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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Journey from Worshipper to Abuser: An Ecocritical Reading of *Arrow of God*

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Article History: Submitted-25/04/2019, Revised-15/06/2019, Accepted-17/06/2019, Published-10/07/2019.

Abstract:

This paper analyses Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God* through the lens of Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a theory which deals with man's relation with the physical world. This paper is an attempt to highlight the relation of people of Igbo society with their environment and nature. The novel is set at the time when the colonial intervention was at its peak. It shows how the colonial forces are responsible for the disintegration of the Igbo culture which is otherwise a nature-based culture. The Colonial intervention has made the Igbos to shun their beliefs in their natural deities and surrounding nature. Achebe has foreseen the upcoming anarchy in Nigeria which is the outcome of replacing the natural deities with Church.

Keywords: Igbos, Colonial Intervention, Nature, Natural deities, Missionaries.

This novel shows the struggle of Igbos and the missionaries for the power and dominance. The title of the novel itself is a reflection of strong Igbo essence which is a proverb meaning a particular person working under the will of God. The British administration has already started setting its firm roots in the African soil in the novel. They have made their strong administration by appointing the natives of the clan only as clerks, messengers and chiefs. The native tribe has strong ties with the nature and natural beliefs. British think of them as a primitive tribe which is illiterate and holds superstitious beliefs. This paper will ecocritically analyze the breaking through of Igbo culture and colonial intervention in Achebe's another novel *Arrow of God*. Novels of Achebe are full of Igbo color. These people have very strong essence of rituals and customs and colonial forces fail to feel the spiritual significance of the Igbo culture. They celebrate festivals like New Pumpkin Leaves which are closely linked to nature and serve as

cleanser of their sins. It is a very sacred process which is done secretly by the members of the society by wearing the masks on their faces. This festival celebrates harvest. There is another festival New Yam Festival which is celebrated as the New Year in the name of new yams. They are very amiable society and celebrate such festivals to unite the whole of the clan.

This novel depicts in detail every aspect of Igbo life like, their history, customs, festivals, traditions, rituals, natural deities, story-telling, use of proverbs and many more things. The Igbo society is based on blood ties. It has the kinship system. Family is at its center and their compound is an important place to discuss family things. They also live close associations with their neighbors. The whole clan is united with the deep faith in customs and rituals. They honor people with titles having extra-ordinary achievements. They also punish the people who break the rules. They present kola-nuts to their guests as a form of love and respect. Their customs of welcoming the bride and burial feasts are other such things. On the other hand, there is also depiction of British administration in the novel with their colonial policy by which they make the natives helpless and in the state of total chaos. However, they faced resistance from the natives through their strong culture but eventually made to believe in the inferiority of their culture and gods. Their social structure is disrupted by the colonizers by making them divided in their beliefs. Their internal quarrels over power and position were given air by the missionaries and they were successful in doing it. Missionary's law, order and courts replaced their traditional judicial system. Igbos placed their strength in religion and it was dislocated by the missionaries. In the beginning of the novel we can see the people of village Umuaro lived one with the nature. They are wholly dependent on nature for all their activities. They are strongly united with the bond of religion which is also a nature-based religion. Religion has a very important role in the society as it regulates the culture and ethics of a society. It keeps people bound with the society. Any downfall in the religion causes the downfall of the society itself and also the destruction things related to it and in the case of religion of Igbos, it is nature which suffered at the hands of colonialists.

Looking at the history of colonial Nigeria till the 1920s, we can see how the British started trade with the Africa after their economy got badly affected. The main commodities which they started trading with Africa were palm oil and palm kernels which were in abundance in the Igbo land. British find the Igbo land quite rich in resources and thought of making colonies there. "At first the British could not settle colonies because of climatic hazards and tropical

diseases like Malaria, but when quinine was invented, they gradually came in large numbers to colonize and rule local Igbo people, exploit them economically and ideologically” (Ibgo Culture as Colonial Resistance in *Arrow of God*, 573). Along with the trade they brought with them Christian missionaries who in the guise of religion made them believe in the inferiority of their religion and left them in the state of total chaos. They were reluctant to the colonizer’s religion in the beginning but their Igbo culture got influenced by their culture and a hybrid culture was formed. British official Frederick Lugard was successful in setting up the indirect rule and firmly established it. Story of the novel revolves around during this time of indirect rule only. Lynn White in his essay, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, says:

Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except perhaps Zoroastrianism), not only established dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends...In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were inaccessible to men, but very unlike men; centaurs, fauns and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one can cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects (1025).

