As a chronicler of life Chinua Achebe offers a new way of looking at tradition and change, which is free from western incomprehension as well as African apology. His originality is revealed in giving a just value and significance to the historical experience of social and human transition affecting the people of the Ibo tribe. He exercises fully the freedom and courage of the novelist in rendering authentically and sympathetically the crisis in the community and in the individual character by mastering the resources of his culture in terms of the possibilities of art. His Ibo Quartet brings into a dynamic balance the contradictions and polarities in the evolutionary process in which time replaces the old order by the new and yet generates a new sense of continuity and affiliation between the individual and the aggregate, giving rise to new patterns of human relationships and accommodation. While relating the African predicament to the colonial experience, in which the perceptual and existential values of two opposing cultures contend for survival or domination, Achebe goes
beyond the external conflicts in the colonial paradigm, and presents the internal crisis of the African society and personality. As Lloyd W. Brown observes:

...Achebe implies that the sense of history and tradition, the burdens of cultural continuity, decay, and rebirth, have all been the African's lot as well as the westerner's. 1

As a matter of fact, Achebe's titles, drawn from Yeats and Eliot reinforce a feeling for history which embodies a symbiotic world-view in which the western weltanschauung dramatises the African experience and the African aetiology modifies the western historicity, and both are made to resonate to the contemporaneous human condition. Things Fall Apart presents the entropy and decay of the Ibo tribe by means of an ironic equity touching upon the conception of history as a succession of epochal cycles in which the first and second comings are interrelated. No Longer at Ease traces the course of African

alienation from the past and the present as the ambivalent hero feels the simultaneity of their pressures in the uncertain climate of two historical dispensations which claim his loyalty and demand his sacrifice. *Arrow of God* applies Blakean mysticism to analyse the predicament of the African magus as an individual invested with power, who, in seeking to use it, loses it and experiences the shock of tragic recognition that the human kind has but a limited, instrumental role in the clash of gods who are themselves the actors in the drama of historical inevitability. *A Man of the People* turns to the Ibsenian metaphor of social realism highlighting the implications of human complicity in a post-colonial situation, in which political power derives itself from a solipsistic manipulation of the narcissistic impulses in human behaviour and is directed to personal profit and gain, demonstrating how history both fixes and is fixed by its human agents. Thus Achebe employs the dialectic of historical imagination to map out the contours of his given society in terms of concrete universals, such that Africa in his fictional world stands at once demythicised and prophesied.

Achebe's novels present tradition both in its positive
and negative aspects while tracing the impact of historical change on the structural and human factors that constitute the social reality of the Ibo tribe. In Things Fall Apart, Achebe projects, at first, an almost self-sufficient and autonomous society at work, absorbing the varied activities of its people into a harmonious flow of community life with its rituals, ceremonies, festivals, public assemblies and kinship affiliations, all of which aim at integrating the individual into the tribal identity. But this traditional pattern of accommodation comes under heavy strain under the colonial encounter which renders inoperative the historically sanctioned tribal structures by subverting their organic growth and strength, and exposing the individuals, disaffected by social imperatives or psychological tensions, to the temptations of power and status. The internal contradictions within the Umuofian tribal order provide an exploitative base for this colonial disruption. The responsibility for things falling apart is ironically laid on the centre which can no longer hold. Okonkwo, who pursues the dream of heroic masculinity, is nagged by the fear of reduplicating his father's feminine personality, and indulges in unconsciously destructive actions, first
manifested in the killing of his hostage-son, Ikemefuna, and last in his own suicide. In a sense, the tribal ethos impels him to enact its own traditional dream of power and glory and then makes a victim of its own hero, leaving him no final route of escape from the dilemma except self-destruction.

Okonkwo overreaches himself in ignoring the other levelling or countervailing forces which maintain the stability of the traditional community and by resorting to impulsive, and inconsiderate personal and independent actions. His ambivalent interpretations of "Chi" as the authority rationalising whatever he does or doesn't is a symptom of his tragic hubris which seeks to justify the expediency of choice through the abstractions of heroic virtue, honour and valour. When his son shies away from the oppressive code of masculinity and opts for the lyric appeal of the western church, it is as though the traditional feminine ethic of the loyalty to the earth goddess triumphs, taking revenge for events and actions violative of its legitimate role in the life of the community. Time casts, as it were, a semantic shadow between the generations, resulting in the entropy of the traditional modes of accommodation and
reconciliation, leading individual members of the community to the precarious edge of bewildered inaction or orgiastic rebellion. The guardians and the custodians of the continuity of the ancestral ways of life, the Egwugwu, are themselves disoriented by the swift-moving scenario of events. As Achebe himself intervenes to say, they fell into tumult, not action, thus demonstrating the loss of the tribal will to believe and to live and the incapacity of the residual cultural energy to reinforce itself in terms of a collective social response to a situational challenge.

Although seemingly unfair and brazenly patronising in his attitude to native concepts of heroic achievement, the British colonial administrator's laconic swan-song of the Ibo tribe, assigning all too brief a report on its pacification, has an air of grim historical inevitability and teleological naturalism borne out by the facts of life. No utopia is exempt from the laws of historical change, and an idyllic dispensation is always vulnerable to disruptive forces both from within and outside. Umuofia fails by its strengths and as well fails by its weaknesses, both so poignantly embodied in the pride and naivete of its most representative hero, Okonkwo. Bogged down in the confusion
of motive and impulse, Okonkwo falters in the use of his faculties in support of his people, leaving the creative resources of tradition unrenewed and unready in meeting with the crisis of change. The community too fails to bring into play its traditional penchant for democratic compromise and reconciliation and squanders away its prime virtues of unity and concerted action amid the inconsequential conundrums of ritual and fantasy.

Achebe extends the theme of entropy into its full dramatic scope in *Arrow of God* by concentrating on the conflicting milieus, personalities and roles of the native and colonial traditions in a perspective of internalised conflict. The histories of Umuaro and of the British colonial Establishment are interlaced in the narrative and the double nature of each is set against the other, contrasting the dilemmas of the priest and the commissioner in their attempts to consolidate and perpetuate their power over the community. If Okonkwo indulges a personal misoneism to arrest and resist change, Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* manipulates his ministry of Ulu to direct its drift to reassert his personal power. This may be seen in their differing attitudes towards their sons. Nwoye's conversion shocks the conscience of.
his father Okonkwo, whereas Oduche is exposed to western education by Ezeulu himself to learn the modern ways in order to sustain the old values and prepare himself as a necessary sacrifice in the war of the contending Gods. The society of *Things Fall Apart*, for all its rich variety and normality, is static, whereas that of *Arrow of God* is much more complex both in its spatial and temporal contexts and is intensely involved in the dynamic of historical change. The federal structure of Umuaro rests on a socio-political contract among different tribal communities which had come together under the power of a common theocracy to ward off the danger of a common enemy. But in the course of time, thanks to the rivalry between Izedimili and Ezeulu, compounded by differences in tribal land disputes, the bond of unity is weakened, giving rise to a contentious theomachy. The secular issues are given a religious colouring, while religious emotions assume nuances and undertones of inter-tribal jealousy and dissension. On the other hand, the colonial regime also finds itself perched on the promontory of a historical dilemma between two divergent perceptions: the white man's burden of his African polity of Direct or Indirect Rule, of which Winterbottom and Tony Clarke are
the rival protagonists. In their awesome mythologies of power, Ezeulu and Winterbottom represent the old verities of their respective cultures, while in questioning their authority or confronting it with a countervailing historicity, Idemili and Tony Clarke represent a subversive alliance of motive and strategy. There is a tragic hiatus falling between the not-too-unlike figures of the priest and the commissioner, which hinders communication and mutual comprehension, thereby resulting in the episode of Warrant-Chieftaincy and the imprisonment of Ezeulu and the whole tortuous course of events that follow.

