

SOME REFLECTIONS ON ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*: A REDACTIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper reviewed Achebe's *Arrow of God* using a critical methodology known as Redaction. According to Caner & Caner (2002), Redaction is "the process of re-defining an established set of terms to fit one's own ideas" (105). Redaction is applied in this study thus leading to a re-examination of the roles of the central character, Ezeulu in the novel. Through this process, the paper re-affirmed that change is the central theme of the novel and that Ezeulu and Umuaro are at the heart of this sweeping change. While Umuaro is reluctant to accept change initially, Ezeulu embraces it earnestly but foundered when it matters most thus leading to both his ruin and the ruin of his deity. After a careful re-examination of the circumstances under which Ezeulu rejects the requests of both the colonial administrator and his clan, this paper concludes that far from being as progressive as his words and actions initially portray him to be, Ezeulu is an anti-progressive traditionalist whose conservatism spells doom for him, his deity, and his Umuaro society.

Introduction

Achebe's *Arrow of God* has attracted much critical attention over the years thus necessitating our use of redaction in this present study. This is absolutely necessary because as DeCrane (2004) tells us, "For symbols and texts which emerged in specific settings to be meaningful in new contexts, they must be reinterpreted, taking account of the changed meanings of words, new symbols, a different sociological setting than was the context of the original text'..."(p.1). Redaction is a kind of re-interpretation of a text in a new context. According to Caner & Caner (2002), it is "the process of redefining an established set of terms to fit one's own ideas" (p.105). Redaction is used in this study to re-examine the roles of the central character, Ezeulu in the novel.

Arrow of God is Chinua Achebe's third novel first published in 1964. In over fifty years of its existence, the novel has enjoyed a robust critical attention from critics all over the world. The numerous reviews the novel has garnered over the years constitute a challenge to the present day critic who wants to study any aspect of the novel as it is almost impossible to review all the critical commentaries on the novel in a paper like this. Notwithstanding this impediment, we shall attempt to look at a few of the important statements made about the novel by critics known to this writer.

Chukwumah (2016) studies *Arrow of God* from the point of view of Achebe's portrayal of Ezeulu as a tragic

hero. He sees a parallel between Ezeulu and other tragic characters in the works of classical writers. Similarly, Olatunji (2016) does a comparative study where he juxtaposes the experiences of the society in *Arrow of God* with the experiences of the Nigerian nation in our so-called nascent democracy urging that Nigerians should learn from the mistakes of the characters in the novel.

Nnolim (1999) begins his reading of the novel by asserting that there “is indeed paucity of critical exegesis on structure and technique in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*”. This comes as a surprise considering the numerous commentaries on the novel as hinted earlier. Nnolim’s view in a way corroborated Udentia (1993) who insisted that much of the critical outpourings on African works were mere “theme and style analysis of arguably mature works, in trite, run of the mill fashion”. In his own view, Nnolim argued that the paucity of critical exegesis on structure and technique of *Arrow of God* is due to the fact “that much of the sociological background of the novel seems to have blurred its artistic and aesthetic merits by the sheer weight of its intrusive presence” (209). Nwokocha (1998) seems to have preempted Nnolim’s view as he focuses on an aspect of language use in the novel, i.e. the language of altercation. Both Nnolim’s and Nwokocha’s approaches are justifiable given that a novel has multiple layers of meaning and what each critic does is to look at it from a convenient angle depending on his background and intention. The critic of the novel is in a sense akin to the proverbial

Hindustan blind men who described an elephant based on the part of the beast that each of them touched or felt.

Earlier before Nnolim's view, both Machila (1981) and Mordaunt (1989), among many other critics, had focused on the character of Ezeulu who happens to be the major character of *Arrow of God*. Machila (1981:119) opined that Ezeulu is an ambiguous character "because his motives are always mixed and spring from numerous, often conflicting interests dictated in part by his personal drives and in part by the demands of his priestly office". Machila's view is anchored on facts emerging from a close examination of Ezeulu's roles in the novel during the war with Okperi where he testifies against his own clan and later his decision to send his son to the new religion and school. These roles caused his image as the priest of the Umuaro community to nosedive. Attempts by his relatives and friends to lure him out of these decisions prove abortive, thus warranting Morduant's (1989) view that Ezeulu's "stubbornness sets him apart as an individualist in a communal structure" (p. 157). We totally agree that Ezeulu by his actions proves to be an individualist and that his individualism in an otherwise communal setting is largely responsible for his tragedy in the novel.

