

Anxiety and Repression: A Psychoanalytic Study of Ezeulu

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Abstract

A study of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* suggests that each individual character in the novel undergoes an unconscious thought process leading to anxiety and the eventual repression of the thoughts. These are revealed through conversations, thought patterns, fantasies, repeated musings and ruminations. This is what Freud calls, "parapraxes", unaccountable slips of the tongue, failures of memory, bungling, misreading and mislaying which can be traced to unconscious wishes and intentions' (Eagleton 137). These unconscious acts represent the mental states, which are probable manifestations of the desires of the individual. This paper is set to study how the characters manage or mismanage these inner promptings, with particular interest on Ezeulu, the Chief Priest, in his quest and attempt to escape or distort the realities of his thoughts, and actions using a psychoanalytic method.

Introduction

The psychical phenomena which, according to Elliott, 'are not available to consciousness, but which nevertheless exert a determining influence on everyday life' (Web), include anxiety, repression and other aspects of behaviours connected with the human mind. All behaviour has a cause and effect process arising from inner impulses. Those behaviours equally act as guards against certain unpleasant instincts and are always working. Sigmund Freud believes that 'the defences must, to some extent, always be in

operation. Just as all behaviours are motivated by instincts, so all behaviour is defensive in the sense of defending against anxiety. The intensity of the battle within the personality may fluctuate, but it never ceases' (Schultz 58). Owing to the fact that behaviour is deterministic, having a cause and effect, there is therefore, an unconscious urge to fulfil a desire and a great resentment to potential obstacle to achieving same desire.

In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu, the protagonist is anxious to fulfil a desire. In order to achieve this, he is 'thrown into 'anxious apprehension', a future oriented mood which prepares him for the upcoming anxious events' (Barlow 158). Every anxious condition leaves a feeling of fear and tension perceived from a seeming hostility or threat. This is the pattern of thoughts and feelings found in virtually all the characters in *Arrow of God*.

Manifestation of Anxiety in Key Characters

Anxiety is a common tendency in individual human beings. This experience varies in individuals in the manner and mode of presentation. Anxiety presents as what Freud posits as 'a signal that impending danger, a threat to the ego, must be counteracted or avoided' (Schultz 58). The pattern of fear and worry in Edogo, the first son of the chief priest is that of an impending danger. This unfolds in his conversation with Akuebue, as he expresses his desire to become or be chosen as the next chief priest but fears he might lose out to his younger brother, Nwafor. He makes his worries evident by taking a defensive position in his complaint to Akuebue. He says: 'but what worries me is that my father makes Nwafor feel he will be chosen. If tomorrow, as you say, Ulu chooses another person there will be strife in the family. My father will not be there then and it will all rattle around my own head' (*Arrow of God* 126). This outburst reveals that Edogo is not in control of his passion. Akuebue understands him, pities him and expresses sympathy over

his fears, as he condemns his weakness in repressing or using a round-about way to express his innermost desire.

The egoistic and antagonistic Nwaka has a craving for power. This keeps him always threatening, agitating, scheming and blackmailing the Chief Priest. The tension in him is almost palpable that the people of Umuaro become concerned and muse in their minds. The question in their hearts is: 'where did Nwaka get this power? For when we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway we must know that its drummer is in the near-by bush' (*Arrow of God* 40). Thus this tension extends to unguarded rivalry between the two deities, Idemili and Ulu.

Obika's greatest anxiety as a man is the fear of the uncertainty concerning the purity of his would-be-bride, Okuata. He is worried of the humiliation he must be exposed to if Okuata is found not to be a virgin. He ruminates absent-mindedly and secretly nurses fear of the worst expectation as he imagines the likely catastrophe. On her own side, Okuata, the new bride is anxious and doubtful amidst her happiness about the true condition of her body. The narrator confirms that in the morning, 'She felt greatly relieved for although she had always known she was a virgin she had had a secret fear which sometimes whispered in her ear and made her start' (122). Although dawn discloses to Obika and Okuata the existence of no hurdle, the unnecessary fear has caused them some anxious moments.

