

Power Changing Hands: A Foucaultian Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) centralizes around the chief priest of the God Ulu, Ezeulu, who is in the quest of wielding an absolute power. Throughout the novel, power is a process and a matter of exchange which continually switches directions circulating through a decentered field of various networks, and is exercised from innumerable points, which can never be totally acquired or seized. Within this respect, the question of power and its division and its loss is scrutinized in *Arrow of God* by means of Michél Foucault's understanding of Power and Knowledge. Foucault situates power in human relations claiming that it is the will to hold power which places people in the realms of domination and submission. In the light of Power and Knowledge, this paper recontextualizes *Arrow of God* in which characters are undergoing exchanges of power.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, Michél Foucault, Power/Knowledge

As a foremost African writer, Chinua Achebe has attracted much attention outside Africa as well as within Africa, since he has become the spokesman of Africa in reviving the history of Africa and demonstrating the culture and traditions of Africa, which has made him considerably renowned literary figure in the Western world. “With his powerful ability, vivid style and punch Chinua Achebe gives European readers a first-hand account of the poetic folklore, and the strong religious and moral sanctions” (Mackay, 1964, p.303) of a Nigerian life. As his works embody the “slice-of-life vividness,” (Gagiano, 2000, p. 62) he has been affiliated with realist movement. “In showing ‘real’ worlds, Achebe never merely records or passively endorses what happened, but conveys a deeply, politically committed vision” (Gagiano, 2000, p. 62-3). In fact, he gives “the real picture without hypocrisy or restraint” (Mackay, 1964, p. 304).

Achebe was born at Ogidi in Nigeria on 15, November 1930. Although his mother tongue was Igbo, he must have learned English at home as his father “was the teacher in charge of the Church Missionary Society’s village school which young Achebe attended” (Ravenscroft, 1977, p. 7). He studied English literature at the University College at Ibadan, then in special relation with this, at the University of London. Later he worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, and in 1961 he “was appointed Director of External Broadcasting for Nigeria, an appointment which frequently took him abroad, to Britain and other parts of the world” (Ravenscroft, 1977, p. 7). During this time, in 1958, he published his first novel *Things Fall Apart*, which can be considered as the first step towards international recognition and reputation of African novel in English literature. In his very first novel, he gives us the story of people who are torn apart due to the colonial invasion. His depiction of internal conflict that the characters go through, characterization, political and religious considerations blended with his unique style has made him one of the most prominent non-western writers in the world. His other novels have also been extremely influential and widely read and appreciated. *No Longer at Ease*, his

second novel depicts the story of a young man who leaves home in order to work in British colonial services. It “powerfully conveys the malaise of a dislocation process” (Gagiano, 2000, p. 65). *Anthills of the Savannah* (1967) “combines important elements of African oral native traditions with sophisticated literary devices (such as the use of multiple narrators)” (Booker, 2003, p. 18). Concerning this, Achebe explores and reveals African culture and African mode of knowledge and understanding using European forms and language within the epistemological context of colonial and postcolonial discourses. While representing and reinventing African tradition and experience, Achebe seeks to “evoke the authority of Igbo culture and its aesthetic codes to recover what the colonizing structure has repressed and to legitimize his narrative strategies” (Gikanki, 1991, p. 9). Achebe has been called “the inventor of the African novel,” (Lindfors, 1997, p. x) and he intends to use literature and his novels as an instrument to enlighten and teach readers since he believes that “good literature can change the world” (Lindfors, 1997, p. x). Not only has he written novels but he also “will be remembered for his short essays, his children’s books, his prize-winning poetry, and his incisive essays on literary, political and cultural matters” (Lindfors, 1997, p. xii).

Although *Arrow of God* bears resemblance to *Things Fall Apart* on many literary and cultural grounds, it can be deemed as a new development in Achebe’s art, for the focus is not a mere investigation of a clan society, but a more sustained exploration of “the crossroads of culture” (Achebe, 1975, p. 119). In other words, it represents the struggle for power and authority between the clashing African and colonial traditions. “Two novels supplement each other [...] In *Things Fall Apart*, the society is forced to give way to an inevitable change because of its violent collision with an alien institution. In *Arrow of God* we have a more explosive situation of a society cleaving apart largely from its own internal strain” (Soile, 1976, p. 283).

