

CHINUA ACHEBE'S COUNSELLING CREATIVITY

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We may borrow the words of Ezeulu of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* uttered in a different context about a different phenomenon and say that Achebe is "like the Mask dancing" and that "if you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place" (46). Although Achebe has said in his most recent book, *There Was a Country*, "I am not a sociologist, a political scientist, a human rights lawyer, or government official" (228), anybody acquainted with Achebe's works knows that they are replete with sociological, political, governmental, and human-rights issues and themes; indeed as well as cultural, historical, religious, moral and ethical themes.

We should include the educational dimension, since Achebe has said that a novelist is a teacher in a paper of that title ("The Novelist as Teacher"). Many critics have welcomed this image of the novelist. For example, Emmanuel Obiechina has observed that "Achebe is quintessentially a teacher, a writer compulsively engaged in enlightening and enriching the experience and life of the reader. He is a teacher who instructs artistically, and therefore, pleurably" (23). Also Donatus Nwoga has remarked, with regard to the same idea of the novelist being a teacher, that "Achebe has always seen the writer as one of the main guides and activators in the national consciousness formulation (152).

Achebe's works are significant stores of diverse human experiences and artistic dimensions, and critics have always explored those works and will continue to explore them, as one would watch a huge Masquerade, from different perspectives. In this, paper therefore, the issue of counselling, which is a crucial function of a devoted teacher and which is plentifully present in Achebe's works, is examined in some of its various ramifications, such as admonition, expostulation, remonstrat6ion, and consolation.

When in *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, visits him in his place of exile, the latter tells the former and his maternal uncle, Uchendu, that the white men had killed almost everybody in

Abame clan, because Abame people had killed one white man, who, according to Obierika and his companions, had said nothing. After listening to the information, Uchendu admonishes them on the issue of killing, saying, “Never kill a man who says nothing.” And to expatiate on this piece of advice, he narrates the anecdote about “Mother Kite,” whose daughter caught a duckling and brought home to her for food. Because, according to the daughter, the duckling’s mother “said nothing” but “merely walked away”, she ordered her to return the duckling, saying: “There is something ominous behind the silence.” The “Daughter Kite” returned the duckling, captured a “chick” and brought it to her mother, who, on learning that the chick’s mother “cried and raved and cursed” the “Daughter Kite”, says to her: “Then we can eat the chick”, for “there is nothing to fear from someone who shouts” (98-99).

This anecdote, like many others used by Achebe in his various works, is employed for the purpose of illustrating and clarifying the admonition being proffered, and also for aesthetic effect. Anecdotes, like proverbs, are significant narrative tools which Achebe has used in his creative artistry with unparalleled masterliness. And the place of anecdotes in Achebe’s narratology has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Egudu 1981).

In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu admonishes his tempestuous, impulsive and excessively brave son, Obika, to exercise his bravery with caution. He says to him: “It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat” (11). And later in the same novel, it becomes the turn of Ezeulu to receive admonition from his good friend, Akuebue, with regard to his high-handed attitude towards Obika. He says to Ezeulu:

in all great compounds there must be people of all minds—some good, some bad, some fearless, and some cowardly; those who bring in wealth and those who scatter it, those who give good advice and those who only speak the words of palm wine. That is why we say that whatever tune you play in the

compound of a great man, there is always someone to dance to it (100).

And this implies that Ezeulu requires the virtue of prudence in the circumstance. Here the admonition is rounded off with a proverb. And beyond this artistic trait, there is what may be called ironic balance in the idea of an adviser being advised, which is a realistic feature of human life.

Early in this novel, Umuaro, Ezeulu's clan, and Okperi, a neighbouring clan, are quarrelling over a piece of land which each of them claim to be its own, and war appears imminent between them. Umuaro people decide to send a peace-seeking group of persons to Okperi, with Akukalia as the leader. At this point, Egonwanne, the oldest man from Akukalia's village, observing that Akukalia "was in great anger," admonishes as follows:

We are sending you, Akukalia, to place the choice of peace or war before them....We do not want Okperi to choose war; nobody eats war. If they choose peace we shall rejoice. But whatever they say you are not to dispute with them. Your duty is to bring word back to us. We all know you are a fearless man, but while you are there, put your fearlessness in your bag (17-18).

