



MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONFLICTS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

DR. G. VENUGOPAL

Asso. Prof. & Head

Dept. of English

Vasantrao Naik College,

Nanded. (MS) **INDIA**

ABSTRACT

Multi-dimensional conflicts and clashes form basis of the novel Arrow of God. The conflicts vary from place to place, person to person and situation to situation. These conflicts arise due to various reasons such as: internal political conflicts, personal and family tensions, rivalries, the jealousy, concern for status and above all the titanic conflict in the religious domain, the colonizers domination over the colonized.

INTRODUCTION

Arrow of God reflects the conflicts of the person of Chief Priest of Ulu. He is the ritual and religious leader of Umuaro. It is a text of manifold conflicts. At first there is a conflict between the local British administration represented by the old-fashioned administrator, Winterbottom, and the native authority represented by the Chief Priest. It also reveals the internal political conflicts between the supporters of the Chief Priest and those of his rival Idemili. It is a conflict between the personal power and, the temptation to constitute himself to an 'arrow' of God, and the emergencies of public responsibility.

The sub-plot in the novel deals with the personal tensions in the house of Ezeulu. It depicts the stress between the father and grown-up sons, and between the children of different mothers in his polygamous house. All these conflicts are result of culture-contact. Ezeulu is the Chief Priest of Ulu, who feels breakdown very keenly. He does not deprecate the change which is inevitable. Ezeulu reviews the situation. He reiterates his historical and ritual role among the leaders.

At the beginning of the novel, the authority of the Chief Priest remains under active attack from the Priest of Idemili who uses his kinsman. It was the presence of the colonial administration that people were in need of collective security. There is a clash and conflict

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between the colonial authority and traditional authority. The colonial authority had withdrawn the judicial and legal rights from the traditional authority. But the collective security was weakening. The effect of the super-imposition of a higher authority with a greater power of coercive violence is to create a ferment in the structure of traditional authority itself. The dominance of Ulu was accepted by Umuaro in the time of old power structure. But now the scenario changes and the situation is seen as an opportunity to shake off an irksome hegemony. The resentment during the pre-colonial days becomes active. Nwaka repudiates the rights of Ulu in the speech that he makes in a secret rally.

Ulu's power is not only confined to the security but he is also guardian of social well-being and keeper of the calendar. His priest keeps the agricultural calendar and calls the biggest feast of the year. He should also shoulder responsibility to care about the economic security. Nwaka's uncompromising attack is a serious move that indicates the falling of the old collective ideology. Chief Priest's horizon for extending his power is confined to limitation. Ezeulu is unaware of the limitations of his power:

"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 could be his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know soon enough who the real owner was. No! 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." (Achebe 1974:3).

Nwaka and Ezeulu are symbolic of inter communal rivalry. Their personalities do not match and they always repel each other. In *Arrow of God*, the God of security is Ulu, his will is interpreted by the Chief Priest. The open attack on Ezeulu's authority is possible in Umuaro because under the pressure of colonial administration, the Christian church and the new economic forces, the oracles and the priests begin to lose their hold on the people. There are realignment of relationships and a readjustment of attitudes. Social transformation empowered Ulu's dominance in the structure of a traditional power. This describes the fragmentary political relationships of the earlier times. A feeling of greater security is behind the attack on Ulu's authority; the 'security' role of Ulu is completely left out of Ezidemili's tirade. His conspiracy could only work at a time of increased security. The presence of the colonial administration and the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade explain this feeling.

To describe the pre-colonial and colonial society, Achebe takes us to the past with some marvellous series of flashbacks. In the novel, he takes us into the past for historical material. Here he contrasts between pre-colonial and colonial society.



Captain Winter bottom's sole resolution to introduce indirect rule in his area of authority proves the craziness of the colonizers for domination to exist for a long time. He decides to make Ezeulu a warrant chief for the Unuaro district. Even the Chief Priest is taunted by his enemies as the creature of the British administration. At first Ezeulu refuses to leave his home immediately to go to Okperi as ordered by the Whiteman. Grabbing the time at right opportunity, Nwaka and his partisans accuse the Chief Priest openly for dealing with the Whiteman. Nwaka declares to cast out Ezeulu.

The pun on 'Whiteman' and Nwaka's indictment of the Chief Priest is calculated to wound most deeply. Ezeulu abandons the effort to mobilise his support within his clan and sallies out to face his fate single-handed. He expects gratitude for the imperial favour of being raised to a paramount chief. He is confronted and rejected. After two months he is released. His 'two months' detention upsets the agricultural calendar. People are hurt by delay in harvesting.

