

Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the Anti-Promethean Figure and Lukács's Sociological Approach to Tragedy

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Abstract

It appears much of the criticism of Achebe's *Arrow of God* – particularly in the twentieth century – concentrates on how the text reconstructs the eroding or devaluation of traditional African institutions, how it dramatizes a typical African society in transition. Often, this experience (that is, that of devaluation and transition) is blamed on the advent of two historical realities – Christianity and colonialism. This work, however, tries to grasp a tragic orientation of *Arrow of God* by crossing a mythical meditation on tragedy in *Arrow of God* with Georg Lukács's sociological approach to tragedy. The mythical figure who captures our interest in this study is Prometheus. To what extent does Ezeulu – the 'priest-king' hero of *Arrow of God* – resemble the mythical Prometheus? To what extent does he fail to resonate with the archetypal essence ascribed to Prometheus, so that we should not consider him a Promethean figure but an anti-Promethean one? What role does this anti-Promethean nature of his play in the transition involving the replacement of the old with the new (Lukács) which occurs at the end of the narrative? Answering these questions is the task this paper has assigned itself.

Introduction

Things Fall Apart is a great novel but there are many who think that Chinua Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God*, is his greatest

achievement as far the novelistic genre is concerned. The reason for this position has usually been, like Charles R. Larson has argued, the fact that *Arrow of God* is 'Achebe's most complex novel' (3). At any rate, only few critics have actually pointed out the effect of this complexity in the text, one of which, in my thinking, is the charming philosophical depth of the text, the fact that it succeeds in pulling our thoughts in different directions without necessarily implicating an 'ultimate point' that closes the argument; making every reading merely a 'direction' and not the be-all and end-all of directions. To put it differently, there is in the text an internal dialectic of reasons which cancel each other out in an unending quest for superiority.

The most frequent reaction to *Arrow of God* is to treat it as a treatise against western imperialism, in the forms of colonialism and Christianity. *Arrow of God* or even Achebe's first three novels have been read as chronicling the resultant tragedy of the transition in many African societies engendered by the colonial and 'evangelizing' activities of the Europeans. This position is encountered, for instance, in Abiola Irele's view:

The immediate subject of Chinua Achebe's novels is the tragic consequences of the African encounter with Europe – this is a theme he has made inimitably his own. His novels deal with the social and psychological conflicts created by the incursion of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African society, and the disarray in the African consciousness that has followed (167).

Such a habit of thought concerning *Arrow of God* is also reflected in recent readings of the text. For example, Seyed Mohammed Marandi and Reyhamah Sadat Shadpour in their essay concern themselves with 'the ways in which Christianity as an ideological instrument was used as a tool for colonization' in *Arrow of God* (48). Our reading here would approach the text differently. Although we shall as part of our task examine the question of transition in *Arrow of God*, particularly within the theoretical context of Georg Lukács's

sociological approach to tragedy, our primary interest is in the main character of the novel – Ezeulu.

It probably does not occur to many that the complexity in *Arrow of God* owes significantly to the richly complex character of Ezeulu. Amechi Nicholas Akwanya acknowledges that Ezeulu is ‘possibly the most complex creation of Chinua Achebe’ (*The Power* 42), a truth which is difficult to belie. In fact, Ezeulu’s interesting complexity is made manifest in the differing reactions that his portraiture has elicited from critics. For instance, whereas Dabaleena Dutta would argue that Ezeulu’s bringing of his people to ruin is not ‘out of intentionality’ (164), S. Syed Fagruthen indicts him of a sort of intentional villainy. For the latter, ‘Ezeulu is a tragic hero who imperilled his community to make a point’ (31). It is this same character that catches our interest in this paper, for in contemplating his nature we are reminded of the mythical, tragic figure of Prometheus, whose personality has continued to charm countless generations of mankind, judging from the way his story is replicated in art and other areas of human life long after it made its appearance in classical culture. There are interesting similarities in the careers of Ezeulu and Prometheus but then there are still areas in which Ezeulu might be said to have turned the Promethean myth on its head. This attitude of pulling both sides of a divide to himself no doubt contributes to his complex beauty as a literary creation but it equally helps to complicate his tragedy in the novel. Ezeulu vacillates between the Promethean and the anti-Promethean, making it difficult for us to label him as either in a conclusive way.

