

## Feminine Identity in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*

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### ABSTRACT

*Arrow of God* (1964) represents the struggle for power and authority between the African and the missionaries and within the Igbo clan. The title of the novel comes from an Igbo proverb in which an event or a person is said to represent the will of God. The identity issues are continued by Achebe as the sequel to the issues reflected in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) during the colonial power. He points out the continuity of African cultural disruption with the same insight and involvement in the 1920s after the arrival of the missionaries in Nigeria. The bygone Igbo culture is depicted through the appealing mode of narration with the diversified change in African culture due to new religion like Christianity, raising the issues of identity among Igbo community. The conflicts in the Igbo tradition and European culture evoke the identity issues.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The novel focuses on the characteristics of the individual's belongings to the homogenous society that is trapped in the rapid spread of Christianity among Igbo people. The missionaries disintegrated the Igbo society by provoking hostility among them through lucrative trades, education, law and order and the taste of power. Achebe reveals the unpredicted change in the native culture by shattering that it is bound to the alien rules of the society. Customs as the part of cultural patterns identify the characteristics of British power in Nigerian Igbo tribe. The question of ownership of the land between Umuaro and Okperi results into the conflicts between two tribes and it marked the issues of identity of the social order with a sense of belongingness. The obligations of traditional religious rituals among Igbo people during the colonial period haunted them into the disruption of culture with the prime issues of identity. On the other hand, Christianity invented by the missionaries caused the pacification among Igbo people.

The power relationships among Igbo proved the limited impact in compare to the power of missionaries. Colonial power is identified as the main source of their disruption. *Arrow of God* (1960) is a

novel about the observable fact of power and the urge for power is evident in the temperament and patterns of interface and dealings between the different forces, interests and entities in the story. The delineation of power forms the identity issues in the patterns and the structure of power. The conflicts between the missionaries and the traditional Igbo system are reflected from the representatives of them and their entities. The conflicts among Igbo tribe are penetrated through their internal identity elements. The two divert applications of the issues of identity are noticeable in the story in the nature of power and its dimensions to distinguish the social patterns and their relations with each other.

The conflicts in power between Ezeulu and the colonial authorities constitute the underlying factors responsible for emerging the issues of identity. The traditional Igbo society monitored by Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, the most powerful god of Umuaro. The Nigerian social and cultural system is represented through the ethnicity of the Igbo people. On the other hand, the pacification caused by the missionaries among Igbo people constitutes the arrow heads of the conflicts between Ezeulu and Mr. Winterbottom. The protagonist Ezeulu resembles Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) but he doesn't suffer from inner conflicts and uncertainties. Achebe

reflects the religious and social power in a representative community with irresistible forces of colonialism.

The identity of women in *Arrow of God* (1964) reflects the traditional gender manifestations with an imbalance of the female principles. The negative side of the women is revealed through some instances in the novel. In the opening slot of the novel, the image of Igbo women is described as a cruel foster-mother. The narrator says, “The moon he saw that day was as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel foster mother” (*Arrow of God*: 2). the identity of the women in such a way is exposed in a form of the rank in a social order. The marriage system in Umuaro among Igbo people flashes the light on the inequality and imbalance between men and women. Men are allowed to marry with several women as portrayed in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. (1958) Akuekue has a couple of wives. Nwaka, one of the local leaders of the village has the five wives. Ezeulu, the chief priest has three wives, the younger wife Ugoye, is of the equal age of his first daughter. The custom of marriages about having more wives is continued in the colonial period in Nigeria. The bride price issue reminds the selling of women by their fathers to the families of the bridegrooms. The women in *Arrow of God* (1964) are forbidden to share the property of their fathers after marriages.

In short, they have to bear the burden of their husbands meekly without leaving their husband's house. The regular beatings of the women are the stereotype identity in the society. Achebe puts in the conversation among them regarding the married Akueke; “They said the man ill-treated her, But Ojiugo's mother said it was a lie and that Akueke was headstrong and proud. “When a woman marries a husband she should forget how big her father's compound was,” she always said. “A woman does not carry her father's obi to her husband” (*Arrow of God* 10). The rape, incest and the molestation of women among Igbo people are evident of the insecure identity of the women. The Igbo people in Umuaro want to increase the numbers of male children to protect their clan from the molesting the daughters of their villages. Ezeulu the chief priest says; why do we pray to Ulu and to our ancestors to increase our numbers if not for this very things?” said the leader, “No one eats numbers. But if we are many nobody will dare to molest us and our daughters will

be able to hold their heads up in their husbands' houses”(*Arrow of God* 12).

