

## **Optimism and the Search for Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Civil Peace*: An Analytical Study**

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### **Abstract**

*This research explores Chinua Achebe's **Civil Peace**'s optimism which plays a crucial role, particularly in the way the protagonist, Jonathan Iwegbu, navigates post-war Nigeria. Achebe's portrayal of optimism is deeply intertwined with resilience, the human spirit, and the desire for stability in the aftermath of destruction. It also focuses on the present circumstances, the importance of community and family, the value of peace and stability, and hope in small things. Moreover, the story tackles key ideological factors in civil peace. Michel Foucault's theory of ideology is going to be applied to this study; in addition to some thoughts of a deconstructive approach. The research examines the struggle for identity in Achebe's *Civil Peace*, post-war identity in a changing society, personal vs. collective identity, and the conflict between hope and despair. The type of language is going to be investigated in this study.*

**Keywords:** optimism, post-war, peace, ideology, collective identity, hope, despair, language

### **I. Introduction:**

“Civil Peace” opened by describing Jonathan as "extra-ordinarily lucky" (Achebe 141). Chinua Achebe's short story offers a rich text for deconstructive analysis, particularly when examining the themes of optimism, identity, language, and ideology. Deconstruction, as a critical approach, seeks to uncover the inherent

contradictions and complexities within a text, revealing how meaning is constructed and deconstructed. At first glance, the protagonist, Jonathan Iwegbu, embodies optimism as he rebuilds his life after the Nigerian Civil War. He is grateful for his survival and the preservation of his family, which reflects a hopeful outlook on life despite the surrounding chaos. He uses his refrain repeatedly, "Nothing puzzles God". However, war has altered not only his personal circumstances but also the collective identity of his community. It is a form of power in Jonathan's personality. As said by Michel Foucault, "we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194). A deconstructive reading reveals that identity is not fixed; it is shaped by external forces such as war, economic hardship, and societal expectations. Jonathan's reliance on his past achievements (his bicycle and his business acumen) highlights a tension between personal agency and the constraints imposed by a changing environment. The story suggests that identity is not merely an individual construct but is influenced by broader ideological frameworks that dictate social roles and expectations.

Achebe's use of language in "Civil Peace" serves both to convey meaning and to complicate it. "Foucault's discourse analysis focused on power relationships in society as expressed through language practices" (Jasem 17). The narrative employs a blend of English and Igbo phrases, reflecting the linguistic diversity of Nigeria. This bilingualism can be seen as a celebration of cultural identity; however, it also underscores the limitations of language fully, capturing the complexities of experience. Jonathan's identity as a husband, father, and entrepreneur is challenged by the socio-political upheaval surrounding him. The ideological reinforcements of "Civil Peace" value close examination, particularly concerning post-colonial identity

and economic survival. The story critiques the notion of progress in a society recovering from conflict, suggesting that traditional values may clash with modern aspirations. Jonathan's entrepreneurial spirit embodies a capitalist ideology that prioritizes individual success; however, this ideology is juxtaposed with communal values that emphasize solidarity and mutual aid. A deconstructive reading reveals contradictions within these ideologies—while Jonathan's success is celebrated, it also isolates him from others who are struggling. This tension exposes the fragility of ideological constructs in times of crisis, questioning whether individualism can truly thrive in a context marked by collective trauma.

## **II. Crucial Aspects of Optimism in Civil Peace**

Jonathan Iwegbu, the hero, offers outstanding resilience in starting anew his own life after the destruction of the civil war. Despite losing his house and many precious things, Jonathan maintains a positive outlook. “The protagonist seems happy despite of low-esteem and all the catastrophes, which he has been through” (Zamani & Haratyan 626). His survival of the war and the succeeding return to some level of routine and daily life represent a triumph of the human will to endure hardship. The refrain “Happy Survival” encapsulates this idea, suggesting that no matter the difficulties faced, there is always hope for recovery.

The protagonist focuses on what he possesses now: his family, his health, and the small opportunities available to him. He sees his modest achievements, such as the use of his house and the ability to run a small business, as sources of pride and hope. His optimism is not about grand achievements, but about the value of small, everyday successes.

