as portrayed in Ben Okri's *Flowers and Shadows*. Though ruthless and pitiless, he is obsessed with his social status: hence, his unremitting struggle to gain power and wealth by all means. Driven also by his fear of poverty and humiliation, and in order to achieve his aim, that is to climb the social ladder (with its privileges), he commits many mistakes and crimes that inexorably lead to his tragic end. In fact, Jonan Okwe's success contains in itself the seed of his downfall in the sense that his wealth is built on various machinations and treacheries. But when misfortune comes his way, he is not the only one that suffers. His family, especially his son and wife, suffers from the reversal of the situation. Do the children pay for the sins of their father?

**Keywords:** obsession; success; failure; poverty; wealth; power; tragedy.

*Little flowers in the shadows: that's what we all are. Nobody knows what the  
larger shadows will do to the flowers: nobody knows what the flowers will become.*

*The shadows, [...], the shadows. They are so many, and so strange.*

Ben Okri, *Flowers and Shadows*

*A man cannot become a hero until  
he can see the root of his own downfall.*

Aristotle

*Flowers and Shadows* (1980) is a story of Jonan Okwe, a successful businessman, who does not hesitate to use all possible means to climb the social ladder and to preserve his success, wealth and power. Throughout the novel, he is portrayed as a man who is perpetually and permanently tormented by his past legacy and his fear of failure. His obsession with material wealth, power and social status derives from his father's poverty, and his determination and endeavour to fight against the humiliation that poverty can entail.

Jonan Okwe's father dies in poverty: "The disease had eaten into his life, there was no money to get him treated, and they were shunned in the village. He was terribly alone in his plight. It was a lonely battle with an inexorable death" (111). Before he dies, he tells his son: "*My son, poverty is a curse...*" (9). Jonan always remembers the last words of his father and these words become the leitmotiv that governs the protagonist's life and his persistence to rise from poverty. In a word, "His father's death had become a symbol of everything he dreaded" (173): "A plague had attacked the village and people died like poisoned flies. Those who were wealthy got their people out, the ordinary folk died miserably. When his father was dying, his father spoke six words [*My son, poverty is a curse...*] to him, and didn't finish the sentence. They were the words behind his life, Jonan said" (9). Also, "He remembered how his father had died young, consumed by an unfathomable

disease, whitish streaks covering his whole body. They had burnt his remains. He remembered how the people of his village began to isolate him, how they disposed of his father's property, how he had escaped to Lagos" (172).

Through both quotations above, one can notice the reasons behind the hero's doggedness to succeed at all cost, and to forget his past, synonymous with poverty, humiliation and powerlessness. As he puts it, "only money and power had any real meaning, and only money and power could make him survive without fear of the past" (172). So, "from the day he was old enough to know what impossible things money could do, from the time his father died consumed by a mysterious plague, from the moment he realised the truth of his father's words that poverty is a curse, he always dreamt of the big time" (11). In order to raise himself from poverty and humiliation, and to reach the "big time", business and hardworking become his obsession. However, his success and power must become solely his life target. Looking back at his past, he cannot but be satisfied with his accomplishment. Nonetheless, his "satisfaction and sense of power reached a stage when they turned into paranoia, into obsession, restless and uncompromising, to possess and subjugate. They became pillars of his one-track life-style" (12).

Jonan Okwe's reaction parallels the one of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In fact, Okonkwo's main motivation is to succeed where his father, Unoka, has failed. Depicted as *agbala* (a man or a woman without a title) and a lazy man, Unoka owns neighbours some money: "Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owned every neighbour some money, from few cowries to quite substantial amount" (4) and when he dies, "he had taken no title at all (6)<sup>1</sup>. Hence, throughout the novel, the perpetual fear of failure has governed Okonkwo's actions:

[Okonkwo's] whole life was dominated by fear, fear of failure and weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and 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. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. (...) And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (10-11)

