Chapter – IV

Arrow of God

In Arrow of God (1964) we find the continuity of African cultural dialogue being taken up and sustained to the end with the same insight and involvement in the human situation as in the earlier novels. The Ibo culture of a bygone age once again comes through in a powerfully built-up narrative. The inevitable merging of two
disparate cultures – African and European – is the issue with which Achebe is primarily concerned in *Arrow of God*.

The main focus, at times, is not only on the African situation but also on the idiosyncrasies of a few individuals, who, though possessing the characteristics of time individuals belonging to a homogenous society, become responsible for the rapid spread of Christianity among the people of their clan.

*Arrow of God* is hailed and awarded Jack Campbell New Statesman Award and descry bed as the magnum opus of Achebe. The novel, the most humane in Achebe’s fiction, revels the native culture caught in the throes of an unprecedented change. The average African is aware of the shattering truth that he is bound to the chains of alien rule. A man like Ezenhu knows that it is this knowledge and this wisdom, which have given the white man, power over lesser mortals, lesser because they lack his intelligence to gain material prosperity. And it is only by gaining worldly knowledge that a society can hope to achieve the higher goal of spiritual truth.

Achebe portrays how the Ibo cultural edifice, built ever so carefully over the years with wisdom, could fall to pieces owing to the
working of anarchy that corrupts the fine individual awareness as well as the collective conscience of the society. Ezeulu, the high priest of Ulu, God of Umuaro, which comprises of six villages, fulfils the requisites of a cultured individual. It’s a kind of a free play of thought upon our routine notions, and spontaneity of consciousness. Ezeulu forms the centre of gravity in the novel. Like the immortal portraits of Shakespeare and Tolstoy, this Achebian hero is case on a colossal mould.

Ezeulu is ever in the process of ‘growing and becoming’ to reach perfection, the elusive goal of human endeavour. Unlike his fictional predecessor Okonkwo, whose fame mainly rests on physical powers. Ezeulu is endowed with a sharp mind, besides a strong body. While Okonkwo resents and resists change, Ezeulu welcomes the same and adopts himself with exemplar finesse. For he, realizes the need to change according to changing times. One of the two sons of a traditional priest of Ulu, he inherits the office of the priesthood of Ulu, a god incarnated during the anxious times when danger threatened the clan of Umuaro.
Religion, being the highest constituent of culture, regulates the other aspects and forms the coordinating principle in a cultural system. Ezeulu’s role as the priest of a powerful deity is also that of the keeper of the clan’s safety – in its political and social aspects. As a mediator between his deity and his people, Ezenulu is in charge of his clan’s conscience as well. An aura surrounds him and he is aptly referred to as half-man, half-spirit. Leading the people of Umuaro through the thick and thin of life as a torch-bearer would, he, nevertheless, is accused of aspiring to be “King, priest, diviner, all” by his enemies. They are not in fault, for that is the kind of role given to him by his people. But, as Achebe says,

Ezeulu already has power-more than anyone else, or nearly. And he certainly has enough strength and arrogance to attempt to assume a lot of power. But he does not want to become a king.

But virtue of his religious authority which is ancestral and the pomp and grandeur that accompany his priesthood, Ezeulu is able to hold sway over the external and inner life of the people of Umuaro. But, it should be noted that he is not a person to use his power to gain any
ulterior ends of his own. It is his ordained duty to announce the event to the clan. While people wish for the fulfillment of their personal wishes as they look at the new moon, Ezeulu prays for the welfare of his community, and others, thus:

“As this is the moon of planting may the six villages, plant with profit. May we escape danger in the farm the bite of snake or the sting of the scorpion... our wives bear male children... May we increase in numbers at the next counting of the villages so that we shall sacrifice to you a cow, not a chicken as we did after the last New Yam feast. May Children put their fathers into the earth and not fathers their children. May good meet the face of every man and every woman. Let it come to the land of the riverain folk and to the land of the forest peoples.\(^3\)

The acceptance of a supreme power in whose control lies the world, its origin, existence and maintenance and the cycle of life and death is what is expressed in Ezeulu’s prayer.

