

PORTRAYAL OF CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

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Abstract:

Achebe, The Voice of Africa and the trend setter, in his fiction besides fulfilling his role as a novelist, as a teacher has been establishing the need of the commoner to be rooted to the traditional past and attacking the natives for the post-colonial pangs and the problems that come with the same. He has been finding fault with the complacency of the natives for not being ready to oppose the corrupt practices of the post-colonial government ruled by the politicians of Nigeria. As a votary of the Ibo culture to which he belonged, Chinua Achebe's appeal however, has been to possess a collective consciousness which will hold aloft the African-Nigerian pride which lies in its culture. This paper attempts to analyze Achebe's celebrated novel Arrow of God published in 1964 in terms of its thematic concerns and identity the cultural conflict the Nigerian confronts.

Key Words: Traditional past, post-colonial government, collective consciousness.

Arrow of God is a portrayal of the last few months in the life of Ezeulu the chief head of Igbo clan of Umrao in the year 1921. *Arrow of God* is the story of Ezeulu, the headstrong priest of God Ulu who is worshipped by the six villages of Umrao. Soon he finds his authority under threat from his rivals in the tribe from the government and members of his own family. He strongly feels he must not be threatened and there can be no one who can touch him. Armed with this belief, he is prepared to lead his people even if it means destruction and annihilation. Yet the people, no more allow him to dominate them. The novel is thus a portrayal of the loss of faith and struggle between change and traditions.

“The peculiar quality of the novel lies in the fact that it is the novel which I am most likely to be caught sitting down to read again. We should be ready to salute those who stand fast, the spiritual descendants of that magnificent man Ezeulu in the hope that they will forgive us. For had he been spared Ezeulu might have come to see his fate as perfectly consistent with his high historic destiny as victim, concentrating by his agony thus raising to the stature of any ritual passage the defection of his people. And he would gladly have forgiven them.” (Achebe, 1965)

A magical writer, one of the greatest of the 20th century, Achebe knew very well the role of the novelist as a teacher and critic. The African writer was born on the crest of the anti-colonial upheaval and worldwide revolutionary ferment. The anti-imperialist energy and optimism of the masses found their way into the writing of the period. The very fact of his birth was itself an evidence of new assertive Africa. The writing itself whether in poetry drama or fiction even, where, it was explanatory in intention, was assertive in tone. It was explaining itself, speaking for itself and interpreting its past. It was an Africa rejecting the images of its past as drawn by the artists of imperialism. The writer even flaunted his right to use the

language of the former colonial master anyway he liked. The Caliban of the colonial world had been given European languages and he was going to use them even to subvert the master. There is a kind of self-assuredness, a confidence in the scope and mastery of material in some of the best and most representative products of the period. Chinua Achebe's works are exemplifications.

Achebe claimed his fundamental theme in his essay, novelist as a teacher to be that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty that they had poetry and above all they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost in the colonial period and it is this dignity they must regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all the novelists' duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa, he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. Achebe has pointed out that the African writer should be a cultural nationalist aware of his responsibility to explain the traditions, African history and values of his people to that hostile alien world. His task, he felt, was to espouse to help his society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the year of denigration and self-denigration. I should be quite satisfied if my novels did no more than preach my readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long myth or savagery from which the first Europeans acting on Gods' behalf delivered them.

The African now, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution has no choice, but that of aligning himself with the people; their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival. The writer will have to confront the languages spoken by the people. He will have to rediscover the real languages of struggle in actions and speeches of his people and learn from their great heritage of creative and above all, learn from their great optimism and faith in the capacity of human beings to remake their world and renew themselves. He must be part of the people who take up arms to smash the new colonial state to complete the anti-imperialist national democratic revolution they had started earlier. A writer must be part and parcel of that unity for democracy, socialism and the liberation of the human spirit to become even more human. Achebe from his role as a teacher and as a novelist has been looking at Nigerian culture as a propagandist and as a protestor too.

The novel *Arrow of God*, was based on Joyces' *Carry's Mister Johnson* which Achebe found appalling who held the view that the colonial powers undermined a healthy civilization constructed over centuries and witnessing its destruction were unwilling to put anything in its place. Achebe has based his novel on the disintegrative effect of colonial intervention.

In the novel, Umurao, the town is the center of the action. The town has a history that retreats into the very distant past when lizards were still few and far between. The action centers round Ulu who deals simultaneously with the adherents of the rural God Idemili, adherents who hold great political power and with the district officer, Captain Winterbottom who has chosen Ezeulu to be his warrant chief in Umurao. The priest declines this offer though it would give him the power to dominate his enemies. Instead, he gets imprisoned for his obstinacy, at government headquarters far from home. His imprisonment passes through two new moons, two sacred yam festivals, harvest, yams remain uneaten yet, and the festival to be called by the priest could not proceed. This makes Umurao face famine the climax, the Christian mission officer's absolution from the wrath of Ulu to those who bring their thanks giving offerings to Christ, and Ezeulu abandoned by his god, rises into the haughty splendor of a demented priest.

Ezeulu, knowing well that the power of his god is waning in Umurao seeks to maintain it. He faces the internal threat from the rival god Idemili and his supporters who claim that Ezeulu is seeking too much power and the external threat from the white rulers and his power god. The threat comes from the nearby town Okperi which is the world of the colonial officials and the District officer Winterbottom.