Igbo culture holds spiritual significance in customs and rituals which is overlooked by the colonizers. They celebrate festivals in the name of their staple crop i.e. yam, which is a festival for the celebration of New Year, harvest and entertainment. The purpose of such rituals and custom is to hold the community together by uniting the people. Festival like Pumpkin Leaves Festival serves the purpose of cleansing of their sins and purification of the surrounding and the souls of the villagers. Suchitra Pramanik in her essay, ‘Ibgo Culture as Colonial Resistance in *Arrow of God*’ says the novel “depicts the Igbo people’s history, their tradition, folk lore, proverbs, their customs and rituals, festivals, day-to-day life, deities, idealisms and many more. On the other side we also see how the British Administration worked at that time, the colonial policy, the oppression and torture on the native people, illegal and unofficial taxation” (571). The people of Igbo live in a classless society where there is no hierarchy of people as they don’t have kings or leaders in their society except for the Chief Priest. In contradiction to other societies, the Chief Priest chosen by the Igbos is the weakest person of the clan. It is so, because they do not

want the priest to hold any power on them. “They had their own custom and their own ways, which suited their ways of life, and their custom and their ways were quite unique from the other parts of the world where the chief is generally the strongest person among them” (*Ibgo Culture as Colonial Resistance in Arrow of God*, 573).

This novel is set in the villages of Umuaro and Okperi in the Igboland in Nigeria during the early twentieth century. It portrays the story of an Igbo village Umuaro and its Chief Priest, Ezeulu in nine months. There is conflict of two different cultures i.e. Igbo culture and Christian culture in this novel. The dominant colonial power has disrupted the Igbos beliefs and cultures. The Igbos are in state of conflict for their beliefs are shaken again and again by the colonial invaders and they are disintegrated from within. They are made to believe in the easiness and virtues of the Christianity so as to reorient their religious beliefs. Such inclination towards the new religion leads to the total loss of the Igbos belief system which is directly related to the non human nature. It shows their gradual loss of faith in nature which they used to keep in high regards. Nature has been an inevitable part of the Igbos in particular and Africans in general. They think nature as a nurturer, God and the one which absorbs all their sins and pains

They worship nature like God and do not try to harm it or touch it unnecessarily. There is an udala tree in the village of Umuaro which is sacred to ancestral spirits. “The tree was full of the tempting fruit but no one, young or old, was allowed to pick from the tree. If anyone broke this rule he would be visited by all the Masked spirits in Umuaro and he would have to wipe off their footsteps with heavy fines and sacrifice” (196). Any person who is found to break this rule has to pay heavy fine and sacrifices.

The protagonist of the novel is an old aged man, Ezeulu, who is the chief priest of Ulu. Ulu is a local god made by the people of Umuaro. He has a big family and is survived by his four sons Edogo, Obika, Oduche, and Nwafo. Chief priest holds a very important position in the village for it is his responsibility to keep their customs and beliefs intact and safe with the people of village. He has a major role of keeping an eye on the movement of moon and its changing shapes. It is Ezeulu only who could announce the beginning of new month on the onset of new moon by eating a sacred yam and beating the Ogene.

The importance of moon is quite evident with Igbos who rely on it for their auspicious and agricultural festivals. Along with the announcing of the new moon, Chief Priest has also the responsibility of the announcing the days for the auspicious festivals like New Yam Festival or

the Pumpkin Leaves Festival. It shows the seriousness and sincerity they have towards the non-human nature. Ezeulu does his duty very honestly and always fears of any lapse on his part. “He was now an old man but the fear of the new moon which he felt as a little boy still hovered round him. It was true that he became Chief Priest of Ulu the fear was often overpowered by the joy of his high office; but it was not killed” (2).

