

The Ambivalent Protagonist in Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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Abstract— *The paper is an attempt to study the character of Ezeulu, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's novel Arrow of God through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'ambivalence'. Ezeulu is the chief priest of the native Igbo religion and has a great influence on the clansmen. He is very proud of his position as "the ezeulu," but at the same time admires the white man and his government. The coloniser attempts to use Ezeulu's influence on the clan as a tool to further strengthen their fort. This attempt affects the personal as well as the private life of Ezeulu leading to his alienation.*

Keywords— *Ambivalence, Menace, Mimic men.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ambivalence describes the two conflicting sides of an individual who is at the same time attracted to two or more opposing ideas or ideologies. "The concept of ambivalence is first developed in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite. It also refers to a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action." (*Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 12) It was Homi.K.Bhabha who applied the concept in post colonial studies. According to Bhabha ambivalence "describe(s) the subtle mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized" (13). This "relationship" may be both "exploitative and nurturing." So in Bhabha's theory ambivalence disturbs the colonial authority and so it is an "unwelcome" outcome of the coloniser's strategies. Bhabha states that an ambivalent "mimic man" could be a direct threat or apparent "menace" to the coloniser. Ezeulu the protagonist in *Arrow of God* is the chief priest of Ulu, a position that earned him great respect in his native village. Ulu is one of the chief deities of Umuaro, a collection of six villages in south-eastern Nigeria. Ezeulu is a different sort of man when compared with his clansmen. "His *obi* was built differently from other men's huts" (*Arrow of God* 1). The distinctiveness of his *obi* is a metaphor used by Achebe to infer the character of Ezeulu. Ezeulu's pride is an important factor that leads the events of the novel to the climax. But it is not the feeling of self-importance or pride that distinguishes Ezeulu from other male members of his clan. Ezeulu's pride is only a device through which the ambivalence of his character is revealed.

II. DISCUSSION

Ezeulu is an ardent follower of the native cultural practices and rituals and also values the power and culture of the white man. This ambivalence defines his self. His identity is totally dependent on the native culture as he lives a prestigious and prosperous life as a Chief Priest of the native religion. The name 'ezeulu' literally mean 'the chief priest of Ulu.' Achebe never reveals the real name of his protagonist. This is a conscious technique used by the author to enhance the ambivalence and to elevate the final alienation of Ezeulu. So all the respect and prestige that Ezeulu enjoys is a direct contribution of his native religion and culture. Ezeulu himself should be aware of this role of native religion in preserving his status at Umuaro. He always tries to appropriate Ulu as the supreme deity of Umuaro and in the process he has earned a few enemies also like the Priest of Idemili. He very much enjoys the power he has as the chief priest of Ulu. He is very dedicated to his profession and values the native religion as the back bone of Umuaro.

Ezeulu is also fascinated by the power of white man and his customs. Unlike the other members of his society he is not ready to neglect the importance of the white man's presence. Though he recognises white man not as a threat, he is conscious of their hidden aim and believes that they are here on a purpose. Ezeulu's passive nature is most evidently manifested in his attitude towards the white man and their religion. This passiveness is a very essential part of his ambivalence. Being the chief priest he could not directly participate in the activities of the white man though the white man's power greatly fascinates him. It is the prestige that the native religion conferred upon him that prevents him from this direct involvement. The position of Chief Priest at the same time prevents Ezeulu from becoming a mimic man like Unachukwu or Isaac and adds to the complexity of his ambivalence.

As Ezeulu cannot enter himself into the religion and customs of the white man and not being able to restraint his curiosity he asks his son Oduche to join the missionaries. Oduche is thus initiated by his father to imitate the white man. This decision of Ezeulu to send his son to the white man has created a lot of criticisms in the village. Many elders including Ezeulu's friend Akuebue was puzzled at this decision by Ezeulu. But the fact is that

a white man named Captain T.K. Winterbottom made enough works to influence Ezeulu. In fact, Ezeulu became only a medium, a tool at the will of Winterbottom to lure a native boy.

