

Bearing the Burden of Native Experience: A Stylistic Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe has made a creative Africanization of the English language in all his literary works. In the process of writing counter-narratives to Euro-centric misrepresentations of Africa, Achebe has successfully harnessed the colonizer's language to make it bear the burden of his native experience. The present paper proposes to take up the third novel by Achebe, namely *Arrow of God* (1964) to introspect the different kinds of narrative strategies involved in it. This includes a study of the kind of narrator used, and a survey of the various ways in which the language is maneuvered—through the usage of standard and pidgin English, through linguistic devices like humour, satire and irony, through symbols, proverbs, images, metaphors and songs—in order to capture a vivid picture of Nigeria of the late 1920s, in which the novel is set. In a nutshell, this stylistic criticism aims to illustrate in effect how Achebe creatively extends the frontiers of English language to accommodate the various shades of Nigerian reality within it.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, Narrative strategies, Linguistic devices.

In all his literary works, the famous West-African Anglophone novelist Chinua Achebe has creatively Africanized the English language. In the process of writing counter-narratives to Euro-centric misrepresentations of Africa, Achebe has successfully harnessed the colonizer's language to make it bear the burden of his native experience. Reading his novels, which are set in Nigeria during different historical periods, one can hardly miss the fact that his narrative strategies change in accordance with the time and message of each novel. As Gikandi puts it:

In every novel Achebe has written to date, what we know about Igbo or Nigerian culture is less important than how we know it: Achebe's narratives seek to create the initial situation in which the African problematic developed and to express the conditions in which knowledge about phenomena is produced. (qtd. in Hu 18)

Thus, the narrative strategy becomes an important element in elucidating the various paradigms of socio-cultural reality and human experience. The present paper proposes to analyze the third novel by Achebe, *Arrow of God* (1964), for the dissection of the narrative strategies involved in it. This stylistic analysis aims to illustrate in effect how Achebe creatively

accommodates the various shades of Nigerian reality within an adopted language, English, that is foreign to the native soil.

Set in the early decades of the twentieth century, *Arrow of God* (1964) portrays the initial years of British colonialism in Nigeria. Based on a true story recorded by Simon Nnolim in the *History of Umuchu* (Innes 64), the novel recounts the story of an Igbo priest Ezeulu in a fictional, west-African village-cluster named Umuaro. Focusing on the tragic downfall of Ezeulu (on account of his abortive attempts to reconcile the contending orders of British and Igbo reality), the novel effectively illustrates the metamorphosis of a traditional Igbo community in the wake of the new dispensation brought about by the Europeans. A highly complex novel by technique, *Arrow of God* uses a multi-voiced narrative strategy to portray in full complexity the “diffused tumult arisen out of the tragic encounter” (Lindfors 91) between Igbo and the British in the early decades of the twentieth century. The third-person omniscient narrator maintains an un-intrusive stance, rotating the point-of-view among various characters in the novel, in order to defy any sort of misrepresentation or biasness. The dialogical objectivity of the narrative is maintained by three ways. First, by incorporation of multiple versions of an objective reality. The most significant instance of this is seen during the Okperi land dispute, where Nwaka gives a different account of clan-history in contradistinction to that of Ezeulu's; but nonetheless both establish that the reason of dispute is Umuaro's (un)justified claim over a piece of land in Okperi. This version is totally overridden by Winterbottom, who deems the real cause behind the dispute to be a petty feud between two drunken men from Umuaro and Okperi. Such juxtaposition of the native version with the European one projects the communication-gap between the British Administration and the Africans. The debate between Nwaka and Ezeulu displays the propensity among Igbos to resist any absolute version of reality. The objective stance thus effected in the narrative through this, is further buttressed by a second method, namely the inclusion of two probable explications for a single incident with the use of a non-committal ‘Perhaps’. Here goes an example: “Perhaps it was Captain Winterbottom's rage and frenzy that brought it [his mysterious illness] on; perhaps his steward was right about its cause [that he is struck down by Ezeulu's magic]” (184). Such balancing of alternatives, which is rampant in the narrative, highlights the assiduous effort of the narrator to include as many options as possible to make a sense of the imponderable ambiguities characteristic of the nebulous times portrayed in the novel. The third method that enhances objectivity in the narration is the balanced response (of sympathy and apathy) evoked in the readers towards every seminal character in the novel. For instance, if at some place Ezeulu is held responsible for the crisis he brought upon

