

## **Fact-fiction correlation: The abuse of authority in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of god* and *There was a country***

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### ***Abstract***

*The engagement with literary creativity and criticism has always received impetus with the measure of relatedness to reality. In this regard, the socio-political conflicts in Africa and Nigeria in particular have been seen to take a centre stage in all the works of Chinua Achebe. From Things Fall Apart through A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah, power and the abuse of authority remain protuberant as the overriding conflict. It is intended to present the patterning of the social-political system within the Igbo state at the immediate dawn of colonialism. This work previews the posture of the court clerks who were merely stooges of the colonial government. Again, this comes with the persistent indictment of Britain in the postcolonial woes of the Nigerian ship of state. Therefore, this work considers the intensity of this posture from Achebe's fictional creations in Arrow of God to the correlating historical events which There Was A Country embodies. There is an attempt here to examine how the facts presented in Achebe's memoir may have instigated and coalesced into his creative work in spite the wide gap in publication dates of the texts under study.*

**Key words:** *Power, society, history and narrative*

## Introduction

Chinua Achebe insisted that the contemporary African artist cannot afford to avoid the pressing socio-political concerns of his time. This assertion has been justified in both his creative and critical works. While the critical works, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* presents a reflection from a literary perspective, *The Trouble with Nigeria* undertakes a projection into the politics and governance of the country. In each of these works, there are ample pointers to 'where the rain started beating us'. And, as Achebe says, until this point in history is recognized at the different levels of existence in society, it is difficult to keep track of where any such calamity will end, if indeed it will.

The projection of this standpoint is not diminished in any of Achebe's creative works. Each of the novels comes with the pulse of history and relates the immediacy of the crucial social challenges. And, the publication of *There Was A Country* comes as 'the icing on the cake' of this searchlight on the confrontations of man within his society. We find in this rare kind of memoir, the antecedents whose echoes had been crafted to reverberate in all his creative works. *Arrow of God* is adjudged to bear the most intense philosophical portrayal of power play in its setting and subject matter. There are certain sounds of ideology whose reality appear clearer in *There Was A Country*. The most prominent of these is the leadership challenge which finds elucidation in the abuse of force and authority. This cankerworm in the socio-political set up of Nigeria remains indicted as the prelude to the many crises. Often, this betrays the selfishness of the authoritarian ruler. At other times it is the precursor to the 'nepotic selvesishness' perceivable in the tribal groupings in the country.

Force, which could be viewed from both the physical sciences and the social sciences, appears to draw the polysemic signification of compelling a thing to align or follow a given order. In the physical sciences, machines are employed to execute whatever force is required while in the social sciences security operatives are equipped with arms as a fortification against any form of dissidence. It seems also that the robotic views of the machines as objects devoid of human feelings are identifiable in the application of force by the law enforcement agents. It becomes pertinent to question how the abuse of power which is viewed as inhumanity to man negates the expectation of the people who have bestowed authority on their leaders. Perhaps, there are indications that authority, in such situations, is neither given by the people nor meant for their wellbeing. In such cases, the ensuing conflict has always distorted the harmony within the society by placing humanity at the precincts of the jungle where only survival matters. This work is hinged on the sociological critical framework in examining how these experiences which had come as fictional presentations are given reality in a more or less autobiographical bearing.

Dobie (15), however, recognizes that the contemporary view of the sociological approach to literary criticism is presented by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in their *Theory of Literature*. The thrust of Wellek and Warren is that literature is basically a product of the society in which and for which it is produced. Scott observes that “Sociological criticism starts with a conviction that art’s relation to society is vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one’s aesthetic response to a work of art” (123). From a more or less literary perspective of the sociological approach, Richard

Schaefer and Robert Lamm identify that “An essential task in building a sociological theory is to examine the relationship between bits of data gathered through research that may seem completely unrelated” (12). There are indeed several relationships that may be pinpointed, each as a given perspective in the appreciation of the literary value of the work in focus. Some of these relationships might include: the one among the characters that make up a given narrative, a survey of relatedness in the attitude of characters in different narratives or the treatment of related subject matters in different works. It is to this extent that the fact-fiction correlation in these two Achebe texts, in spite of varying in their generic mode, is perceived to be germane in this study.