As might have been conjectured already, our study here crosses a mythical or archetypal criticism with a Marxist one. Our mythical interest in *Arrow of God* is in terms of its ‘imitation of generic and recurrent action and ritual’ (Frye, *Anatomy* 366-367), the Prometheus myth being the ancient model or type. (What is alluded to here is the etymological sense of the word archetype). We shall

draw our images of the Promethean from retellings of the myth in both literary and non-literary sources. However, in the second half of our paper, we shall be dealing with the issue of change in the novel. Georg Lukács's 'The Sociology of Modern Drama' is the primary theoretical text of reference in this latter part; although Lukács's task in that work is to delineate modern drama, his discussion of tragedy is insightful and referable to literary texts other than dramatic ones.

The Promethean Ezeulu

Perhaps one of the things many would admire in the character of Ezeulu is his wisdom and foresight. It is also one of the ways that he resembles Prometheus. The commonest etymological sense ascribed to the name Prometheus is 'forethinker' or 'the one who thinks in advance', but Carol Dougherty has identified other possibilities which chime in quite well with an aspect of Prometheus's being. We read in her work that:

Prometheus' name is a compound proper noun, the first half of which is easily derived from *pro* – meaning 'before'. The second part, however, like the god himself, is tricky. One possibility is to derive it from *metis*, cognate with the verb *medomai*, meaning 'clever intelligence' to explain Prometheus' name as 'the one who thinks in advance'. This is surely the etymology that Hesiod had in mind when he invented Epimetheus (late-thinker) as the name for Prometheus' dim-witted brother in his cosmological poem, *Theogony*. The fifth-century Athenian playwright, Aeschylus, introduces similar etymological word play with Prometheus' name into his drama, *Prometheus Bound*. While the Greeks clearly understood Prometheus' name as 'forethinker', recent work in linguistics links the *meth* component to a Sanskrit root *math* – meaning to steal – suggesting that the actual etymology refers to theft, no doubt of fire, and links the

Greek Prometheus myth with other similar myths from the Caucasus (4).

At any rate, we are concerned here with the imports of ‘clever intelligence’ and ‘the one who thinks in advance’ because of their manifestation in the character of Ezeulu. We are confronted with Ezeulu’s foresight and intelligence early in the novel. He is aware of the changing times and what may come of the white man’s presence. He says: ‘The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known tomorrow*’ (46). The knowledge of the fact that with change comes the need to be flexible and that diversification and flexibility are important if one wanted to remain relevant in the future in spite of change is something Ezeulu has no doubt about. But whether or not Ezeulu succeeds in translating this bit of important knowledge into action in crucial circumstances in the text is something we would deal with later. Even in his community, Ezeulu does not lose sight of his visionary role. He tells Akuebue for example

I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same time I am Unknowable. You are my friend and you know whether I am a thief or murderer or an honest man. But you cannot know the thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances. I can see tomorrow; that is why I tell Umuaro: *come out from this because there is death there or do this because there is profit in it*. If they listen to me, o-o; if they refuse to listen, o-o (132).

Ezeulu’s contrasting of communal blindness with personal vision activates the Promethean fire symbol. Blindness is the triumph of darkness but with fire comes illumination. Just as Prometheus literally brings fire to man, Ezeulu brings illuminating fire to bear on the dark spots of Umuaro’s existence. The fear of the unknown is common in human existence. Knowing the future is some useful

tool in determining the profitability or otherwise of an action and being the possessor of future knowledge no doubt would give one a sort of leverage on others. This is the implied logic of what Ezeulu tells his friend Akuehue and that is the same reason he is angry at Umuaro's disregard of his warning. The role Ezeulu plays in Umuaro community is quite reminiscent of that of Prometheus in the community of Hellenic gods. Of this, Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson tell us:

It happened that among the Titans there was one, the wise Prometheus, who would not fight on the side of the elder gods. He of all the living saw deepest into the secrets of time, and he knew that the reign of Cronus was running out and would soon give place to that of the Olympians. First he tried unsuccessfully to persuade his father and brothers to lay down their arms. Then, rather than fight against them himself, he came to Zeus and offered to interpret to him the oracle of Earth (*Biblical and Classical Myths* 283).

The Promethean figure sees 'deepest into the secrets of time'. This privilege usually results in a sort of pride, the pride of exclusive knowledge, the knowledge of the unknown. Most times he challenges forces, buoyed by his vision of the future – probably 'the thing which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances'.