The pattern of fear expressed by Nwafo pushes him to worry about what happens to the moon during his father's incarceration. While he has no business with expecting the moon, he only worries for his father. He thinks, 'what would happen to the new moon? He knew his father had been expecting it before he went to Okperi or would it wait for his return? If it appeared in Okperi with what metal gong would Ezeulu receive it?' (166). He sees an imminent danger and becomes troubled in his mind, thinking about how his

father would resolve the problem of the coming of the moon without the metal gong with him at Okperi.

The white missionaries have their share of anxieties. Captain Winterbottom battles with the uncomfortable climatic change and health related issues. His having to contend with the irritable hot weather, mosquito bites, fever, sleepless nights give him enough apprehensions dangerous to his health. Hence, 'he had grown pale and thin and in spite of the heat his feet often felt cold.... At night he had to imprison himself inside a mosquito-net' (29). All these unpleasant situations constitute his anxious moments.

The day to day rivalries and quarrels in Ezeulu's household are all indicative of the little foibles that cause tension in individual persons and threaten the peace of their environments. Achebe writes that, 'Ezeulu's absence causes great anxiety in his compound throughout the first and second days of his absence' (163). Even at his return from detention, Ezeulu's people are greatly worried when he came in numb and shivering. This creates tension because of fear that the worst may happen to the chief priest, the head of the family. The little jealousies and quarrels between Matefi and Ugoye, and even among the numerous children of Ezeulu are sources of anxiety in his family. Some of these when critically reviewed are insubstantial relative to the level of anxiety they cause in these individual characters.

Ezeulu's Anxious Moments

Ezeulu the chief priest experiences significant unpleasant moments that keep him constantly thinking and agitating. Hence, the thoughts of these keep him speculating and apprehensive to the point of anxiety. The coming of the new moon is usually a moment of anxious search and expectation for the chief priest. The fact of anxious waiting or expectation normally comes with pain and a slow response of the body system to certain feelings. This fact creates 'a link between expectation and pain, fear or negative

reinforcement that serves to dampen physiological reactivity to emotional processing' (Barlow 160). The pain of expectation to avenge the perceived contempt and humiliation wield considerable influence on Ezeulu's pattern of thinking and action, and for him, he must not make mistakes.

Ezeulu not satisfied, ponders over his limited powers as a priest. He has since repressed this fact and secretly wishes for an opportunity to play out his authority. He desires to be more than a watchman for Ulu. He muses, 'No, the chief priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that' (*Arrow of God* 3). The desire to fulfil this aspect of his ego carries him through his thinking processes and actions, and it becomes Ezeulu's anxious ambition. To satisfy this desire, 'he would dare' and carry forward his revenge. For him, 'what kind of power was it if it would never be used? Better to say that it was not there' (3). This propels him to a stronger resolve against his people, and so, this desire becomes like Heidegger's 'driving indestructible controlling force' (Ed. Vernon W. Gras 49) that pushes and hardens Ezeulu's determination to action.

Certain needs must be repressed to attain a desired goal. Ezeulu pretends about his desire to use power. He lives with an unconscious resentment about Umuaro that 'anytime he prayed for Umuaro bitterness rose into his mouth, a great smouldering anger for the division which had come to the six villages and what his enemies sought to lay on his head' (*Arrow of God* 6). His thoughts about Umuaro call up former perceived injustices and disrespect to himself, and fortification of anger and vengeance.

Nwaka's eloquence and rhetoric serve as weapons to blatantly challenge and attack Ezeulu at town meetings and deliberations. There are nocturnal meetings and mischievous breaches of protocols and procedures in order to counter Ezeulu's strong points and eventually to dethrone him for which Nwaka is responsible; for instance, he incites his people to war with Okperi

in a rhetorical feint, when he declaims: 'Let everyone return to his house if we have no heart in the fight. We shall not be the first people who abandoned their farmland or even their homestead to avoid war. Let us also tell them that we marry the daughters of Okperi and their men marry our daughters, and that where there is this mingling, men often lose the heart to fight (16). Such deceitful acts and utterances cause confusion in the people and disrespect against Ezeulu's authority.