There are many implications in the portrayal of Ezeulu’s abuse of his position as the priest-king of the Umuaro community. One is that the ensuing conflicts annihilate the people’s confidence in both the priest and his god. The other is that Ezeulu brings about destruction for himself and his community. These consequences which trail the abuse of authority as portrayed, demonstrate how both the society and its leadership experience the gory entrails of each perversion. But most succinctly, in *There Was A Country*, is the appendage to this memoir’s title, *A Personal History of Biafra*. It culls several levels of perception of history and the many antecedent facets of political entrenchments.

### **Subverted authority in Achebe’s works**

A critical reading of Achebe’s works, gives a clue to the myriad significations of force and its abuse in society. But more succinctly, this vice is portrayed in the characters whose actions

run contrary to the preferred mores of society. In *Things Fall Apart*, such significant portrayals is found in Ogbuefi Ezeudu's counsel; "That boy calls you father, do not bear a hand in his death"(45). The boy, Ikemefuna was to die for an offence he neither committed nor knew anything about. This 'ill-fated' boy was made to live with a man he assumed to be his father and who, with the Umuofia community had to permit him to be live until a certain point in time when the gods demanded the boy's life. This man, Okonkwo considered his ego as being of greater value than the life of the harmless boy. And so, Okonkwo refused to heed Ogbuefi Ezeudu's remark, which stands as both a plea and a counsel. Like Brutus' stab on Caesar, the kind of strike with which Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna goes with unmitigated repercussions.

*In Anthills of the Savannah*, power and abuse of authority is projected in the light of the 'Tortoise and Leopard' paradigm. The ferocity of Sam, His Excellency which is placed against a harmless populace is seen in the autocratic dictates to the commissioners, as the story in the novel opens. All through the novel, Bassa citizens live in fear and torment as a result of Sam's dreadful disposition towards them. Here, there is no question of authority at all since the setting had a military dictatorship. This inordinate exhibition of force is projected by the characters whose attainments in each setting are imbued with some form of authority. It is the apparent abuse of the positions that presents the paradigm of the jungle law, 'survival of the fittest'. And, in the Nigerian setting, it appears to foreshadow the challenges of the amalgamation whose implications reflect the position of things as portrayed in *Arrow of God*.

Perhaps, it is same amalgamation, and the implicating incongruity of the three major tribes, that the friendship of Sam, Chris and Ikem highlights in *Anthills of the Savannah*. It is such relationship of strange bed-fellows which results in the struggle for survival and fear of domination. In all these turn out to be the corollary to wielding and abusing power. It may be suggested that the strange patterning of the society being portrayed, accounts for the absurdity in the various narrative patterns adopted in portraying ‘the struggle’ for survival. In this regard, we find the tortoise and leopard archetype most protuberant. The ferocity of the leopard is placed in contrast to the wittiness of the tortoise.

### **Critical focus on Achebe’s view of conflict**

It is logical to suppose that there is a larger body of critical works on *Arrow of God* than there is on *There Was A Country*. In spite of fact that one is a creative work and the other an autobiography, the gap in the years of publication gives this justification for larger body of criticisms which *Arrow of God* has. The question of power takes a prominent place in the criticism of *Arrow of God*. Virginia Ola presents an assumption that “Ezeulu is his (Achebe’s) best realized hero within the context of his early village novels where character and history are inseparable”(95). She justifies this assumption by recollecting the picture of the “precariousness of Ezeulu’s office which the title of the novel underscores”. Indeed, this relates to the very foundation of Nigeria as a nation-state. If also the abiding problem of tribalism is examined more closely, it is most likely to reveal the extent to which the different regimes have aided and abated this cankerworm in the fabrics of the nation. And, this has often come under the ruse of the much acclaimed ‘unity in diversity’.