To achieve his aim, that is to become the Managing Director of Afionso Paints, Jonan Okwe works "ceaselessly" and even "ruthlessly". In a word, he comes to "master the harsh, ruthless, unwritten rules of business survival in Nigeria at the time" (11). His business and his work become his only *raison d'être* and his family, especially his son Jeffia, suffers from his absence. Driven by the fear of poverty and failure like his father, he puts all his energy in his business and forgets to notice that money cannot replace his love for his son and his wife. Even if with his money he provides material comfort and smooth life (big house, well-furnished and air-conditioned rooms, three cars, servants, night watchmen...) for his family, Jeffia regrets deeply his absence – "he puts so much of himself into the business at the expense of his family" (19) – and his obsession with wealth. Pondering on his father's behaviour, Jeffia says:

He had been a dutiful father to me. He took great care over my education. He was sometimes lavish towards me and as much as he could fill my wants. He was like a great human institution.

But on a deeper level he neglected and distrusted me. I never had his company, I never really knew him for he always seemed to be closed up inside himself. I sometimes had the impression that I irritated him and that he didn't really like me.

<sup>1</sup> In Igbo traditional society, the titles are distinctions given to a man or woman for his/her courage, skills and achievements. Respect, recognition and upward mobility are accorded to those who hold traditional titles.

As far as he was concerned his business came first. I have never seen a man more obsessed with business and success than my father. That was generally unfair to us but he didn't seem to mind. (183)

Mrs Okwe, Jeffia's mother, shares her son's point of view. Her disagreement with her husband's attitude and behaviour is noticeable in her mood: "She was angry that he allowed his business to affect a marriage that had endured for over twenty years. She was angry that despite everything he wanted to go on possessing, go on fighting as if she still had the vigour of youth. *Why can't he face the fact that he is getting old and tone down wisely?*" (39).

These both quotations summarise the malaise and the gap between Jonan Okwe and his family. "Obsessed with business and success", he rules his company with heavy hand and does not hesitate to eliminate anybody who seems to be a threat to him.

Sowho, his half-brother, who helps him to establish the company, is put in jail when the latter asks him to be the director of the company. For him, Sowho becomes a threat. So he corrupts lawyers and judges to send his brother to prison. But his brother promises to take revenge at all cost: "In court Sowho swore that brother or no brother he would get his own back one day. He swore he would exact revenge, even if it was the last thing he did" (169).

Moreover, Jonan uses his connections and influences to condemn his employees whenever he feels that they may be a threat to his power and his social status. It is the case, for example, of Oduko (one of Jonan's employees) who is sentenced to prison for two years because he is accused of "alleged conspiracy in the embezzling of some funds and the theft of a thousand cans of paints" (78). But according to Oduko he is put in jail by Jonan Okwe because "I know the man hates me..." (80). He adds: "I know I am innocent but nobody believes me. Even my wife. Our Oga did it to me. (...) My lawyer advises me to plead guilty. He says I have no chance against our Oga. (...) Okwe has done his worst" (80). It is worth noticing that Jonan Okwe becomes so powerful that no one can win the case against him: with money, title, connections and his social status, he seems to be notorious and invulnerable. It is through his father's diary, discovered later by his daughter Cynthia, that both the reader and Cynthia are aware of the injustice which undermines Oduko's life. It is going without saying that Jonan "had built his success on so many wrongs, so many that they became normal, insignificant" (15).

To crown his wrong doings, he hires thugs to beat up Gbenga when the latter resigns from the company. As a loyal, faithful and trustworthy servant, Gbenga knows too much about Jonan's malpractices and his resignation constitutes another threat to him. According to the narrator, Gbenga "was a pioneer worker, Jonan's right-hand man and stooge who helped him with important information about people. He also carried out Jonan's ruthless operations" (14). When Jonan thinks about the turn that the situation is taking, he becomes suddenly naked and vulnerable:

Now the fool is gone I might not be very secure... that goat knows too much about me. He can't just leave like that, ah aha! Can't just wake up one morning and resign like that (...). That goat knows too much about me and Afioso. That's all there is to it. If anything goes wrong because one fool wants to resign, everything I have been working for all my life would sink with me. (...) There are some things about myself and my business that people shouldn't know about. (24)