Ezeulu’s sincerity of purpose and integrity are seen in the metienlous way he follows each single detail of his priesthood duties. He as an enlightened individual is also a man of sharp intellect who
is fully aware of his power over the crops and hence on people, as well as of the limitations of that power. Often we find him engaged in deep thought, contemplating and questioning the values of his heritage. His desire for expanding the frontiers of his priestly power is intense and incessant even though he knows that:

_The moment an individual strays into unorthodoxy of any kind he threatens the coherence of his society._

The consistency and the quiet control with which he handles his family provides a fine model. He tells one of his wives that –

_In a great man’s household there must be people who follow all kinds of strange ways. There must be good people and bad people, honest workers and thieves, peace-makers and destroyers; that is the mark of a great Obi. In such a place, whatever music you beat on your drum there is somebody who can dance to it...._

This passage clearly shows that Ezeulu is conscious of his heritage and intellect, and what is reflected is his self-esteem but not arrogance. He is flawless in fulfilling his parental obligations. When
Akueke, one of his daughters, leaves her husband’s house because of the ill-treatment meted out to her by him, Ezeulu does not refuse her his protection, though it is not proper among the Ibos for a married daughter to stay long at her mother’s place. He waits for his daughter’s in-laws who are in fault, to come with palm wine and ask for the girl’s return. When they come he gently admonishes his in-law and asks him to behave like an honourable man and treat his wife well.

Among his four sons, he knows that Edogo, the eldest, is the quietest and would take any amount of insult without protest. He aptly represent to him as ‘cold ash’. When Edogo hears people talking ill of his father with regard to Oduche’s locking of the Python, all the does is to hurry home to his father to report the matter. Ezeulu naturally takes offence at the sober attitude of his son. A person with more grit would have dealt with the situation in a sterner manner, he reflects. Ezeulu has praise for Obika, his stalwart second son, for his fearlessness. Yet he often advises him to be submissive because

*The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat.*

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However, Ezeulu prefers to have ‘a sharp boy’ rather than a ‘careful snail’ like Edogo. Despite his soft corner for Obika, he tries constantly to drill wisdom into him. Like any concerned father, he is against the dubious company Obika keeps and also reprimands him for his addiction to palm wine. He warns him, “the death that will kill man beings as an appetite.”

When the whipping of Obika by Mr. Wright is reported Ezeulu, he concludes that the fault must have been Obika’s as he knows his son’s weakness for palm wine. A stern disciplinarian himself, Ezzeulu’s judgement of character is often exacting to the point of provoking ill-feeling.

Ezeulu has a different tone set for the like of his third son, Oduche. With a rare foresight, he realizes the power of the white man. He also knows that in strategy his clan is no more a match to the Europeans. He understands this when ‘the war of blame’ fought by Umuaro and Okperi is effectively ended by Capt. Winter bottom, the white district commissioner.

The white man’s power impresses Ezeulu so much that he takes the advice of Capt. Winter bottom and sends his son Oduche to the
missionary school. His admiration for the cleverness of the white man shows his unprejudiced mind. He reasons, as becomes his situation, that to master any field one should be inclined to learn.

To be ready to learn calls for humility, and in humility great things are rooted. This aspect of humility is present in Ezeulu, though he appears overbearing, harsh and at times intimidating. This amalgam of contrary qualities is possible only in a person who is heir to a rich cultural heritage. Ezeulu senses that a time has come when a human being alone is fit to match the power of a disease. As Achebe observes:

*He is an intelligent man and can see what is about to happen. He sees that change is inevitable, and he tries to master the new forces, to use the new forces in order to retain his own position and to manage the inevitable changes in his society.*

The complexity of Ezeulu, an issue of never-ending discussion among critics, lends depth and grandeur to this character. The two contrary drives of his nature are:
His will to dominate his community and his will to serve its needs.9

The above paradoxical drives seem to be ever locked in tension that reaches a deafening crescendo in the end. The fact, however, is that Ezeulu, a man of superior foresight and adaptable in nature, is misunderstood by his enemies. They presume that he is undermining the values of his own culture by sending his son to the Christians, there by trying to cultivate the white man’s friendship.

