

## **Duty and Freedom in T. Obinkaram Echewa's *The Land's Lord*: A Sartrean Assessment**

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**Abstract.** T. Obinkaram Echewa's *The Land's Lord* appears to be little known among African literary critics, but it is a narrative that explores the individual soul in such a way that it seems to reach far beyond that individual soul, achieving far wider significance. A reading of this novel based on the action represented may get caught up in the discourse and discursive practices of African traditional society and its familiar narrative strategies, whereas it is asking much deeper questions, questions of existence, self-cognition, and identity. One of the main characters of this novel, Philip, is centrally preoccupied with these questions. Sartre's philosophy of authentic humanness is used in this study to make sense of Philip's search, and to account for the other characters' struggles and the kinds of meanings they construct out of their experiences.

**Key words:** absurdity, authenticity, bad faith, fear, freedom, inauthenticity, person identity, role identity

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### **Introduction**

There are quite a few significant Nigerian literary works which have gone out of print while remaining largely unread and undiscussed. Among them are T. Obinkaram Echewa's two novels, *The Land's Lord* (1976) and *The Crippled Dancer* (1986). By their outward form, they belong to what has been called in African literary criticism, the 'traditional' novel; for they seem to reconstitute the discursive structures associated with the first burst of modern literary activity in Nigeria, as well as in the rest of Africa, featuring a traditional society facing restructuring by a Western agency whose worldview and linguistic practices are disorientating and often unwelcome. Nigerian and African writers, having been scolded in the early 1970s for their fascination with pre-colonial themes and themes of colonial struggle and resistance to violent restructuring, and therefore

somehow betraying a lack of creativity and inventiveness, backs were already being turned by the mid-1970s towards anything that smirked of traditional society. This was the time of appearance of these works by Echewa.

Quite apart from the fact that it seems not to be particularly helpful to regiment and artificially impose restraints on art, some events inspire art more than others – for no obvious reasons. There are hugely traumatic events like the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Second World War itself, which have not given rise to an outpouring of art in a scale that would seem to match the events. Others like the dying of the old European culture, which may not seem all that consequential even to the artists themselves have done much better. The dying of a way of life certainly seems to affect the imagination a lot more than, say, the founding of nations. There is no doubt that in the colonial restructuring of the formerly isolated Nigerian peoples a way of life did die. So did the civil war (1967-1970) bring about something like the death of innocence in Nigerian nationhood. The publication of Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012) caused an uproar because some wanted the civil war forgotten, with all its savagery, uninvestigated war crimes and crimes against humanity. We should expect that these events may continue to exercise art for years to come. Peter Onwudinjo's *Women of Biafra and Other Poems* came out in 2000, the much discussed *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Adichie in 2006. However, these pre-existing narratives, culture contact and conflict, civil war and grief may sometimes serve as 'strategies of containment' (Jameson 1981: 53), so that the stories they contain are not in any real sense *about* them. This seems to be the case with both Echewa's novels.

In this paper, the focus is on *The Land's Lord*, a story that turns on character rather than incident (Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*), and therefore belongs to no time – neither the time of traditional society nor of the modern. Our focus is especially on the central character Philip who breaks faith both with traditional society and the Christian community. We shall attempt to understand his breach of faith using Sartre's humanist philosophy of authenticity.

## The Strength of Ancestral Culture

Philip of Echewa's *The Land's Lord* is someone in whose soul the dying of the old culture impinges in such a way as to utterly destroy him. In this narrative, Ahanba is totally certain of the everlasting stability of the cultural tradition. He even gives Father Higler, the Catholic missionary with whom he is in contention for the soul of his community a mock baptism at the closing phases of the crisis of their struggle when he is physically exhausted and without any resources:

'Come,' Ahamba said, leading him by the hand to the water's edge. 'Kneel!' Taking him by the scruff of the neck, Ahanba immersed his head three times in the dirty foot waters of the river, re-baptizing him. 'Take a drink of it if you like ... Ah yes, everything is now restored, just as it was. Except for the scars. You have now arrived. How many years are you? ... This is not the end, though, only a halfway point, a stop in the middle of the road, though some mistake it for the final destination and never go beyond it. But you must go beyond it. Stand. Come...' (144).