The story in *Arrow of God* takes place in an Igbo village in Nigeria, which is “a vibrant cultural environment” (Rowell, 1990, p. 94). The central character of *Arrow of God* is Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the most powerful god of his Umuaro people, and hence he is granted a special position and given enormous power in the society. He is

responsible for performing the two most significant rituals in the life of the people that is the festivals of the Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam. Therefore, he officiates for its protecting deity Ulu for the six villages of Umuaro, which are united as a clan. “Ulu’s sole function — the one for which he was created — is to save the six villages, not to destroy them. The rituals to which Ezeulu is clinging are only a means to attain the god’s purpose and must be altered when they fail” (Moore, 1964, p. 52).

With this in mind, *Arrow of God* centralises around this chief priest of the god Ulu, Ezeulu, who is in the quest of wielding an absolute power. Throughout the novel, however, power is a process and a matter of exchange which continually switches directions, circulating through a decentred field of various networks and is exercised from innumerable points which can never be totally acquired or seized. In this respect, different systems of power together with their dependence on myth, ritual, and community come up. Within this respect, it is appropriate to analyse the novel in relation to the question of power and its division as well as its by means of Michél Foucault’s understanding of Power and Knowledge. Foucault situates power in human relations claiming that it is the will to hold power which places people in the realms of domination and submission.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*(1975), Michél Foucault describes the prison-like figure Panopticon, which is adapted from English philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, who depicts Panopticism similar to a prison structure in which the inhabitants are clearly observed so that every moment and action are under control and surveillance. In Panopticon, the tower is built at the centre from which all inmates are monitored and controlled unceasingly. Through exerting power and surveillance, the reformation and improvement is aimed to be achieved since the inmates are under the pressure of being controlled and observed. This panoptic prison allows “a single gaze to see everything constantly” (1975, p.173). Thus, Foucault by means of taking Panopticism into consideration likens the figure to the Western contemporary society where people are exposed to constant surveillance and confinement. As Foucault states, “The Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its

mechanism of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men's behaviour" (1975, p. 204). Thus, the aim is to penetrate into man's in facet of life so that man is supposed to pay attention to his conduct and his way of living which is measured excessively. Besides, Foucault correlates power with knowledge arguing that power cannot be exempted from knowledge. Additionally, Foucault stresses the fact that the concept of power/knowledge is not restricted to a single authority or a dominant ideology, but it circulates through social structures capable of dispersing the power relations. The striking point is that by referring to Bentham's Panopticon structure, Foucault intends to portray a contemporary society aligned with its systems and institutions in which excessive control and oppressive regimes are prevalent. Through the imposition of enduring inspection, people are turned into bodies that become vulnerable to all practises of power. As a consequence, the bodies are left defenceless to all sorts of constraints due to implementation of excessive observation and control. Therefore, in the light of Power and Knowledge, in *Arrow of God* characters constantly undergo exchanges of power as Igbo world is presented as an arena of the interplay of forces, where everything is in a perpetual flux and movement. Due to this, "authority — including the authority of language and power — has become dispersed among contending forces" (Gikongi, 1991, p. 52).

The novel opens with Ezeulu looking over the sky in order to notice the first sign of the new moon. When it appears, his task is to declare its advent, ceremonially eat the next of the sacred yams which mark the passing months and proclaim to the clan the feast of the New Yam, which can be considered as his primary function in the society. "Ezeulu's duty, on behalf of the protecting deity whose priest he is, is to divine the future and take what measures he can for the clan's safety" (Ravenscroft, 1977, p. 25). However, when scanning the evening sky, he realises his deteriorated eyesight:

Ezeulu did not think that his sight was no longer as good as it used to be and some day he would have to rely on someone else's eyes as his grandfather had done when his sight failed. Of course he had lived to such as great age that his blindness

became like an ornament on him. If Ezeulu lived to be so old he too would accept such a loss. (1969, p.1)

This scene stands for the internal conflict he undergoes, which is, on one hand he desires to maintain his imminent power and authority over his clan, nevertheless, he comes to realization that sign of his forthcoming blindness is a threat; as a result, both his religious and political responsibility and power will be shattered. For the time being, he supposedly holds the tremendous power as he still names the days, and decides the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and the New Yam fest. However desperately he craves for the perpetual authority, he is haunted by fear that his power would diminish eventually. In this regard, the central issue of the book is raised in the following quotation:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops, and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; he did not choose the day. He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As long as the goat was alive it was his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know who the real owner was. No! The Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival — no planting no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare. (1969, p. 5)

In this quotation, Ezeulu’s assertions of power are questioned. Whenever he considers the immensity of his power he wonders whether this power is real or not, and then he proceeds to highlight his doubts about his own selfhood. Moreover, this quotation also calls into the question of whether his power and prowess over the temporal process which is the moon and the seasons are definite or he is merely a watchman.