Umuaro, there are also ample statements that portray him as a helpless victim. Here goes one:

[No] one came near enough to Ezeulu to see his anguish...But although he would not for any reason see the present trend reversed he carried more punishment and more suffering than all his fellows... Beneath all anger in his mind lay a deeper compassion for Umuaro...(274)

This shows that the Chief Priest is not altogether a hard-boiled villain who brings his people to grief solely out of intentionality. That the clan has also been guilty in impelling him upon the precipitous decision is evident in Ofoka's statement:

'What we told him was to go and eat the yams and we would take care of the consequences. But he would not do it. Why? Because the six villages allowed the white man to carry him away...and now he has the chance [to punish Umuaro].' (266)

This shows that clan has also got a share in the present impasse, because it has let the Chief Priest go away, without considering for a moment the serious consequences his prolonged absence would bear upon the clan's agricultural calendar. But then, the clan has also its own reasons to behave likewise. As Ofoka confesses to Ezeulu after the latter's return from Okperi:

'I am one of those who said that we shall not come between you and the white man...The elders of Umuaro are confused...First you, Ezeulu, told us five years ago that it was foolish to defy the white man. We did not listen to you...But just as we are beginning to learn our lesson you turn round and tell us to go and challenge the white man. What did you expect us to do?' (232)

Thus it emerges that the tragedy of Ezeulu is as much consequent upon the communication gap between him and his clan, as much it is on the inevitable tides of time. In this way, the narrative point-of-view is deftly maneuvered with precise objectivity to bring out palpably the highly plastic times portrayed in the novel.

Language in *Arrow of God* is another site of excellence, which displays the novelist's sensitivity towards various idiolects, and also his artfulness in harnessing the same in integrating English with various shades of Nigerian reality. First comes up the manipulation of language in accordance with characters. The English placed in the mouth of the rural

speakers contains copious amount of non-translated Igbo words like *ofo*, *ikenga*, *alusi*, “*Onwa atuo*” (2) etc., and also directly-translated Igbo sentences like, “We do not want Okperi to choose war; nobody eats war” (21). They serve to integrate the foreign language plausibly in the mouth of the native speakers, who are totally unacquainted with the newly-arrived white man’s tongue. But even among the rural folk there is a difference in idiolect, or speech-mannerism. The clan elders like Ezeulu and Nwaka talk in complex rhetoric, which signify the well-developed conversational skill among the Igbos. A speech in a clan-meeting is customarily comprised of an opening salutation, an elaborate introduction of the topic of discussion, a skilled persuasion of the viewpoint taken by the speaker, a conclusive statement and a closing salutation. The entire speech remains rife with appropriate proverbs that both display the wisdom and demonstrative capacity of the speaker. Compared to the aged people of the clan, however, the young men show much ineptitude in handling rhetoric. Being still learners “to speak in riddles” (65), they are more direct and rash in communication. As the narrative puts it, “the language of the young men is always *pull down and destroy*; but an old man speaks of conciliation” (189). The speech of the women-folk is characteristically comprised of superstitions, religious concerns and household affairs. Here goes an example:

‘Moon, may your face meeting mine bring good fortune. But how is it sitting? I don’t like its posture.’

‘Why?’ asked Matefi.

‘I think it sits awkwardly—like an evil moon’ (2).

It is important to mention here that other than speaking such ‘trivia,’ no woman is allowed to speak her mind on the important affairs of the clan or even regarding her husband’s or father’s decision. Anyone found straying in that direction is snubbed to silence. This portrays the marginalization of women in the clan.

