
(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Suppressed Anguish of the white man's Burden in Arrow of God

Dr T Eswar Rao, Assistant professor
P G Dept. of English
Berhampur University, Bhanja Bihar
Ganjam, Odisha 760007
teswarrao72@gmail.com

Abstract

Albert Chinua Lumogu Achebe was a prolific Nigerian writer. It is said that he initiated the modern African literature. The ritualistic Igbo religion housing irrational beliefs with strict code of conduct to govern the primitive society of Africa disintegrates for its inherent flaw with the onrush of European religion and materialistic culture. His Arrow of God is a novel, which is written against the negative portrayal of Africa in western literature particularly Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and many more writers preceded by him. Achebe penned good number of fictional and non-fictional works to highlight the vivid picture of British Empire on the basis of this background, the paper is going to unveil the postcolonial anxiety and identity crises as it has been depicted in the novel. It is not only the sole agendum of the paper to discuss the white man's burden but also to depict the latent interests of Britain towards the African continent.

Keywords: AfricanSociety, IdentityCrises, Igbo Religion, Materialistic Culture, Postcolonialism.

Arrow of God (1964) is about the struggle for power and authority between the African society and the missionaries and also within the Igbo clan. The title of the novel is derived from an Igbo proverb in which an event or a person is said to represent the will of God. The identity issues are continued by Achebe as the sequel to the issues reflected in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) during the colonial power. Achebe tried to continue the same identity issues when he points out the continuity of African cultural disruption after the arrival of the missionaries in Nigeria. The former Igbo culture is depicted through the appealing mode of

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

narration with the manifold changes in African culture due to new religion - Christianity, raising the issues of identity among Igbo community. According to Franz Fanon;

The colonial world is a Manichean world the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil' Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society without values. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of the values, but also the negation of values (Fanon 6).

The basic structure of the novel is found in the second chapter in the flashback to an event that prompts the action of the novel itself. Umuaro, one of the hamlets of six villages is the setting for the novel. The land dispute that arose in the neighbouring community of Okperi brings the conflict between the two villages. The priest of Ulu, Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of the six villages, argues that the land belonged to Okperi originally and Umuaro has occupied it along with the rest of the area. Nwaka, the agent of Ezidemilli, the priest of a rival god, prompts Umuaro against Okperi. When a war began between the two tribes something unexpected happens when a white man named Wintabota brings soldiers to Umuaro to stop the fighting forcibly. This episode shows the growing influence of the alien nations in the area.

The Igbo society is closely knit by the blood relationships and the lineages and kinships. Family is at the centre into which the compound of the Igbo individual is considered for the familial relations. It expands at the village level to the clans and the towns. The lineage establishes the associations with the neighbours. The people take the decisions through democratic process as there is no prevalence of monarchy. The whole society has a deep faith in the religious rituals and traditions. All the people of different age-groups interact with each other during the war or in peace. The leaders and the 'tilted' men are honoured as well as the individuals are promoted and given due credit by the achievements, initiatives and leadership.

Arrow of God portrays contradictions of the traditional structures of social order and leadership in Igbo land and the changing world with the typical idea for the fictional presentation. The issues of culture and the leadership of the society directly foster the past

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

social issues and Achebe shifts the focus by taking the course of flashback. In this context, the novel begins with an issue of the leadership in Umuaro and the tribal war between Umuaro and Okperi. There takes place a meeting of the elders and the men of 'title' in Umuaro to decide the ownership of the land on which the dispute takes place. It is believed that the parents explain the true histories to their children as Ezeulu remarks; "my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi, who gave us a piece of their land to live in" (AOG: 16). But Nwaka, who had taken the highest title in the clan, claims that the people of Okperi were wanderers. Nwaka wins the favour of the people in the meeting and it poses the issues of confused leadership in the Igbo clan by the rivalry between Ezeulu and Nwaka. Nwaka spoke in opposition to Ezeulu "My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved on again... Would they go today and claim all those sites?" (AOG 17) It is evident that the religious power of Ezeulu gets dominated by the political concerns through Nwaka's appeal. The social structure of the Igbo reflects the importance of a rank. In the context, Hunter and Whitten point out; "The differences among adults are differences in influence and prestige rather than the absolute distinctions between the powerful and the powerless typically found in state societies". (Hunter & Whitten 174)