It is obvious that Jonan is afraid that his former collaborator will reveal his frauds, treacheries and corruption that govern his business. Unfortunately, Gbenga is severely wounded during the assault and subsequently dies in a hospital later. Ironically, it is Jeffia who helps Cynthia with his car to bring Gbenga to hospital where she works as a nurse. The encounter between Jeffia and Cynthia (Oduko's daughter) marks the beginning of their dating and love affair. Their love, in the novel, becomes the symbol of hope in an environment polluted by corruption, graft and violence: it is the victory of flowers over the shadows, the victory of beauty over the ugliness (darkness).

Blinded by his unremitting search for power, success and money, he cannot see beauty in anything else than material things. He even despises his son for being too sensitive for natural beauty like flowers. In Jeffia's own words: "I knew one thing for sure: that my father considered me a foolish weakling who would never be as tough as he was" (183). For Jonan, to be sensitive to Flowers is a sign of weakness and laziness. According to him, a man must not show his emotion but rather his "unfailing energy". On top of that, a man has to be "though and unbreakable" (12). Jonan fails to appreciate the value or the importance of flowers which, in the novel, are the symbol of spiritual beauty. They have artistic and aesthetic values. Moreover, flowers are metaphor of human fragility. The frailty of flowers is compared to the weakness of human being in front of the hardships of life. Mrs Okwe rightly notices that "we are not just flowers in the shadows. *We are flowers in the storm*" (90, italics added). However, Jeffia stands in direct contrast to his father whose only concern is his social achievement. Therefore, Jeffia doesn't want to take after his father: "I had made it clear that I didn't want to be like him" (183).

Similarly, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Okonkwo despises his son Nwoye because the latter does not want to take after him. Despite Okonkwo's success, his son prefers not to play an important role in his community. For Okonkwo, Nwoye is a lazy and a weak son who does not deserve to take his name: "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I will sooner strangle him with my own hands" (24). What is worth singling out is that despite Jonan Okwe and Okonkwo's success respectively in *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) and *Things Fall Apart* (1958), neither Jeffia nor Nwoye does not want take after their father. If Jonan Okwe and Okonkwo despise their father for their failure and weakness, Jeffia and Nwoye, in their turn, castigate their father for their blindness and their obsession with social status, power and wealth.

Throughout the novel, the temperament of Jeffia and his mother are at odds with Jonan's despotic and wicked behaviour. Jeffia can be described as shy, tender and affectionate and his mother as strong, loving and compassionate mother. Jeffia and his mother's love for flowers and spiritual beauty are also at odds with Jonan's contempt for anything that cannot bring a material gain:

He [Jonan] didn't particularly like flowers. They never did a thing for you, never solved one of your problems. It was the same with religion, he reasoned, a thing people did because they were stupid creatures of fancy, of fear. They were even more foolish to think that a god that was supposed to be out there in the reaches of space cared about the problems, sufferings, and deaths of people here on earth. (...)

He would much prefer a nice pair of buttocks or a platter of roast chicken to a bunch of flowers. Flowers were for women and lazy-minded fools. (135)

Jona's failure to see beauty, happiness and comfort in spirituality coupled with his persistent search for solace in material things (power, money, social status...) at all cost have been the source of his tragic death. In fact, his tragic downfall and his tragic end are hinted at the beginning of the novel in the first part entitled "Presentiments".

*Flowers and Shadows* opens with premonitions of doom and disaster. The title of the first part "Presentiments" "effectively sets the tone for everything that happens in the course of the novel" (vii) as Adewale Maja-Pearce rightly suggests in his introduction to the Longman African Classics edition of the novel. Many events in this section of the novel foreshadow the tragic end of Jonan, the hero.