Be that as it may, we must note that *change* is at the heart of Achebe's *Arrow of God*. It is the major thematic concern of the novel. However, the attitude of each of the characters to the sweeping changes in their mode of existence differs. While the leaders of the clan initially

resist and oppose the changes brought about by the incoming colonial administration, the chief priest of *Ulu*, their major deity, wholeheartedly accepts same. In fact, in the words of Udentia (1993), Ezeulu in a bid to follow the path of change “sacrificed one of his sons to the God of the new religion brought by the white man” (p.95). Ezeulu’s words as we would see later justify this view.

Nnolim (1999) has noted that change is central in *Arrow of God* and the other novels by Achebe:

Achebe seems to be obsessed with the concept of mutability from one important novel to another... The statement Achebe seems to make from one novel to another is that no one can successfully resist the forces of change because the forces of change are by far stronger than the stubborn individual (p.209).

While the above comment is true about *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo’s failure to reconcile himself with the sweeping changes in the mode of existence in his society leads to his tragedy, one can argue that Nnolim’s comment is truer about *Arrow of God* where it reflects the central concern of Achebe in creating Ezeulu. With respect to Umuaro in the same novel, it can be rightly pointed out that neither their elders nor their chief priest understood the full import of the sweeping changes in their clime at the beginning until they are made to learn the hard way.

This paper thus sets out to examine the issue of change in the novel while probing deeper into the various issues that surround the actions and the reactions of the central characters with respect to change. Along this line, we intend to prove that far from accepting change as it seems through his use of a plethora of proverbs that underscore the desirability and necessity of change, Ezeulu indeed wants time to stand still in Umuaro in order to maintain his status quo in the community. This reflects one of the assumptions of conflict theory as Emezue (2011) tells us: “individuals and groups that benefit from any particular structure strive to see it maintained” (p.56). We shall achieve this through Redaction. According to Caner and Caner (2002), Redaction is “the process of redefining an established set of terms to fit one’s own ideas” (p.105). Redaction is a term that is widely used in theology but we have decided to apply it here since it deals with texts. For us therefore, Redaction is the process of re-examining a text and seeing with new eyes the author’s meaning which is hidden from previous readers.

Umuaro and the Imperative of Change

Emezue (2011) tells us that one of the assumptions of the Conflict theory is that “Change occurs as a result of conflict between competing interests rather than through adaptation” (p.54). There is no place that this assumption is truer than in *Arrow of God*. The numerous competing interests in the novel: the colonial administration as

represented by Captain Winterbottom; Umuaro town as represented by their elders; Okperi town; Ezeulu; Eze Idemili; Nwaka of Umunneora; Church Missionary Society as represented by their catechists etc. are all locked in mortal combat as their interests clash. This clash in turn triggers off the massive changes that are witnessed in the novel.

As we read *Arrow of God*, we discover that change is not an unusual phenomenon in the six villages that make up the Umuaro clan. Earlier in the novel, we are told that the six villages had not been living together as one clan all along. They lived separately with their different deities, priests, markets and even customs in the past. However, change came their way when they joined together to form a clan under one deity. This enabled them to ward off the incessant attacks by the warriors from Abam that were a nightmare to them at that time. The new deity was named Ulu and its chief priest was named Ezeulu. Ezeulu was chosen from a family in Umuachala which happened to be the smallest village in the clan (pp.14-15).

Besides, there were changes in other areas of the clan's socio cultural life. For instance, the practice of carving faces as a test of manhood, the practice of turning children born to widows after the death of their husbands to slaves were all abolished at one time or the other in the clan. Similarly, the number of titles a man could take was also reduced to four. Ogbuefi Nnanyelugo in his famous discourse of change in the novel emphasizes the imperative

of change and the need for Ezeulu to accept the fact of change by eating the remaining ritual yams:

... Nnanyelugo deftly steered the conversation to the subject of change. He gave numerous examples of customs that had been altered in the past when they began to work hardship on the people. They all talked at length about these customs which had either died in full bloom or had been stillborn. Nnanyelugo reminded them that even in the matter of taking titles there had been a change (p. 209).