Different age-groups inside the society had the voice to discuss the issues of their society as a part of their social mobility while the final sanction of the decisions is up to the elders and the men of title. In *Arrow of God* Achebe writes; "There were murmurs of approval and of disapproval but more of approval from the assembly of elders and men of title". (AOG 16) The power relations form the conventional mode of communication between the clan and the entities. The Igbo traditional system and the colonial administrative order are the socio-cultural forces, which come across at oppositional heads. The colonial power gets dominated at the intellectual and philosophical levels when compared to the logic and the reasoning patterns of the Igbo people. The traditional patterns of Igbos are questioned by the new religion like Christianity. Ezeulu states that the colonial

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

power becomes influential among Igbo people due to the war of Umuaro with Okperi. He says;

We have shown the white man the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on. If we now want him to go away again, we must either wait until he is tired of his visit or we must drive him away (AOG: 133).

The novel focuses on the characteristics of the individual's belongings to the homogenous Igbo society that is trapped in the rapid spread of Christianity among the people. The advent of missionaries brought disintegration to the Igbo society by provoking hostility among them through rewarding trades, education, law and order and the taste of power. Achebe exposes the unpredicted change in the native culture which is bound to the alien rules of the society. Achebe reflects the religious and social power in a representative community with irresistible forces of colonialism. G.D. Killam rightly says, "*Arrow of God* becomes the central volume in a trilogy of novel in which Achebe explores the colonial rule in one area of Nigeria" (Killam 60).

The new religion Christianity invented by the missionaries caused the pacification among Igbo people. Achebe says, "Colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it didn't create big political units where there were small scattered ones before.... of course, there are areas of African where colonialism divided a single ethnic group among two or even three powers" (Achebe 19).

Achebe himself was brought up as an Igbo Christian and, as a child, was a member of a mission making meek attempts to convert the heathen. Undoubtedly Achebe is particularly interested in examining that section of the Igbo community who embraced the church from the time that his own parents did. However, we do not see people raised in a post-figurative society simply rejecting the oral wisdom of their elders and accepting the authority of an alien text. Instead, Achebe depicts the struggles of Igbo converts both to explore unfamiliar doctrines and, just as importantly, to adapt those doctrines to fit their own values and experience. In short Achebe tries to portray in these novels the process by which a new Christianity is formed in the Igbo image.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

The relationship of Igbo people within the tribe and the colonial power represents the disintegration of social identity due to transition and the clash between tribal beliefs and the colonial administration during the 1920s after the advent of Europeans. The Igbo people in Nigeria found it difficult to construct the unified identity during the colonial process. The indigenous identity of them is blended with the influence of the colonizer's culture. According to Achebe the culture of the missionaries cannot be completely abolished through the recollection of the past. The resistance of Igbo people to the modernity was not merely the rebellion against the disruption of the culture but also the necessity to make them free from the clutches from the colonial influence. The continuous struggle of the native people to identify themselves as unified clan was concerned with their desires, predicaments, aspirations and failures. Therefore, the change which the Europeans have brought with Christian beliefs is difficult for adaption in the traditional society of Igbo.

Igbo identity in *Arrow of God* portrays their perception to set the principles of their society with certain customs and social patterns. The Igbo people in Nigeria believe in the supernatural things as a part of the superstitions of their clan. The illiteracy among them allows them to follow the traditional beliefs. Before the arrival of the missionaries, they were known as the primitive tribe of Nigeria. Achebe writes "African peoples 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 that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity they must regain". (Ihechukwu 8)

The beliefs of the clan may be termed as the 'superstitions' about the wicked medicine man like Otakekpele, who provides the strong medicines to the clan to drive away the evil spirits from the bodies of sick people by booming the gunshots as the healing process. The Igbo people follow the instructions of the medicine man to keep the clan away from the evil spirits. Obika challenges the power of Otakekpele and throws him away into the bush during mask dancing spirits. The narrator says;

Obika had dropped his matchet, rushed forward and in one movement lifted Otakekpele off the ground and thrown him into the near-by bush in a shower of

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

sand... Otakekpele struggled powerlessly to his feet pointing an impotent finger at Obika who had already turned his back on him.....The Mask arrived appropriately on the crest of the excitement. The crowd scattered in real or half-real terror (AOG 200).

Achebe used the character of Ezeulu as the representative of old or traditional society. Ezeulu struggles in his responsibility to lead Umuaro in the traditional way according to the requirements of his god. Ezeulu fails not least because of his vanity and over-competitiveness, while Winterbottom the opposite of this character is disabled by his ignorance and ambivalence. In an obvious narrative symmetry, both give in to physical and mental collapse. Ezeulu defied the clan averted the war with Okperi, which brought Winterbottom to the struggle. He testified in favour of Okperi, and against Umuaro, in the land dispute. Ezeulu then decides to send his son to learn the knowledge of missionaries. It is interplay of the forces, domestic and remote.

