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## Social Changes in Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God

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### **Abstract:**

*Chinua Achebe is one of the first writers to portray the richness and complexities of African society and its impact on the people. In Arrow of God, the fall of Ezeulu is the outcome of the clash between faith and change. It pits the chief priest of the deity Ulu, against colonial administrators, Christian missionaries and his own people. Ezeulu stands as a symbol of resistance and defeat in a crucial period of social and spiritual crisis in Nigeria. Ezeulu's impotence at restoring order to his own household suggests an inability at unifying the people. He fails at unification but refuses to admit defeat. Arrow of God is an unforgettable portrayal of the downfall of a man in a society forever altered by colonialism.*

Writing about social issues has become an extremely important strain in literature. Novelists portray emotions, actions and reactions of their characters in different human social settings. African writers like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and James Ngugi place their heroes and heroines within the changing structures of their various societies. Chinua Achebe is one of the first writers to portray the richness and complexities of African culture and its people. Achebe's first three novels deal with the impact of Western civilization on the traditional culture of Africa.

In *Arrow of God*, the fall of Ezeulu is the outcome of the clash between faith and change witnessed during the colonial administration. The friction arises due to the need to adhere to one's traditional faith and the compulsion to yield to change. It pits the chief priest of the deity, Ulu against colonial administrators, Christian missionaries and his own people. *Arrow of God* describes the efforts of Ezeulu to assert and to maintain his religious authority. The title, *Arrow of God* refers to Ezeulu's image of himself as an arrow in the bow of his god. Ezeulu stands as a symbol of resistance and defeat in a crucial period of social and spiritual crisis in Nigeria.

*Arrow of God* is set against a background when the colonial rulers have established themselves. The encounter of the white man with a society rooted in its traditions is bound to lead to some dissensions. The novel is about authority and its related problems - who holds the reins of power and whom to follow. This provides a wide range of examining ways in order to reach a conclusive end.

The novel begins with a war between two neighbouring regions of rural Igboland - Umuaro and Okperi. The people of Umuaro start a war with Okperi. This war is launched against the advice of Ulu's chief priest, Ezeulu. The colonial administration steps in to stop the war and rules in favour of Okperi. The people of Umuaro are angry with Ezeulu because he does not take their side. Five years later, life in Umuaro has returned to normal. Christian missionaries try to show that the old gods are ineffective. Ezeulu realizes that his real battle is with his own people and not with the white man. Ezeulu has become stubborn and proud and the god has not sided with his priest. The worship of the Christian god has replaced that of Ulu.

The main protagonist, the chief priest faces obstacles which are complex and diverse in his position as the religious authority. It provides an insight into the traditional forms of policy making and leadership issues concerning individual and communal authority. This novel is an exploration of the imagination that may dwell in the recesses of a powerful spiritual leader, the interaction of rational and irrational motives and desires affecting the actions of men. One of those desires being the will to power is fundamental to the novel.

As the novel opens, Ezeulu, the chief priest watching patiently for the new moon to appear, performing his religious duty, is presented. His prayer for a plentiful harvest is significant. As a priest, he commands respect as the symbol of authority. He resorts to proverbs which are the pillars of truth. The district officer is ignorant of the customs "he came from a land no one knew. He had called Ezeulu the only witness of truth." (*Arrow of God* 325) Despite the flaws of Ezeulu, it is this very integrity in standing for the truth and settling the land dispute at Okperi that has impressed Winterbottom. The fall of the chief priest, Ezeulu from his high pedestal is the outcome of the clash between faith and change. As the change begins operating, crushing the individual in the process, he does not surrender. Ezeulu maintains a strong stance and decides to send his son. He explains "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." (365) Situations of high emotional intensity and historical authenticity reflect the spirit of Africa during the transition period in the first decades of the twentieth century. He explores the relationship between the individual and society at every phase of history.

*Arrow of God* is about a society steeped in traditions. Achebe examines the limits of individual power, "If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival." (321) Ezeulu as the person who holds the holy staff is accustomed to stand alone. He is aware of his responsibility and the fact that "No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare." (321) His decision to send his son to learn the new religion bears testimony to the staunch stand he is capable of taking up. He realises that he is treading into the dangerous and the unknown path yet to be trod by his people. As a chief priest he is set apart. Mere mortals do not have any dealings in the spiritual realm in which he resides. Thus it limits his interaction with the people. "I have my own way and I shall follow it. I can see things where other men are blind. That is why I am Known and at the same time I am Unknowable." (455) He acknowledges the presence of the white man, his reason must keep abreast with the times. The resulting weakness is the desire which paves the way for the downfall. His overbearing nature is seen in his opposition to his wife. The crucial moment takes place when he is in conflict with his community. In refusing to announce the festival, he weakens his God's stand and makes it easier for the new religion to gain solid ground. Ezeulu's failure to accept the plea of his clan makes him lose the favour of the gods. "Two days later ten men of high title came to see him...One of them was too old to be present...His absence from this delegation showed how desperate they all were to appease Ezeulu." (530) His compromising attitude draws criticism from his clan. His problems are aggravated by the lack of understanding displayed by the district officer. "Confronted with the proud inattention of this fetish priest whom they were about to do a great favour by elevating him above his fellows and who, instead of gratitude returned scorn... The more he spoke the more he became angry." (498) Ezeulu's refusal to accept the opportunity as warrant chief leads to his imprisonment and in his failure to announce the appearance of the new moon. He loses the faith of the people in him as they turn to the new religion. His impertinence leads to his failure to understand the sustaining element in their life. This serves an opportunity for the missionaries to fulfil their purpose. What ended in failure for the high priest has turned beneficial for the mission's endeavour. It strengthens its hold and paves the path for the old order to give way. Thus the old tribal world is destroyed.