As the story moves forward, it is revealed that the war between Okperi and Umuaro continues for years, which was earlier dissuaded by

Ezeulu. In this sense, the dispute about the ownership and domination over some land incessantly continues between Okperi and Umuaro is given, so the knowledge with regard to past and the present are interspersed and made known. However, Nwaka, who wins the general support, makes a powerful speech about the land claimed by both clans. The clans are divided once more, and their dispute exacerbates ending with the intervention of the District Officer, who utterly respects Ezeulu, as he tells the truth regardless of clan loyalty. As a consequence, Okperi is granted with the land, yet Nwaka, who gets a slight power, begins to abuse his power by manipulating people uttering that Ezeulu represents the white man rather than his clan as he is befriended with white man.

Ezeulu realizes the fact that his society is undergoing a paradigm shift and change is inevitable, most probably imminent. He believes that “the world is no longer as it was”, thus he sends Oduche, one of his sons to church in order to observe this new religion. He wants to keep up with the new changes taking place all around the world, particularly in the white man’s world, because subconsciously he considers that white man holds the unchallengeable immense power, subsequently knowledge, as a result for “power is within knowledge, knowledge is within power” (Lemert, 1982, p. 27). Ezeulu within this respect asserts that:

The world is changing [...] Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching. I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. 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. (1969, p. 46)

On one hand, he acknowledges the reality of the power of the white man. By sending Oduche to the colonial school, he appears to have recognised the white man’s power and accepted it to a certain extent, since “there is no escape from the white man”, however, on the other

hand, he refuses to serve to the white man and strongly repudiates to yield to his power. This dilemma he goes through unrelentlessly is reflected in his actions and decisions. What has been haunting his mind is that the white man since conquered their land with great power, must be holding wisdom and knowledge as well. Thus, being motivated by his deep-seated oppression of losing his power, he sends his son so as to gain personal wisdom as well as political and social power. Besides, the white man has brought some changes affecting the society. It can be claimed that Ezeulu is intrigued by the white man's power and he supposes that he is exercising shrewdness by sending his son to spy on the white man. Ravenscroft raises questions regarding this: “[A]re Ezeulu's motives disinterested, entirely on behalf of his people's future? Is he more wise and adaptable than his fellows? Or does he wish to learn the secrets of white power in order to enhance his own” (1969, p. 26)? Although Ravenscroft notes that these questions are not explicitly elucidated, still it can be drawn that his power is not at the centre and the power he possesses is not the domination of the singularised class or the essential being. In a way, he is not an omnipotent force, for he is also the obedient subject of the society in which he operates. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault points out the unfixable nature of power, and underlines the idea of the ubiquity of power which operates in all levels of society. In this angle,

Power underlines all social relations from the institutional to the inter-subjective and is a fundamentally enabling force. To understand power, therefore, it is necessary to analyse it in its most diverse and specific manifestations rather than focusing on its most centralised forms such as its concentration in the hands of a coercive elite or a ruling class. (1969, p.3)

Ezeulu understands the fact that knowledge and power are interrelated and “the formation of knowledge and the increase of power reinforce one another in a circular process” (Lemert, 1982, p. 20). Therefore, his attitude to get knowledge of the new religion lies in the fact that he desires to retain his position as a powerful priest and manage the changes happening in the society. As Achebe himself declares in his interview that Ezeulu already has more power than anyone in the society, and “he certainly has enough strength and

arrogance to attempt to assume a lot of power” (Lindfors, 1997, p. 47). Even the prefix ‘eze’ signifies ‘king,’ which applies both to “material and political power” (Lindfors, 1997, p. 47).

It is impertinent to say that Ezeulu tends to think that no change, no other dominating religion, no imposed culture and traditions coming outside can shatter his power and authority. However, this does not prevent him from acquiring knowledge about the things that could have an impact on the society and his people. As knowledge can be correlated with power, being knowledgeable about certain things can make him more prepared and resilient to attacks before they strike them. For example, Ezeulu seeks to learn everything about Christianity and expresses his intention as follows:

This thing is coming. I'll send someone to go and make an alliance with them, but the assumption is that I will remain in power — that the religion, the civilization, the tradition I embody will still remain in power. Let us absorb this thing that is coming: let's arrest it before it ruins or breaks us. (1969, p. 31)

Therefore, Ezeulu has realized that the change is an inevitable fact of life and accepted this fact which has triggered him to send his son to missionary in order to protect and retain his position and power.