Still in our delineation of the convergences between the story of Prometheus and that of Ezeulu, we see in the latter a reminder of the suffering of the former. The human ability to endure suffering is in Hellenic wisdom the legacy of Prometheus, the archetypal sufferer. Akwanya has likened Ezeulu to what Hans R. Jauss in his 'Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience' calls the suffering and 'hard-pressed hero' ('The Power' 42). He is completely shattered at the end, making his suffering a lot like *sparagmos*, tearing to pieces, for he is metaphorically torn to pieces. For the first time the man who peers into the deepest secrets of time cannot comprehend his status, his suffering; if there was a

revelation, perhaps it was not clear to him, for he would have known ‘there is death there’; it is like losing one’s being, the loss of the very thing ‘which beats the drum to which Ezeulu dances’. He is inundated with inner questions for which there are no answers in sight:

But why, he had asked himself again and again, why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him down and then cover him with mud? What was his offence? Had he not divined the god’s will and obeyed it? When was it ever heard that a child is scalded by the piece of yam its own mother put in its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbour’s hut and then unleash rain on him? Who ever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? (229)

Burdened by Ulu’s betrayal and the inability to arrive at some cogent justification for it, Ezeulu’s mind cracks. It is one of the ways that Ezeulu’s suffering differs from that of Prometheus. The latter suffers without losing his being; the reason he suffers is clear to him. It is this disparity that makes Ezeulu’s case very much pathetic.

We perceive another similitude between the careers of the two figures we are looking at. This similitude is not in the persons of the tragic personages, but in the constitution of their relations, particularly familial relations. Prometheus, for instance, has a brother, his opposite, the dim-witted Epimetheus. There is also his brother’s wife, Pandora, who Carl Kerenyi has called ‘the final inexhaustible source of misery’ (in Dougherty 34). These individuals are personifications of thoughtlessness and disobedience, and there is indeed a certain correspondence between the function of these individuals in the Promethean myth and that of Obika and Oduche in *Arrow of God*. In Obika we see the Epimethean thoughtlessness. We see this in his handling of his sister’s husband; in his daring of the dreaded medicine man Otakekpeli for which Ezeulu himself calls him ‘the rash, foolish Obika’; and finally, in his

playing of the *ogbazulobodo* part when he knows full well he is febrile. In Oduche we see disobedience and lack of restraint. He is supposed to be his father's eye but he joins the Christians in desecrating the land and culture; had Oduche brought back intelligence regarding the Christian harvest alternative, perhaps Ezeulu would have taken a decision to counter its success. It is not surprising that on realizing that his son has not kept him abreast with developments on the Christian front, Ezeulu calls him the proverbial lizard that ruined its mother's funeral. Such relatives who like the mythical allies of Prometheus exhibit a lack of restraint and fail to follow instructions help to let the guard of the Promethean figure down. They become the media through which the hero is assaulted, or to put it differently, they constitute the proverbial chink in the hero's armour.

The Anti-Promethean Ezeulu and the Issue of Change in *Arrow of God*

It is difficult to sustain a thoroughly Promethean reading of the Ezeulu character, for there appears to be a 'surplus' dimension to him that truncates the Promethean in his character portrait. That is why we are in this part going to examine his anti-Promethean traits.

First, such an epithet as 'friend of man' or 'lover of man' is sometimes used to describe Prometheus because of his legendary love for mankind. In spite of his divinity, when confronted with the choices of loyalty to the Greek supreme god Zeus and the welfare of mortal men, he chooses the latter. By pitching his tent with mortals, Prometheus is opposed to divine tyranny; the kind of tyranny that undermines human progress, the kind of tyranny that holds man in perpetual subservience to an all-attention-seeking god, and we should add, the kind of tyranny that selfishly aims at frustrating man's recognition of his freedom. However, in Ezeulu we see something markedly different. He is supposed to serve as the middleman between god and man. Although he is the priest of

Ulu, his mediation, by communal wisdom and expectation, should be tilted in favour of the human community. That is the reason, when Ezeulu describes himself as a whip in the hand of Ulu, Ofoka queries him thus: 'But I should like to know on whose side you are, Ezeulu. I think you have just said you have become the whip with which Ulu flogs Umwaro' (209). A thoroughgoing Promethean figure would not become the arrow with which the gods impale humanity; he would display that archetypal rebellion for which Prometheus is known. The Promethean figure is 'protector of mankind' (Dougherty), not a destroyer of mankind. Ezeulu clearly pitches his tent with Ulu and he is quite confident that his action is in tandem with the will of Ulu. He however 'suffers in his person the primordial contradiction that is concealed in things' (Nietzsche 71), for he is, as he believes, inexplicably chastised by the very deity on behalf of whom he acted.

