

WAR OF GODS: LANGUAGE, IRONY AND AESTHETIC DISTANCE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S ARROW OF GOD

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Of all West African novelists, it is Achebe who has emphasized the utilitarian value of art in his writings and pronouncements. He states candidly that he is a committed writer and that his novels are influenced by his political ideology. All his novels have either been a proof or a prophecy of the stress and strain in Nigeria's march towards independence, through early years of democracy and through the rigorous military regime. Being a talented writer, Achebe goes beyond mere story telling. He makes us reflect on our lives and on the history of humanity. It is his political ideology and its evolution through the historical phases of his country that render uniqueness to Achebe's novels. One can notice the novelist growing logically from a teacher to a critic and critic to a reformer.

Achebe's greatness as a novelist lies in his artistic handling of his political ideology or authorial ideology. In literary creativity there is always a contradiction between an author's political ideology and the demands of art. Achebe does not allow the imperatives of his political ideology to triumph over his artistic creativity.

To withhold his involvement and to distance him from the narrative, Achebe employs various artistic devices. For the sake of analysis these can be divided into two broad categories -- thematic and stylistic. The major stylistic devices are narrative

techniques, domestication of the English language, use of irony and satire, symbolisms and the use of proverbs, folk- tales and songs as paradigms.

Things Fall Apart, and its historical sequel *Arrow of God*, take us to the next generation of Igbo history when the white man has established his religion, administration and trade. In Achebe's Igbo community art is intricately bound with the rural culture. It is one of the key realities. There is music, dance, painting, carving, and decoration. Every man and woman is an artist in his or her little world, adding dimension to natural objects in his or her little way. Edeogo, eldest son of Ezeulu, is a master carver. Achebe presents Umuaro as a microcosm of the Igbo society. By exposing their values, laws and rituals, he brings to light the beauty and autonomy of the African culture. Achebe's fundamental theme is not merely picturing the beauty and harmony of these societies, but exploring in detail how their moral equilibrium is upset by the white man who appears on the Igbo land as trade administrator or missionary.

The major conflict in *Arrow of God* is between Ezeulu and Ezidemili, the priest of Idemili. Achebe presents this war of Gods as an outcome of the British administration from Okperi. Achebe unfolds the story of the fall of Ezeulu through a series of episodes- the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves, the "war" with the neighbouring village of Okperi over a piece of land against Ezeulu's advice, the sacrilege committed by his son in putting the Royal Python inside a box, the offer of Paramount Chieftaincy to Ezeulu and his refusal to accept it, and the tragic finale of his madness caused by the death of his first son.

Ezeulu, headstrong though he was, was also a man of truth; his voice was also the voice of sanity; his counsel, always one of sobriety and moderation. He made enemies, as men of his type always do, including his own son. But he shines through it all a magnificent man.

Negritude is a cultural and political myth used by Achebe in the novel. This ideological movement, an existential philosophy, according to Leopold Sedar Senghor, is not only a way of being but also a way of living. It attempts to redefine the ethnological aspects, and re-evaluate Africa within a non- western framework. It has helped in rediscovering Africa and in establishing a new social order. It tries to liberate the man of colour from himself and has rejected what the white world stands for, but it has degenerated into an intolerant and arrogant racialism. Achebe, like Negritude writers, in his anthropological novel tries to glorify and celebrate what is good in the African past; but unlike them appears to have denounced the unhealthy traditions and inhuman rituals and practices by exposing the social evils, and political injustices, in his other two novels dealing with modern Nigerian society.

A man of two worlds is another African myth that Achebe has dealt with in this novel. Ezeulu has a strong affiliation to the native tradition but is drawn to the alien culture.