In truth, Ezeulu;s intention is only to get at the wisdom of the strangers in order to strengthen his own:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there hyou will bring home my share. The world is like a Maks dancing ...... those who do not befriend the whiteman today will be saying had we known tomorrow..10

Indeed, he is a path-finder who blazes the trail that other men follow.
When O duche defeats the very purpose for which he is sent to join the Europeans, by trying to kill the sacred python, Ezeulu, though greatly agitated, does not gratify his enemies by expressing his grief. He faces the sympathizers and enemies with unperturbed calm:

*If the world had been, what I was, I would have given you something to remind you always of the day you put your head into the mouth of leopard.*

Being a man of conviction, Ezeulu does not let the above incident dompen his intent to learn the ways of the foreigners through Oduche. He exhorts his son to set his heart on pursuit of studies and making the knowledge of strangers his own.

Ezeulu recognizes the deep devotion of his youngest son Nwafo to Ulu. He, however, is prudent enough to reserve his opinion regarding the issue of the next priest of Ulu. He believes that certain issues are solved best when left to time and Ulu. Ezeulu the ‘priest of Ulu’ and Capt. Winterbottom (who) are both men of destiny. Both are short-tempered and fastidious, they insist on getting things done perfectly. Proud and sincere, they are a class apart. The only
difference between them is their respective cultures and it prevents
them from getting closer to each other.

Ezeulu’s mind is ever engaged in tapping new sources to
consolidate his and Ulu’s positions. His people’s welfare is his
primary concern in doubtless, the truth of which is evident again and
again in his prayers and thought. For instance, when Akuebue, his
close friend, visits him, he utters a prayer, which is typical of his
larger than life mentality:

    Obbuefi Akuebue, may you live, and all your people. I too
    will live with all my people. But life alone is not enough. May we
    have things with which to live it well. For there is a kind of slow
    and weary life which is worse than death.\textsuperscript{12}

‘Slow and Wary life’ is not Ezeulu’s cup of tea. His aim is always
set high. To live is a natural process to any creature. Akucbue
acknowledges his friend’s wisdom when he says:

    I will not dispute with you’, he said, ‘you have the yam and
    you have the knife’.\textsuperscript{13}
That makes one doubly aware of Ezeulu’s role as the intermediary between his people and Ulu, their giver of plenty and their protector as well. In the tribal world of Umuare it is rare to find a man like Ezeula, whose attitude even to small things shows his refinement. Ezeulu, a man of vision, sacrifices one of his own sons to uphold the good of his society and its culgture, to the best of his ability.

Ironically, the words of Nwaka that Ezeulu is a friend of the whiteman come true as far as Ezeulu;s secret plans to deal with the clan are concerned. The fact that he is kept in prison by the D.C. does not bother him any longer because,

*His quarrel with the white man was insignificant beside the matter he must settle with his own people... They had taken away too much for the owner not to notice. Now the fight must take place, for until a man wrestles with one of those who make a path across his homestead the others will not stop... Let the white man detain him not for one day but one year so that his deity not seeing him in his place would ask Umuaro questions.*
Ezeulu appears to be the very embodiment of serenity, consciousness of inward strength, courage and firmness of purpose, and a constant awareness of his God. By virtue of his morality he succeeds in countering the tendency of anarchy that might have quelled his inner light. His refusal to be the warrant chief is unexpected by the people of Umuaro and it evoked mixed feelings, some respect for him and others consider it sheer madness.