Philip is already dead by his own hand at what Ahamba thinks of as 'only a halfway point, a stop in the middle of the road'. By this act, he has removed what must have been a terror to Ahamba, that someone of his community, Philip, should notoriously disrupt the orderly functioning of the ancestral culture and become a Christian instead. His uncle Nwala expresses Philip's conversion as total loss to the community:

'Look at you! ... You who would not serve his own father's *Ihi Njoku*, now a pot boiler in the White Man's kitchen, Njoku Ekogu, consecrated to the biggest god that this land knows'(19).

'My heart aches for you.... For all the stature wasted on you! Tall like an iroko tree, marked from birth as if to become a chief. In the days when we were fighting for the land we now own you could have been expected to put a spear through two men at one throw, to cut off a man's head with one stroke of the machete. Amadioha! Why were you not still born? All your age mates have married three or four wives and fathered households of children. They are in the Yam Society and Okonko. But you, you prefer to be a pot boiler and sweep the White Man's kitchen with your testicles' (21).

In his 'conversion', Philip's conviction and strength seem to be radical and pristine. He even seems to stand forth as a challenge to the priest, Higler, who is given to self-doubt and a tendency to despair. This transformation goes back to the time of Father Schlotz, Father Higler's predecessor at the mission. But the narrative itself relates the crumbling of all this strength and conviction to nothingness.

Rarely do narratives of Christian missionary activity in Nigeria bring out the human dimension of the experience of the loneliness, fear, and self-doubt entailed, what it means to be far removed from 'civilization' and completely bereft of the support systems one had always relied on to run one's life and manage one's affairs. Father Higler is keenly aware of his solitary and deprived existence and perpetually tortured by these thoughts; an early instance:

here he was, a small, bearded Alsatian, trying to impose his will on this primeval land and tame it, to push the jungle back and light the darkness. He was the only European within thirty miles. A conquering army of one. He had recruited some local help, but the first lieutenant was due for burial in the morning...

Would he be a hero here and have his name marked with stars in the book of life? Or would this churning jungle, this White Man's Grave swallow him, all his efforts, all his hopes. What power of alchemy, what flash flood of God's sanctifying grace would turn him, a cowardly soldier who had once fled from battle, into a heroic priest? (9).

Higler means well as far as the motivation for the missionary effort goes, but he is battling with human psychological pressures which on occasions seem to place his very faith in jeopardy. He is nagged by fear of failure as a missionary, a fear he could not shake off because of consciousness of having once succumbed to it as a soldier in battle and fled. The task he has undertaken as a missionary is no less daunting, and the dangers palpable to him, as he conceptualizes his mission quite literally in terms of enlightening the darkness. In daytime, the darkness seems to confront him in a physical way in the endless forest all around; at night the reality of this darkness assaults his mind as if the manifestation of the devil himself, whereas his servant Philip who holds that there is nothing in the

darkness, that it is quite empty, is unperturbed by night. There is an iconic moment soon after his first arrival in the village, when Philip walks half a mile at night in an unseasonal thunderstorm to check that the priest is all right. As he leaves again to go, turning down the priest's suggestion to stay the night, we read:

He had risen behind Philip, lamp in hand, and had stood in the veranda holding the lamp aloft. But he had succeeded only in lighting an island around himself, not the servant's path. Philip had stridden into the darkness, and the darkness had totally absorbed him back (54).

There is here a foreshadowing of the final struggle where Philip's life and Christian faith would be staked. Father Higler is a protagonist in this struggle, and loses it.

The narrative also plumbs the depths of the people's habits of thought and worldview and comes up with materialism, and even more surprisingly cynicism. These attitudes are inimical to the Christianity preached by Higler. The only convert whose habits of thought seem to have changed radically is Philip. He is the one who will be severely tested. The other converts are ruled by interests quite foreign to the ones implied by their Christian practice. For instance, Genesis confides in a neighbour:

'I will stay with the church,' Genesis said. 'I will keep on going to confession and communion.'

John looked at Genesis, a little surprised by his act of faith.

'For another four or five months,' Genesis continued. 'My wife is now pregnant.'

'Ah, really! Little wonder then.'

'I must wait to see what she delivers' (13).

Genesis is practising as a Catholic as his part in the one-sided bargain he has struck with the God proclaimed by that faith; and the part he has assigned this God in the bargain is to give him a male child. It is either this or he ceases to practice. Ahamba provides Father Higler an explanation for this materialistic way of approaching religion when he says,

‘I tell you, White Man, we already have gods here that do nothing for us but are hungry for our sacrifices. What we need is a god who does something for us...