*Arrow of God* thus goes beyond the typical, and directs its meaning towards the archetypal, which thematic expansion is suggested by the symbolism of the road. The road usurps the power of Earth to make room for trade and commerce, bringing to the African world new conflict in human relationships as well as ecological dislocations in excess of the ancient traditions of synthesis and compromise. As R.M. Wren observes:

...the quarrel between Ulu and Idemili was the quarrel of the no-longer-needed protector against the autochthonic deity. The British action in breaking the power the power of
a warlike community at one extreme of Iboland, in good time brought into doubt of a god essential to the ecological cycle of a community unheard of and unthought of by the colonials and their government. Things fall apart once again, it is true, but now the fragility of the cultural defences has distant as well as immediate causes. The society and its gods were dynamic before the British came. Indeed British intervention can be seen as but one factor in the great change; Certainly not, as in the earlier novel, the effective cause. 2

In developing the symbolism of the road, Achebe differs from the Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka (in The Road) on one hand, and from Joyce Cary (in Mister Johnson). Soyinka dramatises the creation myth of Ogun by examining and exploring the metaphysical ambivalence of the road, integrating it into the Yoruba conception of Agemo which adumbrates the twilight experience between life and death, reality and illusion, word and meaning, setting it up as a bridge between the ontological and epistemological testimonies of the human situation in accordance with the Yoruba world-view. Although Achebe looks at the events from inside his culture as well as Soyinka, he, nevertheless,

works more in the historical and social frame of reference, with an awareness of, and insight into the solidarity and cohesion of African life and the endemic tensions and contradictions in the Ibo milieu. Cary handles the Road as a metaphor of the encounter between two cultures charging it with the western notion of a dichotomy between civilization and primitivism, experience and innocence, and being and becoming. His novel is deficient in the dynamism of imaginative transformation of materials that characterises Achebe's portrayal of his own peopled world.

Achebe shows a society that is far more an actor in destiny than an object that is acted upon. 3

In other words, Achebe's fictional idiom is a measure of the temporal process of change as a balancing of destructive and accommodative forces within his society. Achebe's irony is inclusive rather than isolative, disclosing his essential sympathy with his created universe and the characters inhabiting it, so sharply contrasted with the authorial hubris that a novelist like V.S. Naipaul directs

at his own creations. The Road thereby becomes an elegiac symbol of the crisis brought on by change as well as an epiphanous feedback for the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past. It is related to an overview of human and social possibilities commensurate with the half-human and half-spirit orders of reality which contend for mastery in the personality of Ezeulu.

The centrifugal forces of change affecting the traditional culture in Arrow of God are related to and internalised in the person of Ezeulu who is caught in the conflict between his personal ambition for power and the exigencies of his public responsibility. This conflict is rendered tragic by his unawareness and miscomprehension of the limitation of his power, and also by his self-regarding neglect of the reality of his role as an expressive sanction of the corporate will analogous to the very establishment of a united tribal order protected by a common deity Ulu. The implication of the title, Arrow of God, goes beyond the notion of a mystically ordained manifest destiny to connote the presumptive pride of a single individual invested with the sacred authority of his sacerdotal role as a custodian of Ulu, as keeper of the seasonal calendar, and as a spiritual
vigilante to his tribe. Ezeulu ultimately achieves the tragic knowledge and understanding that in overreaching the nature and function of his power, he has actually misunderstood and misinterpreted the will of his God. He now sees himself as an arrow in the bow of God who is the real archer, with himself a mere instrument in carrying out His inscrutable will. But this humbling perception of himself comes to Ezeulu only after the event, as it were, leaving him, like a tragic Lear, a foolish, fond, old man lost in a derelict landscape devastated by the storms of destiny. He has raised the bitter harvest of drought, famine and starvation and thus become an enemy of the people, and instead of making the past anew brings about its historical declension into a present denied a future in terms of the tribe's traditional resources of responding to change and crisis in a creative manner.

One reason why Ezeulu, while pursuing his ambition for power, refuses to accept it, when it comes in the shape of the much coveted warrant chieftaincy, is that he is too proud to share his priestly direct rule with others in his own tribal confederacy, while he is equally reluctant to participate in the indirect rule under the alien system.
This situational paradox brought on by his ego problem results in his double alienation from the two main centres of power, whose of his own tribe and the colonial establishment, both of which experience the tension between absolutism and relativity as modes of political action. Ezeulu, justifying his oracular prerogative, observes:

I have my own way and I shall follow it.  
I can see things where other men are blind.  
That is why I am known and at the same time  
I am Unknowable ... You cannot know the  
Thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances. 4

The propitiation of the tribal god through sacrifice by giving up his own son as a ransom to alien gods turns out to be a mystery whose full and final meaning is revealed to Ezeulu when he goes into an existential solitude, cut off from his people as well as his god. As priest of a dead god, as Nwaka calls him, he loses his power to regulate the affairs of the tribe which now turns to the new god of the church for its salvation from impending famine and starvation, the grim nemesis of a disowned and discredited

deity. With the traditional reciprocity of god and man having been lost, Ezeulu's claim of exercising Ulu's will has no longer any credibility, much less legitimacy.

Amid the discord and rebelliousness of a people subjected to privation, the western church seizes the opportunity to organise a Harvest festival of its own, a thank-offering to the new god who has the power to dispense justice. Ezeulu's nightmarish anguries of a world in rack and ruin climax into his loss of sanity. As Achebe observes, in his preface to the revised edition of the novel:

For had he been spared Ezeulu might have come to see his fate as perfectly consistent with his high historic destiny as victim, consecrating by his agony - thus raising to the stature of a ritual passage - the defection of his people. 5

Achebe seems to imply that in its ironic cyclicality history has replaced the old gods by the new and abrogated the traditional patterns of social accommodation and renewal by declaring a new mandate of power with its own myths, rituals, conventions and hierarchies. It is the inexplicability of the historical process in terms of an atemporal structure of society, no less than the psychological

indeterminacy of human motive and behaviour, that characterises the roles and actions of the protagonist and his rivals and brings about the collapse of the tribe. History is the invisible god from whom all power flows and is ultimately redirected to its origins in divine will. In tracing the various 'cunning passages' of history through what David Carroll calls "the adjacent yet opaque worlds of the novel", (6) Achebe illustrates, almost on an epic scale, the antinomies in the human situation at large and their interaction with the complex, changing reality of African societies. As R.M. Wren points out:

To the end of the novel, Achebe's view of the movement of history is dynamic. It is an interplay of forces, domestic and remote. The simple tale of a priest at odds with his people shadows a pageant of the transformation of West Africa. 7

With Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, Achebe's rendezvous with the past is over. He offers a counter-statement on tradition and change from the perspective of the present in No Longer at Ease, a generational sequel to