In the face of the confrontation with the challenges of colonialism and the possibility of its transmutation into neo-colonialism, Achebe and his contemporaries took up the burden. It was such great task that received impetus with their acquaintance with the oral and written literary traditions. Both traditions (oral and written), employ conflict as the initial situation which portrays in fictional terms, the abnormalities that require to be rectified to in mitigating the threats to existence. The most vociferous of such conflicts centre on the question survival in the face of marginalization and denigration. In this regard, we see how this plays out in the portrayal in *Arrow of God*, of the early contact with colonialism. It is seen to have come with the denigration of the culture of the colonies and the imposition of alien patterns of governance. Slave trading had been reformed into colonialism. In spite of the dissimulations, its authoritarian posture was not entirely concealed. The penetrating effect of dictatorship became glaring. In the Igbo circumstance, many things had begun to ‘fall apart’, as Achebe’s title bore.

However, the Igbo narrative tradition, which re-presents the equation of power, was very much performed and served as a reminder of what status quo to maintain. There were pointers to the threat on the people’s existence and that of their cultures. There are proverbs whose import had begun to lose their significance with the colonial invasion. These include; – *onye aghala nwanne ya* (no one abandons his brother), *Egbe bere: ugo bere* (let the kite perch and let the hawk perch) *oha zere eze: eze ezere oha* (the people respect the king: and the king respects the people).

In Birago Diop’s poem, ‘Vultures’, there is a glimpse of the abuse of authority by colonial forces. The poem says: ‘when

civilization slapped our cringing brows'. The 'slap' was on the civilization of Africa. Many literary artists like Achebe have always recognized how colonialism came with the force of oppression and dehumanization. It came with the relegation of budding cultural values which needed to have been rejuvenated and repositioned. For instance, the age grade system which performed several functions, as seen in *Arrow of God* is vanquished. In flogging Obika, there was a declaration that the age grade system must have to operate by the standards and limitations of the white man rather than the natural pattern in which the society was stratified.

In 'The Novelist as Teacher', Achebe emphasizes the place of the writer in his society,

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – tot [sic] help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education in the best sense of that word.  
(105)

Achebe makes this observation in recognition of many conflicts, particularly of the inordinate application of force within the society. In another treatise, 'The Truth of Fiction', Achebe cites I.A. Richards and Coleridge in arguing that the acceptability of a work of art lies in its potency in provoking a "willing suspension of disbelief".

Given the great gulf between being and knowing, between his essence and existence, man has no choice really but to make and believe in some fiction or other. Perhaps the ultimate judgement on a man is not whether he acquiesces to a fiction but rather what kind of fiction will persuade him into the acquiescence. (108)

This is what might be considered as the force of imaginative creativity against the force of human denigration. Ngugi views Peter Abraham's title, *Tell Freedom*, as the summation of the African writers' thematic quest in challenging the variegated shades of the force of colonialism. Ngugi finds this justification in such works as; Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Laye's *The African Child* and Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*. He also draws same exemplification in David Diop's versification of 'Africa'. With some kind of allusion to Achebe's configuration of 'things falling apart', Bernth Lindfors observes that Biafran War literature has been more concerned in portraying the moral significance of the war events. Lindfors sounds quite ironical here:

In such novels things and people did not fall apart; they were pummeled into oblivion by forces too powerful for them to withstand or else they tried heroically to resist the cataclysmic dehumanization that was overtaking their world" (26).

It may be valid to say that the same frame of imagination that informed the maternity of the characters in *Arrow of God* was by no means emasculated in *There Was A Country*. Rather, a clearer picture is presented of the historical facts which inundated Achebe's imagination in crafting Umuaro, the fictional setting for this conflict. Anyanwu's discourse on the 'Language of Altercation in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*', touches also on certain instances of the abuse of power. The discourse recollects the conflict generated by Oduche's act in beating up Ojiugo and the language use that gives this indication. Anyanwu cites some of the lexical features of the language of altercation in *Arrow of God* (128-129) thus:

"I say shut your mouth! Are you mad?"