As we saw earlier, wisdom and foresight should ordinarily help the possessor to make favourable decisions. Being a figure that wields the Promethean aptitude of conscious intellect and foresight, Ezeulu puzzles the reader by some of his actions which contradict the wisdom embodied in his philosophies. For instance, he knows that they are in strange times and one has to accommodate the strangeness of the modern generations. He knows that one has to be flexible in the face of the peculiar realities of the time, and he could be said to have demonstrated this required flexibility in sending his son Oduche to learn the white man's wisdom and religion, to be his eye since, to him, those who fail to befriend the white man today may cry had we known tomorrow. The question then is why does he refuse to eat the yams, seeing that his detention in Okperi is really no fault of Umwaro as such an unprecedented thing comes with the package of colonialism? This rigid stance of his has been read as his primary flaw, as we see in Larson's argument:

Ezeulu's flaw is his refusal to negotiate, to listen to the opinions of his people, to change with the times. There has never been a previous occasion when the chief priest was exiled from his village. His peers expect him to be flexible, to accommodate in the face of what clearly has become a new world because of the British and their government representatives (3).

But again we ask the question: why does he refuse to eat the remaining yams? Is it because he wants to test the supposed dormant power of his that he contemplates with fascination at the beginning of the novel, the quest for vengeance merely presenting him the opportunity? Is he following Ulu's directive as he claims? Can't he like Prometheus rebel against such divine will to punish, instead of facilitating this anti-human will? Why does he maintain a rigid stance even though it means ruin for his community? In fact, Akwanya has observed that the question 'why did he do it?' appears to always bob up in Chinua Achebe's novels. For him, 'it is a question that haunts the margins of discourse in *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, but is played out almost exhaustively in *No Longer at Ease*' ('Why Did He Do It?' 105).

There is another example of how Ezeulu undermines his own wisdom in the text. It is from him that we first hear the proverb of a stranger reaping benefits at the expense of two brothers that fight each other. As Ezeulu pits himself against Nwaka and Ezidemili, so are Ulu and Idemili engaged in a divine battle for superiority. These two deities can very well be called brothers, and the same thing goes for their representatives. There is a common foe that threatens them with extermination – the Christian God and His acolytes. But because of the ill-will between them, they 'fight themselves into' self-annihilation, as it were, and this translates into victory for the invading white deity. It is surprising that Ezeulu, being the knowledgeable one, the one who 'can see tomorrow', does not desist from this brotherly fight of ruin. In fact, he begins, at a point, to think of Oduche's desecration of Idemili's sacred

python as an act of Ulu, Oduche being Ulu's weapon against Idemili. He could afford to laugh when he learns that Idemili's python scuttles away when it is threatened with the presence of a Christian. Unknown to him, Idemili's extermination is also Ulu's for both belong to the same old order. As if the gods wanted to rub in the imminence of their extermination, Ezeulu sees it in the dream in the form of the python's song of extermination:

I was born when lizards where in ones and twos
 A child of Idemili. The difficult tear-drops
 Of Sky's first weeping drew my spots. Being
 Sky-born I walked the earth with royal gait
 And mourners saw me coiled across their path.
 But of late
 A strange bell
 Has been ringing a song of desolation:
 Leave your yams and cocoyams
 And come to school.
 And I must scuttle away in haste
 When children in play or in earnest cry:
 Look! A Christian is on the way.

Ha ... (222)

It is from Ezeulu that we hear earlier in the novel the proverb concerning a slave getting a glimpse of the fate that awaits him when he observes other slave's plight. Why then does he not extrapolate from the python's song of desolation the sense of his own imminent cultural extinction? The laughter of the python is reminiscent of his mother's during her fits of madness. This is significant, for it foreshadows his eventual madness at the end of the story.