‘Yes, White Man, if your god can work a miracle on all these people you now have, I tell you something, I will throw away my idols and join your church myself’ (8,9).

It would appear on the surface level that the conception of divinity on which religion is based is entirely different for these people than for Father Higler. For Higler God is Supreme Reality and everything exists because of him and has meaning by reference to him; whereas it would appear that for the people he wants to convert, they and their needs would come first and everything else counts insofar as they relate to these interests.

The situation is a bit more complex than that, of course. Nwala’s speech about *Ihi Njoku* rather shows that the people too have a supreme entity that not only makes demands on them, but also whose demands leave no room for refusal, in regard to which individual freedom has no meaning. The entity that is associated with this absolute priority is the Land. Philip’s role by natural right, as far as the people are concerned, is with regard to this entity. In respect to it, refusal is quite meaningless. Right on his deathbed, his uncle Nwala is still urging it as something about which there is no remedy; and Father Higler of all people is the one being charged to convey the message:

‘Tell your pot boiler for me ... to watch his steps and to point them back to his own people and father, and the duties that fall on his shoulder. If you had a son would you like him to be like him? ... You see, a man cannot run away from the Land, even if he flies like a bird. He must come down to it, and it will be there waiting’ (77).

Any talk of freedom of choice is impertinence for these people. Unlike Soyinka’s *Elesin of Death and the King’s Horseman* who balks at a parallel hereditary duty, preferring life and the love of a young woman, Philip claims the right to choose what he wants to do with his life, without involving anyone else in his decision. He is unmarried. A young widow said to belong to him by inheritance remains unclaimed by him. But he does not refuse the responsibility of looking after the

daughter of this widow who is a halfwit. Personal choice is precisely what the cult of the Earth (Land) excludes, because according to Charles Meek in McCall (1982: 310), this deity is regarded as 'the owner of men, whether dead or alive', a belief to which Nwala alludes in the above.

Philip is a man of few words. This taciturnity is occasionally irksome to Father Higler, who imagines a conversation with the servant as follows:

'Look, Philip, you have a soul.'

'Yes Fada.'

'And you have to save this soul.'

'Yes Fada'

'And here's what you have to do to save your soul.'

'Yes Fada' (8).

He seems to have nothing to say, but there is much going on in his head. The early indication is on page 31 where he comments to Father Higler, 'Myself I need a lot of prayers'. The priest does not follow up this remark, in case he might be of help in remedying the situation, but only comments, 'We all need prayers, Philip'.

What is bothering Philip concerns what his life might mean, beyond serving the mission devotedly as a cook and a catechist. He has space to talk in chapter 14; and it is a moment of extremity. But this is after that tortured soul had already expressed itself in hideous and outrageous actions, targeting the very things he had previously handled and cared for as a sacred trust. He breaks into Father Higler's tabernacle and scatters the sacred host everywhere. He then takes the half-wit foster daughter into a little bush and violates her. If the Christian faith alone is specifically targeted in the violation of the sacred species, the violation of the foster daughter is an outrage against both the traditional culture, particularly against the Land deity, the greatest of all the gods known to the community (134), and the Christian culture. The outrages amount to a double destruction of his own social personality. He had previously rejected the traditional culture, taking in Christianity in a total embrace. All the same he had social personality as one of Umu Njikara. He hardly deserves that identity now; at the same time, having struck at what he understands to be at

the heart of the Christian faith, he ceases to be one the Christians would regard as a bona fide member entitled to comradeship and fellow-feeling.

### **Destruction of Hope**

Philip's running away on the night of his initiation as *Ihi Njoku* is something he is able to live with within the community as he has terminated his flight in the Church's embrace. Although he is deeply reticent about it, he admits to Higler when he comes to hear of it and mentions it to him that fear has something to do with it. He will give a fuller account of it on the day of his suicide, enabling us to infer that fear for his wellbeing is but a part of the story. The deeper fear is the compromise of freedom involved in role identity as *Ihi Njoku*. This role identity by virtue of who he is means that he has been 'born a slave to duty' with 'no choice and no voice' (138); and so his life is useless to him (141). What Philip has always craved for is person identity, not one marked by duty and obligation (role identity), or one marked by membership and status (social identity), but one marked by private hopes and personal aspirations. Such person identity, even if achievable in the way Philip conceives it, nevertheless involves membership in an affiliative network. As Layder has written,

Personal identity is always caught up in, and constantly emerges from, this tension between fitting in with society and other people ... and wanting to follow our own desires, hopes and wishes (2004: 2).