Ezeulu realizes that the social status can be obtained only by performing well within the society. But the role that he received from the society was not an influential one. His desire to make him more influential drives him to send one of his sons to join the missionaries. Nwaka's active conviction in the society deteriorates Ezeulu's power. As a result, he goes against the traditional ethics of the society. According to Fanon, "traditional authorities, sanctioned by the occupying power, feel threatened by the growing endeavours of the elite to infiltrate the rural masses" (Fanon 66). The social identity of the Igbo finds the disrupted due to the colonial impact. David Carroll points out; "The authoritarian agent (Ezeulu) in seeking to escape from the uncertainties of the new situation identifies himself with the source of his power and resists involvement in an uncertain dialectic. Each man becomes vulnerable through the rigidity of his view; in demanding that the world conform to their premises they become the victims of the new contingency" (Carroll 117). Ezeulu makes the people to believe in Ulu and then surrenders by the inexplicableness of the events. "It looked as though the Gods and the powers of event finding Winterbottom handy had used him and left again in order as they found him" (AOG 232).

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

The Igbo people believe that the power of Ulu their deity protects them. This belief acts as a unifying factor among them in all the six villages. According to Satyanarain Singh, “God in the novel is de-mystified and brought right into the midst of the people's struggles with the creation of Ulu as the guardian deity of Umuaro” (Singh 133). Nwaka, the “owner of the words”, is well-acquainted with the God Ulu, and he considers Idemili powerful than the Ulu. The dispute between Nwaka and Ezeulu on this issue shifts the focus of the Igbo people to Christianity. This crumbled the faith of the native and led to gradual shift to Christianity paving the way for transition to modernity. The Igbo tribe was trapped in the web of dilemma regarding the security and solace. Ezeulu, as a priest of Ulu, unable to understand the mighty power of Christianity sends his son to learn the missionary ways. His justification regarding the same leads to the acceptance of the Christianity. He reveals;

... if there is something there you will bring home my share. 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 (AOG 47).

Ezeulu understands the power of the new religion and feels that the native religion is on the verge of shattering. He wants to find a way to balance his individual religious power by maintaining the Igbo traditions. His decision of the war on Okperi is mainly to resist the colonial power. According to the narrator, “The man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform its ritual and to carry sacrifice to it. But I have been watching this Ezeulu for many years. He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all” (AOG 27).

The disruption of Igbo identity due to the conflicting and disorderly Umuaro is clear when the Umuaro people were astonished by the new rule. Some of the older customs have changed and gave way to the new ones. To exemplify this Achebe writes,

Nnanyelugo deftly steered the conversation to the subject of change. He gave numerous examples of customs that had been changed in the past when they began to work hardship on the people. They all talked at length about these

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

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. Long, long ago there had been a fifth title in Umuaro—the title of king (AOG 211)

It signifies the transition to modernity. The Igbo people are psychologically prepared to accept the inevitable change during the colonial period. The traditional rules are abandoned by the people for the harmonious coexistence of the society. The natives of Umuaro are left with no alternatives but obeying the missionaries and their religion. The road, connecting to Okperi and Umuaro is symbolic rather than the two divert traditional patterns of the Igbo people. It proclaims the repair of the damaging system of the native values by the measures to accept the new religion. Moses Unachukwu tells the natives; “As daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs” (AOG 86). The darkness of the Igbo beliefs and the superstitions is driven away by the Christianity as the natives looked in the change of traditional beliefs.

The transition of the Igbo cultural system in the novel is started with the Oduche’s act against the native religion when he tries to lock the royal python into the box. Captain Winterbottom divided the Igbo people by “making a dozen mushroom kings grow where there was none before” (AOG 60). The missionaries appointed the authorities with the title of warrant chiefs to utilize them as the agents of the new faith and the breakers of the traditional cultural rules of the Igbo society. Padmore writes about the policy of the colonial administration in Nigeria. He says, “The Chief is the law, subject only to one higher authority, the white official stationed in his state as advisor” (Padmore 317). Achebe explains the transformation through colonial administration in a similar way in *Arrow of God* as the destroyer of the Igbo customs which were known as the core parts of their culture. The native culture of Igbo people lacks the material aspects, unlike the missionaries. The culture of the natives treats all by giving due respect even he is an enemy. The difference between the missionaries and the natives matters the most in preaching the gospels of the each of the religions. The narrator says about the Igbo culture,

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Ezeulu often said that the dead fathers of Umuaro looking at the world from Ani-Mmo must be utterly bewildered by the ways of the new age. At no other time but now could Umuaro have taken war to Okperi in the circumstances in which it did (AOG15).