The non-human nature which includes trees, rivers, hills, stones etc carry different myths, stories and legends with them. They respect and consider nature in high regards. There is story related a stream near to Umuaro, named Ota. It “had been abandoned since the oracle announced yesterday that the enormous boulder resting on two other rocks at its source was about to fall and would take a softer pillow for its head. Until the *alusi* who owned the stream and whose name it bore had been placated no one would go near it” (7). Women of the village used to go Nwangene to fetch water from the stream. Achebe has given many such instances in the novel which show non-human nature playing an active role in the lives of Igbos but the colonizers fail to see the essence and beauty of the nature and its spiritual significance for them. They also regard their natural deities as the cleansers of their sins. As one of the women named, Ugoye, in the Pumpkin Leaves festival pray to their God Ulu:

Great Ulu who kills and saves, I implore you to cleanse my household of all defilement. If I have spoken it with my mouth or seen it with my eyes, or if I have heard it with my ears or stepped on it with my foot or if it has come through my children or my friends or kinsfolk let it follow these leaves. (73)

The Pumpkin leaves serve as a cleanser of all their sins which are confessed before their gods. They celebrate the festival to thank their god, Ulu for being so generous and kind to the clan. They show respect to nature in the form of worships. Such ceremonies and festivals somehow fail to maintain the charm of Igbo religion due to ignorance of the villagers. The younger generation is more resistible to the native religion and embraced the Christianity.

To begin with the novel starts with a flashback when there is conflict between two elderly people of the clan i.e. Ezeulu and Nwaka. Apart from God of Ulu, the Igbos also have a God of Idemili which has the chief priest Ezidemili. “Idemili means Pillar of water. As the pillar of this house holds the roof so does Idemili hold up the Raincloud in the sky so that it does not fall down. Idemili belongs to the sky...” (42). Nwaka supports the Ezidemili more than Ulu. There is land dispute between the village of Umuaro and Okperi and hence becomes a personal conflict

between the two men, Ezeulu and Nwaka from the same village Umuaro. Ezeulu wants to solve the issue peacefully but Nwaka and his supporters want to go to war against Okperi. “A big savage war had broken out between them over a piece of land. This feud was made worse by the fact that Okperi welcomed missionaries and government while Umuaro, on the other hand, has remained backward” (36). They send a messenger, Akulakia, to the nearby village Okperi to call for war. He was not received cordially by the people of Okperi and as a reaction to their inhospitality he broke the personal of God of one of the villager. It was a bad omen to kill the personal God which enraged the people of Okperi and they killed him for the offence and invite a open conflict from Umuaro.

The situation between two villages got worse which is intervened by the British official named Captian T.K.Winterbottom, the District Officer. To diffuse the situation, Ezeulu goes to the Government Hill and tells Winterbottom that the disputed land belongs to the village of Okperi and his village has no claim on it. Winterbottom appreciates Ezeulu’s decision and gets impressed by him. Ezeulu is well aware of the intentions of white men and wants to know them more closely. So he decides to send his son Oduche to white men’s school in order to learn their ways and real intentions under the supervision of Mr. Goodcountry. He sends his son for the welfare of the clan and save it from disintegration. He warns his son about the cunningness of white men Mr. Goodcountry takes this opportunity and tells him to kill the sacred python which is the biggest crime of the time of the Igboland. He tells all “the converts of Umuaro about the early Christians of the Niger Delta who fought the bad customs of their people, destroyed shrines and killed the sacred iguana.” (47).

It is out of question for Igbos to harm any of human or non-human nature. “These pythons did no harm and keep the rats away. Royal python is actually python regius, a species of python found in Africa and non venomous. It does no harm to the people and is considered good pet. It is of smaller size considered to other pythons and has a docile temperament. It is sacred to the Igbo people. “They treat it with good care and allow it to roam freely. If a man kills the python inadvertently, he arranges a funeral for the sake as elaborate as man’s funeral. They never do any harm to this creature” (Ibgo Culture as Colonial Resistance in *Arrow of God*, 576). Oduche though wants to follow his teacher but does not have courage to do so. He places the python in a box and thinks that python would die of lack of air and he will be able to kill him without being guilty of this act. It was soon discovered by Oduche’s family and released by

