

**Complexities and Contradictions in Human Nature and Societal Norms: A Study of
Emeka Nwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds***

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Abstract

The imaginative arts, which include the verbal and forging forms, collectively constitute man's veritable tools for self-exploration and self-consolidation. Of course, culture is a part of man's life. Some of these, together with the school subjects of religion, history, language, and a few others, constitute the humanities in academic parlance. Literature enjoys a pre-eminent status among them. The more a man indulges in culture, the higher he grows on the ladder of distinguishing himself from other animals with whom he shares the same biological origin. Fully consolidated, 'culture' man would have few fears that he cannot master and accommodate. In the play, *When the Arrow Rebounds*, the contradictions were identified: Ezeulu and his deity - Ulu contradiction, traditional belief system and Christian belief contradiction. This human nature led to the mass defection of Umuaro to Christianity, solved the problem between Ezeulu and his people, and the trouble between traditional religion and Christianity was also solved through Ezeulu's stubbornness and the mass defection of the Umuaro people to the western religion, as seen in this study. Existential theory was used as a tool for the analysis of this paper. At the end, the complexities and contradictions in human nature and societal norms were exposed, depicting reactionary tendencies in man.

Keywords: Culture, Human Mind, Religion, Contradictions, Beliefs

Introduction

The history of man rests on the consistent search for real cultural identity and roots as well as the projection of individual aspirations. Oftentimes, man is saddled with the need to interpret his environment and his relationship with others from a different background. This primordial goal results in major conflicts for individuals or communities. The reason is that man, by inclination or intuition, is compelled to assert himself and define his place among other elements of society - ever ready to defend his cultural identity as human. From the time of the Scriptural Tower when man sought to collectively build a castle that would extend to heaven, but was summarily dispersed by God through the multiplication of languages, which marooned and destroyed their efforts, mankind or humans have ever had cause to defend his identity whenever he feels threatened.

African Literature is generally anti-establishment and reactive to the unfavourable circumstances of the African as a result of his experiences in the hands of the colonial masters during the colonial period. Even though colonialism ended in the wake of the Neo-colonial struggles in Africa, his condition generally has not improved. Most of the predictable gains expected from the struggle for independence from foreign rule have been stifled by the ruling Black neo-colonialists who took over power from the whites. The expectation of the social, political, and economic empowerment by the African people in post-independence Africa has largely remained unfulfilled as poor living conditions and all other social problems have become the prevailing ethos of reality in present-day Africa. In most African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, South Africa, Kenya, Libya, etc, these are the basic realities that some of the known writers across the continent have been and are still writing about in their works of

literature. Average African struggles amidst conflicts and tension largely expressed through despair, frustration, revolts and the unrelenting crusade for liberation. Liberation has been deployed by African writers as a means of portraying the struggles and systematizing the solutions to the identified problems, helping to foster blueprints that will set the continent on the path of progressive development. For the critical realist writer, he may be content with merely identifying the problems without hazarding a solution, but for the truly revolutionary and committed writer, a complete overhaul of society, bringing about a reorientation, is canvassed. This is the dimension of change and transformation seen in socialist realist writings, and the prescription of a revolution is generally acceptable as a way of managing conflicts.

In the wake of the colonial era in Africa, the youths have had to face a new challenge after the rescue provided by Western education from cultural marginalization. It is a threat of life. This development has caused a return to the status quo of youth and the poor being explored by the older generation and those in authority. This is because in the pre-colonial era, the social system accorded the former very little responsibility. The young and weak perceived the old generation as the cog in its wheel of progress for not providing the right leadership to expand the economic domain to accommodate the youth and the poor. On the other hand, and for sitting tight, the older ones refuse to give way to the vibrancy of the youth (Martin 1981).

Certainly, where there is marginalization and exploitation, there is always defiance, challenge, struggle, and confrontations of all kinds. This makes a call for change of the social order utterly inevitable. The stance is arguably more influenced by the concept of tradition as a system of government that thoroughly denied equality in opportunity,

care, love, and rights. Apter (1973) states that the body polity should not be static. The idea that there should be political opportunity and right to office, with the idea that there should be equitable sharing of power and responsibility among the generations, undoubtedly becomes a pressing urge. It is more likely that this perspective is also influenced by Nwabueze's position.