Achebe focuses on the human realities in *Arrow of God*. The text depicts the crevices that had developed in the tradition system as in *Things Fall Apart*. The chief character tries to build a bridge over the wide gulf. Due to the inadequate grasp of situation Ezeulu fails. In *Arrow of God* Achebe covers the events from the greater part of 1921. Achebe states in one of literary conferences:

"I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did not more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." (Mahood 1979:180).

The text is a documentation of the details of history. The centre of the narrative is held by the Chief Priest, Ezeulu, and his extended family, in which marriage and parent-hood are never private concerns; a son marries and his bride is regarded as 'their new wife'. The extended family coheres around the Obi and its shrine, the village coheres around the market place, and the deity. New Yam Feast, a big harvest of the clan is their greatest festival. At Okperi, which is six miles away from Umuaro, there is a seat of British administration.

In the Umuaro community, customs and traditions predominantly rule much better rather than the rulers. The Whitemen at Okperi feel pride for their clocks and calendars. Their pride feeling is short lived because the Igbos have collectivism. Even the Igbo child is brought up to strive for individual achievement. The colonizers notion is that the Igbos are primitives and they develop a kind of aversion on the colonizers. So Achebe focuses that Igbos have their own culture, customs, traditions, philosophy and history. The colonizers think them as 'primitive' but Achebe shows they have their own tradition, history and philosophy. It



expresses Ezeulu's tragedy where we behold Achebe's criticism of life, his sensitivity to complexities of character with great force and beauty.

When Ezeulu gets angry with his Christianized son, he suppresses his anger on him and he throws his rage on Edogo. Edogo sublimates his resentment and carves fearsome masks. Ezeulu, in his determination to make the community suffer for the humiliation it has inflicted upon him, strikes at its very existence in the farming year. The community thinks Ezeulu as Whitman's tool. Winter bottom plans to appoint Ezeulu as warrant chief over Umuaro. Ezeulu is summoned to Okperi. He refuses because a priest is not supposed to desert his village and god. But the community refuses to stand behind him in his refusal. Confused by the new power in the land, they insist that he should go to Okperi at the invitation of his white friend.

Ezeulu is detained by white administrators at Okperi. He seeks a means of compensation for his humiliation that he has suffered at the hands of Umuaro. His opportunity comes three months after his release. He fails to perform his priestly duty of keeping count of the months to the yam harvest. He refuses to proclaim the Yam Festival that initiates the harvest. Though he believes that he is acting as an agent of Ulu, he commits a crime against the earth on which man feeds. Even before the sudden death of his son Obika, which seems to Ezeulu to show Ulu's desertion of him, causes his mind finally to break. The novel concludes with Ezeulu's downfall which is desired and anticipated by the natives because Ezeulu is backed by the white people. The people carry their tribute to a strange God and the Chief Priest remains an awesome figure. His body is painted half black and half white representing as intermediately between the world of men and the world of spirits.

The novel from the very outset describes the tension between communal responsibilities and individual ambition that work within Ezeulu's mind. The first force of disruption in the novel is military, since the Igbo's have no powerful chiefs.

After 1906 the show of military power in Eastern Nigeria was formidable than at the opening of the century. The intervention and Winterbottoms' award of the disputed land to Okperi, in Ezeulu's eyes is a kind of display of strength. It is seen by Winterbottom as victory of his tribal God that is British imperial power. As Ezeulu has a title of Chief Priest, he also got the title of Captain after fighting with the Germans. Winterbottoms confidence has been impaired by his wife's desertation. Like many colonial administrators, he has a belief in the civilizing mission. Winterbottom appears like G.T. Basden, who was the pioneer missionary among Achebe's own people. Basden's *Niger Igbos* has a frontispiece – the photograph of Ezeulu, that is a priest, half man and half spirit, the spirit of half being painted white, confronts with



dignity the white photographer Basden whose black shadow falls across the foreground. The same feeling of negative and positive is depicted in *Arrow of God*.

Igbos not only wanted to control the colonial influence but also wanted to capture it. But Ezeulu thinks that this new force can be useful for his community where he has his own responsibilities. That is why he agrees to send his son Oduche to take education in Umuaro by Christian mission. The python's struggles in the novel depicts the resentment as Moses experiences. His authority is questioned by new generations of Christians with 'book-learning'. It symbolizes nothing but frustration that the society undergoes as its guns are broken by the new administrators and its gods blasphemed against by the new religion.

