

Suicide as a Panacea to Loneliness; Loneliness as a Necessity of Spirituality

By Oyindamola Osonowo

In Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*, the reader is presented with an interesting character in K. K is portrayed as an individual with complex conflicts, which ultimately culminate in suicide. There is no explicit reason given for his suicide. However, events portrayed in the book as well as some interesting character traits make an inquiry into his suicide both interesting and compelling. Although Sensei believes that K's suicide is a result of feeling betrayed by a friend in whom he had confided his love of a woman, coupled with an identity crisis, there is evidence that points to other possible reasons for K's loneliness and eventual suicide. Sensei's feelings of guilt and holding himself accountable for K's death suggest an over-inflated sense of importance. The character of K is strongly spiritual and independent-minded; he is what Freud would call an egoist. This paper seeks to explore in Freudian terms whether K's loneliness can be attributed to either or both his spirituality and his egoist defense mechanism, and whether this loneliness was partly or wholly responsible for his suicide.

K's problems begin with his family's anger at him for his deceiving them. His family thinks that he is studying to be a doctor while in fact he was studying subjects that would lead him to the discovery of "The Way." His deception is even more problematic as it involves another family who has adopted him and is paying for his education. His filial obligation to them demands that he train to be a doctor. Freud proposes that an individual has very strong ties to his family and derives his initial sense of identity from his family. Freud argues that the family, the germ cell of civilization, is unwilling to give up an individual to society and that "detaching himself from his family becomes a task that faces every young person" (Freud 58). In K's case, his detachment from his family in order to pursue his own personal ambitions leads to severance

of ties with his family and ends in a feeling of intense loneliness. He feels that he has been disinherited and has lost a focal point in his life in losing the connection that he once had with his relatives.

On the matter of his dishonesty, K does not indicate that he feels any initial remorse. In fact, he tells Sensei of his deception that, “he did not mind doing such a thing, so long as it led him to the ‘true way’”(Soseki 166). This represents a conflict of interest between K’s personal ambitions and the ambitions of his family for him. At first, his ego triumphs over the superego and he is able to pursue his goal without feelings of guilt or remorse. Sensei supposes that K’s confession to his family might be so that they would tell him to carry on since he had already started. In any event, it would have been difficult for him to carry on with the ruse indefinitely; and K confesses to his family what he has done. His earlier feelings of rectitude quickly change though. In the earlier stages of the fiasco he maintains his stand of self-righteous indignation, and even resists Sensei’s efforts to act as mediator and breach the gap between him and his families and reach reconciliation. The effect of this is that all parties involved are upset, but K’s families especially so and they decide they want nothing further to do with him. Freud says that the conscience is never more vigilant than when misfortune befalls a man and he “searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness [and] heightens the demands of his conscience” (Freud 87). This severity of the superego or strictness of conscience represents one’s own aggressiveness toward the ego. This might explain K’s change of behavior after his expulsion from his father’s house. Sensei comments that “he became more and more sentimental, and occasionally he would talk as though he carried on his back the misfortune of all mankind” (Soseki 173). When Sensei tries to calm him down for his own good after the misfortune that has befallen him, K tells him that his objective is to “become a strong person through the exercise of will-power” (Soseki 173) and K

thinks that this strength can only be achieved by living austerely. Freud suggests that a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals. Sensei concludes that this austerity, rather than make K stronger, makes a neurotic out of him. K's discharge from his family and his feelings of being victimized lead him to have stronger feelings of guilt and a sense of frustration. The loneliness he feels makes him begin to question the purpose for his life and he becomes increasingly worried about his future.

According to Freud, "religion ... explains ... the riddles of this world" (Freud 22) and K's turn to religion and a quest to find "The Way" can be explained as a bid to find a purpose for his life. K's religious beliefs require that he renounce the world, turn away from it, and withdraw himself from it in order to achieve this oneness with the universe. K is searching for "The Way" and believes that "everything had to be sacrificed for the sake of 'the true way,' [which] necessitated not merely restraint of appetite, but total abstinence" (Soseki 215). The total abstinence being talked about includes celibacy, which negates any hope of a romantic relationship with a woman, and the renunciation of any kind of physical pleasure. As Sensei puts it, K seemed to regard respect for material things as a kind of immorality. K suffers from loneliness because of severing ties with his family. His devotion to his spirituality can be explained as a way to assuage his loneliness and find meaning in his life. Living in straitened circumstances makes it difficult for K to form intimate human relationships. For example, although he and Sensei are good friends, Sensei talks about the difficulty he has in discussing intimate things with K, because K is not approachable: "Though we were good friends, there was a stiff formality about our friendship, and it was difficult for me to break through this wall of formality" (Soseki 188). K even resists Sensei's initial attempts to bring him closer to society by

interacting with Okusan and Ojosan. This loneliness undoubtedly causes him a great deal of suffering, suffering which he welcomes because he believes it will make him a stronger person.

On first examination one would think that in his spiritual quest for “concentration of the mind” and “control of passions,” K contradicts Freud’s pleasure principle, which holds that man’s demands of life and the measure for the attainment of achievement are restricted to the quest of sustainable happiness and the absence of pain and displeasure:

A tendency arises to separate from the ego everything that can become a source of such unpleasure, to throw it outside and to create a pure pleasure-ego which is confronted by a strange and threatening ‘outside’ (Freud 14).

K is an ascetic, endures great pain and suffering as a necessity of his spirituality, and thus does not actively do anything to diminish his suffering. Sensei remarks about the extremes that K takes this to when he says of K “he seemed at times to think that mistreatment of the body was necessary for the glorification of the soul” (Soseki 176).

