

A VISION OF THE ANCIENT TERROR: PROMETHEAN ARCHETYPE IN ACHEBE'S 'THE MADMAN'

Chukwumezie, T.M.E
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Prometheus as forethought or foreknowledge embodies the human condition and speaks to innovativeness (the fire - art and enlightenment - he gave to man) as well as suffering (his imperfect knowledge). Promethean thought has provoked endless interpretations, explanatory models and discourse formatives from Hesoid's 'Theogony' to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*; showing the great malleability of this archetype in the human collective psyche. Mythologically, Prometheus is of the Titans: son of Iapetus and Clymene (Hesoid, 'Theogony': 507-509). Prometheus's knowledge of the future is the source of his undoing since he has no power to influence or affect his condition even when his vision is inauspicious.

If I agree with Carol Dougherty that 'myth is a gold mine of poetic possibilities' since it gives poets (sometimes critics) ample themes and questions about human nature and the human condition for elaboration and extension, and questioning (10), I may be suggesting that even contemporary writers like Chinua Achebe can pick (consciously or unconsciously) certain aspects of the ever-pertinent myth and articulately reconstitute them within a new and specific literary milieu. Such is my observation in Achebe's 'The Madman'. Therefore, this paper will focus on how this classical element – promethean archetype – has been transported or rather reflected in a new text from a different culture and context, while we also foreground the idea of the ancient terror and how it shapes the consciousness, and later, the tragedy of Nwibe, the protagonist of 'The Madman'.

My choice of Achebe's short story is informed by observed lack of critical attention to Achebe's short stories, when it is obvious that whatever his novels offer in extensity, his short stories offer in intensity (Akwanya, 'Reading, Text and Metaphors of Perception': 4-5). Nwibe comes to mind with Reuben's reference to 'The ancient terror which makes coward of us all' (9).

Nwibe in 'The Madman' seems to have a vision of the deleterious effects of madness which comprises isolation, aloneness, individuation and ultimate 'exclusion' (Frye) from his community. It is in this light that I use the phrase: 'the ancient terror'. The kind of island-existence which
Okike: Chinua Achebe Memorial Edition

comes with madness is what terrifies Nwibe and he sets about trying to prevent this fate from manifesting. Nwibe's is well ensconced in the Ogbu community. The narrator comments that 'Nwibe was a man of high standing in Ogbu and was rising higher; a man of wealth and integrity (3). The semantic content of Nwibe's name is also suggestive – *nwa* (son), *ibe* (the people, public, community, society). So we can say that *Nwibe* stands for the son of the community; only to lay credence to Akwanya's view that;

...literature can hardly be grasped, without first mastering the movement of mythic thought... brought out in the role that names play in the transmission of myth (*Verbal Structure*, 104).

This sense of communal existence is the antithesis of what both the world and the madman himself represent. And so Nwibe fights tooth and nail to avoid the explosion of madness in his family, having seen the traces of it in his second wife, Udenkwo and the fear of the isolating effect of it sends shivers down his spine.

This connects to the pretext - *Prometheus Bound* - on the basis of archetype. Archetypes as Carl Jung would have it are the 'primordial types' with universal images existing from pre-historic times which manifest in myth and stories. It is the psychic phenomenon that reveals the nature of the soul (Jung cited in Gaury, xvi). That Prometheus is reflected in Achebe only makes sense when we understand Jung's distinction of 'collective unconscious' from the Freudian personal unconscious. Freud believes that the human mental apparatus is developed as one grows up but Jung maintains that all the needed psychic characteristics are innate in the human mind (qtd in Stevens, 16). Anthony Stevens pursues further that those ontological human attributes that make humans who they are, are basic to all human situations of life (10). Therefore, Achebe's role as an independent writer now is to activate the archetypal potential already existing in him. Experience (which may include having read Hesoid's 'Theogony', and Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* or having not read anything at all) also contributes to develop and shape Achebe's primordial images (Stevens, 18); all of which is relevant to his perception of the world of reality (Knox, 2003: 11).

