

## Psychological Realism in the Arrow of God --- Chinua Achebe

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### Abstract

Chinua Achebe's, the third novel, *Arrow of God* centralizes around the struggle for power and authority between the African and Colonial traditions. Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of God Ulu is the protagonist who is in quest of wielding an absolute power throughout the novel. It is the study of psychology of power which incessantly switches directions, but can never be wholly acquired or seized. Achebe wavers between representing the good sides and bad sides of Christianity and Igbo religion reflecting his own ambivalence and split consciousness. To apply Freud's theory to Achebe, we can say that Achebe had a wish to become English-like and to run away from everything that is native. On the other hand, a part of him rejects the white standards and clings to native ones. These two wishes overlap and integrate in his unconscious producing a creative writer whose ego-ideals are revealed in his writings wavering between the two cultures and their languages. His novel, *Arrow of God* criticizes and praises both his people and his colonizers simultaneously because of not being able to identify with either. Achebe's own unconscious is reflected through the central character, Ezeulu who is also fascinated by the power of white man and his customs. The criticism of his native people never disturbed his mind. He goes against his obligations least concerning and considers his power as a device to accomplish his decisions. Towards the end of the novel, we witness him alienated both from his native culture and his white friends succumbing to tragedy. The Psychological Realism in the *Arrow of God* represents Freud's three elements of personality - id, ego and superego controlling the basic needs, reality and morality. The mind is not the physical thing one can see through, but the effects of the actions of the mind on people's lives are felt physically in the novel. Each character undergoes an unconscious thought process leading to anxiety and the eventual repression of thoughts.

**Keywords:** Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God, Ambivalence, Psychological Realism, Unconscious Thought Process, Ezeulu, Id, Ego, Superego, African and Colonial Traditions, Reality and Morality.

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### INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe is a renowned African novelist. His writings teach the necessity of compromise: a loyalty to traditional wisdom and values with a suspicion of western materialism, but openness to western thought. The key idea of tolerance pervades in Achebe's novels emphasizing the fact that acceptance of one's limitations is the beginning of tolerance. He uses exposition more than drama and his characters tend to be representational. Their conflicts are the crucial ones of the society, a juxtaposition of past and present, of the traditional and the modern. *Arrow of God* is set in the early days of colonization, when the white man's rule is not firmly established. Achebe returns to the past taking up the era of British colonization when the traditional society is still intact, but the Christianity and British administration are more firmly entrenched than before. He tries to recreate the former Igbo environment, with an even more elaborate

account of daily life, customs and rituals. He continues to be realistic in his treatment of traditional society through the protagonist, Ezeulu, the representative of social disorder. In him Achebe represents the confidence in traditional roles and beliefs challenged not only by the new British worldview, but also by forces within. According to Rank O, "It seems that Achebe's own day-dreams and phantasies were full of many wishes; the wish to be elevated by embracing the British-like lifestyle and language, the wish to overcome the imperfections of his nation and the wish to be identified and recognized from his people's history." (Art and Artist, 1932, P. 39.).

Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu, the highest godhead in the village believes himself to be of utmost importance because he is responsible for announcing the right time for the planting of yam, which is the principal food. In the eyes of many villagers, however, he has betrayed them by letting their side down in a

conflict with another village which provoked the intervention of the colonial power. Although this gained him the respect of Captain T. K. Winterbottom, the local governor, it considerably lowered his standing in the village. His consequent feeling of slighted importance brings him into conflict with the white man, makes him delay the announcement of the time for the planting of yam and eventually destroys the traditional culture of the village and himself. Achebe wavers between representing the good sides and bad sides of Christianity and Igbo religion. Christianity brings education for illiterate people. In *Arrow of God*, Igbos appear to be tolerant when Ezeulu sends his son, Oduche to learn the new wise religion in the missionary school. However, this religion along with administration divides people and appoints many Igbo kings making a dozen mushroom kings when there was none before. According to Achebe, "Ezeulu's inner thoughts uncover his intolerance of the missionaries when he thinks one of them to be short and thick, as hairy as a monkey." (Achebe, 1964, P.109).