Other than the unlettered village folks, the clan also consists of semi-literate people who have learnt English on account of their proximity to the Europeans. They use it in the form of broken English or pidgins while conversing with the white men. There are instances of such broken English in Unachukwu’s dialogues to Mr. Wright, like: “Pardin,” “Yessah,” “Dat man wan axe master qeshon”(102). The deliberately misspelled words put in his mouth are intended to bring out the nuances of his unaccustomed phonetics. Pidgin English is used by Mr. Winterbottom’s household-workers to commune with him. For example, in reply to his queries about the native children in his compound, his steward says, “My pickin na dat two we de run yonder and dat yellow gal. Di oder two na

Cook im pickin”(37). Pidgin thus serves as an inevitable go-between medium of communication between the natives and British. Incidentally, when the same natives converse with their clan-fellows they switch from pidgin to Igbo. However, a reverse-case to this is established by the two Igbo officers who go to Umuaro to arrest Ezeulu. They purposefully address each other in pidgin and the villagers in Igbo. In this process they intimidate the latter by their supposed command over the white man’s language. This displays the “linguistic chauvinism”(Ngara 69) which the British have effectively inculcated among the native Igbos.

The English used by the Europeans is also at variance. The language of Captain Winterbottom is that of a typical colonial who views himself as a god-sent messenger to bring civilization among the savage races of the world. His speech contains the decorous idiom of a typical ‘gentleman’ European: “It will be fairly cool for a couple of days that’s all.[. . .] Do sit down. Did you enjoy that?”(42). His bigoted attitude towards the Africans becomes evident in his condescending manner of referring them, namely “savage tyrants”(43) whose thrones are “filthy animal skins”(43). He boastfully misinterprets the religious symbol (*ikenga*) of an Igbo man as “fetish”(45). “These terms,” as Ngara observes, “are not used by the Africans themselves. So Achebe shows that they are inventions of the white man’s subjective image of the African”(Ngara 67). In fact, this subversive attitude is immanent in the speech of all the European characters in the novel. The words of the Lieutenant Governor display a high-falutin style that echoes any zealous pamphleteer of Western colonialism propagating racial myths. Here goes an instance of the same:

‘In place of the alternative of governing directly through Administrative Officers there is the other method of trying while we endeavour to purge the native system of its abuses to build a higher civilization upon the soundly rooted Native stock...’ (67)

Aptly enough, Winterbottom refers to the likes of the Lieutenant Governor as “starry-eyed fellows”(68) and “old fossils in Lagos”(43), who seek self-righteous pleasures through impractical drafts that are couched in stock, idealistic words. The speech of the young colonials like Wright and Clarke are easy-going and direct, free from the smugness and pretentiousness of either Winterbottom or the High Officials. For example: “Well,[. . .] I cannot say myself that Old Tom is the most hard-working man I’ve ever met; but then who is? Certainly not that lot at Enugu” (129). However, both easily switch to slang-English while addressing the natives, like, “Tell them this bloody work must be finished by June”(102). This brings out their disdainful attitude towards the Africans.

The Igbo technique of oral narration is retained in the narrative, signifying the still-intact order of native-communication. This includes indicating time in accordance with the native calendar, i.e. in terms of moons and Igbo weekdays. Here are two such instances: “the six villages would be locked in the old year for two moons longer[. . .]”(263); and, “Tomorrow would be Afo and the next day Nkwo, the day of the great market”(3). Another technique of oral narration is vague time-referencing, which is used to indicate events that happened long back, like: “In the very distant past, when lizards were still few and far between, the six villages [. . .] lived as different people, and each worshipped its own deity”(17). This evinces that time is approximated rather than pin-pointed in the unlettered memory of the Umuroans. While recalling an incident from the recent past, they however mention the numerical years, but the stress remains on some important events occurred in the same, which act as clue in the reminiscence. For instance, the day of Okperi land-dispute “five years ago”(18) stand out in the communal memory on account of the dispute ensued between Ezeulu and the clan during that time. As the narrative goes: “On the day, five years ago, *when leaders of Umuro decided to send an emissary to Okperi* [. . .] Ezeulu spoke in vain”(emphasis added 18). It gives a fairytale-effect to the narration, much in contradistinction to the precise exactitude of the Gregorian calendar like: “*Old Tom is always reminding you that he came out to Nigeria in 1910* [. . .]”(129). The clash in the time-view between the British and Igbo orders is succinctly brought out in Winterbottom’s following statement: “They understand seasons [. . .]. But ask a man how old he is [year-wise] and he doesn’t begin to have idea”(42). This shows that the rural Nigeria is yet to assimilate the Western way of viewing time.