Philip has serious problems with fitting in with society. Traditional society will not compromise on its demand that he assume the role of *Ihi Njoku*. Rejecting this, as he has done means that there is no real meeting ground with that society. His membership is physical only.

Affiliation affords a measure of identity to the individual; and so the individual has something to gain from it. This symbiotic relationship accounts for social cohesion and loyalty. The Church to which Philip affiliates upon leaving traditional society has its own roles to be filled and needs of cohesion and loyalty to be serviced. In converting, therefore, he has moved from one pattern of role identity to another. However, ties remain to the old traditional society; at least from the point of view of the community. This comes to the fore over a crisis



in which Philip is accused of killing a kinsman. He is confirmed through divination to have done the deed, despite that he had only been trying to wrench the gun away from a cousin who had aimed it at that same kinsman and drawn the hammer fully, ready to fire. It is a question Philip himself first raises with Father Higler. It is again raised by Ahamba:

‘Yes Ahamba,’ Father Higler replied. ‘I appreciate your concern for me, but mine is really for Philip.’

‘Your pot boiler. Well, he has fled to refuge with you. Can you protect him? As you live here among us, if someone from another village molested you, we would be ready to go to war to save you. Is your pot boiler safe with you? What do you offer him for the risk you have asked him to take?’

Philip is safe enough if your jujus are all he has to worry about. Nobody is going to do him any physical harm and blame it on the jujus, are they?

‘Mmmmh, my friend. If he offends us, the people, he pays to us. If he has offended the Land, it is between him and the Land’ (62-63).

To Father Higler, the land is *matter*, insensate, inanimate, neuter in the metaphysical order. If vengeance from this land is all that Philip is faced with it, then he has *nothing* to fear. He is entirely safe. However, to be threatened with vengeance from the land unless he performs sacrifices of appeasement arouses all the terrors with which traditional religion sustains itself, which Philip had thought he had completely overcome in becoming a Christian. Philip is now face to face with ‘the abstract power of society [creating] its concrete unfreedom’ (Debord 1967, par.73). These fears probably had existed all along at the level of the unconscious. They have now been called to the level of consciousness and have become a living and present menace. They have therefore awakened an enervating sense of insufficiency and exposure.

Father Higler recognizes that this desperate need for protection is a psychological need, first and foremost. But the way in which he seeks to address it falls far short of Philip’s expectation. It is as though he is attempting a diversion:

Father Higler looked up at Philip insisting on his own guilt. Exhaling, he asked, 'Was any punishment assessed against you? Are you required to do anything?'

'Fada... they said I should make sacrifices of atonement to the Land and wash my hand of the blood that had been spilled.'

'Sacrifice, huh?' Father Higler was caught between a sigh and a chuckle. He chuckled first then sighed. 'Was that all? Is that all they asked you to do?'

'Yes Fada.'

'You will assist me at mass in the morning. That is going to have to be enough sacrifice for them. And you can drop into the chapel and say a few Hail Marys for John's soul' (59).

The Earth goddess is said to be an 'ambivalent symbol of agricultural bounty and of retribution and death' (McCall 1982: 305). In Philip's thinking, he must either yield to the sacrifice of atonement demanded of him or have concrete and verifiable protection against the invisible and dreaded force behind the demand.

It does not seem to Philip that the mass suggested by Father Higler is a kind of sacrifice that would meet the demands of the Earth Goddess, here simply called the Land, to avert retribution. So after assisting at mass as instructed by Higler, he is still asking for protection, his fear and anxiety mounting as Father Higler offers nothing more concrete. 'The sacrifices are out of the question,' if Philip wishes to remain a Christian. To keep his faith, he is to do nothing, 'absolutely nothing', except 'to have faith in God. And hope' (60). The desperate measures he tries, going to sleep with a sharpened machete under his head, wearing medals of different descriptions and crucifixes, spending long hours before the tabernacle, and setting up a rude altar in his sleeping quarters bring him no reassurance against the invisible force.