Ezeulu now convinces himself that by becoming the arrow of God and punishing the people of Umuraro, he would vindicate the supremacy of Ulu besides restoring unity to his clan. When Ezeulu proclaims his inability to name the day for the “New Yam Feast” as he has missed announcing the appearance of two new moons during his detention at Govt. Hill, the people are shocked into disbelief. Ezeulu’s strength of conviction comes out now, and he deserves the title with which Achebe hails him as ‘agnificent’. If Okonkwo epitomizes the values of old Umnoafia, Ezeulu, servant and priest of Ulu, represents that awesome divinity or more concretely the essence of African existence.
Ezeulu in the end despite his Himalayan courage and conviction succumbs to circumstances, as the tragic, death of obika and the tragedy that follows strike at the very springs of his clan’s religion:

_Ezeulu becomes a truly tragic figure, proud, aloof, dedicated to his office, yet aspiring beyond its limitation for what he believes is the future safety of his people, and later when the crisis is reached, for what he convinces himself is the true dignity of his God._

Toppled by the turbulence created by his own actions and misinterpreting them to be thos of his God, Ezeulu slips into a demented state of mind. Ezeulu’s failure is “deeper and more moving” because “he fails with dignity.

Men may think that they are masters of their fate. But the caesars, Antonys, and Ezeulus are puppets in the hands of the inoxorable force of time. If the individual is responsible for the kind of fate the suffers, Ezeulu certainly cannot blame anyone but himself, Ezeulu “is a pround man”, says his friend Akuebue “he would not falsify the decision of Ulu.”
No doubt Ezeulu is frustrated because at a time when the clan’s collective solidarity would have been his strength, it fails him. But this is no excuse to misuse the priestly power by which means he thinks he can publish them for their in action and sloth:

*This is the tragedy of Ezeulu. In his determination to make the community suffer for the humiliation it has inflicted upon him, he strikes at its very existence, the life-rhythms of the farming hyear. It is an assault on basic reality, and has to fail.*

What can happen to Earth?17

When Ezeulu refuses to announce the New Yam Feast he never imagines that he would be smashed by the very forces he presumes he controls. In the final analysis, Nwaka’s earlier accusation of Ezeulu, that “It is a man of ambition, he wants to be king, priest, diwiner, all”18 cannot be ruled in the light of the subsequent action of the chief Priest.

The tragic flaw that contributes to the anarchy in Ezeulu’s character is that his desire to pursue and gain the white man’s knowledge is also his desire to consolidate and enhance his power. It is the lack of disinterested passion for knowledge that subject him to
temptations. Certainly it is this individual den or cavrn that corrupts the light of nature.

Ezeulu holds his clan’s men responsible for precipitating the subsequent conflict between him and the clan. When the people of Umkarro face the threat of starvation and death, the shrewd christinan missionaries offer them the solution which they accept out of necessity. With his decision unaltered Ezeulu sees strange visions indicative of his imminent tragedy.

It appears that both the God and his Priest are no longer suited to the present requirements of the society, for old values, being too rigid, are croded by the assault of alien values:

A priest like Ezeulu leads a God to ruin himself. It has happened before, or “Perhaps a God like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself”¹⁹.

Ezeulu’s life is an example of the anarchy, which results when an individual’s righteousness degenerates into fanaticism. Instead of leading his society towards perfection, he only paves the way to a
confused state and a chaotic end. However, being clever, he justifies his actions.

Ezeulu would have been a perfect instrument of his God and not a mere arrow aimed at harming the people at large if he were poised in the serenity of self, without betraying selfishness and ego.

Nemesis follows; Ezeulu goes through hell, among his clan’s men and within his own family. Endowed with a rare intellect, Ezeulu, who could have really been an evolver besides being an adapter slips into the abyss of oblivion. The adaptability of this society presents a curious contrast to the rather obstinate nature of Ezeulu.

Times change and so do people. The Europeans make their advent and disturb the calm and even tenor of the clan’s life. The cultural upheaval that has been brought about by the anarchy created by internal and the external factors cannot absolutely wipe out a society which is strong, though, static. The society of Umuaro is given a definite indication, as to which direction it is taking in *Arrow of God*. What is more pathetic is that even the people of Umuaro do not bear a trace of sympathy for Ezeulu, as they think
that being “headstrong and ambitious”, he deserves what befalls him. According to Achebe, tradition is not merely recenacting the past. The past has to flow into the present and the present, in its turn, must pave the way to the future.

References