Captain Winterbottom is the head of the British administration of the region. He is not presented as a stereotypical colonial authoritarian figure. But Achebe depicts him as a wise and compassionate colonial officer who never contempt the native people. However, the inherent threat of colonial authority is present inside him and he is also a manipulator and exploiter of the natives. Captain Winterbottom is much like the coloniser Charles Grant who introduced “partial reforms” as he was very careful in his dealing with the natives. He comes as a special officer appointed by the British Government to pacify the war between Okperi and Umuaro. It is during the trial of this war that Winterbottom acquaintances with Ezeulu. Ezeulu is asked to be a witness by the white man and Ezeulu who is against war confesses the crime of Umuaro. The people of Umuaro lead by Nwaka are very much distressed by this unbiased act of Ezeulu and they see him as a traitor. But Ezeulu is least worried about the natives’ comments because by telling the truth he has earned the respect and friendship of the white man “Wintabota” who describes Ezeulu “the only witness of truth” (7). This act of Ezeulu is the first one he did to gain the respect of white man. He further longs to cement his relationship with the white man and has no second thoughts when Winterbottom requested him to send one of his sons to the missionary.

But by the time many of the villagers began to develop bitterness against Ezeulu “because he had spoken the truth before the white man” (6) and they began to see him as “a friend of the white man.” The phrase that Winterbottom used to describe him was a matter of pride to Ezeulu. But in theory, by calling Ezeulu as “the only witness of truth” Winterbottom was attributing an inferior status to one of his subject. This is same as the process of Macaulay’s “official introduction of interpreters.” And by conferring a status the wise colonial administrator Winterbottom has established his superiority over the supreme head of the native religion. This novel status elevates the pride of Ezeulu and encourages him to execute further actions that distinguish him from his counterparts.

Though Ezeulu sent Oduche to the missionary school he is unwilling to free Oduche from his control. He wants Oduche to remain both as a faithful son and a learner of the new religion. He hopes that Oduche’s conversion to Christianity would bring good for his family in the future.

At first he had thought that since the white man had come with great power and conquest it was necessary that some people should learn the ways of his deity. That was why he had

agreed to send his son, Oduche, to learn the new ritual. He also wanted him to learn the white man’s wisdom, for Ezeulu knew from what he saw of Wintabota and the stories he heard about his people that the white man was very wise (42).

He hopes that one day his son will become an essential part of the white man’s system.

Ezeulu’s ambivalence of character is revealed when Oduche prefers Church over his obligation as a son and a brother. Oduche informs his father that he will not be there to help building a homestead for his brother as he is assigned to go to Okperi by the Church. This hurts the pride of Ezeulu who says:

Listen to what I shall say now. When a handshake goes beyond the elbow we know it has turned to another thing. It was I who sent you to join the white man, Wintabota. He asked me to send one of my children to learn the ways of his people and I agreed to send you. I did not send you so that you might leave your duty in my household. Do you hear me? Go and tell the people who chose you to go to Okperi that I said no. Tell them that tomorrow is the day on which my sons and my wives and my son’s wife work for me. Your people should know the custom of this land; if they don’t you must tell them. Do you hear me? (13-14)

Ezeulu is afraid that his son Oduche would give more importance to the Church than the native religion represented by him. Even though the pride of being a friend of the white man lessens or overpowers his fear. So he allows his son to continue his dealings with the church by suppressing his fear. This creates ambivalent and conflicting thoughts in his mind:

But now 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 time had come to bring out him again. But what would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, the white man had come to take over the land and rule? In such a case it would be wise to have a man of your family in his band (42).

The change that was happening to Oduche was very apparent. Ezeulu preferred to believe that this change is inevitable as the “world is changing” (45). Ezeulu was only a conscious witness of the change and he justifies his part in the change of Oduche’s life. At first he was sure that Oduche will not go out of his control even though he joins the other religion. He was very careful in choosing

Oduche among his sons. He did not choose his favourite and youngest son Nwafo as he wants him to succeed him as the next "Ezeulu." His eldest son Edogo is a family man and is not suitable for the task. Obika his second son is a drunkard and uncontrollable. So it appeared to Ezeulu that Oduche is the perfect choice. He also boosts a confused Oduche: "I have sent you to be my eyes there. Do not listen to what people say – people who do not know their right from their left. No man speaks a lie to his son; I have told you that before. If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time" (189).