Jonathan's strong familial ties and the sense of community are central to optimism in the story. His ability to protect his family and keep them together despite the

circumstances is a source of strength in a city full of turbulences. In a broader sense, this optimism reflects the idea that rebuilding and healing can occur through mutual support and the care of loved ones.

Moreover, Jonathan's viewpoint represents a contrast to the violence and disturbance of the civil war. His determination to rebuild and move forward reflects an optimistic belief in the possibility of lasting peace and stability, even if it means starting from scratch with limited resources. The title itself, "Civil Peace", highlights the importance of peace after the war. According to Heywood, it is widespread that social identity is crucial to be developed according to modernity, and it has to be supported by societal forces" (24). Thus, any individual in a post-war period has to be optimist to continue his/her life successfully.

Jonathan's optimism is not rooted in material wealth but in the simple blessings he has. For example, when the government offers him a small amount of compensation, he views it as a sign that things are improving, even if the amount is insufficient to truly restore his former wealth. The recognition of small victories and the determination to make the most of what is available contributes to the story's optimistic tone.

### **III. Ideological Factors in Civil Peace**

Achebe's writing often explores the complex dynamics of post-colonial African societies, and in *Civil Peace*, the theme of post-colonial identity is subtly addressed. As known, "literature is not only about written text which is written beautifully and also meaningfully, but can be a reflection of wider social context" (Astuti 99). Nigeria, recovering from the devastating effects of the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War), struggles to redefine itself both politically and culturally.

Jonathan Iwegbu's survival and ability to rebuild his life in a nation ravaged by war highlight the internal struggles within post-colonial Nigeria; that is, in a sense of post-colonial disillusionment facing all challenges. To use Althusser's terms, "I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses ISA a certain number of realities which present themselves to immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" ("On Ideology" 14). The optimism Jonathan displays contrasts with the reality of the challenges he faces due to a lack of effective governance and continued socio-political instability. "The subject was to be seen as the source and origin of all meaning: it was not really itself part of the world since it brought that world to be in the first place. For such ideology had pivoted in the belief that 'man' was somehow prior to his history and social traditions" (Eagleton 50).

Another ideological factor is showing the importance of family. That is, Jonathan's strong familial ties and his sense of duty to protect and care for his family reflect traditional African values that prioritize community and collective well-being over individual interests. His optimism and resilience are rooted in the strength of his family unit, and his determination to provide for them is central to the story. In a broader sense, the story reflects an African worldview that emphasizes the role of family and community as sources of moral and emotional strength. This is especially significant in the context of post-war recovery, where personal survival is often intertwined with the survival of the collective. As Foucault noted that "the problem is not to know what we are, but to know what we can become" (135). Hence, it is a crucial aspect in Jonathan's identity.

The title itself, "Civil Peace", suggests the central ideological factor of the story: the desire for peace and reconciliation after the devastating effects of war. Jonathan's life represents an attempt to rebuild and find normalcy in a society that has been torn apart by violence. It is a matter of binary opposition. In other words, Bressler

mentioned in supporting this idea: "In all binary oppositions such supplementation exists" (78). It is simply a matter of reversing these oppositions and ending up with a pair which supplements each other.

The narrative embodies the tension between the need for peace and the reality of post-war trauma. In other words, rebuilding after conflict is one of the major themes of this short story. While Jonathan remains hopeful and longs for peace, the presence of looters and the constant threat of violence indicate that peace is not easily attained, reflecting the complex process of national healing.

Faith and optimism also play significant roles in shaping Jonathan's worldview. His belief that "nothing puzzles God" reflects a religious ideology that emphasizes the importance of faith, resilience, and divine will. When going through the story, it can be inferred that "one may ask what about different authorities, like God, government or police...?" (Zamani & Haratyan 622). This belief in divine intervention and faith in a better future underpins Jonathan's unwavering optimism, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. In the context of post-war Nigeria, faith becomes an ideological force that helps individuals like Jonathan make sense of their suffering and find meaning in their daily struggles.