As David Carroll has asserted, *Arrow of God* is a political novel “in which different systems of power are examined and their dependence upon myth and ritual compared. Of necessity, it is also a study in the psychology of power” (1990, p.118). In this sense, a wide range of forms of power and variety of challenges come to the fore in issues of power encounters. So, power is exercised over all classes operating within many institutional apparatuses and forces and power does not function as a centre but through various net-like organisations, therefore the “objective pursuit of knowledge that is independent of power and exercise is an illusion” (Lemert, 1982, p. 29). Yet, Ezeulu's judgement is clouded by his personal arrogance which results in his downfall. If he were regarded as a tragic hero, his tragic mistake would be his underestimating the circulation of power within society and his ignorance of the power his clan possesses. As he refuses to respond

Winterbottom’s call, he is arrested, which makes his power shattered. On account of his arrest, the two moons go unannounced in Umuaro, so people cannot eat any sacred yams. Nevertheless, after his release from jail, triggered by revenge, he prolongs to eat yams as a punishment to his clan, precisely because his clan does not stand by him. As Ruth Patterson states, “stripped off his powers and faced with the realization that Ulu is no longer regarded by the people, Ezeulu is crushed” (1969, p.64). Hence, harvest is not gathered, and hunger, famine and suffering follow, and yam rots in the soil.

Foucault’s concept of docile bodies through which individuals are converted into passive, weak, and controlled beings come into view. Ezeulu “sees himself as the arrow of god piercing the heart of Umuaro for its disrespect towards Ulu and his priest. Here the implication is that Ezeulu’s arrogance has ironically caused him to reverse the very function of his office — to bring deliberate disaster upon the people instead of averting it” (Ravenscroft, 1977, p. 27). In this vein, it can be said that “power is not a privilege but a strategy” (Lemert, 1982, p. 74), thereby Ezeulu as a proud and aloof priest, uses his power against his clan which also has power: “Power was no longer from the above, the excluding action of structures on individuals. It was equally, an imminent process, tied closely to knowledge and discourse, which operates as a technique on all levels of society (Lemert, 1982, p. 6). What’s more, “The Arrow of God” is “an Igbo proverb in which a particular person or event is said to enact or trigger the will of God” (Smith, 2001, p. 603). Thus, the title refers to the events of Ezeulu serving the purpose.

As Umuaro is confronted with famine and misery, “[t]he Christians offer immediate absolution to those faced with famine who will not eat the ripe yams from the field lest they incur the wrath of Ulu. They ask the people of Umuaro to bring thank offerings to Christ during the harvest festival, abandoning the God Ulu and his priest” (Manji, 2000, p. 629). This can be thought as the final irony because “even the faithful have been furtively sending mission school boys to dig for them the yams they are forbidden to touch. In gratitude to the new God for making this possible, many yams are sent in offering to the church” (Moore, 1964, p. 52). Thus, Umuaro converts into new religion,

Christianity, “which, they have been told by the minister Good country, does not prohibit them from harvesting their crops whenever they choose, provided that they contribute to the welfare of the established church” (Patterson, 1977, p. 64). This indicates the nightmare of colonialism taking place in Nigeria. Ezeulu confuses “his prestige with his clan’s power and forget that ‘no man however great can win against a clan’” (Gagiano, 2000, p. 90).

The power, which is sought to be imposed upon the Igbo society can be related to Foucault’s definition of power which is exerted so as to turn the individuals into docile bodies. In this respect, Foucault states that “the form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects” (1975, p.331). What can be concluded from this quotation is that for Foucault the individuals, who are deprived of power, are implemented force and pressure so that they would be controlled and subjugated. Foucault argues that when power is circulated, bodies are under effect as he asserts: “[T]he body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it, they invest it, mask it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (1975, p. 35). Foucault’s concept of power is exercised with the intention of reforming the individuals, thus individuals are affected by power as power exists within many institutions functioning in society.