Time is the matrix and functional structure of the human self. The time in African fiction is entirely different from that of the Western. African time is a two-dimensional phenomenon with a long past, a present and virtually no future. Instead of numerical

calendars, the traditionalists have phenomenal calendars in which significant events or phenomena constitute time. To them, time is meaningful at the point of the event. We are told that the death of Okuata, the first wife of Ezeulu, occurred when the evil moon was sighted with legs upward in the sky, a bad omen. Africans have a lunar calendar, “hunting months,” “wedding months,” “hot months,” and “the beans harvest months”. In *Arrow of God* the story begins on “the third nightfall since he began to look for signs of the new moon.” The arrival of moon is watched and welcomed with religious fervor. The pattern of events in the novel suggests the linear view of history in his imaginative rendering of colonial history. The details of events establish the Igbo chronology. The market weeks, moons, harvests, festivals, season and lunar years can be contrasted with the Western weeks, days, dates and twelve-month years.

The time scheme of *Arrow of God* seems to be more elaborately worked out in terms of years. But the phrase “five years ago” occurs more as refrain. The emphasis falls more on the events that distinguished that particular year than the precise date:

On the day, five years ago, when the leaders of Umuaro decided to send an emissary to Okperi with white clay for peace or new palm frond for war, Ezeulu spoke in vain.(15)

In the five years since the white man broke the guns of Umuaro...(38)

It was five years since Ezeulu promised the white man that he would send one of his sons to church. But it was only two years ago that he fulfilled the promise. (45)

In *Arrow of God* Captain Winterbottom uses the phrase “more than two years ago” to describe an event which might have taken place in 1919. The past which is two years ago is expressed as “the more recent past” or “*mgbe gara aga*”. The more distant time is expressed as “*mgbe dianya mgbe*”. Such expressions show more of the spirit of the Igbo system of telling time than the Western one.

For Africans, religion is individual as well as communal and they have a more personal concept of God. The gods in this novel are more immanent than transcendent. The godly power in the novel helps and guides the people in restoring the social order. Achebe emphasizes the vital aspect of the myth- divinity grounded on human realities in this novel. Achebe conceives of God primarily as a moral postulate. He is de-mystified in *Arrow of God* and is brought right into the midst of villagers’ fights with the creation of Ulu as the protector of Umuaro to instill the collective will to work for prosperity, progress and freedom. Umuaro gods- Ulu, Eru, Idemili- are, like Greek gods, not above jealousy and spite.

Achebe consciously employs symbols and symbolistic techniques in this novel. He has used with economy, traditional rituals and conventions to symbolize the Igbo community. In *Arrow of God*, Ulu symbolizes the spirit of political cohesiveness combating the external forces to safeguard the freedom and integrity of the clan. The chief deity also symbolizes the enlightened consciousness of the people of Umuaro, and Ezeulu as his supreme spokesman. The theme of *Arrow of God* elaborates the destruction of the tribal world, but through a more sustained character. Achebe in alternate chapters

depicts the two worlds which could never come closer. Native folktales and legends woven into the novel do not have much relevance to the plot but create the atmosphere that strengthens the traditional life. The threat of collapse of the order because of its exposure to a superior order is stated by Achebe in a proverb, "... a man who brings ant- ridden faggots into his hut should expect the visit of lizards"(3).

Ezeulu, Nwaka, and Captain Winterbottom are symbolic agents of this tragic development. The role of the white man in the collapse of the traditional society is conceived as much symbolically as historically.

Achebe in his novels intentionally draws white characters as flat characters, for they do not totally represent any people, but together they symbolically stand for forces of an alien culture, to which the central characters respond. Captain Winterbottom, the District Commissioner in *Arrow of God* is a foil to the ambitious Chief Priest who tries to demonstrate his temporal authority on Umuaro. Achebe has deliberately made his white characters just phantoms playing insignificant roles in the history of their province, and he gives them names suggesting anonymity.

Achebe's novels are perceived differently by the readers and critics and are thus symbolic. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe has symbolically demonstrated the triumph of a new faith over the superstitious old order, maybe the liberation of soul from the grip of the old order. In the novel, the role of the white man in the disintegration of the tribal world is conceived as much symbolically as historically. Achebe demonstrates that the white man's presence merely acts as a catalyst in the ruin of the old order, which is mainly due to the

antagonistic forces within the clan.