Things Fall Apart, and in A Man of the People, a political code of Arrow of God. The disintegrative theme of Okonkwo's story is reinterpreted in terms of the fortunes of Obi, his grand-son who plays truant to the traditional values by choosing an Osu girl as his fiancée, and is burdened by a divided consciousness in his affiliations to the past and the present. Obi's homecoming enacts the difficulty of choosing between a usable past and a coherent present in shaping a credible, meaningful future. It turns into a kind of internal exile because, educated as he is in the west, he feels disoriented from his tribal and domestic contexts, while the vision he has nurtured in his mind of a New Africa is not replicated by the actuality, the rural landscape or the emerging urban-directed life-styles of his city-bred professional peers. He is also disenchanted by the persistence of old tribal prejudices which are a part of the residual past, and are inimical to the rise of a new order of synthesis, open and responsive to the challenges of a modern conception of private and individual morality required of an old ethos to enable it to take a leap into the future. Change has come to Africa, but without transformation, resulting in an uneasy transition leaving the younger generation in a state of culture shock and
anomy. The logic of the transitional African personality permeates the entire narrative of *No Longer At Ease*, clarifying, if not vindicating, the apparent illogicality of the hero's fall from virtue and grace. In fact, the whole novel is structured as an explication-du-texte for Obi's experience of the loss of self as well as his isolative declension into a corrupt civil servant whose public conduct is shrouded in incomprehension and incredulity. The narrative is organised as an unfolding response to the uneasy and embarrassed question asked by the British Judge,

I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this, 8

which is echoed and further ramified by the equally uncomprehending attitudes of Obi's clan, his parents, and his fiancee herself. Obi too fails to arrive at a proper comprehension of his unmastered actions and his confused motives and is unable to control the whole drift of his career away from passionate idealism towards timid amorality. The self-promoting loyalty of the Umuofia Progressive Union

to Obi is based on the traditional concept of kinship and clan priorities, although it is clear that the tradition of the tribe, undermined by colonial authority, has lost the power to control and regulate private behaviour and has thus become historically archaic and usufruct. In a way, Achebe objectifies the ambiguities of the situational ethic in the story by providing a sociological frame to the theme of corruption in transitional cultures. As R.M. Wren observes:

What Achebe does in No Longer At Ease is to give corruption a social context, and to show that the context is a complex interaction of the African past, the colonial encounter, and the emergent new hybrid culture. When things have fallen apart, anarchy remains, and it is into moral anarchy that Obi Okonkwo is plunged when he returns to Lagos. 9

A Hamletian hero, Obi fails to come to terms with reality for the sociological reason that his society is rotten, and has lost its traditional capacity for compromise and hence cannot offer the necessary contexts for a creative choice to its members. He also fails because of the

psychological reason that he has had an intellectual training without the resources of a positive character to enable him to alter his social contexts through the assertion of a dynamic personal will. His conviction and his anger are at loggerheads as it were, and his actions end in an expense of spirit. The rebirth which he senses in himself towards the end is also the death of his ideal self and his moral decline spells the loss of a sense of identity and purpose; he simply becomes a marginal man sunk in despair and cynicism. In the character of Obi, Achebe projects the fate of individuals in post-colonial societies, for whom the sour wisdom of defeat finally expresses itself in a philosophy of carpe diem. Obi's feelings are in themselves an expression of this post lapsarian disenchantment, the old African Paradise is Lost and can no longer be regained.

He no longer felt guilt. He, too, had died. Beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality. The impatient idealist says: 'Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth'. But such a place does not exist. We all have to stand on the earth itself and go with her at her pace. 10

The Archimedian self-image yields place to the Sisyphean anti-image, which is, indeed a terrible birth, inverting Eliot's Christian vision of the journey of the Magi.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe moves away from the cultural conflict between the African and western establishments and anchors the political theme in an entirely internal African setting. The process of post-independent Africanisation has brought to the fore the malcontents of a society which is ruled by greed and covetousness wearing the public masks of power, status and authority. Here is a society which has lost sight of its past and is engrossed in the present in the pursuit of vested interests, looking to the future, if at all, for purely material rewards and political spoils. Corruption becomes a universally acknowledged way of life, and the difference between public and private morality has all but disappeared, leaving no room for idealism and disinterested humanism. The emphasis is on political survival, on an instant harvesting of personal profit in a highly competitive political commercialism which has come to dominate the leaders who are intent on manipulating the people's political instincts to their own advantage in order to remain in power and get rich before time runs out.
for them. Sharing the national cake has become the new way of life, taking the place of the traditional way of communal participation and reciprocity. What happens in *A Man of the People* is typical of many post-colonial societies in which independence has come to be a political license for corruption at all levels. The personal predicament of the protagonist of *No Longer At Ease* has now been extended to the entire system of social organisation. The scruples which bothered Obi are no longer in existence and consequently the moral unease from which he had suffered has become irrelevant.

The ironical thrust of the title, *A Man of the People* is directed at the populist politics of newly independent nations and the manipulative strategies of democracy which include the staging of pseudo-events and the demotic rhetoric of political leaders claiming to be the representatives of the people in promoting a government 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. The central dramatic relationship around which the action of the novel turns is that involving the charismatic homespun minister of culture, Chief Nanga, and the disenchanted idealist schoolmaster, Odili Samalu. Odili has been alienated from the traditions
and allegiances of his society, which he calls 'primitive loyalties', having been a western educated person who has imbibed the modern liberal values of European democracy. Chief Nanga, on the other hand, is of earth earthly, a seasoned politician, who is well-versed in the folklore and folkways of tribal politics and is realist enough to appreciate and even turn to his own advantage the primitive loyalties from which power is derived. His instinctive grasp of the needs and cravings of the people combines with his personal charm and bonhomie on public occasions to make him a shrewd, cunning and successful career politician.

The polarised views of public and private morality dramatised by the two characters define the basic power politics in the situation. As events unfold in the novel, the idealist and the populist are involved in a love-hate relationship of mutual fascination and aversion. Their public relationship is also complicated by their private affairs to a point where they are forced to pursue political revenge for personal wrongs and indulge in violence, mayhem and scandal. The perversion of ends and means in the spheres of both public and private morality is underscored by the ironic identity finally established between Odili
and Nanga and the demotic sameness of their political roles as men of the people. Political opportunism and expediency become the sole determinants of successful leadership in an atmosphere of corruption, conspiracy and instability in public life. Their fortunes converge on a common plateau when both become tools in the hands of others, Odili striking a deal with Max and Nanga succumbing to the military coup. Odili's attempts to sort out his predicament by reconciling the two halves of his own personality end up in failure and disillusionment, while Chief Nanga has overreached the Josiah-ethic of not taking more than what the owner could ignore and thereby renders himself expendable and vulnerable to subversion and usurpation.

In tracing the political events of the novel, and making the logic of personalities dissolve into a perspective political melodrama, Achebe nevertheless offers a confessional epiphany for Odili's humanity as contrasted with Nanga's hypocrisy. Victim and scapegoat that Odili is, he grows in awareness, if not maturity of vision, and the tempering of his adolescent idealism by the shocks of experience leaves him a chastened individual. His role as an unreliable narrator is finally transformed into that of a holistic
eironos who can view his life experiences in all their chaotic multiplicity as assuming a pattern of clarified meaning. He is converted to a new realism which is reflected in his rejection of politics and his return to the world of personal loyalties underlying the traditional communal ethic which so significantly rests on the episode of the blind man's stick. In the welter of mere political anarchy let loose, the terrible reality of the military take-over coincides with the apocalyptic awareness with which Odili surveys his own past in an act of self-clarification.