What this framework wants to establish is that Achebe's (anybody's) ability to write and produce images or archetypes that are related in similitude to works of the ancients is only possible because the archetypes that inform and influence such perception are instinctual and can only manifest in our consciousness as symbolic images collectively and communally shared. These elements that are innate in a literary text

which elicit universal response are myths and the onus falls on the critic to sift these. It is in this sense that criticism speaks while art is dumb (Frye).

Philip Wheel Wright sees myth (embodying archetype) as the expression of profound sense of togetherness of feeling, action and wholeness (qtd in Guerion, et al, 148); and it transcends time and place in relevance; hence the promethean archetype in Achebe. Consequently, myth becomes a channel through which archetype manifests and engages the conscious mind (see *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 1959:6). So I consider Achebe's ingenuity in 'The Madman' as depending on his ability to explore the 'primordial vision' (Jung) which Guerion, et al see as 'a special sensitivity to the archetypal pattern' (150). Ernst Cassirer summarizes that though mythic thought may not carry 'absolute actuality' and 'complete logical sequence'; the relationship between Nwibe and Prometheus may not also tally, but our psychological investigation here shows 'a spatial order of the world of perception as a whole and in detail (Cassirer, 30). This detail falls back to the acts of identification, differentiation, comparison and coordination as intellectual acts (30); the last four items have provided me with an manual and tool for the analysis.

The ancient terror in Ogbu community manifests like a natural primal human impulse in every Ogbu man. This bent in the Ogbu thought system is such that is instinctively intolerant to any manifestation of insanity. This is because they all know that the verdict of madness is 'exclusion' (both literal and metaphorical) from the community which is the individual essence draws from. This is why manifestations of madness are suppressed and repressed, if not exorcised by all means in this community.

In most modernist tragedies, the direction of development is usually towards the 'collective consciousness' and the incessant attempt to keep at bay the individualizing whim. But the tragic character always and successfully arrives at the latter destination despite the pressures against it. Northrop Frye distinguishes between fictions in which 'the hero becomes isolated from his society, and fictions in which he is incorporated into it. This distinction is expressed by the words 'tragic' and 'comic' when they refer to aspects of plot in general and not simply to forms of drama' (*Anatomy*, 35). The individual is taken away on the premise that his presence breeds threat which may disrupt the cosmic order of such a community all the while anchored on corporate existence. This is the ground on which the 'four hefty beasts of the bush' brought by

the 'two fat-bottomed market woman whip the madman out of his hut which the women claim is their market stall' (1).

The externalization of Nwibe's confrontation with his dreadful vision is the frenzied drama between his two wives - Mgboye and Udenkwo. Nwibe's timely intervention is an attempt at controlling the explosion of madness that projects this ancient terror, over Mgboye's thoughtlessness in not covering her soup pot (a symbolic act, though Udenkwo is notorious for bluntness):

... Why don't you cover your soup pot? Is it easier to hit a dog than cover a pot? Is a small puppy to have more sense than a woman who leaves her soup pot about...?(4)

Mgboye on her part blames Udenkwo's irresponsibility: her failure to control her dog: 'What your puppy did this early in the day...is that he put his slit mouth into my soup-pot' (4).

Nwibe's gentle intervention is calculated to dampen tempers keep the exchanges from getting out of the confines of his household and not shout 'it to all Ogbu to hear' (5). At the mythic however, what we see is his dread of the ancient terror. For him, Udenkwo is already mad, there is no question about that, and so it pays less to listen to her babbling; rather, the safer line of action would be to control the sane Mgboye since madness seems contagious in his compound, as he yells out to Mgboye instead of Udenkwo:

Nwibe: Mgboye! Let me have peace this morning!

Mgboye: Don't you hear all the abuses, Udenkwo...?