Achebe's fictional art goes beyond argument and propaganda and traces the decline and fall of the Igbo utopia towards the political nightmare of corrupt society. Achebe renders meaningfully the Igbo encounter with historical change and crisis and uses with creativity his sense of the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past.

In all his literary works, Achebe has creatively Africanized the English language. In the process of writing counter-narratives to Euro-centric misrepresentations of Africa, Achebe has successfully harnessed the colonizer's language to make it bear the burden of his native experience. Reading his novels, which are set in Nigeria during different historical periods, one can hardly miss the fact that his narrative strategies change in accordance with the time and message of each novel.

One of the ways in which Achebe manages to Africanize the speech of characters in his novels through their use of Igbo words. Although this fact has long been noted and commented on, little has been said about Achebe's accomplishment of using Igbo words in ways that enable even the reader who is ignorant of that language to grasp most of the meanings. Like any other African novelist who chooses to lend authenticity to speech by the use of African words in dialogue, Achebe is faced with the problem that for the great part of the English-speaking world African languages are exotic.

Faced with this real difficulty, the writer who still elects to use African words has two basic options: provide translation through glossary, footnotes, or prose explanations within the novel or attempt to use African words so that their meanings emerge naturally

in the dialogue or in the context of the story. Of the two the latter is more demanding. For Achebe, the supreme achievement of this approach is to be found in *Arrow of God*.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe's use of words taken from the "immediate cultural and language environment" is not limited to words that are explained. Most Igbo words in *Arrow of God* are explained but a few remain obscure.

Achebe's handling of words whose semantic meanings are generally ascertainable can be put into three categories. First, he explains in a non dialogue passage words that appear, or have appeared in dialogue; second he explains Igbo words within the dialogue in which they appear; third, he places the words in contexts in which their meanings are relatively clear.

When Ezeulu, the chief priest, welcomes a visitor to his compound, Achebe introduces the word *nzu* and explains it as soon as it appears: "Here is a piece of *nzu*", he said as he rolled the chalk towards his guest, who picked it up and drew on the floor" (69). A similar technique is used with the word *omu*. A diviner making a sacrifice for a girl who has just been married prepares his material and then makes a request to a member of the party: "Give me the *omu*." Edogo passed the tender palm leaves to him. He tore out four leaflets and put away the rest" (134).

This transparent approach is balanced by the more sophisticated technique of explaining Igbo words within the dialogue in which they are initially uttered. Sometimes the meanings are quite specific; sometimes they are general.

On a few occasions, context and syntax join forces to help a reader arrive a general

meaning of an Igbo world. At one point in the story, several members of Ezeulu's family are quarreling in a way that angers him. After vainly seeking to determine the cause of the argument, he tells one of them: "Let one of you open his mouth and make *fim* again and I will teach him that a man does not talk when masked spirits speak" (146). Syntactically, the verb *make* needs to be followed by a noun phrase; contextually, Ezeulu is speaking in anger. It seems, then, that *fim* can be understood only generally. Whatever its precise meaning, the making of *fim* is something that angers Ezeulu. In the generalness of its meaning, the word is similar to one used later by two of Ezeulu's sons when they are questioned about whether or not an incantation they uttered actually caused a snake to run away. When the old man asks how the snake ran away, they reply: "It ran away *fiam* like an ordinary snake" (234). In this case, the syntax demands an adverbial construction. The word could mean *quickly* or it could be a word imitative of manner, something like the English *swish* or *zap*. The specific meaning does not matter; the point is that *fiam* indicates the way ordinary snakes ran away. In *Arrow of God*, the tag "personal god" can always be applied to *chi*, but *chi* is not always thought of in the same terms. The word first occurs in dialogue in a speech Ezeulu makes to the elders, who are debating the question of war. Ezeulu opposes the war and, in a series of points he makes against it, uses the word *chi* three times and its rough English equivalent, "personal god", once.