The second man who seems to be holding the power is Winterbottom who is in charge of the region. As his name Winterbottom “is a metaphor for the man’s character and ineffectiveness” (Okechukwu, 2002, p. 576), he is not effective in affairs, and despite his long stay in Igbo, he is depicted to be having difficulty adapting himself to the conditions and hot weather of Igbo. Foucault asserts that power relations are like capillary systems flowing in all directions and functioning in diverse social discourses. Foucault displays the omnipresence of power in several relations and organizations that are dominant in all societies. Bearing this in mind, Winterbottom is not the one who possesses the unremitting power; he

lacks necessary knowledge to hold that kind of power. The absolute power he seems to be holding is merely circulating since the power is unlocatable. He tries to augment the power as each character does in the novel.

Captain Winterbottom is clearly the new source of power in the region, but his authority is precarious precisely because it is founded on fantasy rather than reality. In short, his representation of African culture expresses his alienation in it rather than the mastery and control which is manifested by his exercise of power. In effect, Winterbottom is imprisoned by what he assumes to be his knowledge of Africa. On the surface, Winterbottom's notions of Africa seem to be represented with power and authority; like Ezeulu's pronouncements, they don't allow for doubts. (Gikandi, 1991, p. 62)

In this light, Winterbottom is introduced as the holder of discipline and power of the white forces. His vision is clouded by the power he is in charge of exerting, nevertheless his knowledge of African society and culture is so limited as his power. In this sense, what comes to the fore is Foucault's concept of power that is related with the forms of knowledge and his concept of the exercise of power among people in various institutions. Foucault's understanding of power circulation in many discourses points to the fact that, "power is not something acquired, seized, or shared, or something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points" (1985, p. 94). Taking into account the situation of the dispersion of power relations in institutions, it is undeniably apparent in *Arrow of God* that the regulation of actions and disciplines are not in the hands of one, stable, fixed authority but many, as Winterbottom is also observed by white forces, which hold tremendous authority and power. With reference to all of the issues touched upon above, it can be clearly witnessed that

the hierarchy of power and knowledge had become dispersed and divided between several centres of meaning such as Ezeulu/Idemili (Nwaka), Goodcountry/Unachukwu, Winterbottom/Clarke. In a sense, this dispersal of linguistic and

other authority does not lead to a sharing of power; on the contrary, any loss of authority by the old power structures creates “a ferment in the structure of traditional authority itself.” (Gikandi, 1991, p. 68)

In conclusion, *Arrow of God* has been described as “the richest, most mysterious of Achebe’s novels” (Killiam and Wren, 1985, p. 18). Finally, “Ezeulu pays dearly for over-stepping the boundaries set for him by Ulu. He is driven to madness” (Mordaunt, 1989, p.164). Last but not least, as novel embraces many perspectives, various interpretations and multiple distinct points of views, it can be analysed and contextualised from many angles as Innes identifies a number of reasons for these multiple perspectives as such:

First [...] it provides a [...] convincing and complex portrayal of a traditional community and the tensions and rivalries which make it active and vital; secondly this varied community becomes both the background and the most stringent test from traditional Igbo forms of policy making and leadership, for the balancing and reconciling of rival claims, and for raising issues concerning individual and communal authority; thirdly, these opposing perspectives are concerned with what seems to me the central theme of the novel, the problem of ‘knowing’ [...] *Arrow of God* is about the problem of authority and the related questions of whom and what to follow [...]. (1969, p. 47)

The pivotal issue discussed in this paper is the web of infinite power exchanges and circulations. As power and knowledge are interwoven, the problem of power emerges as the problem of knowing or knowledge as well. It can be stated that power is distributed throughout many social interactions creating new forms of knowledge which is the embodiment of development, improvement, and refinement. Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge relations are observed in this very institution in which power is circulated through various discursive relations. As McDougall points out that “the hermeneutic principle of *Arrow of God* is one of fluid movement from one position to another [...] (1987, p. 12). The idea of fluidity, and of the existence of a multitude of different positions from which it is possible to contemplate

the world, is crucial [...] It is possible to understand Achebe's attitude to law, power and authority only by refusing to stay still through an adherence to the dominant legal centralist paradigm (Manji, 2000, p. 631). Achebe, in this novel gives a wonderful picture of psychology of power, which is not only operating within the society but also is sought to exert from foreign forces. Moreover, he explores the inner conflict leading to disharmony among his clans along with the clash of inner and external reality. As David Carroll sums ups:

The author, it appears, is unwilling to commit himself finally on the precise relationship between inner and outer, between Ezeulu's need for power and the god he worships, between Winterbottom's aggressiveness and the rituals of power he practises [...] We are left in [...] the several social worlds of the novel where ritual and convention differentiate and also unify the lives of the characters. (1990, p. 118)

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