Achebe throws insight about the issues of the cultural patterns among Igbo people. He says; “The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika’s death saw more people than even Good country could have dreamed” (AOG 230). The influence of Christianity according to G. D. Killam, “At the end, Igbo society is smashed and the important part, perhaps the finest part, is lost. When Obika dies, the God has claimed his harvest and it is the Christian god that reaps it”.(Killam18)

In Igbo traditional society the person, who goes against the customs of the tribe, has to face the punishment. But the change by the missionaries among Igbo was accepted by the clan and they believed that it is an inevitable one. The power of the missionaries is mentioned in the proverb, “When two brothers fight, a stranger reaps the harvest” (AOG 132). Thus the quarrel between the clansmen gave a chance to the missionaries to seize the opportunity to spread the gospel of the new religion among Igbo people. And it is believed that this in turn gave the way to modernity as the missionaries brought along with the education.

Achebe used the customs mainly to explain the transition from the traditional society to a modern society. Achebe feels that customs and traditions keep the tribe vibrant about the cultural patterns. The Igbo people follow the customs and traditions to regulate the social order. But the customs and traditions have two aspects. If the people of the, tribe do not change their customs as per the changing cultural patterns, the issues of culture persist to collapse the people. The ethnic issues of identity in different spheres take place as the matter of ‘pride’ or ‘title’ in fostering the right cultural patterns. *Arrow of God* reflects the different customs and traditions of the Igbo clan. The Igbo people believe in the religious practices before the colonial administration in the early 20th century. They had their beliefs in the customs and the traditional practices.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Arrow of God is more of a complex type with a complex meaning. It is essentially both a continuation and completion of a project that has stated with the *Things Fall Part*. Achebe brings to the surface the underlying trend in the traditional novels, which is a continuous attempt to recreate the African past as a living drama in which the readers can appreciate. In *Arrow of God*, the handling of the colonial theme has become distinctly more brittle, less chary, the malice, that are in Achebe, lies just below the surface of the narrative which threatens repeatedly to break out into full-fledged satire, especially in the Winterbottom section of the novel.

Yet in an almost paradoxical way, just because its debt to actual historical interpretation is very clear, Achebe's attempt to portray the system of 'indirect rule' with the aid of large sketches of imaginary documentation is less than satisfactory; the passages have too often the feel of having been discussed in the University seminars on African history; slightly hackneyed from fast handling, they lack their wild imaginative touch as is to be found in the confrontation between Christian missionaries and African traditionalist in *Things Fall Apart*.

Works Cited:

- Achebe, Chinua. "Chinua Achebe on *Arrow of God*." Interview with Michel Fabre. *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*, edited by Bernth Lindfors, UP of Mississippi, 1997, 45-51.
- Achebe, Chinua. "Achebe Answering Questions." *Travelling: Chinua Achebe in Scandinavia*, Swedish Writers in Africa, Raoul Granqvist (ed.), Umea, Umea University, 1990, 34.
- Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe*, London, MacMillan, 1980.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Richard Philcox), New York, Grove Press, 2004.
- Felix, Ekechi. *Gender and Economic Power: the Case of Igbo Market of Women of Eastern Nigeria*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1995.
- Gikandi, Simon. "African Literature and Modernity." *Matatu: Journal for African Culture & Society*, vol. 35, 2007, 3-19.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Hunter, David and Whitten, Philip. (eds). *The Study of Cultural Anthropology*, New York, Harper and Row, 1977.

Jeyifo, Biodun. "An African Cultural Modernity: Achebe, Fanon, Cabral, and the Philosophy of Decolonization." *Socialism & Democracy*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2007, 125-141.

Killam, G.D. *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*, London, Heinemann, 1969.

Kortenaar, Neil ten. "Arrow of God and the World on Paper." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2009, 467-473.

Madubuike, Ihechukwu. "Chinua Achebe: His Ideas on African Literature, Présence Africaine Editions <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24349663>.

Padmore, George. *How Britain Rules Africa*, London, Whishart Books Ltd., 1936.