"I have shut my mouth. Why should I not shut my mouth? After all Oduche is Ugoye's son. Yes, Matefi must shut her mouth."

This discussant concludes that his view of language and altercation reveals the state of disorder and conflict within the Umuaro setting. If Ezeulu's charge on Matefi is construed as an abuse of his authority as the head of a polygamous home, perhaps Matefi's may be seen to bear the rhetorical force which Aizenberg sees as another weapon which if employed, could be adopted in confronting the dictator. For Aizenberg the myth of power, that is rhetorical power, becomes a strategy with which the intellectual confronts the brute force of the authoritarian.

Opata's view of the abuse of power is seen as a reinforcement of Achebe's penchant for poetic justice, but the

kind which appears to reveal circumstances in which the consequences of personal hubristic frailties collide with implicated metaphysical determinants. In spite of his indictment of Ulu as such a god who could lead his priest to destroy himself, Opata goes on to say that, “Ezeulu’s refusal to call the New Yam Feast is at the heart of his tragedy. There is hardly any doubt that Ezeulu had grievances against his people Umuaro...”(64). The easiest explanation for Achebe’s view of force and its abuse is that selfishness and dictatorship stands in contrast to the mores and values of his Igbo people, after all, given that power itself supposedly proceeds from the people.

### **Views on force in *Arrow of God***

In *Arrow of God*, force, the use and abuse of power is seen to be central. Achebe presents the natural patterning of checks and balances within the configuration of authority in the nativity of Umuaro. It was not entrenched in any written constitution which was to be culled and interpreted in any judicial council, yet it lay awake in the people’s consciousness. It is seen here as Achebe foreshadows the conflict,

Whenever, Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the years and the crops and, therefore over the people he wondered if it was real. It was true he named the day for the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves and for the New Yam feast; but he did not choose it. 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...But the day it was slaughtered he would know soon enough who the real owner was.(3)

The preceding narrative emphasizes this point thus; “What kind of power was it if it would never be used?” (4). We find an utter rejection of the abuse of power with such subtlety in this rhetorical question. The portrayal of power as deriving from the people’s consent is constantly re-enacted in the traditional practices. We also find this in Ezeulu’s incantation on the feast of the Pumpkin Leaves,

At that time when lizards were in ones and twos, the whole people assembled and chose me to carry their new deity. I said to them: Who am I to carry this fire on my bare head? A man who knows that his anus is small does not swallow an udala seed. (70)

There is evident somberness and layers of asceticism, the kind which sedates the zest for power. This situation is placed in sharp contrast to the British - indirect rule policy and the French – assimilation policy. In the parallel presentation of these two autocratic patterns, the irony overthrows their dissimulation. Winterbottom is used to portray the oddities in the application of indirect rule:

We British are a curious bunch doing everything half-heartedly.... What do we

British do? We flounder from one expedient to its opposite. We do not only promise to secure old savage tyrants on their thrones – or more likely filthy animal skins – we not only do that, but we now go out of our way to invent chiefs where there was none before. They make me sick (36)

More succinctly captured here is the probability that the spate of impositions against the will of the people stood as a precedent for the warrant chiefs. We find a clearer picture of abuse of authority in the flogging of Obika. It is in the face of such jungle law that Winterbottom tells Mr Clark to investigate the matter:

I've heard all kinds of ugly stories of whippings and that kind of business. Without prejudging the issue I may say that I wouldn't put anything past Wright, from sleeping with native women to birching their men ... (56)

We see another grievous case of abuse authority by the District Commissioners who eventually authenticate the warrant of the chiefs. What Winterbottom desires here is that his own investigation on the matter of sexual abuse be confirmed. This is what he says;

Within three months of this man receiving his warrant Captain Winterbottom began to hear rumours of his high-handedness. He

had set up an illegal court and a private prison. He took any woman that caught his fancy without paying the customary bride-price. Captain Winterbottom went into the whole business and uncovered (57)