All these underscore the imperative of change in the novel. However, as important as these changes were at the time they occurred in Umuaro, none of them was of the same magnitude as the sweeping changes which the incoming colonial administration brought. The white man brought a new religion, an educational system, new judicial system, new system of governance etc. Thus in a nut shell, what the white man brought is a total or complete change that would turn around completely the clan's way of life. It is important to note that in all the previous cases of change which the clan earlier witnessed, though there were few dissenting voices in the clan, the majority of the people accepted them wholeheartedly. On the contrary, the

changes brought by the incoming colonial administration were unanimously rejected by the entire clan. This view is buttressed by the colonial administration whose records show that:

Umuaro had put up more resistance to change than any other clan in the whole province. Their first school was only a year or so old and a tottering Christian mission had been set up after a series of failures (p. 117).

The attitude of resisting the changes brought about by the new colonial administration by Umuaro in the novel sharply contrasts with the open acceptance of these changes by their Okperi neighbours who wholeheartedly gave their land for the building of the administrative headquarters of the colonial regime. Umuaro's resistance to colonialism puts them in the same class with Umuga in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*, another colonial narrative. Umuaro however, does not resist to the point of fighting a bloody war with the administration as Umuga did in Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel. While the leaders of the different villages of Umuaro reject the colonial intrusion, their chief priest, Ezeulu accepts some of these changes thus leading to the initial faceoff between him and the rest of the clan's leaders who either rightly or wrongly accuse the chief priest of having betrayed the clan. Ezeulu's role in the land dispute between Umuaro and their Okperi neighbours and his subsequent decision to send his son,

Oduche, to the new religion and school (an indication of his acceptance of change) are seen as evidence of the chief priest's betrayal of the clan thus leading to the aggravation of the already tense situation in the land.

However, the conservative attitude of the clan's leaders towards change alters after many years of futile opposition to the colonial administration and the new religion. This comes after they learn, as their chief priest would always tell them that "it was foolish to defy the white man" (p.188). Surprisingly, just as the clan's leaders are coming to terms with the reality of these changes, Ezeulu who had been at the forefront of the advocacy of change and could easily be seen as the only progressive in the clan begins to buckle under the sudden realization that his own position in the clan is under threat of being relegated to the ground. It is in view of this that Ogbuefi Ofoka, one of the clan's leaders relates an earlier discussion with the chief priest to Akuebue:

I reminded him of his saying that a man must dance the dance prevailing in his time and told him that we had come too late to accept its wisdom. (p. 212)

As a seeming progressive who had hitherto accepted the reality of the new religion and government, Ezeulu should also have accepted the change which these brought in the mode of life of the clan and change along with them by modifying the rituals that precede the new yam feast as the leaders of the clan urge him to do. His

refusal to change with the changing times predisposes the clan to hunger and suffering. His latter stand sounds quite strange and contradictory considering his earlier position on the matter. However, it justifies the fact that people strive to maintain the status quo in society so long as they benefit from it.

Although Ezeulu had initially presented himself as a farsighted liberal in Umuaro and often validated his stand on mutability with such proverbs as “if the rat cannot flee fast, it should give way for the tortoise; the world is like a mask dancing, if you want to see it well, you do not stand at a place”, his refusal to accept the change which would have resulted from the proposal of Captain Winterbottom to assume the position of a paramount chief of Umuaro portray him as an anti-progressive traditionalist. Indeed, in view of his already waning popularity in Umuaro leading to Nwaka’s malicious insinuation that both the deity and its Chief priest should be banished from the clan, the only option that could have ensured the continual relevance of both Ezeulu and his deity would have been Ezeulu’s acceptance of Winterbottom’s proposal thereby integrating his priestly office with that of administration under the colonial rule. This could have disarmed his detractors like Nwaka and Ezidemili. This had the potentiality of bringing him close to the white man who is popularly referred to as “the masked spirit of today” (154). This could have catapulted Ezeulu to the position of the spokesperson of the

Ulu deity and the white man who is viewed as the masked spirit of the day.