### **Authenticity and Inauthenticity**

It is undoubtedly the case that Higler has offered all that there is in his stock to Philip, namely the Christian faith. But he sounds magisterial and distant in trying to guide Philip to cope with his fears, whereas what Philip longs to access is what Gadamer calls 'the powers of commonality ... in comradeship, in human

solidarity' (*The Gadamer Reader* 108). This particular crisis will recede in consciousness before Higler's human sentiments awaken towards Philip. But his inability to respond at this time has deepened Philip's sense of aloneness, of being without resources of any sort, human or material to help shore him up. Higler does not understand Philip's experience of 'the underlying strength' of the African ancestral culture (Roscoe 1971:4), and how it could impinge so heavily on his consciousness; nor indeed does he understand the nature of Philip's need. That underlying strength – at least part of it – is by reason of its settled existence as part of the background formation in the minds of the people, with roots deeply sunk in the unconscious. It is the same for Father Higler and his own culture, of course, but he has always thought of the people as targets of conversion, not really individuals with person identities and personal histories, subjects of rights and responsibilities, deserving respect. Therefore, he is unable to exercise solidarity with him in the measure required – a serious failing, for as Gadamer has shown, it is 'solidarity that makes human societies human' (*The Gadamer Reader* 91). His way of being in the world; at any rate, his attitude towards the local people is governed by 'a one-dimensional thinking', where success is determined in terms of the number of people who have joined his Church and how quickly his new stone church is rising from its foundations. Ultimately this boils down to 'the will to power', since he thinks of himself and his mission as engaged in a conquest.

In Philip's situation we see asserted 'the claims of another way of being in the world, a way of human solidarity and interhuman understanding' (*The Gadamer Reader* 109). Higler scarcely pays attention to these claims as his interest is in physical structures capable of enduring long after he himself is gone (79), and in the numbers of conversions he makes. This again has material form, as it is a statistic that may be used for comparison. His disinclination to heed the claims of human solidarity is also seen in his encounter with Philip's charge, Ugochi, where he has a chance to see the injustice he and his mission had done to Philip:

'You know who I am, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Who am I?'

Still grinning. 'You are our Father at the mission. *Nna*, he works for you.'

'That's right. Why don't I ever see you in my church?'

She began grinning again. Looked at herself critically and brushed her hand across her chest. 'Like this?'

She was naked, except for a strip of loincloth girdled around her waist and a string of beads around her neck....

'Look,' Father Higler finally said, 'don't you have any clothes?'

She shook her head slowly.

'We have to see about that. Yes... ' He began walking off. 'Yes ...' (78-79).

Higler would probably provide the clothing he promises, but he is not shocked that Ugochi has no clothes, nor does it occur to him that it is probably his fault that she is naked. Philip after all works for him. He had also worked for Father Schlotz before him, treating his service to the mission as if one of the debts he owed, to be discharged without any expectations of recompense. Rather 'he was always enthralled whenever the priest-master extended to him the gratuity of a friendly tease. It was the rare, unexpected gift, something unnameable – a token of appreciation, acknowledgement of service, the plucking of a common chord of humanity' (92). A chance incident opens Father Higler's eyes with respect to Philip not just as a friendly native and a compliant tool for furthering his mission, serving as a cook, a catechist, a mass server, a house cleaner, and a bodyguard, but also a person with personal memories, some happy, some tragic. He will go on to discover that Philip has been without remuneration all these years at the time that Philip's fears over the judgement of the elders have become complicated and deepened by further demands from the ancestral culture arising from the death of his uncle Nwala.

Higler is dreaming about filling his church with converts, but what he needs more than anything else is to hold on to Philip. His relationship to Philip does eventually develop into a deep and touching sympathy, after he is shocked with the realization that Philip had not always been a morose and 'impenetrable shell of reticence' (104), but was once a happy child and had played childish pranks under a devoted mother's protection, and was once happily married, but had lost his wife in childbirth. From the day of these discoveries on,

Father Higler was overwhelmed by a surge of human sentiment for the servant, sentiment that defied faith and paid little attention to theology. His heart went out in understanding, an empathy which he had never quite managed before (96-97).