Though at first shocked by the power of British intervention and is desirous to learn their secret, Ezeulu is not far sighted. His determination to avenge his god, as he feels that he has been wronged finally blinds him to the practices of his society. The inherent flaw in Ezeulu rightly pointed out by his wife is his domineering spirit in expecting allegiance from his family "Ezeulu's only fault was that he expected everyone...to think and act like himself." (414) Thus in his fall he is defeated as it represents the attempt of a strong character applying his inflexible will on society. The tragic end of Ezeulu is indeed appalling for a great man with such stature. He loses the goodwill of the administrators and have to bear with the loss of his son. The reasons have been clearly summed up by Ezidemili "This should teach him how far he could dare next time." (554) Unable to come to terms with his sufferings, Ezeulu breaks down "But why, he asked himself again and again, why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him...Had he not divined the gods will and obeyed it?" (554) These futile thoughts have driven him mad and is mercifully spared. But having shown the weakness of the protagonist Achebe adds another dimension to his character. Achebe points out that Ezeulu's fate "...is perfectly consistent with his high historic destiny as victim, consecrating by his agony – thus raising to the status of a ritual passage – the defection of his people." (*South Asian Responses to Chinua Achebe* 37) In the end, "Their god had taken sides with them against his headstrong and ambitious priest...If this was so then Ulu had chosen a dangerous time to uphold that truth, for in destroying his priest he had also brought disaster on himself." (*Arrow of God* 555) There is no doubt Ezeulu is seen as an individual braving all odds against him. It also shows the weakening of a traditional society giving way to a superior force.

Ezeulu's fall along with his god represents the irreversible victory of history over the uncompromising stand of Faith, resisting change at all cost. Historical change is accelerated by two factors – the white man and the personal weakness of the protagonist. The chief priest of Ulu, half man and half spirit symbolising spiritual authority over the people is tormented by doubt, over the range and strength of his power. "It was true he named the day for the 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." (321) Here lies the tragic flaw which is instrumental in his downfall. The position he holds makes him arrogant and question whether he would dare to refuse to comply with the ritualistic demand of his god. This ultimately becomes an obsession and leads to his fall. He is kept in confinement which may be termed as a breach of trust. After the harsh treatment he has received from the British Administration, he has never failed to comply with their wish. "The white man is Ezeulu's friend and has sent for him." (467) Achebe ascribes an immensely powerful image to Ezeulu's character from the very beginning with its tragic irony. "Tell the white man that Ezeulu will not be anybody's chief, except Ulu." (498) In spite of his inflexible will, Ezeulu is realistic. He makes an attempt to adapt and send his son to the Christian Missionary realising the changing trend and the need to be watchful. "The world is changing...I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there." (365)

Achebe has created a powerful figure in this novel as Winterbottom describes "a most impressive figure of a man." (357) Ezeulu is awe inspiring and defiant in his stand. His fall is in proportion to the collapse of the traditional world. In the novel, the integrity of the society is stressed, a concept which is important in African society. "No man however great can win judgement against a clan." (454) Ezeulu has failed them when they looked to him at a time when their fate depended on his ritualistic involvement. There is enough reason for them to break away and seek inspiration elsewhere. Arthur Ravencroft thus states that the "complex misunderstanding of the relationship between his personal desire for power and his sacred priestly responsibilities brings madness to him and ultimately destroys his people's traditional faith..." (*The Literary Criterion* 47)

In depicting a society living within the limits of traditions, Achebe exhibits certain characteristics peculiar to the natives. "They all managed to turn themselves into little tyrants over their own people." (*Arrow of God* 430) The white man regards the natives as backward. But when they are given titles they carry it with ease and pride. The people have to face problems as the British administration was enacting new laws and the introduction of rulers among the Igbos who had never experienced kingship. The intention of some of the British is towards betterment of the community but the purpose is marred by the natives themselves who have

inflicted cruelty upon their own fellowmen “It was this elemental cruelty in the psychological make-up of the native that the starry-eyed European found so difficult to understand.” (377)

*Arrow of God* is an unforgettable portrayal of the loss of faith and the downfall of a man in a society forever altered by colonialism. The cultural clash, the domestic contention and other forces serve to accelerate the conflict which is gnawing at the chief priest's innermost being. Ezeulu's impotence at restoring order to his own household suggests an inability at unifying the people. He fails at unification but refuses to admit defeat. Achebe chooses a chief priest as the central figure and has shown the profound effect that is inevitable. By the depiction of the Igbo society in decline, Achebe has created the image of Africa being politically transformed.

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