Oduche at first was unwilling to join the church and is apparently forced by Ezeulu. With the incident of Oduche locking a royal python in a box the things got more worsen for Ezeulu. He was slowly being alienated from his society and this incident accelerated it. He was aware of this alienation. "He was full of amazement at the calumny which even people he called his friends were said to be spreading against him" (59). Even Oduche's mother was unhappy at her husband. Every one accused Ezeulu and alienated him without acknowledging the role of the Church. Ezeulu also did not criticize the church for his son's deed. He always maintained a passive response when the Church or the white man tried to irk the smooth going of his family. This passivity is even more evident when he refuses to accuse the white men when they whipped Obika. He says to Edogo: "I think he was late in going. But the white man would not whip a grown man who is also my son for that. He would be asked to pay a fine to his age group for being late; he would not be whipped. Or perhaps he hit the white man first ..." (88) This passive reaction is due to the ambivalence of his character. Later in the novel he says to Akuebue: "a stranger can whip a son of mine and go unscathed because my son has nailed up his ear against my words" (98).

His pride or self-importance is the only factor that encourages him to comment against the white man. But this ambivalence of Ezeulu is not the same as the one of Unachukwu, John Nwodika, or Obi Okonkwo, other famous characters of Achebe. But Ezeulu's ambivalence is the earliest version of the ambivalence of Bhabha's "mimic men". However, Ezeulu is not a mimic man himself. He knowingly or unknowingly became a part in the white man's technique of 'initiation' into colonial mimicry. Even though he feels alienated from both his own people and the white men he survives the British Government's attempt to tempt him to accept their offer. In fact, it is his pride that kept him away from accepting their offer. But in his rejection to become "the paramount chief" what is revealed is his ambivalence.

The criticism of his native people never disturbed his mind. As a chief priest he has certain obligations towards his people. But he is least concerned about his

obligations and considers his power as a device to accomplish his decisions. For the people of Umuaro Ezeulu is not only a religious leader but also a role model. "People were asking: 'If the Chief Priest of Ulu could send his son among people who kill and eat the sacred python and commit other evils what did he expect ordinary men and women to do?'" (125) The deeds and decisions of Ezeulu thus had a direct impact on the life of Umuaro. The white man Captain T.K. Winterbottom was so wise in maintaining his friendship with Ezeulu, but the attribution of the title of "paramount chief" is part of a larger colonial policy.

Ezeulu is not only negligent to the criticisms but also justifies his ambivalent decisions and flawed deeds. The commoners' anxieties and opinions are represented through the voice of Akuebue. Akuebue is a well-wisher of Ezeulu and always be there as a medium of solace throughout the novel whenever Ezeulu had to deal with a crisis. But Ezeulu seldom values his friend's advices. Akuebue says to Ezeulu: "but you forget one thing; that no man however great can win judgement against a clan. You may think you did in that land dispute but you are wrong. Umuaro will always say that you betrayed them before the white man. And they will say that they will betraying them again today by sending your son to join in desecrating the land" (131). But Ezeulu is stubborn to all his critics including Akuebue. His reply to Akuebue reveals his stubbornness:

'Don't make me laugh,' said Ezeulu again. 'So I betrayed Umuaro to the white man? let me ask you one question. Who brought the white man here? Was it Ezeulu? We went to war against Okperi who are our blood brothers over a piece of land which did not belong to us and you blame the white man for stepping in. have you not heard that when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest? How white men went in the party that destroyed Abame? Do you know? Five.' He held his right hand up with five fingers fanned out. 'Five. Now have you ever heard that five people- even if their heads reached the sky- could overrun whole clan? Impossible. With all their power and magic white men would not have overrun entire Olu and Igbo if we did not help them(132).