Apart from Igbo time-referencing, the other elements that are used to evoke the oral tradition are parataxis or usage of the connective ‘But’ to begin sentences with, and aetiological endings, i.e. the use of explicative phrase “That was why.” Here goes an example of parataxis: “But for Ezeulu there was no next time”(225). It serves to maintain the lucidity of oral narration. The same purpose is served by aetiological ending. For instance: “He [Ezeulu] must go on treating his grown children like little boys, and if they ever said so there was a big quarrel. *This was why* the older his children grew he seemed to dislike them”(emphasis added 113). In this way the narrative persona while attaching itself to an Umuroan, effectively vivifies the lore-tradition of the rural West Africa.

The narrative employs beautiful images, metaphors and similes, some of which evoke the African locale. An instance of lucid imagery comes up in the following statement depicting a tropical storm: “Palm trees and coconut trees swayed from their waists; their tops looked like giants fleeing

against the wind, their long hair streaming behind”(36). It not only brings about a fabulous effect, but also evokes the local fauna that is characteristic of the country’s latitudinal position. Metaphors indicating the African setting are also vivid in their quality and are appropriate in dispense. For example, the metaphor contained in the statement “I shall slap okro seeds out of your mouth”(188) draws association from an African crop whose corn-cobs effectively resemble broken teeth. Same purpose of highlighting the African setting is served by the mention of puff adder—a venomous snake commonly found in Africa—which is metaphorically attached to the avenging attitude of Ezeulu. The narrative also contains racial metaphors that are used by the Europeans to refer to the natives, like “pet dogs”(94) and “black monkeys”(102); they signify the initiation of colonial debasement in Africa. Other than images and metaphors, the similes also play a role in vivifying the African ambience. Here goes two examples from an African fable: “the leader of the spirits then produced a flute shining like yellow metal,” and “Then he produced another flute shining white like the *nut of the water of heaven*”(236). A refreshingly de-automatized view to see things, these similes not only reflect the African world-view, but also hint at the African’s newness to the commercial nomenclature of the above metals, namely gold and silver. There are also instances of similes apportioned in accordance with the character. For example, Ezeulu feels “like one stung in the buttocks like a black ant”(21), while Winterbottom is “stung like three wasps”(132) at moments of sudden irritation. This once again highlights the difference between Igbo and European way of naming sensory perceptions.

A reference may be made of the effective use of onomatopoeic words that once again highlight the distinction between Igbo and British way of naming reality. For example, the ‘African drum’ “throb”s (36) for Winterbottom whereas it—the *ogene*—“GOME”s (2) for Ezeulu. Similarly the churchbells ‘ring’ to all ears while the *ekwe* speaks “*kome kome kokome*”(280).

The narrative of *Arrow of God* is richly contained with proverbs, which play an important part in establishing the conversational skill of the Igbos. Being mini-folktales in themselves, they aptly encapsulate complex issues in pithy statements. For example: “When an adult is in the house the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether”(21). Ezeulu uses it to remonstrate the clan-elders, who agree with Nwaka to indulge Umuaro in a “a war of blame”(21) against Okperi. It is ironically table-turned on Ezeulu by the clan, when he condemns Umuaro to hardship and hunger by not naming the Feast of the New Yam. Proverbs are also used to foreground or highlight certain events in the narrative. The oratory of the night spirit *ogbazulobodo* is potent with such proverbs. For instance, “The fly that struts around on a mound of excrement wastes

his time; the mound will always be greater than the fly”(282). Its implications may be connected with the futile efforts of Ezeulu and his people to resist the pressures of the new religion and administration. Another example is, “It is *ofo* that gives rain-water power to cut dry earth”(282). It signifies that the power of the Chief Priest is actually a benediction of his people.