As a political novel, *A Man of the People*, registers Achebe's disturbing intimations of the African political scene and his undeceived satirical indignation. Yet it also constitutes a deeply felt response to a rapidly changing society full of a foreboding poignancy. Coming as it does before the emergence of militarism in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa and the Third World, the novel almost assumes the dimensions of a political prophesy. While pointing a finger of admonition at the ills of post-colonial, post-independent national cultures, Achebe explores the pressures in society which affect a sensitive individual
and cause his fall in a universally corrupt milieu turning our attention to the dark areas within the human self and the intricate alliance of the past and the present in shaping socio-political behaviour among people. In this sense, *A Man of the People* reinforces, instead of depleting, his creative insight into the shared complicity of the human condition, viewed though from his own specific context. It is a melancholy but still compassionate transcript of the actuality of political experience and its message is adroitly administered as in his other novels. This could not have been achieved without a strong sense of history. As Achebe observes:

> After all, the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. 11

It is Achebe's capacity to integrate the historical and the synchronic elements into a single blend that makes, in

the words of Bernth Lindfors for

'an African parable not a Nigerian prophesy'. 12

II

Among the four novels of the Ibo Quartet, Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God deal with the past, while No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People are concerned with the present, all of them together spanning the events in Ibo history from 1875 to 1966. Achebe not only presents the conflict and interaction between two cultures or two existential situations in crisis, but also dramatises the manner in which temporal change penetrates the spatial relationships among individuals and the traditional community and affects the private and public choices open to the individuals for meaningful action in the world of outcomes. The emphasis in his novels accordingly falls on the problems of individuals in responding to the challenge of time to

avoid its disintegrative effects and woo its restorative powers in coping with the factors of change. As Lloyd W. Brown observes:

... Achebe accepts the historiographic principle ... to compress repetitive conflicts between Christendom and paganism, or between hostile cultures, into a single event or personal experience. 13

While the District Commissioner's reportorial dismissal of Okonkwo's tragedy in a single reference or footnote to imperial history denigrates and obscures his heroic dignity, Achebe's narrative not only clarifies the moral and cultural connotations of the protagonist's suicide but also dramatizes how the various elements in his character tend to offend the tribal code, guarded by the Earth Spirit. Okonkwo's ambivalent 'Chi' is rendered as the equivalent of tragic hubris whereby his actions independent of the community are presented as proceeding from the dominant psychological drives of his personality, his heroic self-conception and his self-destructive pride landing him in moral error and alienating him from his tribe, his family and finally from the creative resources of his culture. Although his tragedy

is presented as an apocalyptic fable, it is replete with a feeling of psychological inevitability.

In *Arrow of God*, working on a broader historical canvas, Achebe extends the theme of the past into the domain of myth, tracing the course of events within the framework of the tribal rituals which are ordained to hold the community together and regulate the flow of time as well as cushion the shocks of change with the appropriate rites of passage for the individual members of society. Ezeulu, the priest, empowered with the mandate to determine the seasonal pattern and maintain the harmony between the gods and the humans with the intricate cosmology of tradition, is halfman and halfspirit. In the exercise of this double role in actuality he exceeds the limits of both and becomes in the end a dissociated personality. Power turns like a fire in him and consumes him, and, in confronting the world he claims to rule, he makes a sacrifice of these as well as of himself. The historical process reveals not only the complicity of the white man in the destruction of the tribal culture but also the internal inconsistencies and inadequacies of the native community in containing the centrifugalism of power vested in the traditional symbols
of status and authority. Ezeulu is both victim and scapegoat, rebel and autocrat; and in his gradual disorientation from his dual role, he becomes morally blind, losing sight of the ultimate good of his people whose welfare is his sacred trust. In his refusal to declare the harvest at its proper time, he loses his credentials as the custodian of traditional power. By bringing the impending disaster of famine and starvation to the tribe, he turns the tide of history and unconsciously abets the triumph of the alien gods over Ulu. His loss of sanity is symbolic of the loss of collective will to respond creatively to the situational imperatives of historical change and of the failure of the old world-view in responding to the challenges of the new. The priestly vocation of prophesy and divination which Ezeulu embodies in himself and from which he derives his sacred power fails in its capacity for anticipating events and taking preemptive or remedial measures to meet the future shock that his community has to face. In clinging to the illusion of secular power he becomes alienated from the real nature of his priestly obligation to ward off the dangers and evils threatening the cohesion, the continuity and the solidarity of the traditional society. The contrary drives of Ezeulu's own nature, the will to dominate, and the desire to serve his community,
result in ambivalence and ambiguity. This is also reflected in the rivalry between Ezeulu and Ezidemili as well as in the nature of the power that is conferred on him by the anthropomorphous god, Ulu, who is a product of tribal history. Ezeulu's power contrasts and clashes with the power wielded by the hierophants of the colonial gods who are also products of history, that of the British Empire. As a trusted carrier of Ulu, Ezeulu has intimations of ancestral memory which remind him of his obligations.

Yes, it was right that the chief priest should go ahead and confront danger before it reached his people. That was the responsibility of his priesthood. 14

But the strong man of god is pushed beyond the end of things, as it were, impelled by his own vocational pride and personal vanity to become an unwilling witness to the destruction of his people and the usurpation of his god. In a sense the tragedy of Arrow of God exemplifies the antinomies implicit in two opposing or unreconciled views of time, the cyclic and the linear. In trying to make the best of both worlds, in his pursuit of the mysteries of power,

Ezeulu is disoriented from both. Instead of achieving a dynamic balance between the past and the present he succumbs to insanity. The witness to history becomes witless, unable to bear the oppressive pressure of reality. The ordeal of consciousness of Ezeulu is in fact a trying out of the historical process in the ironic contexts of a cultural situation where survival or extinction becomes an apocalyptic choice.

*No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People* explore these ambiguities of history in terms of a present in which the past has ceased to be a vital agent and has come to be anything but a usable past. If the alienation experienced by the protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* is the result of a society in crisis during a historical transition and hence epochal and structural, the disaffection of the heroes in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* is more sociological than anthropological in its nature. The social action in these later novels is dominated not by gods and ancestors, but by men made uneasy or derelict under the pressures of the present. The contrast is not so much between the heroic and the quotidian as between the possible and the probable as the Ibo society
moves through neo-Africanisation and modernisation, from the rural to the urban value systems, and from tradition-direction to other-direction as the motive force behind the private and public behaviour of individuals. Obi and Odili represent the new generation born to one culture and brought up in another,

'swimming in a stream of double currents, one traditional, the other modern'. 15

Western education and its notions of individualism and liberalism have been imgrained in their outlook. But the facts of life they are forced to confront are partly shaped by the residual elements in a tradition which has forfeited its value except as a retarding agent. The dichotomy in their character leads to a crisis of identity resulting in their inability to find a source of strength in alternative codes of behaviour and action.