He justifies his part and accuses the natives for all the chaos. At a point he even justifies the cause of white men who according to Ezeulu is dragged into the native chaos. He further adds: "Who showed them the way to Abame? They were not born there; how then they find the way? We showed them and are still showing them. So let nobody come to me now and complain that the white man did this and did that. The man who brings anti-infested

faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit” (132). Unlike Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu is not ready to accept his mistakes. He is even unaware about his mistakes. He is more like a modern Nigerian politician or a thinker. His words suggest that that he is more than an ordinary tribal leader. He is much ahead of his time when he says: “We have shown the whiteman the way to our house and given him a stool to sit on. If we now want him to go away again we must wait until he is tired of his visit or we must drive him away” (132). In the case of Oduche locking the sacred royal python we see Oduche criticising not the Christian religion or the white man but the natives. Ezeulu also justifies his decision to send his son to the church. He justifies it by saying that it is a sacrifice.

A disease that has never been seen before cannot be cured with everyday herbs. When we want to make a charm we look for the animal whose blood can match its power; if a chicken cannot do it we look for a goat or a ram; if that is not sufficient we send for a bull. But sometimes even a bull does not suffice, then we must look for a human. Do you think it is the sound of death-cry gurgling through blood that we want to hear? No my friend, we do it because we have reached the very end of things and we know that neither a cock nor a goat nor even a bull will do (133).

In the final chapter, a totally alienated Ezeulu scolds his estranged son Oduche for destroying his expectations:

‘Do you remember, Oduche, what I told you when I sent you among those people?’... ‘Since you have become dumb let me remind you. I called you...and told you to go and be my eye and ear among those people. I did not send Obika or Edogo; I did not send Nwafo, your mother’s son. I called you by name and you came here- in this *obi* – and I sent you to see and hear for me. I did not know at that time that I was sending a goat’s skull. Go away, go back to your mother’s hut’ (220).

Here also Ezeulu is not admitting that his decision to send one his son to missionary was a mistake. Instead he prefers to believe that he made a mistake by selecting Oduche.

Ezeulu’s ambivalence is best manifested when he rejects the offer of becoming the paramount chief. Most of the villagers and even the white men never expected such a determined decision from Ezeulu. Ezeulu’s lust for power is known to all: “At first few people in Umuaro believed the story that Ezeulu had rejected the white man’s offer to be a Warrant Chief. How could he refuse the very thing he had been planning and scheming for all these years, his

enemies asked?” (176) His foremost enemy Nwaka describes Ezeulu’s ambivalence as madness: “‘The man is proud as a lunatic,’ he [Nwaka] said. ‘This proves what I have always told people, that he inherited his mother’s madness’” (176).

Tony Clarke in the absence of Captain Winterbottom tried his best to persuade Ezeulu. “Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody’s chief expect Ulu” (175). This reply of Ezeulu to Clarke reveals the other side of his ambivalent nature. At this stage his pride forces him to value his native religion over everything. But the irony is that he delays the announcement of the New Yam Festival. This affects the entire economy of Umuaro. As a Chief Priest it is his duty to declare the correct date. But he adamantly stings on the customs which were actually for the welfare of the natives. Ogbuefi Ofoka reminds Ezeulu of his own ambivalence by saying Ezeulu’s old words that “a man must dance the dance prevailing in his time” (212). The natives affected by poverty and financial crisis starts criticising Ezeulu for his delaying of the declaration. “Perhaps Akuebue was the only man in Umuaro who knew that Ezeulu was not deliberately punishing the six villages” (219). He tells to Ofoka: “I know Ezeulu better than most people. He is a proud man and most stubborn person you know is only his messenger; but he would never falsify the decision of Ulu. If he did it Ulu would not spare him to begin with” (212).

But we cannot assume that Akuebue is right in his understanding of Ezeulu. Ezeulu’s main concern is to show the natives on his authority. At his first day at Okperi he contemplates his revenge against his natives:

He had temporarily lost his status as Chief Priest which was painful; but after eighteen years it was a relief to be without it for a while.... But his greatest pleasure came from the thought of his revenge which had suddenly formed in his mind as he had sat listening to Nwaka in the market place. ... Ezeulu’s muscles tingled for the fight. 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 (160).