The narrative also employs the linguistic devices of humour and irony, though the usage of the former is kept at a low key in keeping with the somber ambience of the novel. There is humour in the narrative statement, “Clarke opened his mouth to say that love of titles was a universal human failing but thought better of it”(133). It is a dig upon the smugness of Winterbottom who looks down upon the narratives for their lust for title, but himself conveniently ignoring that he too is meticulous about his two titles, namely ‘Captain’ and ‘Otiji-Egbe, or the Breaker of Guns.’ Such kind of pure humour is also present in the rare pieces of friendly banter between Ezeulu and Akuebue. However, more often than not, humour takes a satirical hue, as is the case in the following statement:

Mr. Goodcountry, not knowing the full story behind the growth of his school and Church put it down to his effective evangelization...He wrote a report on the amazing success of the Gospel in Umuaro for the *West African Church Magazine*, although, as was the custom in such reports, he allowed the credit to go to the Holy Spirit. (269)

It signifies the self-complacency among the Christian missionaries and their tendency to misread situations. The limited use of humour is balanced by an effective use of the ironic device, which renders a gravity and depth to the tragic situation in the novel. It is ironical that Ezeulu, the Time-Keeper of his clan himself becomes instrumental in jeopardizing it. There is pungent irony in the fact that the Chief Priest who claims himself to be omniscient, cannot see his own doom in over-exercising his power. The white man ‘Wintabota’ whom Ezeulu befriends to keep abreast of the new dispensation, ironically becomes an agent in bringing about Ezeulu’s downfall. In this way, various shades of irony enhances the tragic effect in the novel.

A lot of children’s tales and songs are included in the narrative that portends the upcoming events in the novel. The story of the jealous mother and her son that Ugoye tells Nwafo and Obiageli bears the moral that the sin of avarice never go unpunished. Similarly, the song-exchange played between Obiageli and Nkechi contains the understatement that offence is followed at heels by retribution. Both forebode that Ezeulu will

be punished for attempting to “dare”(4) too far in his priestly powers. The song sung by Obiageli to placate little Amechi is equally apprehensive of the priest’s fate. It says: “Father’s goat is in the barn/ And the yams will all be eaten,” and “Look! He’s [Deer has] dipped one foot in water/ Snake has struck him!/ He withdraws!”(153) Indeed, the yams will all be eaten by the goat (catechist) of the Father (Christianity), and the Deer (Ezeulu) has already got struck by the Snake (Winterbottom) while he dipped one foot in the water (new dispensation), and thereby has retreated from it. Apart from these children’s lilt, there are also songs sung by the native workmen while working under the white man’s supervision. This indicates the natural propensity among the blacks to resort to music to mitigate the labours of life and also to defy oppression.

A lot of motifs are employed in the narrative to enlighten various issues in the novel. The most prominent of all is the dream motif. A “para-linguistic affective device,” Ngara observes, the dream motif is used “for foreshadowing subsequent events [in the novel] [. . .]”(Ngara 73). The dream Ezeulu has on his first night at Okperi vividly prophesies the very way of his fall—that he will be stripped of power and become “the priest of a dead god”(197). The second dream comes at the penultimate stage of the novel, when “the struggle between the various opposing forces has reached its peak”(Ngara 73). It contains signs of death and disintegration not only of Ezeulu’s own home—portending Obika’s death and his own insanity, but also that of all the Chief Priest stands for—his religion, his way of life, and his culture.