Obi, a citizen of two worlds, finds himself an internal exile after his homecoming, unable to choose between his mother and Clara the Osu girl, loses both in

the end. Wavering between traditional and modern values, he steps into the dangerous neutrality of amoral professionalism which tempts him into corruption. Ironically enough, his bribe-taking is an inversion of his grandfather's title-taking and family fate comes full circle in his moral fall paralleling Okonkwo's suicide. His putative, self-imagined rebirth as a realist, going with earth at her pace, is a kind of death beyond which there are neither deals nor values. Obi's compromise with the existential present moment is a movement away from romantic humanism towards cynical disenchantment, a peace that is in fact an uneasy truce born out of a torpor that evades understanding. Hence the embarrassed tone of universal incomprehension of his moral decline occurs like an iterative refrain in the narrative.

As Roderic Wilson observes:

... Obi is fragmented, and is so in a peculiarly modern way, attributable in its historical sense to the irreversible meeting of incompatible forces. 16

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The slippery path of corruption that Obi in *No Longer at Ease* treads becomes, as it were, the primrose path of dalliance in *A Man of the People*. Corruption now becomes a universal phenomenon and the traditional honour of title-taking becomes the modern lust for office in the highly politicised atmosphere of third world democracies. Achebe diagnoses, through the fortunes of his hero Odili, the aftermath of socio-political change since independence. Odili, like Obi, is a divided character, a character in crisis. However, his schizophrenia is resolved not in the inertia of neutrality, but in the subversion of his ideal self by the facts of life until he lapses into the anonymity of the faceless crowd of political minions for whom the commonwealth is a booty. Odili is an abstraction seeking to be a character, whose western-derived idealism and theoretical view of political morality is pitted against the crude but empirical perceptions of the self-regarding Chief Nanga. Alienated by his intellectual naivety from the very people whom he hopes to serve, Odili finally capitulates to a lower intensity of feeling represented by his compulsive erotic needs. His quarrel with the corruptive forces around him takes on a personal dimension. In seeking to hold the political process where he wants it
to be, he ends up by himself being held where it wills. Consequently, he comes to be a doppleganger for Chief Nanga, the very man he detests. The distinction between him and his adversary is blurred and he assumes that identity he has withheld so long from his ideal self. In an ironic sense he too becomes a man of the people. If Nanga exploits the people for political reasons, Odili too uses the elitist mask of anti-corruptionist messianism to pursue his personal vendetta against his rival. Even Max is martyred, Odili is convinced, not by his enemies, but by the single woman he loved. Odili recovers consciousness, after the final debacle and prolonged convalescence, in a world ruled by the ethic of the national cake, into a reality that is ripe for the rule of brute force. In negating both extremes in the political spectrum, Achebe seems to analyse the grim inevitability of history rather than project it as a prophesy. In A Man of the People, people have ceased to exist: "in the affairs of the nation, there was no owner". When the external confrontations of a colonial past have receded into the background of racial memory, the internal conflicts of the complex present take over and occupy the stage of history. Myth accordingly is replaced by the chronicle as a narrative and perceptual strategy, whereby A Man of the People becomes, a kind of ironic counterstatement of Negritude as the central
premise of African political life. As Griffiths remarks:

A Man of the People is Achebe's first attempt completely to disassociate himself from the solutions and figures he creates. But it is a logical technique for a man whose work as a whole shows the finest kind of objectivity. The need for such objectivity, so amply illustrated by Odili Samalu, is the product of the dilemma which Achebe faces by being isolated from a simple allegiance to any one culture. 17

In rendering the African experience, as chronicler, historian and fabulator, Achebe maintains a balance of sympathy and detachment towards his created world in which the main focus lies on the mutations that self and society undergo in their mutual interaction in the process of cultural transition. The dramatic conflict in his novels is projected through a dominant central character who clashes with others who are sharply contrasted with him and whose judgements and perceptions provide a choric affirmation of the communal norm and the existential dynamic it embodies. Examined in the light of sociological change, the psychology of individual behaviour assumes importance as the central thematic concern

which shapes the pattern and design of Achebe's novels. Achebe invests his characters with an individuality which is defined by their deep-seated human instincts and impulses and clarified by the trials of self in which they are involved by events, circumstances and situations. Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi and Odili are all drawn in terms of their ruling passions and obsessions, and not merely as ethnic stereotypes. In their ambivalence as well as in their complexity, they transcend the purely historical situations in which they are placed and compel attention as individuals responding to their unique predicament. In other words, they attain the dignity and authenticity of human reference beyond and above the limitations of literary naturalism.

As Ngugi points out:

What the African novelist has attempted to do is restore the African character to its history. The African novelist has turned his back on the Christian god and resumed the broken dialogue with gods of his own people. He has given back to the African character the will to act and change the scheme of things. Writers like Chinua Achebe have paved the way. His characters have that vital relationship with their social and economic landscape. We can see and feel how his characters, their whole view, their aspirations, have been shaped by a particular environment, in a particular historical phase. They live in history yet are not mere cogs in a machine because they, the Okonkwos and
the Zulus, are makers of that history. By so doing, Achebe has succeeded in giving human dignity to his African Characters. 18

Achebe's characters, whether drawn from the past or from the present, are presented also as being answerable to the changes and transformations in their social situation. They are presented in terms of human feelings as it emerges out of the existential side of the partnership between tradition and change. Almost all the major characters in Achebe's fiction, are tragic failures. Their tragic flaw manifests itself in their pathos of incomprehension, or deficient understanding of the historical factors at work in their world, which renders them vulnerable to illusion and error. The arbitrating will of the community, expressing itself through the proverbial wisdom of acceptance and accommodation, affirms the principle of reality from which the protagonists are alienated by an individual will exceeding, or falling short of, its independent sphere of action. In providing a fictional restatement of self and society within the African context, Achebe dramatises the

tragic isolation of his heroes by contrasting the divergent generations and showing their convergence at critical points of human experience in the cyclicalty of time. Okonkwo and Nwoye, Ezeulu and Oduche, Issac and Obi, Chief Nanga and Odili are all presented through an ironic pattern of difference and similarity in the unfolding generational conflict. The rebels of yesterday become the conformists of today and the process in all its fateful continuity underscores the ambivalence in human response to change.

In a sense, in tracing the course of events leading to the decline and fall of the Ibo society, and in interpreting their significance, Achebe seems to set up a creative tension between his roles as chronicler and historian. The ironic conclusion of *Things Fall Apart* underscores two contrasting interpretations of tribal history, one reportorial and the other epic, whereas *No Longer at Ease* is framed as an explication of the question posed as to why Obi has had to fall from a position of integrity. The narrative point of view becomes a kind of mediational counterpoint to the temporal flux of events and experiences in which the characters are involved. Achebe deals with the old and new historical orders of Ibo society by relating their
conflicts and crises to the effects on the human personality. The defeat of epic values in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* and the collapse of social values in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* imply a displacement of heroic virtue as well as moral integrity by simplified human responses conditioned by economic and political realities. The historian, accordingly, turns critic, and in doing so Achebe brings the Ibo Quartet full circle with its interrelated themes of tradition and change and of man and society absorbed into the fictional structure. The pattern of Achebe's fiction thus indicates a progressive shift from the epic to the realistic mode, without the loss of the essential inwardness to the quality of the African experience. The question of Okonkwo's heroism and suicide, Ezeulu's sacred power and secular authority, Obi's idealism and corruption, Odili's political romanticism and disillusionment are all shown as aspects of the temporal crisis. If the crisis is sociological in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, it is politico-economic in *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People*.