The story's ideological underpinnings also include a critique of the civil war itself. The narrative subtly suggests the futility and devastation of war, as well as its lasting effects on the individual psyche and society at large. The war, while never explicitly discussed in detail, is present as a force that has shaped the lives of the characters, particularly Jonathan.

#### **IV. The struggle for identity**

The struggle for identity is a central theme in literature, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, and it often explores the challenges individuals or groups face in

defining or redefining who they are, especially in contexts of societal change, conflict, or personal transformation. Hence, identity issues link the raising of post-materialism and the declining ability of class to generate a meaningful sense of social identity (Heywood 19). In relation to Chinua Achebe's "Civil Peace", this theme can be examined in terms of the character's journey toward self-definition in the aftermath of war and social upheaval.

In *Civil Peace*, the protagonist, Jonathan Iwegbu, exemplifies the tension between personal identity and societal transformation after the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). The war has not only physically scarred the land but has also fractured the identities of individuals and the collective nation. For Jonathan, the struggle for identity lies in rebuilding his life after the devastating effects of the war, which has shifted his role within both the family and the broader community.

Before the war, Jonathan had a sense of belonging and a defined role in his community. After the war, his life is marked by a quest to find meaning in a society that is in the process of reconstituting itself. While he is content with his survival and small successes (such as restoring his house and maintaining his family), the war has taken away much of his previous identity, and he must reconstruct it based on what he has left—his family, his resilience, and his determination to survive. As mentioned in the story, "Let it go where everything else has gone. Nothing puzzles God" (Achebe 146).

The broader struggle for national identity in post-colonial Nigeria is also a significant factor in understanding personal identity. Achebe, through Jonathan's story, captures how individuals are affected by the collective trauma of the civil war and the rebuilding process. According to Jacques Derrida, "the subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language" (145).

The quest for peace and a new national identity is a central concern after the war. For Jonathan, this is not only about personal survival but also about contributing to a society that is healing from the wounds of war. His focus on “civil peace” reflects a personal effort to align his identity with a more stable and hopeful future, even if the larger nation struggles with post-war fragmentation.

The economic context is also crucial in shaping Jonathan's identity. The war has left most of the population in a state of poverty, and Jonathan's identity is, to some extent, defined by his economic circumstances. Jonathan said in the story, “What do you want from me? I am a poor man. Everything I had went with this war. Why do you come to me? You know people who have money...” (Achebe 143). The limited resources available to him after the war challenge his previous self-conception. Jonathan's identity shifts from a person of wealth or prominence to someone who must work diligently with small opportunities after war. His optimism, however, is key to his new identity. He sees his small victories, such as earning a modest income from his bicycle business as successes. This reflects a shift in his understanding of identity: rather than being based on material wealth or societal status, identity becomes tied to personal resilience and the ability to adapt.

For Jonathan, his family plays a central role in the formation of his post-war identity. The story highlights that identity is not only personal but is often shaped by one's connections to others, particularly family. Protecting Family is a core value; Jonathan's relationship with his family remains strong throughout the story. "The individual is not a being who is in himself, but a being who is in relation to others" (Foucault 6). His family's survival and unity become the core of his identity, and his determination to protect them reinforces his sense of self. This is especially important in a time of national crisis when the larger community may be fractured.



Jonathan's ability to care for his family amidst chaos solidifies his personal identity and acts as a source of meaning and purpose.

Jonathan's optimism in the face of hardship is an important aspect of his identity. His ability to maintain hope in a post-war world that has lost its direction speaks to his personal resilience and his capacity to adapt to new circumstances. However, this hope is not completed without its tensions. As Jonathan experiences setbacks (such as the theft of his money), his optimistic identity is challenged, forcing him to confront the fragility of life in the wake of war.

"Nothing puzzles God" is an ideological anchor that helps Jonathan maintain a positive outlook. His identity is closely tied to his religious faith and belief in divine will, allowing him to accept the losses and keep moving forward. This attitude of hope becomes a cornerstone of his post-war identity, even as the social and economic landscape around him seems uncertain and hostile.