And concerning this tyrant, Chief James Ikedi, who teamed up with a certain dishonorable road overseer who had earned the title of “Destroyer of Compounds”, it is revealed that:

this overseer went around intimidating the villagers and telling them that unless they gave him money the new road would pass through the middle of their compounds. When some of them reported the matter to their chief he told them there was nothing he could do; that the overseer was carrying out the orders of the white man ... (57)

It was imperative upon the people to swallow every kind of order that was said to have proceeded from the white man. There is in this, the evident posture of the threats that abode with the Umuaro people,

But when the roof and walls of a house fall in, the ceiling is not left standing. The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road – they are all part of the same thing. The white man has a gun, a matchet, a bow

and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone. (85)

Ironically, not much has been done to draw the parallel between the different pictures of the abuse of authority as the warrant chiefs received them and as initiatives from the white man. Here we find in the description of the natives who received one form of warrant or the other.

Clark opened his mouth to say that the love of title was a universal human failing but thought better of it... 'The man was a complete nonentity until we crowned him, and now he carries on as though he had been nothing all his life. It's the same with Court Clerks and even messengers. They all manage to turn themselves into little tyrants over their own people. (107)

More grievous is the fact that the transcendence of the many vices of the colonial rule in the contemporary situation has become more obvious. Facts in reports were also misrepresented or not presented at all. This is a kind of its own abuse. It is through Winterbottom again that we learn how Clark handles the matter of sexual harassment.

'One thing worries me, though,' said Winterbottom without any indication that he even heard Clark's last piece. 'You say in the report that after careful enquiry you

were satisfied that there was no truth in all the stories of Wright whipping natives.’ Clark’s heart fell. This was the one falsehood in the entire report. In fact he completely forgot to make any enquiries ... (106).

All these are seen to have informed the spate of corruption which the court clerks carried on in their roles in the Indirect Rule era.

### **Abuse of authority in *There was a country***

In *There Was A Country*, we find the presentation of the abuse of authority with the facts as they occurred. Much of these relate to the writer’s preoccupation of presenting some kind of diary which had remained personal. This much is given credence in the second component of the title: *A Personal History of Biafra*. These historical events relate to Achebe’s caricature of the amalgamation and the many oddities it provoked. Unfortunately, it has remained difficult for the leaders to find recourse to literary models in forging the way forward. At other times, it is the fact that the bloatedness in the psychosis that accompanies power, produces the kind of numbness which is presented here,

When the artist’s imagination clashes with life’s very reality it creates a heavy conundrum. The story Nigeria had of herself was that something like a military coup will never happen ... I had hoped that

the politicians would sort things out for our new nation (64-65)

However, the abuse of authority found in *Arrow of God* is seen clearly in its reality here

It was a desperate time. Soldiers were being used by elements in power to commit a number of crimes against the Igbos, Nigerian citizens. Military officers were rounding people up and summarily executing them, particularly in the north ... (67)

This culminated in a Civil war which many critics agree was very much avoidable. That is seen in the following presentation,

No small number of international political science experts found the Nigerian-Biafran War baffling, because it deviated frustratingly from their much vaunted models. But traditional Igbo philosophers' eyes ringed with white chalk and tongues dipped in the proverbial brew, lay the scale of prophecy and complexity of our situation at the feet of ethnic hatred. (123)

This touches on the matter of amalgamation which we view as an unholy matrimony with the daring consequences of the Biblical parallel of an 'unequal yoke'. In what is captioned 'The Triangle

Game: The UK, France, and the United States' we see how Achebe captures the plot of these world powers in perpetuating the exploitation of Nigeria. Harold Wilson enforced the stand of Britain; "as our former colonial master' she would not stand the break-up of her prized colonies, especially one she had worked very hard to develop"(99). When put in another way, it is 'one she had worked very hard' to amalgamate.