The traditional loyalties and allegiances of a spatially organised society being what they are, change
necessitates a shift in the tribal ethic as well as a mutation in the temporal order. The failures met by Achebe's protagonists are the outcome of the discrepancy in awareness or the disproportionateness between their aspirations and their actions. Their existential choices, reflecting their psychological crisis, lead them into areas of reality exceeding their grasp and their capacity to manipulate the intrusive forces of time to their own desired advantage.

Okonkwo is a Herculean hero who is thrown out of his Olympian element by the Fates; born and bred to masculine virtue, he falls to the feminine crime of taking his own life.

Ezeulu is a Promethean hero, whose creative fire ironically brings into play a destructive force upon the very divinely ordained society which he is expected to serve and protect; in overreaching the limits of his power, he transgresses the moral order on which it is based and also becomes an unconscions accomplice in the dethroning of his tribal God.

Obi is a Faustian hero, whose ideal constructions of reality and whose romantic quest for an alternative ethic based on knowledge and education are frustrated by temptations of personal status and material comfort which eventually lead to the selling away of his soul and to his fall from virtue into disgrace.

Odili is a Sisyphean hero, whose gestures of self-righteous rebellion leave him in the end where he
began; and his apologetic "new realism" is nothing but a despairing acknowledgement of the futility of discredited idealism in the face of vast impersonal forces at work in the absurd world of third world politics. Achebe's human figures thus move along the contour of time from the initial festive world of the tribal harmony to the final fiasco of the historical disruption and thus cumulatively represent the social and psychological mutations to which the human personality is subjected to in the whirligig of change.

As Abiola Irele observes:

... In the last resort he (Achebe) is not dealing simply with the collapse of African society, but with its transformation. He is examining from the inside the historical evolution of African society at its moments of crisis; and the inevitable tensions attendant upon this process. In the final analysis, his novels reveal the intimate circumstances of the African Becoming. 19

III

As a novelist dedicated to the task of helping his

society regain belief in itself, Achebe reasserts the African world-view in a perspective of change by presenting African culture as a concrete living reality and dynamic process, and not merely as an anthropological abstraction. He peoples his African landscape with individuals in animated response to the shocks and transformations of historical experience. As Juliet I. Okonkwo observes, Achebe's novels succeed in recreating the pre-colonial society complete with legal, religious, and social organisations which worked for order and equity. Thus the positions of individuals in society, their beliefs, their relationships to others, their anxieties, their aspirations, and their entire cosmic world-views are illuminated. 20

In adapting a holistic view of the African identity, Achebe restores the individual to the primacy of man in society, seeking to find his existential centre in the human world of historical events and outcomes as a social being. Consequently, Achebe is also concerned profoundly with the writer's role as a critic so that his fictional presentations proceed from a sense of examined life relating the disorders

and disorientations affecting society to the rooted anarchies in the African inheritance itself. As Achebe writes:

We must seek the freedom to express our thought and feeling, even against ourselves, without the anxiety that what we say might be taken in evidence against our race. 21

Therefore, while portraying the beauty and rhythm of African life, Achebe also records his adverse intimations of a society and culture gradually going out of touch with the native genius. The blending of an affectionate delineation of the African world-view and a satirical scrutiny of its ugly underside is what makes Achebe's Ibo narratives impressive transcripts of intimately felt life. And hence, too, all the closely observed details of the society and its people at work in their quotidian activities, ceremonies and rituals, and of their physical environment as well as their world-view are unobtrusively integrated into the thematic patterns of the novels without giving the impression of being anthropological palimpsests.

The success of Achebe's local colour scenes lies in

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their inwardness to the cultural reality of the Ibo people, which controls the narrative voice. In *Things Fall Apart*, which is narrated in the third person, the gestures and formalities of tribal discourse and the hieratic appearances of the egwugwu establish the rhythm of social continuity which is related to the seasonal recurrence and cyclicality of the natural world. Once the human and the seasonal cycles are organically interrelated, the suddenness with which fate intervenes to break the pattern, by way of the locusts invading the land, is dramatised. From here the narrative moves on to present the pattern of individual and generational harmony being unsettled by the social and psychological factors in the flow of time. Okonkwo's normal world is overtaken by tumult, and this is enlarged into the wider perspective of the historical disintegration of the community. In modulating the shift from the communal life of Umuofia to the individual consciousness of Okonkwo, Achebe manipulates the narrative dialectic between self and society as a structural principle informing the novel. From the savage liquidation of Ikemefuna to the truculent desertion of Nwoye to the new, alien religion, from the idyllic equilibrium of tribal life to its spasmodic rallying to confront its own demise, from the protagonist's proud
Olympian self-assurance to his panicky self-destruction, the narrative moves inexorably to the ironic finale which contrasts two opposing views of human achievement. The ironical shift in perspective at the end of the novel, rendered in subtly measured tones of voice, frees the sense of life in the novel from the tyranny of African stereotypes and western stock responses. As David Carroll points out:

The author is putting his fictional world to the test. What is undermined in Things Fall Apart ... is not the fictional world but the persistent, stubborn stereotype. 22

In Arrow of God, Achebe similarly makes the tribal scene, with the history of its origins and creative myths, its genealogy of gods and priests, its Festivals of the pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam, its public debates and areopagetical settlement of issues, all organic to the theme of conflict between the individual and the society as embodied in the personality of Chief Priest, Ezeulu. That the African world lives simultaneously in two spheres of existential eventuality, in an awesome condominium of matter and spirit,
tradition and change, is stressed in the ceremonial appearance of Ezeulu, half black, half white, half human and half spiritual.

He wore smoked raffia which descended from his waist to the knee. The left half of his body - from forehead to toes - was painted with white Chalk. Around his head was a leather band from which an eagle’s feather pointed backwards. On his right hand he carried Nne Ofo, the mother of all staffs of authority in Umuoro, and in his left he held a long iron staff which kept up a quivering rattle whenever he struck its pointed end into the earth. He took a few long strides, pausing on each foot. Then he ran forward again as though he had seen a comrade in the vacant air; he stretched his arm and waved his staff to the right and to the left. And those who were near enough heard the knocking together of Ezeulu’s staff and another which no one saw. At this many fled in terror before the priest and the unseen presences around him. 23

The double nature of Ezeulu’s role as a man of God and as a leader of men is throughout put to the test in terms of time in its regenerative as well as destructive aspects and also in terms of the priest’s inner psychomachia prompted by the ambivalence of his Chi in enacting the drama of power.