Ezeulu. Royal python holds a sacred place and it is an act of great abomination for them. It is more surprising for them as it happened in the house of Chief Priest, the one who protects them from the wrath of nature and natural deities. Commenting on this incident in the novel, Suchitra Pramanik in her essay, 'Ibgo Culture as Colonial Resistance in *Arrow of God*' says,

Here we see how the colonizers, in the name of fighting local bad customs and blinded by their missionary zeal, encouraged the natives to kill harmless animals. They preached that to prove Christainity and loyalty to church, the Igbo must kill Iguana, royal python and whatever animals were sacred to Igbo people. These harmless animals had not offended the Igbo people or the Christian in anyway. Moreover their sacredness to the Igbo people had one great advantage which was that they did not kill animals. It was a great process to preserve biological diversity. This was the reason that various animals were made sacred to various tribes. Otherwise people would kill them unanimously. (577)

Tony Clarke, Assistant District officer, is always busy in reading a book written by previous British official, George Allen, titled, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. It is a book which very biased towards the locals of the village. It looks at them from the lens of white people. The last chapter of the book named 'THE CALL' says:

For those seeking but a comfortable living and a quiet occupation Nigeria is closed and will be closed until the earth has lost some of its deadly fertility and until the people live under something like sanitary conditions...The British race will take its place, the British blood will tell. Son after son will leave the Mersey, strong in the will of his parents today, stronger in the deed of his fathers in the past, braving the climate, taking the risks, playing his best in the game of life. (33)

This clearly shows the white man's intention to rob the African land of its dense forests and fertility and their dream to set their empire on the Igboland. Captain Winterbottom in conversation with Clarke says that they should be very clear to the native ruler.

Ezeulu did not punish his son for the sin which further angers his enemies in the village. Nwaka has the support of the priest of Idemili, who is the personal deity of the village of Umunneora. The priest of Idemili, Ogwugwu, Eru and Odo were unhappy over their secondary roles in the village as a priest and they are not happy over Ulu being their ruling deity. Ezeulu was well aware of the fact. Missionaries were somehow able to ignite the enmity between their

gods Idemili and Ulu. Ezeulu's internal fears are coming true. The inclination of villagers towards the other religion disturbs Ezeulu:

Ezeulu was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace. Ezeulu had already spoken strongly to his son who was becoming more strange every day. Perhaps the time had come to bring him out again. But what would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, the white man had come to take over the land and rule? (42-43)

The new religion preaches them to leave all their traditional ways and embrace the new religion. It says, "Leave your yam, leave your cocoyam and come to church" (43).

The white man after winning quite a big number of converts now started increasing their territory in the geography of Igboland. They have started disturbing the ecology of the African land. The British have started with a road and drainage construction project. The overseer of the land always visits the village and keeps on telling the villages to give him money in the form of tax or the roads will pass through their compounds. Their chief Ikedi is a corrupt man appointed by the colonial masters and he shows his helplessness when people tell him about the overseer. He gives them the option of giving yams or goats, if they are not able to give money to the overseer. In this way the native rulers along with the colonial masters were robbing the locals of their assets which were in one form or the other are a part of non-human nature.

They are disturbed by the construction of road in their village as the white men are reaching fast to their sacred forests and cutting them down so as to make plain and barren lands. This is gradually fading the spiritual significance of the non-human nature. They are helpless under British administration. Obika is not able to believe when he comes to know about some sacred trees and hence deities in danger, "They were now approaching the old, ragged *egbu* tree from which the night spirits called Onyekulum began their journey loaded with song and gossip in the carefree season after the harvest" (81). They all lament,

As daylight chases away darkness so will the white men drive away all our customs...But when the roof and walls of a house fall in the ceiling is not left standing. The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road- they are all part of the same thing. The white man has a gun, a machet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone. (85)

Ezeulu is called by Winterbottom to the Government Hill. He wants to make him warrant chief. Nwaka and others become doubtful of the growing friendship between Ezeulu and White men. Ezeulu is reluctant to go to Government Hill in Okperi. He intentionally delays his arrival to Okperi which angers Winterbottom. He is imprisoned by them in the jail in the Government Hill. Winterbottom has become ill and is hospitalized. Tony Clarke, Assistant District Officer, makes the offer to Ezeulu that the British administration would like to make him a ruler. Ezeulu refuses to become the ruler of his people on white man's behalf. This, further, angers them and they extend his imprisonment for two more months.