“The sense of the collective that Achebe attempts to present emerges as important as the individual protagonist and through the portrayal of the rituals associated with birth, marriage, death and the rites of passage, festivals like the *New Year Festival*, *Feast of the Pumpkin* and ceremonies associated with other ceremonies and, arts, he attempts to uphold the entire flow of Igbo life.” (Ghosh, p-38)

In the *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu questions the nature of his own power.

“Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and therefore over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast, but he did not choose the day. He was merely, a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive, it was his; he would find its food and take care of it; but the day it was slaughtered, he would know who the real owner was. The chief priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day, there would be no festival, no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse?” (Arrow of God)

The above lines assert the individual power and it also marks the downfall of Ezeulu. The problem of knowing of authority is the central issue in *Arrow of God*. Achebe interrogates the sources and limitations of the authority of Ezeulu and in doing so; he sows the seeds of dissolution by admitting into the novel the existence of an infinite range of normative possibilities:

“Diversity of disputing processes and intricate connectors between everyday behaviors and the living law.” (Innes, 72)

According to Achebe, all representations are inevitably misrepresentation.

“The moment I became conscious of the possibilities of representing somebody from a certain standpoint, from that moment I realized that there must be misrepresentation, there must be misjudgment. There must be even straightforward discrimination and distortion.” Achebe speaks of depiction of Africa in European literature and the need to correct misrepresentations.

Ezeulu's consciousness of uncertainty of his power is contrasted with the approach of the British administration towards him. Whereas Ezeulu perceives his power as one which never be used, the colonial project requires him to exercise the authority of a warrant chief.

“The creative misunderstanding which is necessary for the British to make an administrative chief out of a man who is certain of the limitations of his spiritual role, is examined in the novel”, says Debashish Lahiri. (p124)

The colonial state is portrayed as being skillful and adept in finding a chief where none has existed before. The novel concerns itself to explore the administrative and political power exercised by the British through native chiefs.

Culture, the fruit of history always reflects each moment the material and spiritual realities of the society of individual man and of man and social being, confronted by the conflicts which put them into opposition with nature and the imperative of life in a community. Further every culture is made up of essential and secondary elements, strengths, and weaknesses, values and defects, positive and negative aspects, progressive and stagnant or regressive factors culture. The creation of the society and the synthesis of the equilibriums and solutions which society engenders for the resolution of the contradictions which characterize it at every stage of history is equally a social reality independent of the will of men, of the colour of skin, or the shape of eyes. Undoubtedly the denigration of the cultural values of the African peoples based on racist prejudices and on the aims of perpetuating their exploitation by foreigners has done much harm in Africa. But in the face of the vital necessity of progress, the following acts and practices will be just as harmful. Undiscerning praise, systematic exaltation of virtues without any criticisms of faults, blind acceptance of cultural values without considering the negative, reactionary or retrogressive aspects 'it has or can have, confusion between that which is the expression of an objective and material historical reality and that which seems to be a figment of the mind, as the result of a specific nature; the absurd linkage of works of art be they valuable or not to claimed characteristics of a race; and finally the

unscientific critical appreciation of cultural phenomenon. These lines acknowledge the right of any community or peoples to determine what constitutes the progressive or retrogressive aspects of its own culture. The preliminary responsibility of ascertaining and bringing to knowledge every aspect of society that has gone into the creation of its periodic cultures. Finally it is imposed upon the creative intellects of that society the task of reinterpreting through then contemporary experience and visionary activity. These are the natural lessons of those cultural properties without the dominance of external preconditions. Their process constitutes what is called the assertion of a cultural autonomy.

Chinua Achebe is an evocator of the past. The history of African people provides us with two principal enemies of their authentic traditions and their will to cultural identity. One is European imperialism, the other Arab-Islamic penetration and domination of significant areas of the continent. The creative methods of dealing with both provide a spectrum that reveals sometimes in spite of the anthroxi-conscious intent, the prior culture of the society which these foreign values have supplemented. The first category includes cases where the author no longer queries, or indeed is hardly conscious of the event of his ethno-cultural supplanting, his writing proceeds from a basis of self-negation, an ethnic submission which need not be a matter of conscious choice. The writer recognizes him being and his society in no other terms than what is easily proved akin.

The writings by the elite prompted the emergence of a second category Negritude a phase of black affirmation by the great black francophone poets and dramatists like Leopold Sedar Senghor and they said Rationalism is essentially European; the black man is emotive and intuitive. He is not a man of technology, but a man of dance, of rhythm and song. This view of black man's world did not pass without its challenges however and even the Negritudianists soon found themselves compelled to begin to modify their position. Still, they did receive some unintentional bolstering from another category, best described as unmediated exposition. Chinua Achebe has been considered as the first practitioner.

Achebe, in the novel explores the intricate connections between authority and labour. "The Whiteman's view is built using unpaid labour chosen by the elders among the age groups of Umrao." To conclude, in the words of a well-known critic, in the novel, Achebe presents the picture of a total universe over which the gods Ulu and Idemili are pitched in a deadly conflict against each other through their protagonists.

Ezeulu knew that the priests of Idemili and Ogwugwu and Eru and Odo had never been happy with their secondary roles since the villagers get together and made Ulu and put him over the older deities. But he would not have thought that one of them would not have thought that one of them would go so far as to set someone to challenge Ulu. And when later he decides to carry the struggle against his rivals to avenge humiliation at the hands of the white man, it is possible for him to see the struggle as something larger than a personal issue. It was a fight of the gods. He was no more than an arrow in the bow of his god.

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