The virginity of the women before marriages is questioned by the Igbo customs. Okuata's relaxation after finding hers self-virgin is pointed out in the novel as a part of insecurity of them to prove them virgins. Achebe writes that “She (Okuata) felt greatly relieved for although she had always known she was a virgin” (*Arrow of God* 122). It is a matter of pride for her that her husband Obika had decided to present as goat to his in-laws. The writer says; “Obika had already chosen an enormous goat as a present for his mother-in-law should his wife to be a virgin” (*Arrow of God* 118). Actually, Okuata was at the risk to lose her virginity when she came in contact with Obiora. It is the matter that made her worried about her virginity. The narrator says; “It was the thought of the moonlight play when Obiora had put his penis between her thighs. True, he had only succeeded in playing at the entrance but she couldn't be too sure” (*Arrow of God* 118).

It makes a point that the virginity of the Igbo girls is seen at the risks of their beliefs. The identity of Igbo women is dominated by the male- oriented customs. The women are expected to consider their husbands' guilt if they beg a favour of their wives secretly. Ezeulu says in this context; “It our custom a man is not expected to go down on his knees and knock his forehead on the ground to his wife to ask her forgiveness or beg a favour. But, a wise man knows that between him and his wife there may arise the need for him to say to her in secret; ‘I Beg you.’ When such a thing happens nobody else must know of it and that woman if she has any sense will never boast about it or even open her mouth and speak of it. If she does it the earth on which the man brought herself low will destroy her entirely” (*Arrow of God*: 172).

The male dominance of the Igbo people to treat the women in a social and judicial manner is revealed in the novel as a part of the patriarchal society. The women were not given the importance in the social meetings, sharing and the spiritual practices. Ezeulu's return to the village in Umuaro is marked by the elders and the men of the society excluding women. The narrator says that “In the course of the second day, he counted fifty seven visitors excluding women” (*Arrow of God* 187). The females in Igbo society are not given any kind of

importance in the decision makings and the well-beings. But it is strange to point out that the different deities are given the names of the women and the social aspects are monitored by the orders of them. The deities such as Ulu, Eru, Esdemili, Chukew are known as the highest Gods of the male gender. The social image of the female is considered as the place of a mother before marriages that occurs in the context by saying the 'son of our daughter'. The people belong to the same village are considered the 'son of the village'. According to the Igbo historian Felix Ekechi, "Woman was seen as subordinate to the male" in traditional Igbo society is an "enduring stereotype of male-female relations (Which) needs modification so as to reflect the African reality" (Felix, 41). The proverb 'A man does not speak a lie to his son.' (*Arrow of God*: 93) is a discourse about the feminine identity that a woman, who teaches their children to speak a lie.

The masculine identity overshadows the feminine qualities and the aspects related in the social framework. The narrator reveals the words 'my father' throughout the story which are associated with all the remedies, past knowledge, customs, moralities, justice and ethical values. Ezeulu decides the fate of his son, Oduche by asking him to join the Christianity. Ugoye, Ezeulu's wife tries to resist him but it was in vain when the Ezeulu replies, "I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there.....How does it concern you what I do with my sons?" (*Arrow of God*46). In the patriarchal Igbo society, The Igbo women were deprived of the decisive power and they had no any right to share their opinions in the familial and social arena.

## II. CONCLUSION

The African Igbo society is reflected by relations with the Missionaries and the presence of the imperial power of colonization. The issues of their individual and social identity subsist in various dimensions of conflict: religious, patriarchal and cultural, as well as traditional. In each of these dimensions revolve around issues of identity and culture. The Igbo people express themselves in spiritual communal ethos by which the individual and social identity are found deeply rooted in a spiritual sense of the kinship that do not keep them vibrant

with the changing pace after arrival of the missionaries. The continuation of their cultural patterns becomes the complex issues as they consider the changes are meant for to fall them apart from their values. The transmission of the cultural patterns due to imperialism is pointed out as the disruption of their identity.

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