Nwibe: I hear nothing at all from Udenkwo and I want peace in my compound. If Udenkwo is crazy must everybody else go crazy with her? Is one crazy woman not enough in my compound so early in the day? (4-5).

To him, one mad woman is more than a handful. The situation would be entirely beyond him if there were two instead of one. For this same reason, he comes to a decision to put off changing Mgboye's thatch roof to zinc till he has enough money to do the roofs of the two women together. Nwibe is ruled by this fear of Udenkwo's madness, just as Okonkwo is ruled by the fear of failure or being thought weak. In terms of right, Mgboye is senior and so takes precedence over Udenkwo, but his fear has always been that 'Udenkwo will set the entire compound on fire' (3). Therefore he compromises and conciliates in favour of the unstable woman, wishing that Mgboye would take the cue and act accordingly.

Nwibe's vision of his compound being on fire is akin to Prometheus's dreadful vision of his future which he laments to the chorus:

...I foresee

All that shall come to pass, no sharp surprise

Of pain shall overtake me, what's determined (119-111).

Prometheus is a god while Nwibe is mortal; he has certitude that the dreaded suffering has no remedy until Io's son (Hercules) to be born thirteen generations later, rescues him. Nevertheless, he refuses to yield to Oceanus's attempt to intercede on his behalf. Maurya in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea* who chooses not to struggle against her situation but yields to the movement of necessity even if it means the sea drowning all her seven sons one after the other, togetherwith her husband recalls Prometheus's unyielding nature. Such is Prometheus's yielding to necessity:

[I will] bear, as I can, I must, knowing the might

Of strong Necessity is unconquerable (122-123);

This unflinching will is typical of divinity. In 'The Madman', however, having necessity take its course is a terro in itself; and so Nwibe relapses into blind hopefulness.

His fateful visit to the stream is just a calculated attempt to get closer, just like Eman in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, to Eke Market 'to answer the call of the market place' (10). If fate has a hand in the tragedy of Nwibe, it is signalled in the call which acts like a spell. It is a dangerous turn of events, already hinted by the road to the market, hence the metaphor of the snake – 'beautiful boa-constrictor of a road to Eke' (2).

As Nwibe goes to 'wash off the sweat of work' to go and have a drink in the market, three facts are obvious to him: first is that the day is a big market day and so the stream is less busy; secondly the time is the middle of the morning, so people are out in the market; finally, he is on the part of the stream meant for men alone (5). Why does he face the forest and back the approaches? Even the narrator's 'instinctive modesty' (5) cannot account for this since fate is involved. So his disadvantaged position makes it difficult for him to see the agent of fate (the madman) approach and make him a pharmakos that would pay for the sin of all the adversaries of the madman:

This was the same hefty man who brought three others like him and whipped me out of my hut in the Afo Market....The same vagabond who descended on me from the lorry in the middle of my highway... the same fellow who set his children to throw stones at me... (6).

The madman becomes fate personified in that he is there to lure Nwibe into the trap set by some malignant supernatural force(s) situated in the market place. Nwibe knows that chasing the madman naked constitutes

a norm-breaking act (Akwnya, 2008: 170) but once 'the divinities of the market place' are at work, Nwibe is confronting something 'more than man'. We read that, 'a mist gathered and hung over Nwibe's vision as he ran' (7). Moreover, Nwibe's irascible personality which could be discerned from the narrator's earlier assertion that: 'Nwibe was such a sensible man that no one can think of him beginning something he was not sure to finish' (3) justifies his pursuit of the madman. By this act, Nwibe exchanges his role with the village madman (Agbada, 95) to confirm Achebe's view of the Igbo world as 'an arena for the interplay of forces'; so that the tragic individual is one who fails to come to terms with the numerous forces that give this life (Igbo life for Achebe) its tense and restless dynamism (62-63). This mist that beclouds Nwibe is the same that beclouds Prometheus to dare Zeus, Ceasar to go to the Capitol; Macbeth to clutch the dagger and kill Duncan; Okolo to challenge Izongo; Ezeulu to punish Umuaro, and so on.