He wants to show his enemies that his absence can shake the very basement of Umuaro and hence he delayed the announcement by pointing out the customs. In sending Oduche to Church Ezeulu never considered the customs of Umuaro. He is a manipulator of customs. Another incident in which he manipulated the native customs is when he wanted not to go to Okperi when he is asked to summon there by Winterbottom. He was not impressed by the way in which Winterbottom sent the message and was so not interested in going. In order to report the message to the other elders and leaders of the clan and for attaining their support Ezeulu calls an urgent

meeting. At the meeting Ezeulu reveals his unwillingness to go. He claims that the customs prevent him from staying away from Umuaro as he is the Chief Priest of Ulu. Nwaka was also there and he suddenly points out the ambivalence of Ezeulu's claim. He says: "Is this the first time Ezeulu would be going to Okperi? Who was white man's witness that year we fought for our land – and lost?" (144)

As Ezeulu is not a mimic man himself he is not a "menace" to the colonial policies. But he offers resistance against the white man's attempt to convince him. The natives who came to visit Ezeulu after his return from Okperi said: "The white man has met his match in you [Ezeulu]" (184). At the end of the novel, Ezeulu become alienated and he cannot distinguish his enemies. He once supported the white man and at the end asks the native to challenge him. But he wants his son Oduche to be an integral part of the white man's system. The ambivalence of his nature is very apparent in the final portion of the novel and it is revealed through the words of Nwaka: "First you, Ezeulu, told us five years ago that it was foolish to defy the white man. We did not listen to you. We went out against him and he took our gun from us and broke it across his knee. So we know you were right. But just as we were beginning to learn our lesson you turn round and tell us to go and challenge the same white man" (188).

Through the study of Ezeulu's nature we can conclude that ambivalence will lead to alienation. Ezeulu is both alienated from his kinsmen and the white men. During the first days of the detention Ezeulu was unable to sleep as the feeling of isolation haunted his mind.

He thought once more of his fruitless, albeit cursory, search for the door of new moon. So even in his mother's village which he used to visit regularly as a boy and a young man and which next to Umuaro he knew better than any village – even here he was something of a stranger! It gave him a feeling of loss which was both painful and pleasant... Away from Ulu he felt like a child whose stern parent had gone on a journey (160).

When he is allowed to return to Umuaro he tells to a white clerk: "They [natives] call me the friend of white man. They say Ezeulu brought the white man to Umuaro." (179) Once he reaches his village he began to feel a different sort of alienation which can be directly associated with his ambivalence.

As long as he was in exile it was easy for Ezeulu to think of Umuaro as one hostile entity. But back in his hut he could no longer see the matter is simply as that. All these people who had come to him could not be called enemies. Some of them- like Anosi – might be people of little consequence,

ineffectual, perhaps fond of gossip and sometimes given to malice: but they were different from the enemy he had seen in his dream at Okperi (187).

III. CONCLUSION

Ezeulu's ambivalence is not that sort of one we would expect from a typical mimic man or a colonial subject. Ezeulu was astonished by the power of the white man and he admired their superiority. He was sure that white man will rule the land and so he found it necessary to have a member of his family in the white man's system. That is why he sent Oduche to join Christianity. Friendship with white men was a matter of pride for him. Apart from gaining a superior status there are factors like 'fear' or 'inevitability' that encourages a native to become a mimic man. It is true in the case of Ezeulu as he himself consider white men his superior.

It can be concluded that 'ambivalence' is the most common, almost inalienable trait of a colonial subject. The final culmination of ambivalence is alienation of the character. Ezeulu is victim of this culminate alienation. Towards the end of the novel, we find him alienated both from his native culture and his white friends. But we cannot consider him as a typical "menace" of Bhabha's theory. Even though he offers some sort of challenge to the coloniser by not accepting the luring status of "the paramount chief."

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