Ezeulu's personality, however, is complex, as are his motives. Accommodation is his pragmatic way of preserving the clan and his own power. When the opportunity arises for him to become the political representative of his people to the British government, he refuses out of a sense of loyalty to his local God. This complexity is, however, contradictory and confusing, thus reflecting again the transitional state of affairs during the early colonial period. Ezeulu doesn't seem to know what his motives are as he jockey for power with Winterbottom and with the priest, Idemili. In trying to save the community, he sets up himself and his God as the sole sources of wisdom. As priest--- and thus considered half man and half spirit---he may, as Achebe seems to state, confuse his sacred role with his human vanity. According to Freud, "The formation of an ideal heightens the demands of the ego and is the most powerful factor favoring repression." (On Narcissism, 2010, P.2948)

*Arrow of God* spawns a story of the exercise of power, the exploration of the nature of power and its limits which generate fractious conflicts. It is also a story of war and peace amid the pervasive cultural, economic and religious upheavals. All these issues generate several intricately interwoven conflicts which form important sub themes: European-run civic verses indigenous authority, religious and cosmic order versus communal freedom and individual humanism. The research paper focuses on Ezeulu's exploration of the extent and limits of his power as the vulnerable old Chief Priest of Ulu. It analyzes aspects of his character that hurtle him forward towards the quest for unlimited power, the character and cultural composition of the people of Umuaro, as well as the caprices of fortune in the form of his encounters with Winterbottom, Clarke and their colonial administration, Oduche's adventures

with the sacred python, and the tragically cruel death of his favoured son Obika that sets limits to the realization of Ezeulu's ambition for unlimited power. (Arrow of God, 1989).

*Arrow of God* is a dark drama blended with major and minor rivalries between various persons and gods in Umuaro whose relentless struggles generate unrest throughout the novel. This internal unrest that culminates in fragmentation of the entire society are between Edego, Ezeulu's eldest son and Nwafo, the youngest son; between Matefi and Ugoye; between Ezeulu and Ugoye over Oduche, the son he sent to school who is used as a sacrificial lamb; between Ezeulu and Okeke Omenyi, his elder brother over the sacerdotal mantle. Intense rivalry exists between Umuaro and Okperi, the seat of government administration. Moreover, there is rivalry between Ezeulu, the high Priest of Ulu and Ezidemili, the Priest-guardian of the royal bring matters to a head. Among the Christians, there exists a tense conflict between Mr. Goodcountry, the missionary and Moses Unachukwu, the new convert over Christian attitude towards the royal python. (Arrow of God, 1989).

Then, there is the ideological conflict over the system of indirect rule/appointment of paramount Chiefs between Mr. Winterbottom, the colonialist, knowledgeable in the ways of the natives and his superiors who however always overrule his decisions. Above all, the belligerent shadow of Nwaka's personality, that of his mentor and the brooding bitterness of Ezeulu stalk the entire drama suffusing it with dark, melancholy overtones. While Okonkwo's tragic demise is brought about by a kind of unwitting and unthinking impulsiveness, a lack of reflection before acting, the decisions that trigger Ezeulu's downfall are personally calculated and deliberate. Ezeulu has the entire span of the drama to brood and plan to hurt his own people. (Arrow of God, 1989).

The character of Ezeulu is of immense significance in this poignantly tragic drama of political and religious intrigues. Known yet unknowable – the contradictions implicit in this paradoxical personality form a rich quarry from a psychoanalytical perspective. He sacrifices himself and his people to the will of the god. We can only speculate that since the society created god in the first place, it could also destroy him. According to Freud, "The creative writer who writes an egocentric story that has a hero as the center of action, which is exactly the same as His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream." (Creative, 1950, P.425).

Although the protagonist of the novel is motivated by a personal pursuit of power, the fact that he refuses to originate it from the colonizer's

impositions of indirect rule, remains as a brave instance of resistance against colonialism.

### Unconscious and Conscious Conflicts - A Psychological Perspective of Realism

We can analyze four concepts of psychoanalysis simultaneously at work in the protagonist, Ezeulu. There's *repression* of huge emotions of anger and bitterness as he struggles to appear unconcerned and in control of the situations within Umuaro and his family which are clearly out of control; there is also *isolation* as he rejects the friendly overtures of friends, family and even Winterbottom; there is *intellectualization* as he rationalizes all the causes of conflicts with Nwaka and Ezidemili, and within his family. But there is also *neurosis* for these negative issues that are not well-repressed into the subconscious. Ezeulu, the protagonist and Chief Priest of Ulu stands as a powerful local religious leader whose authority is justified by his representation of the patron god of the clan. His devotion to his spiritual identity is so devout that he claims to be the embodiment of the will of God. According to Neil Ten Kortenaar, "The priest identifies his own will with the god Ulu's. Ezeulu imagines himself to be an arrow of God and erases the realm of freedom. He identifies his self too absolutely with one of his roles; he forgets the man and allows the priest to subsume his whole identity." (Beyond Authenticity, P.30-42).