Ezeulu is ready to act in this way in his son's defense. He decides to go to Winterbottom and ask him the reason. Ezeulu fails to ask Obika if Wright struck the first blow. But before this, Winterbottom sends for Ezeulu. Winterbottom also faces individual frustration since he has to ask according to the orders of his headquarters. Affairs at Okperi are left in the hands of Clarke. Clarke, like his superior officer, fails to ask the right question at the right time. He rationalizes his failure to ask questions by constructing a theory that the way to get the things done in colonial administration is to impose the demands of one's own culture.

When Ezeulu is free to go home, a crisis occurs in the novel. Since he is isolated for over a month at Okperi, he is cut off from his life and community. He gets angry with the Umuaro people, who have shut him into this box of white people. He has a dream of frustration that Umuaro elders turn against him and calls him the priest of a dead God because he fails to save them from the white man. Achebe represents Ezeulu's fatal decision of postponing the Yam festival with narrative dexterity.

Achebe uses highly skilled craftsmanship in constructing the novel. '*Arrow of God*' describes Achebe's vigorous style. Achebe wrote '*Arrow of God*' four years after Nigeria's independence. It was a time of the resentment and apprehension for the Igbo. Igbo men who left their overcrowded and over cultivated farmlands in order to work in the North, found themselves discriminated against the physical danger. The novel was written when the Igbo people thought that they were shut up in a box. They were frustrated. '*Arrow of God*', like some other outstanding political novels, derives its vitality from the fact that it was written in the time of sharp political awareness. Since the writer's bow is perfect the arrow moves rightly. In the novel, Achebe focuses Ezeulu with a greater concentration. He is a tragic hero, who chooses destruction of his people at last. In 1967, the Igbo political leaders made the same tragic choice. In 1969, the near starvation of people in the Igbo heartland brought them total agricultural dependence. In some degree Achebe himself was victim of the war.



Mahood, M.M. (1979:204) comments:

“If ‘Arrow of God’ is a story of frustration and of the suicidal defiance which is an individual way of escape from that frustration, it is also a story of resilience. A blind and desperate act of vengeance offends against the community and against the earth that nourishes it, but both renew themselves; the question ‘What can happen to Earth?’ asserts an acceptance of forces that are far more powerful than the idols of the den.”

‘Arrow of God’ is the most complex and richly-textured novel that has come out of Africa. In many ways ‘Arrow of God’ is a truer sequel of ‘Things Fall Apart’ than ‘No Longer at East’. The context of *Arrow of God* is greatly expanded both in time and space. The centre of the action is the town Umuaro, that possesses a history. In *Arrow of God* no single event is organized, but there are number of events, i.e. hundred arrows in the hands of god that bring about the rite of passage, which is substance of the novel.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* Achebe deals with Igbo culture. The source of *Arrow of God* is a socio-historical pamphlet published by Nigerian Police Force. His name was Alagbogu Nnolim, and the title of the pamphlet was *History of Umuchu*. One of the passages in it was a story of the priest who refused chieftaincy, was imprisoned and had rejected to roast the sacred yam.

Briefly the action of the novel concerns with the priest of Ulu who must deal simultaneously with the adherents of the rival 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 Umuaro. The priest declines the chieftaincy, though it is the medium of vehicle for him which endows him with the power to dominate his enemies. Instead, imprisoned for his obstinacy at government headquarters away from home, he conceives a higher retribution for his enemies and the enemies of his god.

Like *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* concerns with socio-cultural milieu of the people prior to British occupation. These books focus greater depth in African tradition and myth and deal with the problems of cultural conflicts and especially with the colonial situation. We find a kind of similarity in the protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Okonkwo and Ezeulu are common in terms of their respective communities and sincerity of their purpose.

In the text Achebe represents the highly individualistic and hierarchical group of Europeans. They reside at the Government Hill of Okperi of the five Europeans, first is captain Winterbottom the first generation colonial administrator who is District officer. Tony Clarke

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is the second generation colonial officer. Wright is a Public Works Department man engaged in a road-building activity. Roberts and Wade are two police officers.

Achebe fictionalises the clan loyalties and political rivalries. Achebe chooses the historical sequence of the 1920s of the Igboland. It also explores the depth of myths, rituals and traditions of the clan. The novel emphasizes that power rests only with group, community and society.

Achebe's concern for his natives identity is clearly reflected in the novel, *Arrow of God* through various anecdotes, incidents situations and characters. However, there is a scope for thinking as to how one can suppress the colonial domination over the Africans. Time has come to create political awareness among the Africans to liberate themselves from the enslaved life.

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