While in jail, Ezeulu is neither able to eat sacred yams nor announce the new moons for next two months. Ezeulu is the only authority of all the six villages who has the power of telling the time of sowing, ripening, and harvesting of the crops. The next harvesting season starts on when the one yam is left and begins with the New Yam Festival. People of the village have started losing their faith in nature, natural deities and priests of the gods. They have started questioning their faith. Ezeulu's fate at the hands of British administration has weakened his position and shakes his spiritual significance as the chief priest.

Ezeulu witnesses changing dynamics between people and the priest, villagers and nature, villagers and the white men etc. It is only elderly people of the village who are still stuck to the age old beliefs, customs and to the mother-nature. Ezeulu while still in prison in Okperi is worried about the moon. They are more worried about the total imbalance which is going to create because of such disturbances.

Ezeulu is released after thirty-two days which means skipping of two new moons. He is angry over his people for they have done nothing to get him released from the jail. After his release from the jail, he refuses to announce the new moon and started counting the days from where he left. Yams have started rotting in the fields. He has shifted the New Yam Festival to two more months causing famine in the village. Ezeulu's stubbornness is more than the hunger and feelings of the villagers. He thinks that he is the arrow in the bow of Ulu god. Villagers are in a fix to be loyal with their God or to go with the survival of the clan. They want either the custom be flexible or they should move to other religion. Out of hunger and growing disloyalty with the Chief Priest, people decide to go with the white man's religion. Meanwhile there is sudden misfortune on Ezeulu's family as his son Obika dies suddenly while performing in a

funeral. This incident acts as judgement over the issue of refusal to announce the new moons and New Yam Festival

People's faith in their natural gods and deities has started fading. They have become more rebellious and violent. They are so keen to go on war with Okperi. They are least bothered about the outcome of such violence. Achebe commenting on the people of Umuaro says, "But Umuaro had grown wise and strong in its own conceit and had become like the little bird, *nza*, who ate and drank and challenged his personal god to single combat. Umuaro challenged the deity which laid the foundation of their villages. And- what did they expect?- he thrashed them, thrashed them enough for today and for tomorrow!" (14).

This shift in beliefs turns away the villagers from the natural customs and rituals. Ezeulu's refusal to be a warrant chief of British not only cost him jail but also makes him responsible for the downfall of the Igbo culture by refusing to eat the two left out sacred yams. Selfish motive of White men led to such a crisis in the village. Mr Goodcountry grabs the opportunity and tells the villagers to come under the blessing of Christian God which is more powerful than Ulu and so, their God can save them from the wrath of Ulu. Missionaries tell them their Christian God is more loving and merciful as compared to their god who is rigid and stubborn enough to punish them. The indigenous natural deities are replaced by the Christ. Achebe has foreseen the anarchy which is going to fall on the villagers and gives final comment on the novel:

If this was so then Ulu had chosen a dangerous time to uphold that truth for destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself, like the lizard in the fable who ruined his mother's funeral by his own hand. For a deity who chose a moment such as this to chastise his priest or abandon him before his enemies was inciting people to take liberties; and Umuaro was just ripe to do so. The Christian harvest which took place a few days after Obika's death saw more people than even Goodcountry could have dreamed. (230)

Through this novel, Achebe tried to highlight the ignorance of Igbos and its connection to their illiteracy. Igbos of the time of the novel was an ignorant and simple clan. They were swept through the new religion's easiness, charming cultures, customs and ethical values. This ignorance on their part made them pay a high cost of destruction of their own originality and harm to nature which was otherwise sacred for them. G.D.Killam in *The novels of Chinua*

Achebe says, “At the end, Igbo society is smashed and the important part, perhaps the finest part, is lost. When Obika dies, the God has claimed his harvest and it is the Christian god that reaps it” (18).

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