From Ezeulu's speech, *chi* begins to emerge as a personal god who is connected to pride and fate and sets limits to a man's conduct. No sooner are these notions grasped,

however then a new idea is introduced within two pages. Nwaka, the rival of Ezeulu, secretly opposes the chief priest and manages to convince a group of villagers of the rightness of his ideas. "If a man says yes then his *chi* also says yes," Nwaka states (p.31) as he urges war. *Chi* may still set limits to conduct, but, according to Nwaka, they are not arbitrary limits.

In the rest of the novel or its English equivalent appears several times. It becomes increasingly clear not only that there is no English equivalent for *chi*, but also that the concept itself is rather complex. The best that the reader can do is to conclude that *chi* refers to spiritual forces fully respected but not fully defined, to the mystery of human life and behavior, to the extra rational that seems involved in ideas of fate, fortune and luck. If, in other the meaning of *chi* is less than precise, the concepts themselves seem a little fuzzy. After all, Achebe writes fiction not cosmology. It is his triumph that he handles English dialogue well enough that the general meanings of alien concepts emerge in a novel that is much more art than anthropology.

Achebe is successful in his use of Igbo words in his other novels too but *Arrow of God* is best for an examination of his techniques. Language in *Arrow of God* is another site of excellence, which displays the novelist's sensitivity towards various idiolects, and also his artfulness in harnessing the same in integrating English with various shades of Nigerian reality.

The initial phase of the colonial encounter is the social matrix on which *Arrow of God* is based. Through the creative process of recollection and association Achebe

foregrounds what the ancient world of the Igbos must have been like. However, his is not an uncritical rendering, as what he attempts to do is to re-create the past and in the process question the very nature of change or cultural transition. He invokes with delicate poignancy the primal force and beauty of the archetypal image of Africa and it is this spirit that seems to imbue Ezeulu in different ways. The lack of a comprehensive social vision and the emptiness of modern existence have hardly any relation to the past that Achebe had portrayed in *Arrow of God*.

The anxiety that is reflected in *Arrow of God* underlying human condition has its specific history. The search for meanings, values and ideals suited to the needs of the emerging context creates an alterity that helps define the process of identity formation in terms of the axis of resistance against homogenization threatening to stifle indigenous growth and development. Achebe through this novel attempts to explore both the possibilities and limits that emerge in the very process of acculturation and reflects the alternative language that writers must find by an active engagement with the contexts that they are trying to critically define.

Generally women in Achebe's works are revered and honoured as mothers. This is not strange in Igbo culture and African traditions. But *Arrow of God* is more chauvinistic and patriarchal than its predecessor. Ezeulu's story has little room for femininity. Woman fills gaps while the male characters dominate the spiritual, social and political lives. Woman is, at best, tangential to male actions and intra-gender clashes. We see women and girls as storytellers but for the rest, this novel is a celebration of patriarchy and masculine

strength and rivalry.

Achebe's reconstruction of Igbo history, his evocation of a traditional culture with a predominantly oral sensibility -- a structure of feeling that is still extant in contemporary Nigeria -- paradoxically make use of writing. His books are among the first few written documents on the Igbos. Gareth Griffiths has considered this act, the transmission of an oral culture through writing, as evidence of the writer's participation in the process of the destruction of that pre-literate world (89).

In recent years, there has been a growth of interest in the nature of the state in Africa. The African state, in its colonial and postcolonial manifestations, has been the subject of a vast body of theorization. Here the state has been categorized variously as patrimonial (Sandbrook 11), a weak Leviathan, in decay, or in crisis (Callaghy 87-116). Within this wider scholarship, there has been a distinct interest in the creation of the African state under colonial occupation, (Mamdani 46) in the theoretical underpinnings of colonial administration and in indirect rule and the role of law in colonialism. These themes occupy Achebe in *Arrow of God* and it is therefore worthwhile to explore contemporary discussions of the nature of the colonial African state before turning to the author's account.