In Georg Lukács's 'The Sociology of Modern Drama' we find useful paradigms in comprehending the nature and significance of the tragedy in Achebe's *Arrow of God*, but of course the peculiarity of the novel under study makes it imperative for us to encounter

areas that are discordant with Lukács's expostulations. Lukács distinguishes between old tragedy and new tragedy. The central thing for him is change but this change can be quantitative as in the old drama or qualitative as it pertains to new drama. Lukács writes that 'from the past is born the future which struggles free of the old and of all that stands in opposition. The end of each tragedy sees the collapse of an entire world. The new drama brings what in fact is new, and what follows the collapse differs qualitatively from the old; whereas in Shakespeare the difference was merely quantitative' (934). Of course the sense of the collapse of an old order is felt at the end of *Arrow of God* but the conflict between the old and the new is not as intense as the one between representatives within the old order; we are referring here to the opposition between Ulu and Idemili, and consequently Ezuelu and Nwaka (Ezidemili being Nwaka's proverbial beater in the bush). In fact it might really be difficult to say whether this rivalry between Ulu and Idemili originated from the deities themselves or whether their representatives inaugurated the conflict then drew the gods into it. For instance, is Ezeulu as he tells us truly an arrow in Ulu's bow? We are told that, 'after a long period of silent preparation Ezeulu finally revealed that HE INTENDED TO HIT UMUARO at the most vulnerable point – the Feast of the New Yam' (201 *emphasis added*). We do not usually expect an arrow to have intention; the intention is the preserve of the one who pulls the string of the bow, in this case, Ulu. Is it not then possible to think that Ezeulu intended to use Ulu as an arrow in his (Ezeulu's) bow? This clearly anti-Promethean tyrannical use of power, this maliciousness of Ezeulu to the community helps to facilitate the change or transition in the story, for like many tragic heroes, he misfires, which is in fact the original sense of the Greek hamartia – to miss the mark.

Furthermore, in *Arrow of God* there appears to be a conflation of Lukács's old and new tragedy. The reason for this is twofold: the first is that the major player Ezeulu seems to straddle two worlds;

as Natasha Himmelman puts it, 'Ezeulu teeters between traditional Ibo society and the infringing colonial regime' (8); in other words, he is ambivalent. Ambivalence seems in fact to characterize Ezeulu's nature: he sends his son to acquire the new religion even though he is the custodian and defender of the old religion; he is half human half spirit, which really makes it difficult to say which part of his dual being is responsible for some of the decisions he makes. However, the second reason is that the conflict in the text rages at two fronts simultaneously – there is the conflict within orders and the one between orders. Mark Mathuray is thus right in talking about 'the pre-eminence of a continuity/change opposition' in the *Arrow of God* (26). Mathuray's representation of this continuity/change rivalry in binary oppositions is equally helpful: 'Winterbottom/Ezeulu (colonial power/traditional power), Nwaka/Ezeulu (political power/sacred power), John Goodcountry/Moses Unachukwu (desacralisation/retaining the sacred), Oduche/Nwafo (conversion/ fidelity)' (27).

It appears that Moses Unachukwu is the one who acts with the wisdom of the proverb regarding the enemy reaping the benefits of a fight between two brothers. He knows that to win in this 'conflict of generations' (Lukács), there has to be an internal mending of fences. In fact, his role in ensuring the success of the substitution of the Feast of the New Yam with the Christian harvest is significant: '*Moses Unachukwu, who had since returned to full favour with Goodcountry, saved the day.* 'If Ulu who is a false god can eat one yam the living God who owns the whole world should be entitled to eat more than one' (216 *emphasis mine*). Ezeulu's failure to live up to his own wisdom by burying his animosity with his so-called enemies in the interest of preserving communal identity and progress is the reason some critics like Fagruntheen will dump the blame of the transition at his feet (see 'Downfall of Traditionalism in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*').

Conclusion

We have seen the ways Ezeulu can be said to emulate the tragic or character traits of the mythical Prometheus. Certain parallels between their stories have also been established. At any rate, there are as we have seen ways in which Ezeulu might be said to have subverted his Promethean self, areas in which he fails to exude the Promethean through and through, making him what we have called the anti-Promethean figure. His complicity in the change at the end the story has been understood to be a concomitant of his failure to exude a thoroughgoing Promethean nature.

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