First of all, the reader, in the opening chapter of the novel, witnesses the violent suffering and cruelty that a brown dog rescued by Jeffia undergoes: "One held the dog by the legs, while the other, it seemed, tried to stick a piece of wood up its anus. Indifferently they watched it struggle. The bigger of the boys held the dog's mouth to prevent it yelping. It was a small brown and white puppy, too small to fight back" (4). What Jeffia doesn't know is that the dog belongs to

Juliet, one of his father's former mistresses. Unfortunately it is Jonan himself who later kills the small dog when he pays a visit to Juliet. The tormented dog and its subsequent death symbolises the premonitions of Jonan's tragic end.

In addition, his business begins to wane after many years of success. His handling of his company and his attitudes are the main causes. Now, the edifice he has taken so many years to build is shaking and the "tremors were unmistakable. The picture emerged gradually; staff resigning, sharp drops in profit, clamouring shareholders, and other strange and unforeseen happenings" (12). The employees are on strike and the activities of the company come to a standstill. They ask for better working conditions and raise of wages. On the walls of the company buildings, there are the caricatures of Jonan Okwe depicting him as "miserably and hawk-nose" and slogans such as: "*Forty per cent or nothing... Afioso is stingy ... pay the workers well... More money to the workers... Workers must live... We are being exploited...*" (147).

Moreover, the car accident in which Jonan loses his life in the third part of the novel entitled "Darkness" is presented to the reader through Mrs Okwe's nightmare. She dreams that her husband's car has exploded during an accident and she "woke up, trembling, sweating. The moment she realised that she had been dreaming, a vague premonition settled upon her" (7). Then, come Sowho's telegram and strange anonymous telephone calls which deepen Mrs Okwe's uncertainty. In the telegram, Sowho announces his coming and in one of the anonymous calls, the person on the phone threatens to publish a photo on which Jonan is naked with one of his mistresses. The atmosphere becomes heavy and stuffy in the house. Jonan is restless, withdrawn and angry. For Mrs Okwe, the name (Sowho) "swirled around in her brain and struck something deep in there – a nameless fear, an association with some kind of numinous horror" (25-26) and she thought: "What was he [Sowho] doing in town? *Why send a telegram?*" (25).

In fact Sowho's coming back has the scent of revenge. His encounter with his brother Jonan (who has ruined his life) cannot but be explosive. When he arrives, Jonan is absent and while waiting for him, he tells Jeffia:

Jeff, do you know that your father is a wicked man?  
His uncle spoke again.  
The sins of the father are visited on the children... have you heard that quote, eh?  
His uncle went on speaking. Coolly. Calmly.  
Your father is going to suffer. The wickedness he has done will bounce back at him. (167)

In the light of Sowho's speech, one may notice that he comes prepared to fight with Jonan, to take his revenge as he swore in a court ten years ago. When Jonan comes back home, Sowho is waiting for him in the sitting room. Sensing the violence that is hanging in the air, Jeffia shouts: "All of you are evil..." (171). And after pulling Jeffia out of the sitting room, Jonan's determination to fight as a man to settle the matter with his brother is clear: "this is a matter for men... not for rats" (171). Therefore, the bloody and senseless confrontation between brothers becomes inevitable:

I know what you are here for, you coward! He [Jonan] shouted suddenly. (...)  
You blind fool... Sowho went on, calmly. (...) I am not going to fight with a skeleton that doesn't know its flesh is gone... I will only show you a mirror... murderer... murderer... that's what you are... just wait till the inspector comes... you will know how sweet it is to go to jail, and we will distribute your company the way your father's property was...

Jonan shouted. His vision hazed and a spasm of insanity gripped him. He pounced on Sowho and flung out a punch. Sowho jumped back, more out of surprise than anything else. The momentum of the punch carried Jonan and he tripped over the centre table. Sowho dived for him. They scuffled. Sowho hit him anywhere

his hands could reach. Jonan reached for his penis and gripped it. Sowho screamed and gouged at his eyes. Then they both let go. They stood breathing heavily, like two enraged wrestlers.

In another insane moment Jonan turned round and rushed for the Haoussa swords which hung on the wall. (...) He unsheathed it, shouting and foaming like a man possessed by demons.