The power that is bestowed on him from birth as his position is greater than any of the other oracles of priests of the clan, is bewildering and confusing even to the man himself that he gradually loses the balance between his will and that of Ulu's. Besides his religious duties, Ezeulu is unable to comprehend that he is also a member of the society who should work for the collective welfare of the village which brings about the dissolution of the boundaries of his two selves. The otherworldly aspect of his identity as a priest grants him more influence over others which he unconsciously cherishes. According to Nwoga, "He often debated in himself whether he was merely a watchman for the god's decisions whether he was more than that". (Nwoga, D.Ibe. (The Igbo World, pp.14-42).

Major communal events such as the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam Festival, by custom can only start after he performs certain rituals which inform the society of the time and date of the events as if he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival—no planting and reaping. The fact that these two festivals mark the times of planting and harvest is the indication of his impact on the pragmatic life of the village as well as his religious authority. The awareness that he can possibly condemn the whole village if he just wished to, gives him the illusion of possessing an unquestionable and unchallengeable power. Nwoga opines, "He is characteristically a man who had pride in

himself and his position, who wanted to prove himself stronger in his age than the young people, who was quick to anger with his family and strangers but slow to take resolve." (Nwoga, D. Ibe. The Igbo World, PP.14-42).

By questioning even the reality of power, he proves that he is aware of its vastness which the ambiguity of the spiritual aspect of his character enables him to make use of. Although, self-interest becomes the main motive of his actions, he remains to be the representative of the old tradition which he strongly upholds in the changing times even if it leads to his demise. Bonetti states, "Achebe names him a saving grace as the Igbo know that they had a priest, a chief priest, who said, 'No' at some point. That sounds like a pillar in the course of their history, a place from which they can take bearing." (An Interview with Chinua Achebe, PP.61-83).

The novel indicates that the main motivation of the creation of Ulu is socio-political rather than religious as six different villages unite under the clan Umuaro in order to resist against the common enemy. Similarly, the role of the Chief Priest in the major festivals can be observed to be socio-economic rather than religious. Thus, the creation of Ulu is designed in a way that the Umuaron society maintains their staple customs and socio-economic values and they conform with the will of their patron god at the same time. Kortenaar argues, "The Umuorans illustrate the first distinction, between moral objects and real programs, when they raise yams for subsistence, but tell themselves that they do so to comply with will of Ulu. What they must do to survive also fulfils the higher end of uniting them in a community." (Beyond Authenticity, P.34).

Just like the possibility of the creation of new gods, the Igbo gods are prone to be destroyed and lost. If the function of the constructed god in regulating the social life of the believers loses its practical effect, it contradicts the nature of the creation of that particular god. As a result, it is plausible to say that people are free to abandon a god whom they no longer have a need for. Nwaka who actively runs a campaign against Ulu in favour of Idemili is another major god of the Umuaro clan. As human constructions, the gods are expected to disclose their will through their priest in parallel to the will of the people. Olakunle George claims that, "As a matter of principle and historical memory, Umuaro pagans claim the power to discard old gods and create new ones to grapple with worldly contingencies." (Emphasis in the Original, Project MUSE, P.352).

The power struggle between the representatives of two gods appears to be on the religious level when inspected superficially. However, the fray is much more personal than it is first presented.

Ezidemili and Nwaka, who is one of the wealthiest men among the villagers, intentionally make use of the political unrest in order to replace Ezeulu and have further respect and power. Ezeulu is accused of being manipulative and motivated by a desire for power by Nwaka. In parallel Gikandi remarks, "The conflicts in Umuaro are not a rivalry between two gods Ulu and Idemili. They are actually a struggle between two conflicting ideological interests and authorities." (Research in African Literature, P.3-8).

While Ezeulu's struggle to maintain his position as the most influential priest in Umuaro, his family, especially his four sons, act as the microcosm for the different aspects of his society which are under the threat of both internal and external attacks. Edogo, Obika, Oduche and Nwafo are his possible heirs to pass down his title, from the eldest to the youngest respectively. Each of them are set in different paths according to either their father's or their own will. George remarks on the parallelism between the social and domestic sphere, "What interests me most is the sense in which the public conflict is complicated by the undercurrent of family tension in Ezeulu's polygamous household. It is in the domestic sphere that Achebe figures a level of change and social realignment that none of the main actors recognize." (Emphasis in the Original, Project MUSE, P.355).