But what he never realizes, until probably the last episode of the novel, is the critical importance of Philip to his mission. More than Ahamba even, Philip is the custodian of the ancestral tradition. He is consecrated at birth to the Yam-god *Ihi Njoku*, whose cult is woven into the fabric of the people's everyday life just like the Land. As studies of Ancient Near Eastern religions have shown, the belief about such agricultural deities was that they 'made the land fertile so that man might have food' (Mackenzie 2005). Accordingly, the optimistic trend in ancestral religions has its roots in the agricultural deities. Conversion of one like Philip had to be a radical reorientation, involving a change of mentality and attitudes. But he is required to succeed to the position of the chief priest and custodian of the religious heritage of the lineage following the death of Nwala, the previous holder of that position. He is therefore the prize the winning and holding of which would have amounted to a serious shock to the ancestral culture. Higler is also slow to see all this, and comments,

'That is all rubbish.... But tell me, is anyone else in the village burdened with so many obligations as you? In any case you know my answer. I have had reason, sadly, to give it to you recently. I realize that your uncle is dead and I sympathize. But apart from your own faith which seems in danger enough, you have to think of not giving the scandal to other members of our church. Why, Philip? Why don't you, instead hedging towards this grave mortal sin, why don't you see that there is nothing – nothing – in the jujus?' (89.)

Has Philip made the radical break with the ancestral tradition which would enable him to see that both the traditional obligations and the basis for them were 'all rubbish'? This becomes profoundly doubtful since he had run from the ordeal of initiation and escaped into the embrace of the Christian faith. The consequences are, on the one hand, that his relatives and the cultural group do not take him for a *convert*. He is a runaway and nothing more than a refugee with the missionary. Running from nothing at all, but duty, he is a source of

great disappointment to them considering ‘all the stature wasted’ on him. His disastrous end will serve one like Ahamba – and presumably the entire community – as confirmation of the ancestral order of things: the system had taken vengeance on Philip for impertinence and recovered its status quo (144).

On the other hand, Father Higler realizes that he could not be counted upon as a powerful influence in the community because he isn’t in their eyes the respectable figure he had thought. Having revised his potential contribution to the mission downwards, Father Higler who himself had been guilty of desertion under fire makes a gallant effort to restore Philip’s self-respect and in that way pull him out of despair. He tries to lenify this desertion by citing his own experience in spite of which he had gone on to become a priest and a missionary. He explains that in speaking to the servant about the initiation from which he had fled, a conversation that sadly coincided with onset of serious and protracted illness for Philip, he

‘did not mean any harm. Understand? I had only wanted to tell you there was nothing in your life to be ashamed of. Me here,’ he tapped his chest, ‘I ran away from the war. Would you believe that I was in the middle of it and I ran away. That is how I came to be a priest. I deserted under fire. Out of fear, cowardice . . .’

‘Fada was afraid?’

‘For my very life, Philip. That’s right, Philip. You see, I too have known despair, as deep as what you now face, or perhaps even deeper. For in the heat of battle I had no time to ponder my decisions and no one to give me advice. I ran, just as you did from your initiation.

‘What did Fada do then? What cure did Fada find for his despair?’

‘Hope. One finds a new hope. I found a new hope in the priesthood, in serving God exclusively.’

Philip exhaled, clasped his hands across his chest and wrestled with unspeakable thoughts. ‘Fada, Fada is satisfied now? Fada’s heart is now in complete peace?’

The question made him want to laugh and cry at the same tune. He looked down on the ground before him, then lifted his eyes to Philip's patiently expectant face, shaking his head slowly as he said: 'No, Philip. No ...'

No indeed, he thought, sighing and shifting in his seat. Not even in a priest's heart did peace pitch its tent for long (111-112).

Father Higler has been forced by Philip to see that even serving a 'greater cause' than oneself (Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Part1) cannot extinguish or expiate that 'moment's surrender' to weakness (*The Wasteland* 413). For him to carry on regardless may be considered an act of Christian fortitude. And this is what he urges on Philip. He could make a new start, he tells him, by remarrying:

'You have more than earned the money for a bride price from this parish.'

'No need, Fada. I need nothing *now*.'

'The labourer is worthy of his hire.'

'There is no need, Fada. I need nothing *now*' (121).

