

The Loss of Identity in *Arrow of God*: A Postcolonial Reading

C. G. Sijo

M.Phil. English Literature, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli

Introduction

Postcolonial literature is one, which negotiates with, contests, and subverts Euro-American ideologies and representations. It is an attempt to critically engage with history of oppression, colonialism, racism, and injustice. Postcolonial literature is a literature of emancipation, critique and transformation (Nayar xiii). The term postcolonial signifies a transformed historical situation and the cultural transformations that have arisen in response to changed political circumstances, in the former colonial power (qtd. in Nayar 8). To make it more clear, it describes a completely new experience of political freedom, new ideologies and new agendas (Nayar 8).

Postcolonial literature has got a very peculiar nature. One may not be able to or one should not go for a 'pure' literature over there. Rather we have a unique type of literature. According to Peter Barry, postcolonial literature and the writers go through phases of adopt, adapt, and adept. The first stage, adopt, is the phase of colonial literature, where the writer tries to adopt the European form and model they stand assuming a universal validity. The second stage, adapt, aims at adapting the European into African subject matter, thus assuming partial rights of intervention in the genre. Third stage, adept, is a declaration of cultural independence whereby postcolonial writers remake the form to their own specification without referring to European norms. The notion the double, or divided or fluid identity is the underlying characteristic of postcolonial writer and literature (Barry 189).

Chinua Achebe is one of the African writers, who brought the attention of the world to the concerns of African people and the richness of cultural heritage of Africa. Still, the decolonisation of Africa has not been complete in the mental level and that the traumatic effects of colonisation still hover upon the African people. Therefore, to reclaim the identity is an existential concern for the people of Africa by reconciling them with past, history and civilisation. He calls for to purge away the complexes accumulated over the years of self-denigration and self-abasement. At the same time, this should not end up in a nonsensical idealisation of African past as Garden of Eden.

Arrow of God is a novel in which Achebe portrays two cultures confronting each other. Achebe wanted to show the disrupting effect as an externally imposed power system has on an internally imposed power system. Conflicts already present within the Igbo society coupled with repercussions from external invasion result in disaster for the Igbo society. Thus it disintegrates from within and reorients itself to Christianity. This reorientation leads to the

assimilation of Western values and beliefs and eventually the Igbo identity is lost.

The paper will highlight the loss of identity of African people at socio-cultural, religious and political levels. The identity of African people was at stake at the advent of colonial invasion. The life with modified and hybrid identities make the life of African people an inauthentic existence. The religious, social, cultural and political implications of civilizing Africa was very much detrimental to the original and spontaneous life of the Africans, in a large frame work, the life of all the people in the colonies. The history, religion, society, culture, etc. of the native people were defined in terms of the compartmentalised, linear, exclusive and absolutistic framework imported from the West. The philosophies and dynamisms behind the culture of natives were looked down as derogatory and many of them are extinct without being able to withstand the powerful intervention of the mighty powers of colonisation.

The novel, *Arrow of God* of Achebe has been really a success in its exploration of Igbo culture. Like the novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, this novel also explores the intersections of Igbo tradition and European Christianity. The novel is set in the village of Umuaro at the beginning of the twentieth century. Almost in the lines of the main characters in the preceding novels, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, the story of Ezeulu the central character unveils ultimately leading to his tragic end (Batra 9).

The *Arrow of God* is a political and cultural novel set in Nigeria in the early twentieth century. It explores the intersections of Igbo tradition and European Christianity by telling the story of Ezeulu, a chief priest of Ulu. In this novel cultures confront their differences. Achebe portrays the disrupting effect exerted by the colonialist upon the Igbo society which disintegrates from within and reorients itself to Christianity. This reorientation not only led to the assimilation of Western values and beliefs but also to the eventual loss of the Igbo cultural identity (Grate 1). The homeland of the Igbos was divested virtually by the European colonizers. African religion and way of life have been irreparably tampered and substituted by a hybrid culture and vision of life.

Socio-Cultural Identity

Achebe is very much alarmed by the fact that the socio-cultural identity of the African people was put to stake with the advent of colonial administration in the Igbo region. At various levels, the Igbo traditional values and taboos were redefined. Achebe was keen to react against the attitude of the Europeans to describe Africa in term of exotism with a reductionist and distorted mentality (Zouiche 5). The socio-cultural identity of people in Africa may be summarised as having unified sensibility, having a synchronic approach towards time. It was Communalistic, Agrarian. Whereas the foreign identity that was superimposed upon the African people was one of dislocated sensibility, diachronic,

individualistic, urbanised and economically based on money (Pandurang 96-97).