Obika appears to be the embodiment of the traditional, yet reckless, Igbo man who upholds customs and social codes of the village. Oduche, on the other hand, is the example of the Christian influence on the Igbo people as he attends the missionary school with his father's encouragement in order to learn more about the white man and his ways. The third son, Edogo, is absorbed with the spiritual and artistic values of his society as he carves masks for the ancestral spirits. He represents the spiritual side of his father's identity in the sense that he dedicates himself more to the artist's social responsibilities. Nwafo, the youngest son with his innocence and lack of his father's ambition for power, represents the future of Igbo. He is a member of the next generation to whom the priest wants to transfer his experience just as he received it from his father and ancestors. Trapped in the dilemmas of the changing times, Ezeulu's sons demonstrate the cultural changes and dislocation in the microcosm of the family. The priest's ambitious pursuit to maintain control over his people is distorted by his inability to maintain control over his sons. George states, "In addition to the struggle of supremacy between Ezeulu, on one hand, and Ezidemili and Nwaka, on the other, the text poses domestic and familial competition as a second possible source of Ezeulu's calculations. The tragedy at the end of the novel is that Ezeulu is defeated politically and in the domestic sphere." (Emphasis in the Original, Project MUSE, P.354).

Ezeulu realizes the fact that his society is undergoing a paradigm shift and change is inevitable, most probably imminent. He believes that the world is no longer as it was. Thus, he sends Oduche, one of his sons to church in order to observe his new religion. He wants to keep up with the new changes taking place all around the world, particularly in the white man's world. According to Lemert, "Subconsciously he considers that white man holds the unchallengeable immense power, subsequently knowledge, as a result for power is within knowledge, knowledge is within power." (Social Theory and Transgression, 1982, P.27).

The other person who is holding the power is Winterbottom, in charge of the region. He is not effective in affairs, and despite his long stay in Igbo, he is depicted to be having difficulty in adapting himself to the conditions and hot weather of Igbo. He is not the one who possesses the unremitting power; he lacks necessary knowledge to hold that kind of power. The absolute power he holds is merely circulating since the power is unlocatable. He tries to augment the power alike each character in the novel. Gikandi states, "Captain Winterbottom is clearly the new source of power in the region, but his authority is precarious precisely because it is founded on fantasy rather than reality. In short, his representation of African culture expresses his alienation in it rather than the mastery and control which is manifested by his exercise of power. In effect, Winterbottom is imprisoned by what he assumes to be his knowledge of Africa. On the surface, Winterbottom's notions of Africa seem to be represented with power and authority; like Ezeulu's pronouncements, they don't allow for doubts." (Reading Chinua Achebe, 1991, P.62).

*Arrow of God* reveals the true horror of the psychological subjugation of the colonized quite vividly. The missionary school teacher Mr. Goodcountry tells the story of how the Christians of Niger Delta fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed their shrines and killed the sacred iguana; he urges his students kill the royal python. Influenced by Goodcountry's hate speech and indoctrinated by his militant religious views, Ezeulu's son, Oduche attempts to kill the royal python. Killing the royal python is a sacrilege and as serious crime as killing a kinsman. By attempting to do so, Oduche manifests the depth of his hatred for indigenous culture that the Christian missionary has instilled in him. It reminds that the missionaries provoke Igbo people to go against their customs if they want to change in their religious and cultural lives. The duality in the two religions creates confusion among people and the issues of culture seek the chaos in the cl. Césaire points out, "As the colonized people undermine their own culture and accept the elevated status of the colonizers' culture, the colonizers start to see the colonized as an animal, treat the colonized like an animal and tend objectively to

transform the colonized into an animal.” (Discourse on Colonialism, 2000, P. 41).

Ezeulu’s consideration to the act of his son without any punishment signifies the duality in the religious faith among the Igbo clan, which is considered the issue of religious identity of the tribe. David Carroll opines, “Ulu has reasserted his control over the divine half of Ezeulu’s ambiguous nature in an unmistakable way and all doubts and the perplexities are resolved. Now the priest becomes once more the remote agent of the Supreme God, rather than the representative of the clan. (Chinua Achebe, 1980, P. 116).

