



## Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God: Tragedy of the Priest

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### ABSTRACT

*The novel Arrow of God of Chinua Achebe speaks of the Igbo community under white rule. Ezeulu is the protagonist of the novel. He is the priest of custodian deity of his village, Umuaro. He is the guardian and custodian of Igbo community. He enjoys vast power. Festivals are observed and harvest is done as per his command. His power makes him proud and ambitious. He loses his integrity. His mind differs from his action. He misuses his power. He underestimates villagers. He gives importance to himself and to Ulu, the deity of the village more than his community. Being humiliated by white men, he thinks of taking revenge on his community. Respecting the command of Ulu, he does not allow people for harvesting crops. People suffer and become his enemy. Nobody respect him as before. People burn his huts. Degradation, decay and tragedy come to him. He repents and changes himself. To save his community he worships not to Ulu but to Christ. The novel thus conveys a message that no man however great can prosper going against the clan. The tragedy of Ezeulu is because he dares doing such mistake.*

**KEYWORDS:** power, ambition, degradation, decay, tragedy, repentance and transformation

Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God deals with the socio-cultural situation of Igbo community prior to British occupation. The protagonist of the novel is Ezeulu. The novel and all the characters in the novel revolve round him. He is the Chief Priest of Ulu, the principal deity of Umuaro. The functions of Ezeulu as the Chief Priest are to perform the rituals periodically, offer prayers and sacrifices to the deity on behalf of Umuaro. He also declares the agricultural calendar of the community. In this capacity, he names and conducts two important events of Umuaro: namely the Festival of Pumpkin Leaves – a ceremony of purification before plantation and the New Yam Festival which marks the end of the old year and beginning of the New Year. He is also the custodian in the matter of internal security of the community. Thus he enjoys vast powers and responsibility. As David Carroll points out: Arrow of God is a study in the psychology of power (123)".

As the novel opens, Ezeulu the old Chief Priest is looking for the new moon so that he can declare different events and festivals. He has the feeling that his power is not limited. He is not only a priest but also the unrivalled leader of his community. As he thinks: "No! The chief priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day, there would be no festival, no planting and no reaping (Arrow of God, p.3)".

But Ezeulu's path of enjoying absolute power is not clear. He has constant rivalry with Nwaka, a very wealthy and influential person of Umuaro. As C.L. Innes points out: "Arrow of God deals with complex relationships and rivalries, the jealous concern for status which influences almost every social contact and Ezeulu is surrounded by a whole of conflicts and rivalries (71)". Ezeulu confronts the formidable opposition from within as well as colonial administration ruling the country from the neighbouring Okperi. Winter-bottom, the English District Officer interferes into different internal affairs of Umuaro. Ezeulu sends his son, Oduche to the white man's school wanting him to be his 'eyes' there and learn the wisdom and secrets of the white man. He is aware of the fact that "the white man had not come for a short visit but to build a house and live (45)".

Nwaka never tolerates Ezeulu and his actions. He accuses Ezeulu on the issue of sending his son to the white man's school. He makes an assessment of Ezeulu's limitations: "The man who carries a deity is not a king. He is there to perform his god's ritual and to carry sacrifice to him.... He is a man of ambition; he wants to be king, priest, diviner, all (27)".

Oduche, Ezeulu's son, instead of learning the white man's wisdom and secret, goes against his clan. He keeps royal python in a box, which is worshipped as Father in the clan. Ezeulu is disturbed at this. He is blamed by the people of his village. He is suspected to have alliance with the white man. Ezeulu is mentally disturbed by this criticism. But he claims he is not wrong in sending his son to white man's school and says: "I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same time I am Unknowable (132)".

Captain Winterbottom decides to make Ezeulu as the Chief of Umuaro. He sends a messenger to Ezeulu with a message to meet him. But Ezeulu

is hurt by the behaviour of the messenger and his message and bursts out: "tell your white man that Ezeulu does not leave his hut. If he wants to see me he must come here (139)". He informs about the message to Umuaro council. The council forces him to meet Winterbottom. But Captain Winterbottom is very angry to know about Ezeulu's misbehaviour with his messenger. He signs a warrant of arrest of Ezeulu. When Ezeulu arrives at Okperi he is kept in white man's custody for thirty two days. In order to be good in the eyes of his clan's men he rejects their proposal to be the Chief of Umuaro. He is set free after thirty two days.

Ezeulu returns to his village. He is well received by the people of his village. But he mentally resolves to take revenge on Umuaro for his humiliation by the white man. As the Chief Priest he declares New Yam Festival after consuming twelve yams in twelve months. When harvesting is undertaken. But as he was in white man's custody for thirty two days, he could not consume two yams. So he thinks of making late in declaring New Yam Festival. But for time being he wants not to show his real nature. At that moment Ulu, the deity says:

I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits you? You want to save your friends who brought your palm wine, he-he-he-he!... Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blow not meant for you! Do you not know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili, whose envy seeks to destroy me so that his python may again come to power... (191-192)".

Now the priest becomes an agent of god, not a representative of the clan. He becomes an arrow in the bow of his God. As Lynn Innes comments: "one must see Ezeulu's submission to Ulu's authority as if he were a mere arrow in the bow of God (79-80)". With the command of god he alienated himself from his community. Such alienation becomes the cause of his disintegration and tragedy. He takes a fatal decision to defer the naming of New Yam Festival. The elders of the clan persuade him to eat the yams and declares the Festival enabling people to carry out harvesting operations. He agrees to consult the deity to find a solution to the crisis. But he returns from the shrine and informs the elders that there is no response from the deity. A god like Ulu leads a priest to ruin himself.

Meanwhile, the ripe crop of yams begins to rot in the earth. Ezeulu becomes an enemy of his villagers and faces hostility from the clan. People do not care him as they were caring him before. He becomes lonely. The sudden death of his favourite son, Obika affects him a lot. There is change in his mind. He has more faith on alien God of Christianity than Ulu. He offers sacrifices in the form of Yams to Christ for starting of harvest and security of his clan.

Thus, Arrow of God conveys a message that no man however great can prosper going against the clan. Power rests with the group, the community and the society. Any attempt by an individual going against this principle faces disastrous end. The tragedy of Ezeulu in the novel is due to his giving importance to himself and his deity than the community.

## REFERENCES

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