The divided attitudes of the confederation of the villages to the nature of the priest's function and role give shape to the irrevocable destiny which engulfs all, while the secularization of the community's power structures under the indeterminate imperial policies leads to a progressive erosion of the ritual content of Ibo culture. At a time of crisis, the traditional props of social cohesion crumble and the dire necessity for survival makes it imperative for the community to disown the priest and his god and embrace the new dispensation and its empowered godhead. As Achebe observes in his preface to the revised edition of *Arrow of God*:

> For had he been spared Ezeulu might have come to see his fate as perfectly consistent with his high historic destiny as victim, consecrating by the agony - thus raising to the stature of a ritual passage - the defection of his people. 24

In betraying the interests of the clan which he must protect, Ezeulu sets in motion a course of events which result in the clan abandoning him. In resisting the historical forces, he feels 'like two separate persons, one running above the other', and capitulates to the hostile

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necessity of going it alone. In the process, he inadvertently prepares the ground for a new dispensation in which the heraldic universe of the totemistic Yam is powerless to fix its own magic spell. The symmetrical counterpointing of the oral history of the Umuaro community and the documentary chronicle of the colonial administration dramatises the complex fate of the Ibo culture as it is mirrored in the disjunction of the demented. Chief Priest, who is troubled that the punishment visited on his people was not for now alone but for all time. The nightmares and visions which Ezeulu experiences in the extreme isolation of his self-centred world represent an apocalyptic depletion of his sacred power and the complete takeover of his role by Ulu. Responding to the alien silence broken by the thundering voice of the angry god, he feels:

After that there was no more to be said. Who was Ezeulu to tell his deity how to fight the jealous cult of the sacred python? It was a fight of the gods. He was no more than an arrow in the bow of his god. This thought intoxicated Ezeulu like palm wine. 25

In the disastrous crusade that follows, with all its intimations of eschatological ruin, the two contrary worlds,

human and divine, natural and supernatural, are made to confront each other, bringing the dialectical structure of the novel to the edge of a fearful epiphany:

From the rafters right round the room the skulls of all past chief priests looked down on the mound and on their descendant and successor. Even in the hottest day a damp chill always possessed the shrine because of the giant trees outside which put their heads together to cut off the sun, but more especially because of the great, cold, underground river flowing under the earth mound. Even the approaches to the shrine were cold and, all year round, there was always some ntu - nanya-mili dropping tears from the top of the ancient trees.

As Ezeulu cast his string of cowries the bell of Oduche's people began to ring. For one brief moment Ezeulu was distracted by its sad, measured monotone and he thought how strange it was that it should sound so near - much nearer than it did in his compound. 26.

The initial description of the magically puissant personality of the priest is finally deflated by the ecological barrenness of the shrine of Ulu, now derelict and desecrated, in which the Christian bell tolls a requiem for the death of the pagan god. Arrow of God is thus, in its structure, an elegy commemorating the succumbing of a society to the violence

of both inner and outer forces, and the passing of a hero on the earth-mound of a house divided. The tragedy it embodies proceeds from the interplay of several areas of darkness in human experience and historical evolution, in which self and society search for a dynamic of accommodation and survival, but fail to find a centre of creative transformation. Once again things fall apart, leaving behind them a trail of the past in noble ruin.

Such a story at other times might have been treated with laughter. But there was no more laughter left in the people. 27

If the past is irrevocable, the present is inexorable. No Longer at Ease presents its hero in terms of an uneasy transitional world lacking definition and personality, and hence ambiguous and uncertain. Obi's homecoming enacts the failure of the alienated intellectual to impose unity between his inherited and acquired cultural experiences. While his divided consciousness finds its symbolic correlative in the passage to Lagos, a city of "two cities in one" representing an Africa moving in the direction of Europe, his return to his native village represents his cultural dislocation.

In his professional activities in the city, he oscillates between the worlds of public responsibility and private morality, both of which are put to the test by the residual tribal ethic of clan solidarity, on one hand, and the western code of rationalism and individualism, on the other. A stranger in his own country, his ideological perplexities take on a personal immediacy in the form of his courtship of an osu girl which is forbidden by the traditions of the clan and retold by the overriding authority of the family. His efforts to assert his independence drive him to successive compromises with his professional ethics, but these lead to further divisions in his psyche. In confronting his society, he experiences a loss of self, a virtual dismemberment of the self, and is left without the assertive force of a will at harmony with the world in which it is emplaced.

His mind was troubled not only by what had happened but also by the discovery that there was nothing in him with which to challenge it honestly. All day, he had striven to rouse his anger and his conviction, but he was honest enough to realise that the response he got, no matter how violent it sometimes appeared, was not genuine. It came from the periphery and not the centre, like the jerk in the leg of a dead frog when a current is applied to it. 23

The death of his mother is a turning point in Obi's life, producing in him a sense of stoic amorality which places him above guilt and despair. Going with the earth itself at her pace, he is converted to the urban realism of status and authority, power and comfort involving a cynical sense of material well-being which is free from moral compunctions. Thus Obi becomes a marginal individual drifting away from all values whether public or private, and from all loyalties, whether to the past or to the future.

'The most horrible sight in the world cannot put out the eye', 29

as he intellectualises his situation in an ironically proverbial register. His progressive corruption, which is not explained by the seeming illogicality of his disgrace, is almost paradigmatically probed by the novel as a response to the baffled question of the judge at the beginning. No Longer at Ease is a fictional cul-de-sac in which the retrospective movement of the narrative culminates not in a tragic catastrophe or denoument, but in an anticlimatic devolution of the hero's personality into an existential

void. Obi's character is not so much discovered as uncovered, not revealed but unravelled. 'Everybody wondered why ...'— the answer to the question is subsumed by the unflappable wisdom of the Union President:

A man may go to England, become a lawyer or a doctor, but it does not change his blood. It is like a bird that flies off the earth and lands on an ant-hill. It is still on the ground. 30

In *A Man of the People*, the action of the plot is bifocal, unfolded through the contrapuntal relationship between the two main characters, Odili Samalu and Chief Nanga. The conflict of values between the idealism of Odili and the opportunism of Nanga, is neutralised by the appalling approximation of their personalities to the situational ethic that has come to prevail in the highly politicized atmosphere of post-independent African societies turning on the nexus of power. The story is told from the point of view of the participating narrator whose remembrance of things past in the immediate present shuffles between his earlier ethical self and the later amoral self. The narrator's point of view is thus rendered unreliable because his confessional

is mnemonically blurred and tends to be egocentric and apologetic. His remarks on the politicians' role in bringing about the general moral decay in society reveal his own responses which become circumspect in the rhetoric of vanity and personal heresy:

As I stood in one corner of that vast tumult waiting for the arrival of the Minister I felt intense bitterness welling up in my mouth. Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gun-powder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation. I wished for a miracle, for a voice of thunder, to hush this ridiculous festival and tell the poor contemptible people one or two truths. But of course it would be quite useless. They were not only ignorant but cynical. Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you -- as my father did -- if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth.

This attitude of patronising contempt for others, combining with a self-opinionated and self-exonerating emphasis of statement, reveals the superciliousness and judgemental presumptiveness of the narrator. When we find him learning his political slate-work at the feet of Chief Nanga, we are surprised at this vulnerable ideologue succumbing to the

All I can say is that on that first night there was no room in my mind for criticism. I was simply hypnotised by the luxury of the great suite assigned to me ... I had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one forever. And may be I should have thanked God that I wasn't.