When they were compelled to work for the road, which Mr. Wright was building to connect Okperi with Umuaro, people at the villages became restless, as they had to work without payment. And in the gathering that followed their dissatisfaction, Moses Unachukwu, one of the first converts to Christianity, speaks about the total infiltration of western ideals with feelings of submission and helplessness. He tells the native people that: "...and I can tell you that there is no escape from the white man. He has come. When suffering knocks at your door and you say there is no seat left for him, he tells you not to worry because he has brought his own stool. The white man is like that" (Achebe 84). Here Unachukwu accepts the advent of white man and his intrusion in a mood of helplessness. He is not ready to act against or resist rather he is submissive and takes it for granted that there is no way outside and no escape. He continues that, "as daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs" (Achebe 84). Here he unknowingly admits that the customs and practices of their native origin are of darkness and it has to be expelled by the 'light' which white man brings in. An assent to the colonial powers is already present in the thoughts of Moses Unachukwu. Besides, he construes his own native culture in terms of darkness. An unconscious inferiority feeling is injected to the minds of natives of the people by the education and exhortation of the colonisers.

Here it is very much apt to the recall the contribution of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (McLeod 40-41). Creating binary divisions to contrast whatever is inferior and negative with natives, branding them as uneducated, not enlightened, uncultured etc.

Achebe through the mouth of Unachukwu brings about the intrusion of white culture in all its forms and systems. When the discussion about compulsory labour without payment went on and most of the villagers got agitated at the justification and fearfulness of Unachukwu regarding the dominance of white man, he cautioned them, "...The wither man, the new, religion, the soldiers, the new road-they all are part of the same thing, the white man has a gun, a matchet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone" (Achebe 85).

The education they gave to the natives, often led to creation of 'white mental images' in the minds of those who attend. So the ideal was given to them and they should aspire and follow those ideals, which are not in tune with native traditions. Thus, we see Oduche, who had to be compulsorily sent to the church, developing an admiration towards English language and the culture of British people. It is very clear from Achebe's description:

But there was somebody else who had impressed Oduche even more. His name was Blackett, a West Indian missionary. It was said this man although black had

more knowledge than white men. Oduche thought that if he could get one-tenth of Blackett's knowledge he would be a great man in Umuaro (Achebe 46).

Chinua Achebe was very particular to revive the African past and move with it in a renewed confidence. Once he commented that his interest is to help the fellow Africans to a real pride in their own, pre-colonial culture. He made it very clear in his words at a conference in Leeds in 1964:

...it would be foolish to pretend that we have fully recovered from the traumatic effects our first confrontation with Europe. Three or four weeks ago my wife who teaches in English in a boys' school asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said he would be laughed out of class if he did such a thing!...

I would be quite satisfied if my novel did no more than teach my reader that their past-with all its imperfections- was not only long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. (as qtd. in Ravenscroft 28-29)

Religious Identity

The work of the missionaries in the Igbo regions did affect them to a great extent, that the Africans lost their native religious practices and lost to a Christian world of beliefs and religious practices. We see a number of instances where we see the religious interventions in the novel and affect the course of life of Ezeulu, the chief priest, his family, the villages of Umuaro.

Ezeulu himself is seen sending his own son, Oduche to church. Of course, it was part of his shrewdness so as to know about and access to the power of white man. He wanted his son to be his eye in the church so that he can closely observe what was going on there and act accordingly.

Unfortunately, all his plans proved to be wrong, when Oduche got attracted to Christian religion and once he tried to shut a sacred python in a box because the catechists had taught him against the devotion to python. Mr. Goodcountry, the new catechist taught, "if we are Christians, we must be ready to die for the faith, he said. You must be ready to kill the python as the people of the rivers killed the inguana. You address the python as Father. It is nothing but a snake, the snake that deceived our first mother, Eve. If you are afraid to kill it do not count yourself a Christian" (Achebe 47). For Umuaro people, python is very much related to the devotion of deity of Idemili and nobody should kill a python. It was an act of sacrilege for the people in Umuaro.

Everybody was shocked at the action of Oduche, who dared to lock a python in box. Furthermore, as it was from the son of the priest, it heightened the graveness of the issue. People began to think about the incident in very negative terms. "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?" (Achebe 125), they began to ask themselves. People were highly dissatisfied with the action of Ezeulu and his son.

The feast of Yam: This led to lot of dissatisfactions and commotion among the people of Umuaro. However, Ezeulu was very much adamant in his position, “You all know what our custom is. I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three yams and so I know that the time has not come” (Achebe 207).

At this juncture, the catechist Goodcountry understood that this was an appropriate time to intervene and attract the people to offer their yams to Christian God. So in the new church committee, he made his mind clear that the people may bring yams, livestock, money and what not. He succeeded in making them convinced that they could do harvesting without fearing Ulu.