Unfortunately, Akukalia, in spite of Egonwanne's wise counsel against impetuosity, goes ahead and commits an outrage in Okperi by violently breaking Ebo's "ikenga", "the strength of his right hand." And as a reaction, considered justified even by Akukalia's people, Ebo shoots him dead. The same Egonwanne observes that Akukalia "challenged his *chi*" through his evil action, and by so doing becomes like "the fly that has no one to advise it [which] follows the corpse into the grave" (26-27)). By using this diminution simile, Egonwanne and, by implication, Achebe have reduced Akukalia not only to the physical size of a fly, but also to the sub-human level of being and significance.

We also encounter admonition in "Beware Soul Brother", the title poem in the collection of Achebe's poems entitled *Beware Soul Brother and other Poems*. Here the persona admonishes his "soul brother", his "mother's son", to be always cautious in the performance of his duty, which is presented in the image of dancing

and singing, so that he does not soar so high in it as to forget the ground from which he rose and to which he must return. Through a number of striking images and allusions the persona delivers his admonition: "Beware soul brother/ of the lures of ascension day/ the day of soporific levitation/ on high winds of skysong..."; "Take care/ then...lest you become/ a dancer disinherited in mid-dance/ hanging your lame foot in air like the hen/ in a strange unfamiliar compound." And he concludes, saying:

...Take care
brother, of this hard patrimony on which
you will walk again when the song
is finished and the dancers disperse;
remember also your children
for they in their time will want
a place for their feet when
they come of age and the dance
of the future is born
for them (19-20).

This is a heartfelt and sincere piece of advice against fanatical enthusiasm and idealistic quests which can easily make their victim get lost and ignore his realistic responsibilities to himself, his family, and society.

This poem is characterized by plenitude of alliterations and enjambments, which, as in others of Achebe's poems, make for pleasant sound and easy continuity; for Achebe's poetry can be rightly described as that of sonority and fluidity.

Another aspect of counselling in Achebe's works is expostulation which, like admonition, is directed to intractable characters. Expectedly, Okonkwo is one of those whom friends and relations try to dissuade from one course of violent action or another. We meet the elderly man, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, in *Things Fall Apart*, counselling Okonkwo against participating in killing Ikemefuna: "...that boy calls you father.... I want you to have nothing to do with it" (40). Okonkwo is of course heedless; for he not only participates, but strikes the boy dead himself. The immediate effect on Okonkwo is that he becomes so weak that, as he walks, "he felt like a drunken giant walking on the limbs of a mosquito" (44).

Achebe is a master of similes, and as in this case, they are often as biting as they are humorous.

Also on a different occasion, two of Okonkwo's wives humbly plead with him to stop beating his third wife, Ojiugo, who has offended him. Their appeal is based on the fact that the period is the "Week of Peace...the sacred week" during which every act of violence is eschewed. But Okonkwo does not listen to them, for he "was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (21). And this is one of the numerous instances of Okonkwo's unguarded impetuosity which make Charles Nnolim (171) remark that "Okonwo fails because he is not a leader of his people whose mores he breaks, whose wise counsel he does not seek [or take], whose caution he squanders."

Counselling as expostulation also features in *No Longer at Ease*. When Obi informs his father that the girl he is intending to marry was an *osu*, his father reacts, saying:

Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and you children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory.... Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that my son (121).

Even though Obi's father is a Christian, he ironically tries to dissuade him from doing what Christianity cherished, and that is, avoidance of discrimination against any person for any reason, ethnic, religious, or social. He fully realizes this when he says, "We are Christians," but negates his realization by adding, "but we cannot marry our own daughters" (121).

Obi's mother's reaction is a straightforward violent one. She says to him: "If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my prayers, you will not wait long.... But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (123). And Obi's friend, Chris, who is a Christian and educated like him and who he thinks and hopes would support him, puts the finishing touch to the wall of opposition to Obie when he says: "You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our

customs. You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an *osu*" (130). The frightful leprosy image and the threat of suicide employed by Obi's father and mother respectively does not appear strong enough weapons for them in this war of dissuasion. But they are useful as aesthetic tools.

