



CHINUA ACHEBE: A NOVELIST OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND SOCIAL CRISIS

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to search out the fundamental themes of religious conflict and the social crisis in the novels of *Chinua Achebe*. His famous novel *Arrow of God* (1964) unveils the picture of the religious conflict between *African* tribal religion and *Christianity* as an outcome of the colonial encounter between the native *Africans* and the *Britishers*. While dealing with the religious conflict, he happens to highlight the various aspects of religion like the sociology, psychology, philosophy, semiotics and ritualism of religion. Anthropology teaches us the lesson that whenever the two cultures mingle with each other, the dominant one affects the other one in various ways. The minor one is likely to undergo a process of acculturation by being drawn to the dominant one (foreign). In his famous novel – ‘*Arrow of God*’, religious conflict is deeply-rooted against the backdrop of political and cultural conflict. His another famous novels – ‘*Things Fall Apart*’, ‘*No Longer at Ease*’ and ‘*A Man of the People*’ etc, point out the radical social changes in the *Eastern Nigeria*. Since the genesis of *African* novels in English, *Chinua Achebe* has remained a significant subject of the study and research for English readers and critics. *Okonkwo*, the hero of his first novel – ‘*Things Fall Apart*’, is physically very much strong and invincible like *Hercules*, adventurous like *Odysseus*, relentless like *Changez Khan*, daring and unyielding like *Napoleon* and arrogant like *Hitler*. Despite possessing all these heroic qualities and extraordinary valour he has to encounter the colonial forces which had dominated in his own village of *Umuofia*. *Achebe* depicts in this novel how he submitted to the circumstances. Ultimately the hero desperately ends his life with a defeatist pessimism.

Chinua Achebe happened to be a competent *Nigerian* novelist, poet, professor and critic. He was born on 16th Nov. 1930 at *Ogidi*, a very large village in *Nigeria* and breathed his last on 21st March, 2013 in *Boston, Massachusetts*, United States. His first novel – *Thing Fall Apart* (1958) added a new feather to his cap. This one is known as the masterpiece and the most widely read book in the modern *African* Literature. He is also considered to be the father of the modern *African* literature. He penned some other novels as *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), *Civil Peace* (1971) and *There Was a*

Country (2012) etc. Following his wonderful talent, he received *The Booker International Prize* on *March 22, 2013*.

This paper intends to focus how the different incidents of success and failure, trouble and tribulation in the life of the protagonists are predecided and governed by same mystical forces. Similarly the protagonists of his subsequent novels – ‘*No Longer at Ease*’ and ‘*Arrow of God*’, undergo mental agony due to some mistakes in their decision and action leading to the way of their tragic

downfall. In all these novels, *Achebe* seeks to impress upon the readers the concept of the supreme power of law of change and metamorphosis that affects every sphere of life. It is irresistible and invulnerable. In contrast to this immeasurable and invincible power, human strength, ability, capability and fortitude to encounter it are limited. Thus the heroes of *Achebe's* novels have to grapple indefatigably with their adversaries and hostile forces but eventually submit and succumb to the mighty power of destiny. Thus we are taught the lesson through his novels that the human power is completely powerless before the omnipotent power of destiny (*God*). Destiny waits in the mighty hands of *God*.

Later on we have to explore the dominance of the religious conflict and the social crisis as the fundamental themes into his novels. In the opening part of the discussion of this paper, we would come across to highlight the religious conflict in his famous novel – '*Arrow of God*' and in the latter part of this paper, we would intend to focus our attention upon the basic theme of the social crisis as revealed in his novel – '*Things fall Apart*', his best one.

The novel – '*Arrow of God*', intends to deal with the different aspects of *African* religion. The salient features of the *African* religion become crystal clear when they are getting compared and contrasted with other religions, like *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Christianity* and *Islam* etc. In the olden times, the tribal *Africans* would quarrel among themselves about meaningless problems. Thus they remained divided. The dwellers of some villages had been attacked by those of the other neighbouring villages. Being compelled by the contingent crisis, the dwellers of six villages resolved to amalgamate themselves by accepting a common (supreme) god called *Ulu* and by appointing *Ezeulu* as the *Chief Priest of Ulu*. *Ezeulu*, thus, assumes the status of a religious authority as well as responsibility. The chief aim of religion is to maintain unity, security, peace and the communal harmony among the believers. *Ezeulu* leaves no stone unturned in bringing about peace between the people of *Umuaro* and these of *Okperi* who have been quarrelling since long over a piece of land.

Though *Ezeulu*, having been elected as the '*Head Priest*' of *Ulu* and a custodian of the religious values, is not a bachelor, but rather a married person having three wives, four sons and four daughters. Thus he has to play the double role of a householder and a religious authority. As a religious authority, he has to regulate and monitor the ritual observances in his village and facilitate the harvesters, while paving the way for the community happiness. In other words, he is not expected to be satisfied with his private encounter with *God*, but to discharge his duties as a patron and mentor of the community of believers. *Ezeulu* is very much conscious and cautious of his religious power and wants to exercise it whenever necessary –

"Whenever *Ezeulu* considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops and therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast : but he did not choose it. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive, it 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. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare."^[1]