Ezeulu also worries about little family issues, including little neglects and acts of complacency from his sons. He tries to cover up such lapses by thinking for his children and leading them to do what they should do. He wishes that his children do the right things always and that nothing will wait unattended to. For Ezeulu, 'a new wife should not come into an unfinished homestead. I know such a thing does not trouble the present age' (13). Ezeulu expresses disgust with Obika's complacency in serious matters, and worries about his overzealousness, drunkenness, and associations, particularly with Ofoedu. It is muted that, 'the young man's behaviour was like a load on his father's head' (79). These carefree tendencies in his children cause him much concern and get him irritated and distressed.

Ezeulu's Critical Decisions and Patterns of Defence

As the cultural and spiritual leader of his people Ezeulu has a lot of issues centring on his ego that conspire to get him destabilized and unstable. Having to contend with a lot of pressures he makes critical decisions. His ability to stand and defend these decisions whose realities and implications add up together to become a burden on his psyche make him what he is. However, he has reasons for any actions that seem to overwhelm the tranquillity of his being and existence. This becomes a complex phenomenon as he anxiously assumes a personality and an individuality that leave him in constant battle with his inner self in defence of his actions.

Left with viable options, either to run away from the threatening situation, or inhibit the impulsive need to obey the dictates of the conscience, Ezeulu's crisis of anxiety is based on his ability or otherwise to manage the pressures created by his decisions. He earns the so-called friendship and recognition of the white colonial administrator being the only Umuaro man that stands by the truth and openly testifies about the rightful ownership of the disputed land between Umuaro and Okperi. He does that in defence of the integrity of office of the chief priest.

The fact of his objection to Umuaro's decision to wage war with Okperi becomes an opportunity for vengeance on Umuaro for all contempt of power, person and position meted out on him. Ezeulu asserts that, 'the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in' (15). Speaking from a vantage position, he stresses the fact that Ulu would not fight an unjust war and tries to dissuade Umuaro from going to war with Okperi over that piece of land.

As the conflict against Okperi results in a bloodshed, the white colonial administrators intervene and sit in judgement between Umuaro and Okperi. Mr Winterbottom who hears the testament of the people from both communities asserts that, 'I should mention that every witness who testified before me from both sides without exception – perjured themselves' (38). It is only Ezeulu, the chief priest that acts differently, and says that the land does not belong to his own people Umuaro. Acceding to the ownership of the land to Okperi is one critical decision that helps to decide Ezeulu's fate.

Ezeulu's decision to send Oduche to school to be his eye there, places him under pressure of criticism and castigation. Being the custodian of tradition, the action is viewed as sabotage and desecration of the land. Ezeulu's self-pride and conviction that there is something good in the white man's education and religion decides him to send Oduche to be his monitor there. He instructs Oduche 'I have sent you to be my eyes there.... 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. I want you to learn and master this man's knowledge so much that if you are suddenly woken up from sleep and asked what it is you will reply' (14). The mandate to Oduche is very specific. This is also Ezeulu's unapologetic defence of his action. It is his desire that Oduche takes the mission seriously and be able to defend whatever knowledge he acquires at any point in time.

Ezeulu remains adamant in certain decisions he makes and fails to entertain a second view. His refusal to announce the new yam festival comes against every persuasion even from the elders of the community. The narrator notes that, 'the news of Ezeulu's refusal to call the New Yam Feast spread through Umuaro as if it had been beaten out on the ikolo. At first people were completely stunned by it, they only began to grasp its full meaning slowly because its like had never happened before' (205). There has been a heightened agitation and tension among the people, as the situation is fast taking an explosive dimension. Even as the tension increases, Ezeulu still holds an evasive stance. He claims: 'I have not heard that there is a disagreement about the new yam.... but with you, I need not speak in riddles... 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' (207). With this insistence on his ignorance of the discomfort the action is already causing the people, this leads to a public outcry, generates public hatred and attack on not only Ezeulu, but on his family members. Achebe writes that, 'almost overnight, Ezeulu had become something of a public enemy in the eyes of all. And as was to be expected, his entire family shared in his guilt' (211). As a matter of fact, the hatred and disdain may have been averted. Ezeulu's obstinacy leaves his wives and children to bear the brunt of the perceived wickedness of their father.