The Christianity being a monotheistic religion with triumphalism had always looked down upon other religion and labelled them as heathens or gentiles. The approach of Christianity powered by its Royal Empire backup early from the beginning always had totalitarian claims over others and categorised people on harsh terms. The European colonial invasion and missionary work had so many things to give and take. Both processes made the other easy and enriched each other for a long time.

The religious backup for colonisation and standardisation of the uncultured is a thing that is criticised often. Zouiche points out that the ‘inferior status’ of the Africans had even received religious sanctions when Biblical interpretation was invited in to suggest that the negro race as lower race to serve the superior white race. This often led to justify the exploitation of millions of Africans and the settlement of Africa as a civilising mission and the white man’s burden getting the Africans civilised (Zouiche 6).

Political Identity

With regard to the Igbo people, where life was approached holistically, strictly compartmentalised western investigation may prove to be an ambitious effort. Hence to understand the loss of political identity cross references to loss of identity in the cultural and religious levels is very much normal.

The colonial administration represented by the team of captain Winterbottom, his assistant Tony Clarke, and others like Robert, Wade, etc. always wanted to have a hand in the villages. The Okperi district was already under the colonial powers also. But at Umuaro, things have been little more difficult.

As the Igboland was conquered, the colonial administration wanted to set up a new system of ruling. They want to appoint warrant chiefs. The chief is to be called so because the sole legitimacy derived from a colonial legal document, the warrant. The introduction of warrant chief system disturbed the system of African societies. These warrants were ultimately the puppets of colonial administration. So, many of the village chiefs did not want to be mere warrant puppets in the hands of colonisers. So people like Ezeulu reacted against this system of administration (Batra 46).

In the novel we instances where Ezeulu is very much proud of himself and never wanting to be a tool in the hands of British people. When he was asked by the messenger from captain Winterbottom to come and meet him, he was very proud and told to the messenger, "...and tell you white man that Ezeulu does not leave his hut. If he wants to see me he must come here" (Achebe 139). Though he had been very much proud, later on he went to meet captain to the captain's place. His own village chiefs and people did not want him to stay at Umuaro without going to meet the white man.

We see the power of Ezeulu and the African native administrative system represented by him becoming weak as the novel progresses to the end. Ezeulu and his system could not withstand the powerful invasion and dominance of the white people. Even before the collapse of Ezeulu, Mr. Wright was able to keep the people of Umuaro to construct the new road between Okperi and Umuaro without paying them. Getting people to work without payment is nothing but slavery. Thus, the colonial administration had succeeded to control the fate of the Igbo people.

Politically Igbo people lost the identity as independent society having its own rules, customs and traditions. The branding of the system by the colonisers as insufficient and very much primitive is nothing but a part of the scheme that the colonisers had upon them. The white man's burden for educating and civilising the native people is always a rational explanation in disguise to justify motive plundering the resources of natives.

A study of the loss of identity is justified in order to reaffirm it. A process of decolonisation should take place as a counter discourse. Decolonisation can be said to be a reaffirmation one's cultural values and systems. As the colonial master had rejected and crumbled native culture. They tried to impose the European way of life into the colonised people. Thus, decolonisation seeks for a retrieval of the forgotten rhythms of life (Nayar 83).

This paper was an attempt to look into the novel *Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe with a postcolonial bend so as to enable us to identify the loss of identity in the various layers of the life of Igbo people, in a broader sense, the people of Africa. The people of Africa have really suffered to inexpressible depths as a result of the colonising endeavour by the white people especially the British people.

Various techniques are employed by the colonising agents to make the process of colonising easy and justifiable. The colonising powers tried to convince themselves and others that they do care for the people of Africa and try to civilise them and lead to a life of enlightenment and culture. Thus technically, the native people of Africa were considered in terms of negative that are to be made positive and corrected with the 'generous' help and concern for the uncivilised and uneducated aboriginal people.

The religious, social, cultural and political implications of this giving a 'helping hand' was very much detrimental to the original and spontaneous life of the Africans, in a large frame work, the life of all the people in the colonies. The history, religion, society, culture, etc. of the native people were defined in terms of the compartmentalised, linear, exclusive and absolutistic framework imported from the West. The philosophies and dynamisms behind the culture of natives were looked down as derogatory and many of them are extinct without being able to withstand the powerful intervention of the mighty powers of colonisation.

Thus, it can be observed that the loss of identity in socio-cultural, political and religious levels depicted in the novel *Arrow of God* coincided with the annihilation of the genuine original native identity. At this juncture, 'a going back' will involve finding the lost identity and escaping from the imposed artificial one.

Conclusion

Postcolonial approach calls for a re-reading of the completely colonial epistemology, despising anything that is non-western. A redefining return to the past to launch to brighter future is the mission to be accomplished. However, this process is not as simple as merely returning to the traditions. It is a journey in search of the lost identity among the distorted identities while owning a modified identity.

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