Ezeulu’s pride as a powerful religious man and Chief Priest in Umuaro is an instance of the relational system of the Igbo community, which identifies them integrated. But the disruption of their identity due to diverse conflict and disorderly elements of society creates chaos among the clan. The Psychologists Laplanche and Pontalis state about the identification of the social system, “Identifications viewed as a whole are in a way a coherent relational system. Demands coexist within an agency like the super-ego, for instance, which are diverse, conflicting and disorderly. Similarly, the ego-ideal is composed of identifications with cultural ideals that are not necessarily harmonious.” (The Language of Psychoanalysis, 1985, P.208).

Ezeulu’s imprisonment by the missionaries made the people believe that he is the priest of the dead God. He didn’t seek any help from the clan and when he returned from the prison the clan insisted on him declare the Feast of New Yam. The crisis of it led to the divisions of two groups of the clan. The missionaries took the advantage of it and convinced the people that the Christian God would protect them from the anger of Ulu. Achebe says, “So the news spread that anyone who did not want to wait and see all his harvest ruined could take his offerings to the God of Christians who claimed to have power to protect such a person from the anger of Ulu.” (Arrow of God, 1969, P.216.).

In the end, Ezeulu ends up not really knowing himself; too restrained, too upright, he has no means of recreation to release his tension. Internalizing everything, Ezeulu becomes like a boiling volcano waiting to erupt. Madness is a huge leitmotif in Arrow of God. There are profuse references to madness or death in the narrative tying in with the eventual actual madness of Ezeulu. According to Mordaunt, “Ezeulu pays dearly for over-stepping the boundaries set for him by Ulu. He is driven to madness.” (Conflict and its Manifestations, 1989, P.164).

The desire in him to always project himself as the man of the moment, in charge of his household, in control of his environment, highlights his individuality

as a unique human. This self-identity makes for various defenses that Ezeulu unconsciously applies to distort the reality of his anxiety. His defense strategies project him more as a human reacting to issues as a layman, rather than as spiritual icon. His biological nature predisposes him to be menaced by his fragility as a finite being filled with the secret love and desire for revenge. Ezeulu is found to be unable to manage the transitory physical processes of strife, tension and eventual frustration engineered by his thought patterns and reactions. His personality crashes with the resultant desperation and the psychological breakdown into dementia at the death of his son, Obika. He is guilty of being conscious of protecting his personal ego, to the detriment of those factors that would promote existence. Schultz states, “The intensity of battle within the personality may fluctuate, but it never ceases. Owing to the fact that behaviour is deterministic, having a cause and effect, there is therefore, an unconscious urge to fulfill a desire and a great resentment to potential obstacle to achieving same desire.” (Theories of Personality, 2005 P.58).

## CONCLUSION

Chinua Achebe’s novel, Arrow of God embraces many perspectives, various interpretations and multiple distinct points of views; it can be analyzed and contextualized from many angles. Firstly, it provides convincing and complex portrayal of a traditional community and the tensions and rivalries which make it active and vital; secondly this varied community becomes both the background and the most stringent test from traditional Igbo forms of policy making and leadership, for the balancing and reconciling of rival claims, and for raising issues concerning individual and communal authority; thirdly, these opposing perspectives are concerned with what seems to be the central theme of the novel. Mc Dougall points out, “The hermeneutic principle of Arrow of God is one of fluid movement from one position to another. The idea of fluidity and of the existence of a multitude of different positions from which it is possible to contemplate the world is crucial.” (Achebe’s Arrow of God, 1987, P.12).

As a cultural and spiritual leader of his people Ezeulu has a lot of issues centering on his ego that conspire to get him destabilized and unstable. Having to contend with a lot of pressures he takes critical decisions. His ability to stand and defend these decisions whose realities and implications add up together to become a burden on his psyche makes him what he is. However, he has reasons for any actions that seem to overwhelm the tranquility of his being and existence. Elliot states, “The physical phenomena are not available to consciousness, but which nevertheless exert a determining influence on everyday life, include anxiety, repression and other aspects of behaviours connected with the human mind. All behaviours have a

cause and effect process arising from inner impulses acting as guards against certain unpleasant instincts and are always working.” (Web, 13. Pdf).

Achebe, in this novel gives a wonderful picture of psychology of power, which is not only operating within the society but also is sought to exert from foreign forces. Moreover, he explores the inner conflict leading to disharmony among his clans along with the clash of inner and external reality. David Carroll states, “The author, it appears, is unwilling to commit himself finally on the precise relationship between inner and outer, between Ezeulu’s need for power and the god he worships, between Winterbottom’s aggressiveness and the rituals of power he practices. We are left in several social worlds of the novel where ritual and convention differentiate and also unify the lives of characters.” (Chinua Achebe, 1990, P. 118).

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