But the admission to Philip may have left him with a sense of the priest's inauthenticity. Like Kurtz's dreadful cry in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* after glimpsing the truth about his inner self, Philip's 'I need nothing *now*' has 'candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth' (84). Higler sighs out his defeat.

Higler's new-found hope in the Catholic priesthood after his desertion in battle may also be seen from Sartre's viewpoint as 'bad faith' because of the transference and assimilation involved (see Heter 69); for he has shifted his failing to a new ground where it could be seen as having occurred for a higher purpose, and therefore, really, an act of God. But as we have seen, Higler does try to make 'the greater cause' serve him, since he is seeking to immortalize himself in the landscape in building the great edifice. There is 'bad faith' here also. Philip, however, does not know this aspect of Higler's thinking. All he knows from Higler's own communication is that without coming to terms with his own reality as an inconstant person he has made the transference to priestly ministry and assimilated his weakness into virtue. This keeps him in the state of being 'anguish in the form of "not-being it"' (*Being and Nothingness* 44).

It is curious how profoundly Sartrean Philip is in his assessment both of himself and Father Higler. His reactions are also as if from the book. For instance, when Father Higler first inquires about his flight from the initiation, he is assailed and got the better of by nausea, 'a condition that reveals an inauthentic relationship with the world' (Poiana 77). For in Sartre's philosophy, how others see a person is part of who he is. Now Father Higler knows that he is not just his servant or 'just Philip' as he had told him at the introductions at Higler's first arrival, but a fugitive from an initiation that doubled as a test of manly courage and endurance.

The exact reason for Philip's flight is not clearly spelt out in the narrative. What can be regarded as the view from the outside is that he has done so out of fear. While not flatly rejecting this, Philip does make an oblique reference to a bid for freedom from servitude in his speech about being 'born a slave to duty'. This indecision about the *meaning* of his flight is one of the ambiguities of this story. But his cry for freedom from slavery to duty proceeds from what Sartre would call *human-reality*. He is also committed to authenticity in the manner of Sartre: he would have this freedom or else ruin his life in such a way that neither the cultural group nor the Christian missionary could use it for any purpose whatever. Hence his 'suicide, in fact, is a choice and affirmation-of being' (*Being and Nothingness* 479).

### **Escape from Anguish**

Philip's outrages against Christianity and the Land seem entirely irrational. But his formula for turning down offers of help, 'I need nothing *now*', suggests that he has processed it all in his mind and decided what exactly to do. To Higler, the decision must be inspired either by madness or by the devil. Ahamba similarly wrestles with the point, to make sense of it. First he thinks the gods have driven him into this infamy (131). After Philip's death, with emotions now drained, he looks at the issue more calmly, and concludes that Philip had accessed forbidden knowledge and had paid dearly for it. In the final dialogue with Father Higler, Ahamba brings up the tragic function of truth and rests the case:



‘He was crazy! Insane!’

‘He found the truth and it drove him to despair. Even to madness as you say. He did what he did in despair. The truth is dangerous.’

‘Of what truth do you speak?’

‘The secret which makes us human and keeps the gods divine to us. Few men ever find the truth and survive it. It is a dangerous secret. The trick is to take as much truth as we can bear and go on living’ (145).

Ahamba’s solution to the Sartrean problem of ‘human-reality’, namely ‘the desire to be God’ (Priest 14), is renunciation of the desire for transcendence and acceptance of limitation: ‘to take as much truth as we can bear and go on living’. But by connecting Philip’s action to the search for and retrieval of a dangerous secret pertaining to a state higher than the human, Ahamba brings mythic insight into this sequence, raising it to the status of a tragic struggle, one movement of ‘the encounters of man with more than man’ (*Oedipus the King*). Philip, however, speaks of his action as his ‘revenge against everything’ (138), against fate, against the world, the Land, the ancestral tradition, Christianity, all the systems and principles that have impinged on his life and tried to control and exploit it. In this revenge, the tables are turned, so that he himself becomes the actor instead of victim and a subject.

Part of what he may have discovered is the incompatibility of fear and freedom. To free himself and become authentic, he has to get rid of fear. In his absurd logic, it means he cannot cling to life. He retorts to Father Higler who is trying to save him at all costs,

My life is no more use to me. I have no fear to lose it. I will not save it now because I then go back to fear of losing it and running to save it. Here I am, I say. No more running’ (141).