As mentioned earlier, Ezeulu's subsequent refusal to eat the remaining ritual yams as the elders of Umuaro urge him deals the final blow on both him and his Ulu deity. Had Ezeulu accepted this proposal bearing in mind that it was these same elders that brought the Ulu deity into existence through consensus, he would have endeared himself to the generality of the suffering Umuaro people. As a self proclaimed liberal, his refusal to accept change in this vital area of the clan's life means that the clan would abandon him and his deity to their fate as they take shelter in the new religion, a repeat of what happened many years when each of the villages abandoned their deities and followed *Ulu*. They therefore send their sons with offerings of yams to the Christian harvest which take place shortly after Obika's death:

The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika's death saw more people than even Good-country could have dreamed. In his extremity many a man sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised immunity. (p. 230)

Thus, Ezeulu's refusal to change becomes his ruin and the ruin of the Ulu deity. The clan on the other hand, loses nothing, except their allegiance to traditional religion which they abandon in favour of the new Christian faith.

Thus, the offering of yam which they should have given at the shrine of Ulu is diverted to the Christian church. Ezeulu thus becomes the lizard in his own proverb that ruined his own mother's burial (p. 221). It was in view of this that Nwokocha (1998) describes him as a "mere watchman who does not understand the domineering influence of Christianity on the Ulu deity" (pp.215-216). As a tragic hero, Ezeulu is quite different from other such characters as he falls alone and suffers alone. He loses the support of the entire clan who prefers to see him as a headstrong priest who deserves whatever punishment he got from Ulu. Thus, while we agree with Chukwuma (2016) that Ezeulu is constructed like other tragic characters in Greek literature, we can add that Ezeulu nevertheless differs from these tragic heroes in the sense that he falls all alone and in fact his society celebrates his downfall and ruin.

Ezeulu: An Anti-Progressive Traditionalist

Right from the beginning of the novel, Ezeulu impresses the reader as a progressive in an otherwise conservative Umuaro society. While the clan in their conservatism resists the white man and his institutions, Ezeulu befriends both, thus earning the enmity of his people as we have earlier noted. This is because as the chief priest of the Ulu deity, Ezeulu should have defended the traditions of his people by rejecting the white man's school, government and religion which conflict with the traditional religion that he is presiding over. But instead, he sends his

son to join the alien religion thus betraying both his people and the deity he is serving as chief priest. This in addition to the earlier testimony he gives against his people before the white man's judgment seat.

He is quick to warn his people about the futility of opposing the white man. In a bid to justify his decisions, Ezeulu waxes philosophical:

The world is changing ... I do not like it.
But I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba.
When his friends asked him why he was
always on the wing he replied: "Men of
today have learnt to shoot without missing
and so I have learnt to fly without
perching" ... The world is like a mask
dancing. If you want to see it well you do
not stand in one place. My spirit tells me
that those who do not befriend the white
man today will be saying had we known
tomorrow (pp.45-46).

By espousing such bold opinion at that time, Ezeulu appears to the reader as a progressive in an otherwise conservative society. He does not only accept change but matches words with action by rebuffing the opposition of Ugoye his younger wife, Akuebue his intimate friend, his children as well as the antagonism of his clansmen by sending his son to the new religion. He uses many Igbo proverbs to justify his actions. Nnolim (1999) citing Lindfors (1978) has argued that Achebe used proverbs that

reflected change to provide a grammar of values by which the deeds of his protagonists could be measured and also to serve as thematic statements reminding his readers of some of the motifs in his novels. This is very true about *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu's proverbs, in this regard, underscore his wisdom and at the same time justify his attitude towards the sweeping changes in his community.

But what then could be responsible for his refusal to take concrete action when it becomes very clear that he needs to alter the ritual of eating one yam tuber at each new moon to save the clan from looming starvation? Was his acceptance of change not total? Or was it only in the area of the white man's religion and administration that he accepted change? Was he right to go back to consult Ulu his deity on the matter after Umuaro had spoken with one voice that he should eat the remaining yam tubers and thereafter name the day for the feast of pumpkin leaves?