Furthermore, in Achebe's short story, "Dead Men's Path", there is the case of Michael Obi, a young headmaster of a primary school, who, against the wishes of the people, closes the footpath that runs across his school compound. The old village priest of *Ani* (the Earth) approaches Mr Obi and appeals to him to open the path, because "the whole life of our people depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming to be born." The headmaster disregards the appeal, telling the priest that "Dead men do not require footpaths." The priest gently replies, saying to him: "If you reopen the path, we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch." And he leaves without uttering a word more. The headmaster remains adamant in his intransigence, and a few days later he wakes up to find the school compound devastated by the people he has insulted (73-74).

Remonstrance is another form of counselling we will deal with here. It is very closely allied to expostulation but differs from it in that it does not aim at dissuasion: it merely protests or condemns an action, usually after the harm has been done. For instance, after Okonkwo has killed Ikemefuna, Obierika protests to Okonkwo, saying: "If I were you I would have stayed at home... if the Oracle said that my son should be killed, I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (47). But unfortunately, remarks Achebe, "Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action" (48).

In *A Man of the People*, Boniface, Odili's chief campaign manager-cum-thug, remonstrates with Odili over his posture of gentility and rationality in the context of inter-party politics, specifically with regard to Boniface's design to hire some people to burn Chief Nanga's car. Boniface, frustrated, says to Odili: "Look my friend I done tell you say if you no wan serious for this business make you go rest for house. I done see say you wan play too much gentleman

for this matter....Dem tell you say na gentlemanity de give other people minister...?" (128).

And on his part Odili's father severely blames him for what appears to him to be his sin of ingratitude against Nanga. He says to Odili, damning him:

When a mad man walks naked it is his kinsmen who feel shame, not himself. So I have been begging Chief Nanga for forgiveness, on your behalf. How could you go to his house asking for help and eating his food and then spitting in his face?.... You did not tell me any of these things—that you abused him in public and left his house to plot his downfall (132).

Achebe's interest in every class of people in society is easily noticeable in the contrast between the raw vibrant and comical pidgin language of Boniface and the standard English language of Odili's father. It is also particularly remarkable that a servant could remonstrate severely with his master with apparent impunity.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* a similar situation where a junior person remonstrates with a more-than-senior person, indeed the Head of State, must seem intriguing and unimaginable. Here the young lady, Beatrice, is enraged by the way her Head of State and some of his ministers, are virtually worshipping a young white American girl called Lou, inviting her to every State House Party, and holding private conversations with her. On one occasion, Beatrice boldly remonstrates with the Head of State, saying: "If I went to America today, to Washington DC, would I, could I, walk into a White House private dinner and take the American President hostage. And his Defence Chief and his Director of CIA?" But the Head of State, instead of realizing the indignity he is unleashing on his country and people, foolishly describes Beatrice's patriotic corrective action as "racist" (81).

Consolation is the last aspect of counselling to be discussed in this paper. And there is one instance of it in *Things Fall Apart*, which appears particularly significant because it combines consolation and education in the same breath. Thus, seeing that Okonkwo has remained inconsolable while an exile in his mother-land, his maternal uncle, Uchendu, undertakes to console him through educating him on the meaning of a particular Igbo name, Nneka. He asks Okonkwo

why “we say Nneka—“Mother Is Supreme”, but Okonkwo could not answer the question. Then Uchendu says to him:

It’s true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? (133-134).

In this situation, counselling/consolation has become education: not only Okonkwo but other persons around have been taught the reason for the name, Nneka—Mother Is Supreme.

At this point there is enough reason to conclude that Achebe’s works constitute an immortal reservoir of wisdom, discernment, prudence and art, out of which various aspects of counselling and the aesthetic vehicles for conveying them have ensued. If, according to the American poet, Emily Dickinson, “There is no frigate like a book/ To take us lands away” and there are “no coursers like a page of prancing poetry [or prose]”, which is “a frugal chariot/ That bears a human soul” (191), then each of Achebe’s books, whether prose or poetry, is such a “frigate” or prancing “courser” transporting the reader joyfully through the seas or fields of ethical wisdom and counselling, which Achebe has bequeathed to humanity. And if, according to the ancient critics, literature is the art of telling the truth, laughing (“*ridentem dicere verum*”), then Achebe has excelled in that art.

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