The insistence on uniting the northern and southern protectorates is what Achebe's presentation of Winterbottom in *Arrow of God* describes thus: "Unlike some of the more advanced tribes in Northern Nigeria, and to some extent Western Nigeria, the Ibos[sic] never developed any kind of central authority. That's what our headquarters people fail to appreciate" (37).

USSR was another world power whose interest in the Biafran War instigated the abuse of their power. As it is captured,

The Soviet Union had no significant presence in the region prior to 1966 but progressively took greater interest in Nigerian affairs after the Aguiyi-Ironsi coup d'tat and the emergence of Nigeria as an important oil exporter. (104)

Also noteworthy in this exposition, is that the known international organizations abused their responsibilities. There was apparent complicity on the part of the Organization of African Unity OAU is seen thus: "Most African countries adhered to the doctrines of the Organization of African Unity, which supported Nigeria for the same reasons espoused"(97). The objectives in the formation of the United Nations dates back to

the realization that the World Wars would be forestalled with the institution of such formidable union that could also mediate in matters involving uniting member countries. Contrarily, the situation here demonstrates the negation of those key objectives. The complicity of the Organization of African Unity is presented here:

... even the most committed anarchist would have expected greater United Nations involvement. That did not happen, and I and several others believe that had the United Nations been more involved, there wouldn't have been as many atrocities, as much starvation, as much death. (212)

There is this view of great gloom in considering how the abuse of authority trickles down from the International leadership to the national and further on to the tribes, clans and families.

### **Conclusion**

This study on *Arrow of God* and *There was a country* reveals Achebe's interest with the debasement of the political virtues which the socio-political system possessed. These are seen to touch on the inordinate employment of force and abuse of authority. The culmination of the events which justify the choice of the title of Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is the destruction of the cultural values of the people. Towards the end of this novel, we find the presentation of the zeal of the court clerks and the conflicts they provoked. It is in the light of this clash that *Arrow of God* portrays a more extensive concentration

on the early expression of indirect rule in the eastern part of Nigeria. Achebe adopts the character of Captain Winterbottom in exposing and ridiculing the British and their preference for Indirect Rule:

What do we British do? We flounder from one expedient to its opposite. We do not only promise to secure old savage tyrants on their thrones – or more likely filthy animal skins – we not only do that, but we now go out of our way to invent chiefs where there were none before. They make me sick. (36)

The traces of corruption and abuse of authority have stretched beyond the precincts of decorum over the years, indeed with great consequences in the eruption of social and political disorder. In *There Was A Country*, Achebe observes how “the World Bank recently released numbers indicating that about \$400 billion has been pilfered from Nigeria’s treasury since independence. “In 2011, Nigeria was ranked number fourteen in the Failed States Index”.(250). Achebe cites a presentation in the House of Commons by Winston Churchill. Here, the demonstration of corruption is pictured thus; “when the infrastructure of ordinary life decays, and when the greed of rulers overwhelms their responsibilities to better their people and their surroundings...” (249).

In this study, we have attempted to capture how Achebe’s portrayal of the abuse of authority in *Arrow of God* is made to echo the facts which are revealed in his memoir, how the actors

bequeathed with political power which legitimately should proceed from the people, become vectors of the abuse of such authority. While the setting of *Arrow of God* portrays the inception of this cataclysm which suggests the premeditation in Achebe's fictive design here. Several years after the Biafra War, the memoir comes with such historical pulse as reveals how experiential facts might have endowed upon the writer's passion the eloquence of narrative force. More succinctly, each recollection in *There was a country* underpins the nostalgia for ideologies, part of which the said country (Biafra) came to be proclaimed. These seem not only to have fizzled away, the selfishness and greed attendant upon abuse of authority ostensibly parallel the conflict into which Ezeulu was enmeshed. The annihilation of political and spiritual morality appears protuberantly in the pessimism which marks Achebe's message in both his fictional narrative and factual memoir. Achebe has always drawn attention to where the rain started beating his people. It is recognized in this work as the option for the much needed change.

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