Odili soon becomes one of those power-mongers who had all been in the rain together till yesterday and who now seek the amenities and comforts of high life indoors. His promise of a distanced and detached view of things gets convoluted in his attempts at political ascendency which are foiled by the superior manipulative populist strategies of his adversary. Achebe reveals the entanglement and fated concurrence of the two characters in public and private affairs until the distinction which the first person narrator labours at drawing between himself and his rival is attenuated to a vanishing point. The self-regarding idealist and the self-seeking politician eventually coalesce into a single identity, after a series of reversals in their fortunes, and the ideological content is completely drained from a relationship which becomes increasingly deflected into

In projecting the political theme, Achebe presents a satirical farce in which the recrudescence of populist tribal attitudes is set off by the betrayal of the intellectuals in a neo-colonial milieu. The collective complicity of all elements in society in the melodramatic pursuit of power and appetite is underscored by the subversion of democratic values by motives of personal revenge and self-aggrandisement forming an unholy alliance with hypocritically proclaimed public interest. The chase for the slices of the national cake becomes a ruling passion and the espoused altruistic pretensions are given the go-by in cynical indifference. The intolerable stalemate can only be alleviated by the application of force to end violence and corruption, and hence the sense of historical inevitability in the army's intervention in the national affairs. What is left is the doubtful possibility of individual self-awareness and the realisation that

.... in such a regime, I say, you died a good death if your life had inspired someone to come forward and shoot your murderer in the chest - without asking to be paid. 33

The shift in the point of view from that of the immature, recalcitrant narrator to that of the mature, chastened narrator gestures, however feebly, the validity of the values of love and loyalty embodied in the sacrifice made by the youthful stormy petrel, Max. In fact, it is not Odili or Nanga that emerges as the hero, but Max who represents the triumph of values over expediency in his tragic death. But the predominant note, in the narrative, however, is one of disenchantment which even Achebe's astringent irony and the art of burlesque are powerless to laugh away.

Thus Achebe's Ibo Quartet dramatizes the decline and fall of the traditional Ibo society and its way of life under the multiple pressures of time and change. The fictional pattern unfolds the historical march of the society from order to disorder, from prelapsarian innocence to post-lapsarian experience, and the resulting complexity of the interaction between self and society. Achebe's is an understandably tragic vision which contemplates with sympathy and understanding, and at the same time with objectivity and detachment, the melancholy spectacle of the loss of the African paradise in the chaos of change and mutability. The design of the novels is commensurate with that shaping vision.
In relating form to experience, and placing both at the service of the novelist’s role as teacher, Achebe portrays a balanced and accurate account of human relationships while vouching for the truth of the past as well as the immediacy of the present in a fictional mode which combines a variety of technical and expressive resources with great success. He is only too aware of the need for temporal as well as spatial distance in imaginatively projecting the felt life of his people in terms of universal human feeling. In pursuing this, Achebe uses the various devices of the fictional art to reinforce his vision and analysis of the relationship between society and the individual rather than to purely technical ends. Accordingly the structure of his novels takes on a dialectical shape in which self and society are evenly poised and all the other details are organically related to the nexus formed by them. Underlying Achebe’s world-view is the perception that the coherence and the continuity of tradition rest on the solidarity of the community and on the interdependence of its unity and the creativity of its human members. Change, in any kind of society, is a fact of life, though its perceptions may vary from one culture to another. It is in coping with the crisis of change that the strengths and weaknesses of societies and individuals
are revealed, and the Ibo society is no exception to this. Achebe's contribution as a novelist lies in presenting his society as a living reality in which as he says,

"wherever something stands, Something Else will stand beside it." 34

Even the gods and human beings are bound together by the connective tissue of an interdependent and reciprocal relationship; ancestors and the present generations are similarly affiliated. The Chi, the monitoring inner voice too, resonates to the will of the individual, while determining his fate. The uniqueness of the individual is also validated only when he acts in consonance with the genius of the clan. Thus the fictional dialectic in Achebe's works denominates not a dualism of opposites but a corroborating mutuality and complimentariness in human affairs.

When this holistic view is lost, whether in the uncertain realities of the present, or in the ambiguities of the historical process, or in the conflict of cultures, the community and the individual can no longer respond to

34. Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day, p. 94.
each other's needs in a spirit of accommodation and resolution. This is the tragedy which Achebe describes in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* in which the strong-willed protagonists imperil the very societies for whose traditional and customary values they stake their lives. The intransigent heroism of Okonkwo and the dogmatic theodicy of Ezeulu represent extreme versions of human response to historical crisis. Their personal absolutism undermines the collective openness of the traditional society rendering infructuous its capacity for mediation. The failure of the traditional balance between self and society within the frame-work of shared perceptions and reciprocal roles, represents the real tragedy of the Ibo people. Achebe traces it to the failure of the historical sense and consequently that of social relatedness. As the old order changes, the old customs and beliefs are eroded and individuals brought upon traditional values stand exposed to the new ways of the world in which their habitual responses to life are rendered outdated and ineffectual. In coping with their complex fates, Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi and Odili do not have the support of their society from which they are isolated by their own ego problems. Society in its turn is weakened by the loss of leadership and succumbs
to the overwhelming tides of change. The best lack conviction, while the worst act in passionate intensity, and in the chaos that is let loose, mere survival takes precedence over every other form of heroic fulfilment. In a sense Achebe holds the Gorgon mirror of history to the travails of social transition to show how the haughty insensitiveness of sensitive individuals, like his Ibo protagonists, results in perceptual distortions as well as existential inversions in traditional cultures whose sense of reality is not reinforced by new creative inputs in the form of a meaningful interaction between self and society. Identity and self-differentiation in personal evolution are dependent on the continuity and affiliation of the social environment. Achebe's Ibo narratives tell and show the snapping of this mutual bond.

When the mutually fructifying interdependence between tradition and the individual talent is impaired, both self and society are pulled into the vortex of uncomprehended historical change, and ultimately flung around. Ezeulu's perception of the value of adjustment when he says,

The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place, 35

is not replicated in actions which run rather counter to the proverbial wisdom, leaving him in a noble hieratic solitude, the other face of which is his despairing comic absurdity. On the other hand, it is given to Obi, shuttling between the intellectual and moral poles of his awareness, to grasp the true nature of the problem of human accommodation when he, in a moment of introspection, feels that an existentially terminal situation has been reached by him which he had neither the power nor the resources to challenge.

The predicament of the dissociated individuals in Achebe's novels lies in their inability to translate their moral awareness of what is right into an active choice and stand up to it in moments of crisis. Their susceptibility to illusions of heroism, power, status and authority results in their isolation from reality which renders their moral sensibility inoperative. The demon of subjectivity takes a heavy toll of their capacity for objectivity, which is reflected in their brushing aside of the wisdom of the tribe and the prudence of their clansmen which is often embodied in the gnomic and proleptic force of the proverbs employed liberally in Achebe's novels. In other words, Achebe's portrayal of self and society in the Ibo world
focusses attention not so much on change in itself as on the complications that change brings into human relationships in contexts where knowledge does not mature into right action and where experience falls short of meeting the contingency of historical accommodation. This tends to be an essentially tragic view of existence, but Achebe's unfailing integrity as an artist commenting on and clarifying, the life of his people saves it from communicating only a melancholy voice of judgemental anguish. In this he is sustained by his understanding, compassionate attitude to the human scene as well as by the firm grounding of his imagination in the conviction that the "most horrible sight in the world cannot put out the eye". As Achebe says in *Beware, Soul Brother*:

I come power-packed enough  
for two and the gentle  
but butterfly pops open  
in a bright yellow  
smear in the silicon  
hardness of my vision. 36

As a novelist, Achebe's creative charity, going beyond the  

violence and destruction of his times, springs from the silicon hardness of his vision exploring the possibility of a dynamic harmony between self and society emerging out of the thickets of human separateness.