#### **V. The Theme of Social Turbulence: Central: The Challenges Individuals Face in The Aftermath of War**

In Chinua Achebe's "Civil Peace", the theme of social turbulence is central to understanding the challenges individuals face in the aftermath of war. The story portrays how society, particularly in post-war Nigeria, is struggling to rebuild itself amidst poverty, instability, and the lingering effects of conflict. According to Hofstede, "culture is a living thing, constantly growing and evolving in response to the challenges and opportunities of the world around it" (Hofstede 26). A key manifestation of this turbulence is the prevalence of theft and crime, which contrasts sharply with the idea of peace and the optimism of the protagonist, Jonathan. Achebe uses this social turbulence to explore the complexities of living in a society that has not fully recovered from the devastation of civil war.

In the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, the social fabric has been torn apart, leaving behind a society marked by instability and insecurity. In studying society, it is good to refer to Bakhtin's terms when he discusses social aspects. In this respect, he is interested in the historical development of literary forms, and their interaction with social forms (Kessey 269). Social structures, such as law enforcement and community cohesion, are weakened, and the rule of law becomes unreliable. The collapse of these institutions creates an environment where theft and crime flourish, as individuals seek to survive in a world where resources are scarce, and moral boundaries are often blurred.

In "Civil Peace", one of the most significant instances of theft occurs when Jonathan's hard-earned money is stolen by a group of thieves. This theft reflects the broader breakdown of social order that occurs in a post-war society. "It is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority, but one is in the true only by obeying the rules of discursive 'policing' which one has to re-activate in each of one's discourses" (Young 61). The thieves do not view their actions as criminal in a traditional sense; instead, they see it as a necessary response to the dire economic conditions around them. They are victims of the same system of poverty and instability that Jonathan is trying to rebuild.

The thieves' actions highlight a key aspect of social turbulence; the moral ambiguity that arises in situations of extreme hardship. In a society where basic needs are hard to come by, and resources are limited, individuals may justify crime as a means of survival. "In societies where basic needs are hard to come by, individuals may justify crime as a means of survival" (Doe 45). Jonathan, in contrast, demonstrates a more moral stance, refusing to view the thieves as a simple criminal entity. His ability to forgive them and focus on his family's survival reflects his belief that peace, even in the face of criminality, is more important than revenge or retribution.

Achebe highlights the tension between the ideals of peace and the reality of post-war conditions. Again, "Nothing puzzles God" (Achebe 9). This quote reflects the protagonist's resilience and hope in the face of adversity, highlighting the struggle to maintain peace amidst the chaos of post-war life. While Jonathan clings to a sense of optimism and tries to foster peace by focusing on his family's well-being, the surrounding social turbulence is always present. The people around him are grappling with the same struggles but in different ways—some resort to crime to fill the gaps left by the war, while others, like Jonathan, choose to pursue peace through perseverance.

Crime, in "Civil Peace", is a symptom of peace's fragility. In the context of post-war Nigeria, peace is fragile, and the ease with which theft and crime occur reveals how tenuous the restoration of order is. Jonathan's personal sense of peace contrasts with the lawlessness that others experience. For example, after he feels happy of the survival, he faces those thieves. He attempts to rebuild his life, not only through economic survival but also through the restoration of social values, such as trust and community support. The criminals, however, highlight how peace is constantly threatened by the chaos of survival in a society that has not yet fully recovered from its violent past.

A lesson in social reconstruction is illustrated through Jonathan's willingness to accept the theft as part of a broader societal struggle which suggests a more profound understanding of post-war reconciliation. The peace that Jonathan strives for is not simply the absence of crime, but a moral peace—one that can only be achieved through personal responsibility, forgiveness, and the belief that the rebuilding process requires both economic recovery and social cohesion.

## VI. Different use of Language in the short story

The use of language is significant in shaping the themes, characters, and social context of the story. Achebe employs different forms of language throughout the narrative, contributing to the portrayal of the post-war Nigerian setting, the moral outlook of the protagonist, and the societal tensions that arise from the war's aftermath. An exploration of the different uses of language in the short story is illustrated as follows:

Simple and direct speech is used by Jonathan Iwegbu's which is straightforward, optimistic, and pragmatic. His speech reflects his resilience and the way he approaches life with a positive, no-nonsense attitude. For example, Jonathan expresses his gratitude for the survival of his family and the preservation of his bicycle, despite the destruction caused by the war. His positive outlook is revealed in his simple, direct language, such as when he says, "Nothing puzzles God", emphasizing his deep faith and belief in the power of survival.