These are crucial questions whose answers would help us in understanding the role Ezeulu plays in ruining both himself and his deity. We must note that Ezeulu's desire to revenge on Umuaro his infamous trip to Okperi during which he is detained for about two months is responsible for his refusal to consider any other option out of the looming imbroglio. Furthermore, his pride or *hubris* also plays a major role in aggravating the conflict. In view of this, the narrator reminds us that the most proud man in Umuaro could only be Ezeulu's messenger (p.212). *Hubris*, as was the case with Sophocles' Oedipus becomes Ezeulu's

major tragic flaw which eventually leads to his ruin. In his haughtiness and blind desire for revenge, Ezeulu forgets that Ulu is not a nature god like Amadioha (god of thunder), Ala (earth goddess) but a god by convention. That is, Ulu is a god that came into being by mutual consent of the six villages who made it and set it above all the other gods in their clan. Ezeulu forgets that the same villagers that agreed to make the deity at a time of great need could also agree to depose it and its chief priest whenever they desired. Indeed, Nwaka of Umunneora, his foremost antagonist had on several occasions hinted at this truth which unfortunately flew above the head of the proud chief priest. Had Ezeulu caught this truth at that time, he would have no doubt accepted the decision of the leaders of the clan to eat the remaining yam tubers and name the date for the new yam feast. In going to consult his deity first when those that made the deity had told him what they wanted, Ezeulu shows his disrespect for the clan that made the deity he is serving as chief priest.

Secondly, Ezeulu either knowingly or unknowingly, wants to set Ulu and Umuaro against each other. He also contradicts his own saying that “a man must dance the dance that is prevailing in his time” (p.212). So his blind refusal “to dance the dance prevailing in his time” in this area is one of the factors that lead to his ruin.

But, even before this time, Ezeulu had rejected the white administration’s offer of a warrant chief for Umuaro, a position that would have made him more relevant to his

community in the new dispensation especially considering the waning popularity of his deity. His immediate rejection of this offer without even giving it a thought leaves the reader in doubt about where he stands with respect to the changing times. All along, as we noted earlier, he had been outspoken about change, but it now becomes obvious that as a traditionalist, he wants only the type of change that would not tamper with his priestly position over the entire clan so that he could continue to lord it over the clan by controlling both their planting and harvesting seasons. Being a warrant chief would mean his being subject to the colonial administrators at Okperi which would in a way curb some of his vast powers. Thus, he rejects the offer. This meant maintaining the status quo at the expense of everybody. In fact, even his action of sending his son to the white man's religion, as he later reveals, is an act of sacrifice to retain his place in the clan:

Shall I tell you why I sent my son? Then listen. A disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with everyday herbs. When we want to make charm we look for the animal whose blood can match its power; if a chicken cannot do it we look for a goat or a ram; if that is not sufficient we send for a bull. But sometimes even a bull does not suffice, then we must look for a human. Do you think it is the sound of the death-cry gurgling through blood that we

want to hear? No, my friend, we do it because we have reached the very end of things and we know that neither a cock nor a goat nor even a bull will do. And our fathers have told us that it may even happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of things, and their back is broken and hung over a fire. When this happens they may sacrifice their own blood. This is what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere else to put his hand for support puts it on his own knee. That was why our ancestors when they were pushed beyond the end of things by the warriors of Abam sacrificed not a stranger but one of themselves and made the great medicine which they called Ulu' (pp. 133-134).

So we can now have a clearer view of Ezeulu as a core traditionalist who at the expense of his son sacrifices him to the God of the new religion not minding the objections of the boy, his mother and the entire clan. This implies that notwithstanding his several pontifications on the need for change, Ezeulu is more or less an anti-progressive element whose selective approach to change not only ruins him but also the entire social and religious life of the clan. The result of his refusal to change is the abandonment of the Ulu deity by the clan in preference to

Christianity, the death of his son and his consequent insanity all of which are inflicted upon him by the abandoned deity. With the mass defection to Christianity, Umuaro effectively transits from traditional to modern society.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Ezeulu is basically not as progressive as his words and actions initially portrayed him to be. He is a core traditionalist and conservative. His refusal to eat the remaining sacred yams as suggested by the clan leaders so as to protect the clan from protracted famine underscores this. However, his conservatism spells doom for him. This further buttresses the fact that those that make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable and that no man however gifted can win judgment against his clan.

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