Tragedy as has been said arises when one challenges his situation, in the case of Nwibe, what he challenges has 'a solid metaphysical foundation' (Akwnya, 2008: 117) and all we could have for him is the tragic emotions because his exclusion starts right from the moment of the challenge. First the two girls going down the stream quarantine and place Nwibe in isolation as 'They threw down their pots and fled, screaming' (7) and the Ozo titled community also excludes him (10). Frye tellingly notes that:

The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos is the study of the isolated mind (*Anatomy*, 37).

We can feel 'sympathetic identification' (Jauss) for Nwibe suffering undeservedly, but pity and fear becomes the feeling when the first medicine man called in to treat Nwibe is gripped with both pity and fear as he asserts:

...never have I professed to bring back to life a man who has sipped the spirit-waters of *ani mmo*. It is the same with a madman who of his own accord delivers himself to the divinities of the market place (8-9).

The tragic nature of the story is not just the challenge of Nwibe to the madman but his successful exclusion from his community, hence:

Nwibe became a quiet withdrawn man avoiding whenever he could the boisterous side of the life of his people (10); just as the excluded Prometheus accepts:

Of my free will, my own free will I erred
And freely do I acknowledge it (299-300).

The fire that Nwibe envisions and dreads that Udenkwo will set on his compound ends up consuming him: 'his chest was on the point of exploding from the fire and torment within him' (7) on his way to 'the occult territory of the powers of the market' (8).

To end it, Nwibe has a vision of the ancient terror, struggles that it will not manifest; but he ends up swimming in the stream of his fears.

Conclusion

This story like every other Achebe's story has that *Achebean* archetype, the unification of two opposites, such that what the characters struggle against, usually becomes their lot as in *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo's fear of an offspring who could not raise his head high in the clan turns out to be his heritage. For Nwibe, his fear of madness and consequent separating of an individual from the rest of the community from where he draws the source of his individual strength is what catches up with him. He struggles to control the manifestation of it, at least within his family, but having been caught up by his fears and confirmed mad, he is denied a place in the Ozo cult which has been his ambition, a testament of his supposed nobility.

Work Cited

- Achebe Chinua. 'The Madman' *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1999, Print.
- _____. *Things Fall Apart*. Ibadan, Heinemann, 1958, Print.
- _____. *Arrow of God*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1989, Print.
- Aeschylus. *Prometheus Bound*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, Web.
- Akwanya, Amechi. *Discourse Analysis and Dramatic Literature*. Enugu: 2008 print.
- _____. *Verbal Structures*. Enugu: ACENA, 2004, Print
- _____. 'Reading, Text, and the Metaphors of Perception'. *Philosophy Study*, January 2013, Vol 3, No. 1, 76-84, Web.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Manheims, Ralph (Trans.). New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1955, Web.
- Dougherty, Carol. *Prometheus*. USA: Routledge, 2006, Web.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. New York: Atheneum, 1970, Web.

- Gaury, Jane. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Hand book*. El-Shamy (Ed.) New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc, 2005, Web.
- Guerin, Nilfred, et al. 'Mythological and Archetypal Approaches'. *A Hand Book of Critical Approaches to Literature (3rd Edition)*. New York: Oxford University.1992, Web.
- Hesoid, *Theogony, Works, and Days, Testimonia*. Most, Glenn (Eds. and Trans.). London: Harvard University Press, 2006, Web.
- Knox, Jean. *Archetype, Attachment, Analysis: Jungian Psychology and the Emergent Mind*. USA: Brunner Routledge, 2003, Web.
- Reuben, Richard. 'Psychoanalysis and the Tragic Sense of Life'. *Issues in Psychology*, 1992, 10 (3), 347 – 362. Web.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Strong Breed*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers, 2004, Print.
- Stevens, Anthony. *Archetypes Revisited: An Updated Natural History of the Self*. London: Brunner Routledge, 2004, Web.