Thus *Ezeulu's* religious authority is to be celebrated for the betterment of the community in general and not for any selfish or egoistic purpose. With an awareness of his religious authority as well as responsibility, *Ezeulu* happens to cut the roasted yam and puts it in the wooden bowl. When it gets cooled up, he starts eating it silently. He has to discharge his holy duty every *New Moon*. Likewise he takes of a staff, sitting in front of the shrine and prays to *Ulu* for the rich harvest, prosperity, male progeny and happiness. His holy prayer symbolizes the comprehensive face of *African* religion which includes a desire for the general human health,

prosperity, abundance of harvest, escape from various dangers, male progeny, growth of population, natural and chronological sequence of deaths, and good for all. It is very interesting to observe how the *African* religious ideals embrace individual, social, economic, natural, supernatural, providential and moral aspects of human life. *Ezeulu* who articulates his high and sublime ideals through the prayer, is very much irritated to think of quarrels among the dwellers of the six villages simply because he had spoken the truth before the Whiteman.

Ezeulu persists in his thinking that he has been absolutely right in executing his plan and action and feels surprised why *God* should snatch away his son. He fails to see the other side of the coin. But the people of *Umuaro* think that the arrogant, priest *Ezeulu* has rightly suffered retribution and that the clan has won at last.

A. *Khayyoom*, comments aptly —

“Arrow of God may be described as a tragedy of power, of historic confrontation where *Ezeulu*, the obstinate, overbearing and overweening Chief Priest of *Umuaro* is ruined by his lack of ancestral wisdom and by the historic forces beyond his control. In the end, *Ezeulu* is betrayed by his own villagers, is disillusioned and is punished by his own deity.”^[2]

Thus *Ulu* has not only destroyed *Ezeulu* but also brought disaster on himself. Ultimately now that the native god has become powerless, the *Christian* god grows powerful in *Umuaro* and attracts many people to the church. Thus the novel shows the final victory of *Christianity* over the native *African* religion as part of the colonial situation.

“In ‘Arrow of God’, the traditional culture is still a forceful and vital aspect of life. Achebe highlights in the novel the weaknesses and the disruptive forces within the organic and the coherent society represented by *Ezeulu*’s rivals like *Nwaka*, which are more responsible for the disintegration of the traditional society than the mere presence of the white man’s culture.”^[3]

It can, thus, be summed-up to say that the victory of *Christianity* in *Umuaro* is brought about by the triple factors like the disunity among the native. *Africans*, the concealed arrogance and ambition of the priest and the liberal approach of the *Christian* missionaries.

Thus ‘*Arrow of God*’ is a very complex novel in which *Chinua Achebe* has beautifully projected the basic theme of the religious conflict against the background of the colonial encounter between *African* and *British* cultures, acting a historical force. As a competent novelist, he has enriched the texture of narrative with innumerable *African* proverbs, descriptions of folk-beliefs, myths, dreams, visions, oracles and supernatural events. He has created a graphic socio-anthropological picture of the *Igbo* society thereby setting a model for the other *Commonwealth* writers of other countries.

In the latter part of this paper-discussion, we would come across to deal with the theme of social crisis as depicted in his most famous novel – ‘*Things Fall Apart*’. This *African* novel is normally connected with the represent of different kinds of cultural anxiety as well as conflicts. There is a state of unpleasant touch between tradition and modernity. But the real argument grows between the individual and the society. It is the society which scores over the individual in the *African* novel. But in the *European* novel, the case might be different where the triumph of the individual over the society does occur. His best novel – ‘*Things Fall Apart*’ was first published in 1958. It is termed as ‘a classic in modern *African writing in English*’. In his interview with *Lewis Nkosi*, *Achebe* said:

“I know around ‘51’, 52, I was quite certain that I was going to try my hand at writing and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Carey’s novel set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was praised so much and it was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture – not only of the country – but even, of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside.”

[4]

'*Things Fall Apart*' is a typical Ibo novel dealing with Okonkwo's rise and fall. He was 'well-known throughout the nine villages and even beyond'. His greatest achievement at the age of 18 was 'throwing Amalinze the Cat'. Amalinze, the great wrestler was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. But Okonkwo threw away the Cat at last. It was said that when Okonkwo grew angry, he never uttered his words. His father Unoka owed some money from every neighbour. His earlier days were running smoothly –

"He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's bond and their dancing 'egwngwn' to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty"^[5].

The whole community gets deeply shocked at Okonkwo's suicide in the end of the novel. None can touch the dead body of Okonkwo. They can't bury him. Only strangers can do it, because it is a sin against the Earth, his body is evil. His ignominy is very much shameful for his whole clan. We have pity not only for Okonkwo but for the whole community. Things really have fallen apart. The title of novel seems to be borrowed from W.B. Yeats's famous poem – '*The Second Coming*'. The opening lines of this poem run thus –

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer,
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold"

* * *

The title of the novel — "*Things Fall Apart*" suggests the meaning that values – social, moral, cultural, religious and spiritual etc. have gone dead in every walk of life. This does happen in this novel. Okonkwo was embittered by total inactivity of his clan. He was a man of action and he completely lacked the support of his clan. He grew powerless without the strength of his clan. Thus he had no more choice than preferring suicidal death to survival. He could not survive as a non-existent person in his society. B.K. Das relevantly comments–

"Okonkwo is not an individual or a mere leader of Umuofia, he symbolizes Ibo pride and identity. Achebe made it clear that with Okonkwo's death, the disintegration of the Ibo society becomes complete."^[6]

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