I am going to kill you here now... I will fling off your neck... (...) (173-174)

This violent fight between Jonan and Sowho ends in a car accident in which both perish. It is worth mentioning that this car accident is evoked at the beginning of the novel through Mrs Okwe's nightmare. Here is the materialisation of the "presentiments" which give its title to the first part of the novel. "Darkness", the third part of the novel, depicts the tragic end of Jonan and his brother Sowho. Commenting on the metaphorical meaning of "Darkness" in the novel, Robert Fraser (1990-1991: 198-199) suggests that "darkness (...) encroaches upon all human endeavour and all human virtue; and this is a book which tries hard to be dark, or as dark as it dare".

The second part entitled "Shadows" singles out the fear of Jonan's family, the outcomes of his corrupt business and of the signs that precipitate his tragic end. Not only Jonan's corrupt life hastens his own tragic downfall but also affects the life of his family. Jeffia and his mother leave their cosy house in Ikoyi, the quarter cynically called "the Europe of Lagos", to hire a room in Alaba, the poorest area of Lagos. Meanwhile, the thieves break into their house to steal their cars.

Besides, Jeffia is always bewildered by people's reactions whenever he mentions that he is Jonan Okwe's son: "it sometimes frightened him the ways people responded when he said yes, he was Jonan Okwe's son. Some would immediately lose interests in him. Some would give him intense, malicious looks; others would make a fuss of him" (31). This quotation seems to validate the pervasive mood of cyclical curse and doom that grips the characters, namely Jeffia. Hence, the significance of this repetitive quote: "the sins of the father are visited on the children..." (167) or "A son lives in the sins of the father... the father sows, the son reaps ... the son becomes the father... the cycle continues" (127). This cyclical curse seems to be what Robert Fraser (2002: 29) calls "generational tragedies", a generation "betrayed by their parents" (Okri, 1996: 251) or "*A generation of guilt, and blindness, and infernal responsibility*" (290, italics in the novel). But, Jeffia's determination not to repeat his father's mistakes seems to break the cycle of the curse.

"Flowers", the fourth part, portrays the consequences of Jonan's malpractices on his family after his death but more importantly, it shows the optimism symbolised by the love Jeffia and Cynthia have for each other: "I felt warm and free. Cynthia had that power of making me feel whole again. Just standing there with her made me joyful. As the pleasure of her presence glowed in me, the inner world where I had been hiding seemed to recede far into the background. And all I knew was that I could be happy again" (193).

*Flowers and Shadows* is a tragedy of Jonan Okwe, the hero of the novel. The description of Jonan Okwe can be applied to what Aristotle terms a "tragic hero". According to him, a tragic hero is

A man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity. (...) The change in the hero's fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part (...). (*apud* Cuddon 1998: 926-927)

Jonan Okwe's blind passion of success and his relentless struggle to gain social status, power and wealth hide a certain malaise: a fear of failure and weakness. Throughout the novel, "the nightmare of his father's death played havoc with his thoughts. He feared that he might plunge back to the depths he had sprung from" (173). The death of his father due to lack of money to

get treatment, and especially his last words “had always been a driving part of his life. It gave him his energy” (111). His fear to die in poverty like his father presumably has been the cause of his tragic downfall. Blinded by the gleaming of material things and money, he fails to see any merit in beauty, love and generosity.

Ironically, after his death his company is shared by those he calls his “enemies”. Jeffia aptly summarises how his father’s company has been the cause of his success and his tragic death:

His company has fallen into the hands of the enemy, and the circle seemed complete. That company into which my father had put all his energy was responsible for so many evils. It had raised him from the gutter and had been responsible for his death. It had made him a power merchant, a steam-roller, crushing the lives of many. It had forced a wedge into the family. It had made him an intolerable egoist. Now it had fallen into the hands of the philistines. (191)

The tragic end of Jonan Okwe due to his obsession with material things seems to say that “the real meaning of living was not to possess but to express one’s self in the noblest endeavours, and to improve one’s self in one’s own way” (49) because “there was no such thing as finding peace outside oneself in the heat of a life’s journey or in the hustle for material acquisition” (197).

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