Jonathan's use of language is practical and reflects his focus on the essential. He is not concerned with elaborate descriptions or emotional outbursts but instead speaks in terms of immediate survival and what can be done to get by. This use of language is reflected through the culture of Jonathan and the opposing one of the thieves. "Culture is not a static, homogenous entity; it is a dynamic and contested terrain, constantly being shaped and reshaped by internal and external forces." (Hall 274). This focus on survival and resilience is mirrored in his language, which is economic, devoid of unnecessary flourishes, and always oriented toward solutions.

Class Distinction is practiced in this short story. The language used by Jonathan's community is distinct from that of the thieves. The former speaks a humbler, communal language, reflecting their shared experiences in a post-war society.

Jonathan's speech, though not elaborate, is clear and grounded in the community's values. He speaks with a level of respect and dignity, even when dealing with the thieves who steal from him. Achebe highlights class distinctions in "Civil Peace" through Jonathan's perspective when he reflects, "To Jonathan, it was a miracle that he and his family had survived the war at all" (Achebe 3). This sentiment emphasizes the struggles of the working class amidst the societal upheaval following the conflict.

Achebe's use of colloquial language adds authenticity to Jonathan's character: "Nothing puzzles God" (Achebe 2). This reflects Jonathan's optimism and resilience in the face of adversity. Additionally, proverbs such as "A man who uses force is afraid of reasoning" (Achebe 15) underscore the importance of dialogue over violence. Moreover, Achebe's vivid imagery enhances the narrative: "The sun was hot on his back as he walked along the dusty road" (Achebe 5), illustrating the harsh realities of post-war life. In terms of social class and background, Jonathan's dialogue contrasts with the thieves' language, which is often more aggressive, and rooted in survival tactics. The thieves are not concerned with the polite formalities of social interaction, as they are acting from a position of need and desperation. In contrast, Jonathan's speech reflects his ability to maintain respect for human dignity, regardless of the adversities he faces.

Achebe uses proverbs and idiomatic expressions in Jonathan's speech to reflect the cultural context of Nigeria. For instance, the phrase "Nothing puzzles God" not only reveals Jonathan's faith but also shows how the language carries cultural meaning. Proverbs in Nigerian culture are often used to encapsulate wisdom and offer concise moral lessons, and this is reflected in Jonathan's way of speaking. His language reflects his background and understanding of the world, shaped by traditional African values.

Jonathan's language is infused with a sense of local pride and a strong sense of belonging to his community and culture. Even when he interacts with other characters, his speech remains tied to his cultural identity, underscoring the importance of language in reflecting personal and social identity. By using culturally rich expressions, Achebe reinforces the theme of survival and hope that is deeply rooted in Jonathan's sense of who he is and where he comes from. "One of the biggest challenges in cultural exchange is overcoming the ethnocentric tendencies that lead us to view our own culture as superior" (Gudykunst, W. B., & Ting-Toomey, S.).

## **VII. Conclusion**

Chinua Achebe's "Civil Peace" explores the optimism and the search for identity in the aftermath of conflict. Through Jonathan Iwegbu, Achebe illustrates how resilience and a hopeful outlook can empower individuals to rebuild their lives and redefine their identities even in the face of overwhelming adversity in a deconstructive style. The interplay between hope and identity is evident as characters navigate their new realities, grappling with loss while striving to reclaim a sense of purpose. The story emphasizes the ideological framework of the society in Nigeria in the post-war period. Language is also a turning point in the short story; Achebe uses two different forms of language. Ultimately, "Civil Peace" serves as a poignant reminder that optimism can be a powerful tool for transformation, enabling individuals to forge new identities and foster resilience in the wake of turmoil. Achebe's work encourages readers to recognize the potential for growth and renewal, underscoring the enduring strength of the human spirit in its quest for meaning and belonging.

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