While it is almost impossible to imagine that K’s endurance of suffering might actually be in line with Freud’s pleasure principle, it is a notion that cannot be discounted nonetheless. Freud says, “all suffering is nothing else than sensation; it only exists in so far as we feel it, and we only feel it in consequence of certain ways in which our organism is regulated” (Freud 27). According to Sensei in speaking of K’s aversion or indifference to comfort he says, “he seemed to be under the impression that once one had become accustomed to hardship, one would quickly cease to notice it....He believed, I think, that there would come a time when he would become insensitive to hardship” (Soseki 177). Freud explains,

One may therefore hope to be freed from a part of one’s suffering by influencing the instinctual impulses. This type of defence against suffering...seeks to master the internal

sources of our needs...killing off instincts...If it succeeds, then the subject has...given up other all activities as well—he has sacrificed his life; ... he has achieved the happiness of quietness (Freud 28)

In other words, if one can master one's ego (wherein lies an individual's defense mechanisms) to become accustomed to suffering, one would become insusceptible to it. This, of course, corroborates Freud's principle about man's desire for happiness and his quest to avoid unhappiness. This is a profound explanation for K's ascetism and his quest for happiness. He is not merely seeking "The Way" but also the "happiness of quietness" that Freud explains further as, "a certain amount of protection against suffering is secured, in that non-satisfaction is not so painfully felt in the case of instincts kept in dependence as in the case of uninhibited ones" (Freud 29). K's case can be described as one of "masochism," which Freud says, is a union between destructiveness directed inwards and sexuality. K believes that "love without bodily desire was to be avoided" and strongly believes in celibacy, which Freud would call a restriction on his love instinct. Freud would also argue that the instinct of destruction embodied in K comes with narcissistic enjoyment, in which the ego enjoys the fulfillment of the wish for omnipotence, for control over the human flesh and control over human nature, which is precisely what K's suicide in this context represents. He strives like the ascetics for tyranny "over their flesh for the freedom of their souls, who had lashed their bodies so that they might find the way" (Soseki 193).

K is strongly an egoist, inclines towards self-sufficiency, and thus seeks his main satisfaction in the acquisition of knowledge and the discovery of "The Way." It becomes easier to understand why K feels confused and suffers an identity crisis upon falling in love with Ojosan if one considers Freud's ideas about ego boundaries. The ego is defined to be "partly

conscious and contains the defense mechanisms and the capacities to calculate, reason and plan” (Peter Gay, “Sigmund Freud: A Brief Life in Freud xx). Thus, the ego defines an individual’s sense of self. Freud argues that ego boundaries are the result of a distinction between our own persons and the “threatening external world” that thus prompts us to set up psychological boundaries as a defense mechanism. To Freud, these boundaries are lowered or indeed eradicated when, at the height of being in love, the boundary between ego and love-object threatens to melt away. Then the ego loses the clear and the sharp lines of demarcation, which define our feeling of self, which according to Freud is the thing we are most certain of. Sensei tells us of a K who does not hold others’ opinion of him in high esteem as long as he is of the conviction that what he is doing is right. However, towards the end of the book K expresses the quandary in which he finds himself where he wants Ojosan’s love but is unwilling to give up his sense of self (his ego) in order to pursue that love. He says to Sensei, “I can’t decide whether to take a step forward or to turn back” (Soseki 213). Considering K’s initial contempt of Ojosan as a woman, it is unlikely that K feels that Ojosan has or can become more like him, “K remarked to me that women seemed to graduate without having learned a thing. He attached no importance whatsoever to the things which Ojosan was studying outside of school” (Soseki 184). It is more likely instead that he feels he has to be more like Ojosan for there to be a “we” rather than “I,” for his ego boundaries to be less clearly demarcated in order to become one with Ojosan.

In his analysis of the situation, Sensei infers that K is afraid to ignore his past as that would mean that his life so far has been without purpose. For K, an identity crisis is extremely troublesome, especially if it conflicts with his bid to find significance for his life in the pursuit of his spiritual ideals. It is obvious that K considers control of passions and will power very important, and he considers the “humanity” that Sensei upholds as a weakness. When Sensei

tries to extol the virtues of being “human,” he finds K accuses him of trying to hide all my weaknesses behind this word” (Soseki 192). The realization then that he might be considered weak or inconsistent causes him great discomfort and instability. He needs reassurance of his sense of self and asks Sensei what he thinks of him. He is very troubled when he says, “I have found I am a weak man, and I am ashamed...I am lost. I have become a puzzle even to myself” (Soseki 213).

K’s suicide letter to Sensei implies that he decided to die “because there seemed no hope of his ever becoming the firm, resolute person that he had always wanted to be” (Soseki 230). The loneliness that K feels from losing his family and his subsequent turn to spirituality to assuage that loneliness only serve to further isolate him from civilization and society. His repression of both his aggressive and love instincts makes him neurotic. Rather than unleash his aggression outward, he internalizes it and directs it towards his ego. He embraces suffering and pain in a bid to live a meaningful life, not realizing that it is a defense mechanism to counter the pain he has to endure as a consequence of his expulsion from his father’s house. His endurance of pain and suffering is a manifestation of the guilt he felt for deceiving his family. His internalized aggression and his feelings of hopelessness upon realizing that he is not the person that he thought he was and he will never be that person that he hopes to be lead to his eventual destruction. His final words to Sensei, “Why did I wait so long to die?” (Soseki 230) are a profound testament to the hopelessness and futility that he has always felt since losing his ties with his family.