Ezeulu's rejection of the offer of a warrant chieftaincy is to the utter amazement of both the white colonial administrators and the Umuaro people. Contrary to other people's opinion and allegation of his alliance with the white men, Ezeulu confirms that he has a different agenda of proving his royalty and projecting the authenticity of the efficacy of Ulu. Thus in a paper 'The Power of the Unknown', Akwanya posits that, 'Ezeulu is now in the process of recreating him (Ulu), endowing him with properties of omniscience and paternal providence.... Ezeulu's status as the spokesman who announces his will and decisions... would be unmatched throughout Umuaro and throughout its history' (Akwanya 2013). This particular decision generates diverse reactions among the people, as there are speculations about the real intention in liaising with the colonials. Akwanya, further captures the feeling that:

What Ezeulu knows is one thing, in short, the reality quite another. That is equally true of the participants who are watching him. The people think that he has been scheming all along to be king in Umuaro. The District Officer basically has the same idea, having arrived at it from a separate route. But he is so convinced of it, or at any rate that this would suit Ezeulu's purposes to perfection, that when he proposes the chieftaincy to him, he does so with an 'I-know-this-will-knock-you-over feeling' (Akwanya 2013).

While the people remain perplexed by Ezeulu's rejection of the white man's offer, Ezeulu himself presents an entirely different argument in defence of his action. He actually aims at making history by assuming an identity or personality high above his people. He wishes to create an identity for himself and assume a uniqueness that sets him apart from the rest of the people.

His quest for personal identity is described as 'such that will mark his intense search for personal identity that will not permit him to be regarded as an arithmetical concept, or to be set

alongside other beings... or to be used as a means, even for the most sacred goal' (Zizioulas194). The desire in him to always project himself as the man of the moment, in charge of his household, in control of his environment, highlights his individuality as a unique human person.

This self-identity makes for the various defences that Ezeulu unconsciously applies to distort the reality of his anxiety. His defence strategies project him more as a human person reacting to issues as a layman, rather than as a spiritual icon. His biological nature predisposes him to be menaced by his fragility as a finite being filled with the secret love and desire for revenge. Ezeulu is found to be unable to manage the transitory physical processes of strife, tension and eventual frustration engineered by his thought patterns and reactions. His personality crashes with the resultant desperation and the psychological breakdown into dementia at the death of his son Obika, He is guilty of being conscious of protecting his personal ego, to the detriment of those factors that would promote communal existence.

Conclusion

Ezeulu's thinking processes are recorded as major drives for his unconscious anxious states. The drives though not available to his consciousness, 'are psychological phenomena that exert determining influence on everyday life' (Elliott PDF). At the point of each crisis, Ezeulu seems to smoulder on his plan of revenge. He fails to see the disturbing trend of events, but rather dwells on strategizing his present plan. He has scores to settle with his people, as he had mused from the onset. At last, it is all desolation and futility. Thus Ezeulu's course of anxiety and the sequence of defence, leave him shattered and humiliated, as he distorts reality and represses a lot of tension. All these work against his psyche and lead him into dementia. But the questions anxiously waiting for answers remain:

Why has Ulu deserted Ezeulu? Is it to strike him down and then cover him with mud? When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of yam its own mother put in his palm? Whoever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? (*Arrow of God* 229).

These questions still remain unanswered. Perhaps it is the constant, futile throbbing of these thoughts that finally leave cracks in Ezeulu's mind, and lead to the collapse and ruin of all things, including Ezeulu himself.

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