That is to say, for him, life is absurd because of its fear content; that it is fundamentally insecure. For the absurdist, ‘beginning to think is beginning to be undermined’ (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Philip makes a choice of suicide as a way to escape or overcome anguish because his implacable logic has led him there.

Higler who has chosen the path of Christian fortitude, but is still troubled by absurdist thinking and questions of authenticity ultimately comes to terms with

himself in the very episode in which Philip completes his self-destruction. He is driven by the urgency to save Philip to put his own life for that of Philip:

Father Higler looked at Philip and tears welled up at the ends of his eyes. But no! This was no time for remorse and self-blame but for action. He had to save Philip, redeem him before man and before God. Redeem himself! But how? What could he do?

His offer to abandon his mission if only he would be allowed to take Philip away with him only incenses the tribesmen who have Philip and his half-wit foster daughter bound and ready to be sacrificed to cleanse the Land they had polluted by their incest. Although he is alone and he has experienced on his own body a taste of their violence, he seizes a fleeting chance that comes and cuts Philip free. The need to save Philip has led to his overcoming the fear for his life which had led him to desert his duty post under fire; for when Philip gains hold of the weapon with which he had been cut free and in a frenzy smashes up the jujus assembled for his sacrifice, we read:

He whirled, thinking someone was about to jump him. It was Father Higler. The broad machete was lifted over the servant's head and his hand was cocked as if to slice the priest in two.

Father Higler stood his ground, but his breath, his heart, all his senses suspended action. So this was it, was it? the priest was thinking. His mind began reciting an Act of Contrition.

'Fada!'

'Philip!'

'Go! Go now! Escape! If you wish. No one else needs to die!'

No one needs to die at all, Philip' (143).

Higler's courage in this wracking episode does not cancel the history of desertion. Up till now, his yearning for something to help him believe in himself has had no anchor. For instance, it crops up even during this terrible night he was to have personally witnessed the slaughter of two human beings in a sacrifice of appeasement. He had sought to attach himself to the image of St Paul; and perhaps,

By sheer force of the will he was going to claim on God's behalf a territory as wide as the ocean itself. A visionary. But had he not superseded his original bargain which was just to become a priest? Wasn't that virtue? Was his move from *contemplation* to *action* not virtue? (140).

These ruminations reflect his anguish he has not come to terms with until he overcomes fear for his own life in the face of a frenzied Philip's avenging machete. Now he is conscious of having been strong and courageous where it mattered. It is not by a 'power of alchemy' or in material terms the 'flash flood of God's sanctifying grace' that he has turned into a 'heroic priest', but the power of authentic solidarity, his best human sentiments, common human decency, backed by his Christian faith and charity. Now he would not need to doubt himself, even though, according to Ahamba, the pass he had come to is 'only a half-way point'. It is a very important moral victory that he has won for himself over himself. But he must decide for now what to do next, according to Ahamba who has declared himself the victor in the contest for the lordship of the land.

## **Conclusion**

*The Land's Lord* as the name of the narrative of the triangular conflict involving Ahamba, Higler, and Philip trains the gaze on two of the participants, Ahamba and Higler, ignoring Philip. But as we have shown, Philip may be seen as the central figure in the narrative. To see it from Philip's perspective, the character and his motivations, personal meanings in general, become dominant. Philip's personal meanings, however, are under the influence of a worldview that has come to be identified with Jean-Paul Sartre, the humanist philosophy of authenticity, which rates any state of being based on compromise and adjustment to reality as 'bad faith'. All three characters are influenced by this philosophy, Philip most of all, Ahamba least of all. Ahamba, for instance, has his demands of his deities and idols and *punishes* them when they default (chapter 13). He also arranges the peace in due course and dictates the terms. In him we see someone who acts out quite literally the Christian claim that the gods of the pagans are made by human hands. He makes and unmakes them according to his dispositions. Higler, on the other hand, who believes in a merciful God is

unable to forgive himself for a fear that had got the better of him in battle, resulting in desertion. He will not quite accept himself with that blot in his character. It is Philip's total rejection of 'bad faith' and compromise that creates the opportunity for him to write a new history of himself he can live with. This is the history he would be proud to present to his own God. These varieties of personages, including the absurd man Philip, who finds suicide preferable to compromise are 'universal' in Aristotle's sense, not being bound by temporal, spatial, or cultural parameters.

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