The sacrificial motif comes up of and on in the novel. Both Obika and Ezeulu are compared with the sacrificial ram. While he is whipped by the white man in public, Obika “shivered like the sacrificial ram which must take in silence the blows of the funeral dancers before its throat is cut” (101). In the end he actually becomes one as he gives up his life to atone for his father’s guilt by running *ogbazulobodo* in ailing health. Ezeulu, himself the carrier of a deity who is formed of human sacrifice, becomes a “funeral ram”(286) for his clan by sanctifying through his agony his people’s defection to the new faith. Earlier in the novel, the priest confesses to Akuebue that his son Oduche is meant to be a metaphorical sacrifice to the new religion on his behalf, so that he could retain centrality in the alien order as well. The monthly yams offered by Ezeulu to Ulu are “death”(280) or symbolic sacrifice to the deity in recognition of the protection given by the deity to Umuaro.

The madness motif is another feature that comes up time and again in the novel. Almost every character in Ezeulu’s household is

ascribed to it. Ezeulu's mother is said to have died of lunacy. It amply foregrounds the priest's mental derangement at the end of the novel.

Finally, lack of communication is another important motif in the narrative. Both Ezeulu and Winterbottom are at ill-communication with their respective community, which balks their every attempt to do something positive. Ezeulu and Winterbottom are improperly communicated by an incompetent messenger, which contributes in the precipitous events that follow by. The British Administration is at ill-communion with the natives, which is evident in its attempts to appoint Warrant Chief among the fiercely democratic Igbos.

Finally, a discussion is necessary regarding the use of symbols in the narrative. The new moon is the symbol of the unattainable desiree—the mother-figure around whom takes place the phallic play for power in the clan. Ezeulu's "fear of the new moon"(2) is actually a signifier of the castration complex, since it reflects the priest's dread of old-age when he would have to let go his position of power on account of his incapability to locate the moon in his failing sight. Nwaka's rivalry against Ezeulu's priestly privilege of declaring the new moon represents usurpation attitude, which is best-evident in his following-statement: "Why should we rely on him [Ezeulu]?...Is there anybody here who cannot see the moon in his own compound?" (197). In the fight for centrality in the clan's affairs, it is noteworthy that each rival—Nwaka and Ezeulu terminologically attempts to establish the other as impotent. The annual cycle of productivity (planting and harvest) associated with the new moon also reinforces its connection the mother figure by evoking the monthly cycles of female fecundity. Ezeulu attempts to jeopardize this cycle of time by not naming the Feast; he does so to establish his exclusive rights over the new-moon and its demarcated Time. This excessive exertion of phallic authority finally leads Ezeulu to his dethronement and also symbolic emasculation—as is suggestively hinted in the children's song in chapter eighteen. The real owner of Time—the clan moves on to discard its namesake father Ezeulu, and adopts a new one—the Christian God. Apart from this, the new moon is also associated with lunacy, since Ezeulu's mother "was seized by madness...at the new moon" (278), and ironically Ezeulu too falls from sanity on a new moon. This establishes the long-debated connection between lunar cycle and lunacy.

Python is an ambivalent phallic symbol. The phallic connotation is established in the song of the workmen in chapter eight. Representative of the Igbo tradition, the python becomes a natural target for the castrating intentions of the new religion. Also, the python stands for Idemili—the rival

deity of Ulu. It thus embodies resentment against Ulu's paternal finality, which Ezeulu tries to repress on the deity's behalf.

Finally, communication may be seen as a representative symbol of the hierarchical British administration impinging over the democratic clan-administration of the Igbos. The white man communicates with the natives through interpreter, by which the natives are pushed to passivity. They are also denied the right to question, as it is shown in chapter eight. So they are left with no option but to accept whatever the white man bids. This comes in contradistinction to the Igbo way of handling clan-affairs, where every communication becomes a part of collective deliberation in a community-gathering, whereby each person is accountable to the clan for his statements and thereby inevitably takes into account the listeners' responses.

In this way, Achebe has explored the various possibilities of the English language to capture vividly and credibly the overall ambience of Nigeria of the early 1920s. The stylistics employed by him in the novel form a subtext by itself, enlightening various subtle paradigms of theme and characterization.

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