Apart from its literary and aesthetic merits, *Arrow of God* demonstrates the ineffectiveness of logic devoid of rhetoric as a means of persuasion in social matters and the inability of rhetoric divorced from dialectic to lead a society to success when it is confronted by contingent matters that require the rhetor's masterly steering of the populace

towards the right decision. At each point of the novel the reader sees that the protagonist, Ezeulu, is a wise man who knows how things ought to be in his society, is astute and fore-sighted enough to discern the impact the invading culture is going to have, and tries to prepare himself and the society for it. In the major scenes of oratorical combat, those between Ezeulu and Nwaka, Achebe probes the relationship between dialectics and rhetoric.

The ideas of fact and truth play a crucial part in the whole debate. Ezeulu regularly fails to consider that a fact is a fact only when everybody agrees that it is a fact.

Like Ezeulu, Winterbottom is a man immersed in dialectic. The name Winterbottom is a metaphor for the man's character and his effectiveness. Winter is a cold month in the Western temperate world -- a world that has, in effect, intruded into the tropical climate of Africa. The word *winter* evokes a picture of the lethargic state into which everything and everybody go during this season. *Bottom* has the connotation of stark stupidity in the Igbo language. The description of Okperi, which Achebe gives at the beginning of Chapter Three when he introduces Captain T.K. Winterbottom, is that of a place seen through the eyes of an ignorant white man. Only a white man will see the coming of the first rain in the terms of Achebe here uses to describe it: "the heat had been building up to an unbearable pitch" (32).

Winterbottom, a European colonizer, lies to himself when he presumes to know the natives because he lacks the power to know. It is the repudiation of the colonizer's lie. This justification of imperialism becomes the counter-discursive and the political

imperative of Achebe's project in the novel like *Arrow of God* (Achebe, 44).

Achebe has explored the various possibilities of the English language to capture vividly and credibly the overall ambience of Nigeria of the early 1920s. The stylistics employed by him in the novel form could be a subtext by itself, enlightening various subtle paradigms of theme and characterization.

Achebe's excellence in the individualization of his main characters should not lead to his novels of traditional life being studied as if they were, in the European tradition, the tragedies of those characters. To be true to his total achievement, we must keep to his expressed emphasis on the society in conflict and transition. Though much is exposed through the sensibility of the main character, the novel does aim essentially at the most crucial points of the colonial penetration and subjugation of the Igbo people and their spirit. Achebe's treatment of the society in all its facets, and the society's confrontation with Europe, must therefore be given the strategic positions they hold in the total novelistic exploration of the theme.

Critics have looked at setting, style, conflict and characterization in terms of cultural, political and religious considerations. The internal conflict of central characters, one of Achebe's achievements, lies in his skill at the externalizing the conflict of his characters.

Achebe distances himself from the events he pictures, from the characters he portrays and from the ideology he pronounces. This ability to step back from total involvement makes Achebe a unique artist. Outside his novels Achebe makes open, point-

blank commitments, but inside them we meet an ambivalent and tongue-in-cheek attitude. One can even notice an apparent contradiction between what the author says outside and inside, between his authorial and aesthetic ideology, between veins on the one hand and the demands of art on the other hand (Ngara 117). In the dialectics between these two there emerges a lasting work of art.

For artistic distancing, Achebe uses various thematic and stylistic devices. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe hints that the much praised democratic nature of the Igbo community has been the very cause of its disintegration.

The rural societies of Achebe are not models of internal harmony. Achebe wants us to believe that the rural societies were receptive to change, and the premises of the new religion, especially in the form of the fruits of education, attracted them. He wants us to believe also that the civil order of these societies was destroyed as much by internal stress as by the colonial invader, though it could be argued that but for the presence of the white man they could have held things together regardless of their internal fissures. This ability to balance events and to express sentiments without sentimentality makes Achebe's artistic distancing safe.

Thus a reader recognizes the contradictions between Achebe's political ideology and the ideology which his novels project. The events pictured are not, one would feel, in keeping with the pronouncements made by the author before or after the publication of the novel. He creates an impression in the reader that he is listening to an objective, detached and impartial narrator who is not emotionally, personally and ideologically present in the

narrative. This artistic distancing is the key to Achebe's fiction- craft. And the thematic devices employed by him for this are the most conspicuous ones.

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