From antiquity and through human history, Literature has made and will continue to make an indispensable impact on society. Its role ranges from reflecting and projecting the people's aspirations for the future. This keeps the collective imagination of the society alive for communal social construction. Ezeigbo (1996) asserts it to be the greatest tool in representing reality. This serves as an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspects of society such as politics, religion, social conflicts, class struggle and human condition. Literature is a great discipline. It makes one understand the world in a holistic sense, perhaps as no other subject does. Sometimes, Literature can comfort you; it can calm you. It can open up the world, even its numinous essence to you, just as the way religion does. So, in moments of anarchy, there are things that come to your mind, especially culture. A creative artist combines reality and imagination to address certain social issues in his work. Literature as a discipline, therefore, reflects society by giving an insight into the world at large and by so doing, appreciates good traditional values.

Review of Related Scholarship

Manasseh and John (2016) maintained that Nigeria is where she is today as a result of her political leaders who are full of mischief,

betrayal, corruption, and deceit. "Most of the leaders entrusted with the affairs of this nation are those who were found wanting or indicted at one point in time or the other in the history of this nation." (314). The youths must be up to aspire for unity and rise against the shackles of imperialism. Progress is only sustained when human security is guaranteed.

African culture is aware of these issues and has taken care of all in the past. This proves that literature is a rich treasure house of healthy, cultural, and moral values. All citizens must respect this view to understand one another and fight against corruption, hunger, oppression, humiliation for Western values and create a moral and just society. A society where personalities will be recognized, not because of their ability to wield oppressive powers, but for what achievement one has reached, reflects directly on humanity. This is a true reflection of Mba's (2016), where he stated that political crisis has eaten roughly into the fabric of Africa as a nation. It is like a norm. Power tussle creates much havoc in society. Politically, Africa is far from the culture of democracy, "The military has no political culture and must not give a chance for evolution as theirs is a dictatorial style." (303). She suggested selfless leadership as a solution to leadership problems in Africa. Also, Agbo (2020) declared that the expectations of political freedom and economic empowerment by the Africans after independence have remained unattained due to poor living standards, joblessness, poor health facilities, high cost of survival, shoddy social infrastructure, and the concomitant accentuation of crime, corruption, poverty, and all other reprehensible social problems have become the prevailing ethos in Africa;

The fight for decolonization in Africa was arduous and fraught with violence as earlier identified, but regrettably, the gains of the struggle have

been largely appropriated by the political class in many nation states of Africa, leaving the common people to their fate (212).

Furthermore, Omo (2015) stated that the political injustices and economic exploitations meted out on the people over time by hegemonic forces in the Nigerian state reflect the social, economic, and political temper of the time and place. This is what Arohefeada's music avers. "The song-poems, which are often multi-layered, rely on historical analogies in evaluating the political verities that conditioned the people's place in the Nigerian project." (130). Literature is indeed a veritable tool for conflict management and resolution, as Onwumere and Ugorji depicted. They maintained that the dramatists not only set standards for conflict management and resolution, but their works constitute a clarion call for opinion molders and custodians of African culture and tradition to revisit some of the African values that pose challenges to the people's well-being and come up with standards that would give both male and female folks their real place.

Historical antecedent and cultural environment are fundamental to the assessment of the interplay between the dominant and the marginalized. Abubakar and Ajao state that monarchical institutions are marks of surviving traditional authority in contemporary Nigeria. They maintained that this is against the past when the kings and the chiefs had moral and social obligations to their communities. "The trust and respect vested in these potentates are now so abused that the powers that be connive with them to exploit and oppress the less-privileged" (217). The connivance that the traditional rulers easily succumb to and partake in thwarting efforts and struggles against generational exploitation. They believe that since the politicians having suppressed the traditional rulers by seizing power from them now and extending the domination and oppression to

the entire citizen as seen in the activities of Ezeulu who extends hands of fellowship to the whites, but as this fellowship turns sour, he decides to punish his people and allow their farm products rotten by refusing to eat the remaining three yams as traditions demands to enable those who planted yam to harvest. Despite his knowledge of the plight and suffering of his people due to his acts, he remained adamant. This his attitude swayed his people towards the Whiteman's God. The people quickly adopted the foreign God and abandoned their known god. At this point, there was a heave of relief. This is the crux of the paper.

Theoretical Framework

Existential theory was adopted as the tool for the analysis of this work. The word existentialism is a noun derived from the verb root word 'exist'. It is one of the most popular literary critical 'isms' formulated by a group of scholars to aid in the critical reading, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of literature as a mirror of man's life in society through the existential philosophy. This theory is promoted by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The central focus of existentialism is on man and the universe. It dwells more on man's lonely nature and isolation. This further discussed the world in which a man finds himself as conceived to possess no real human truth, value or meaning. To this extent, if a man finds himself in a world that possesses no inherent human value, everything would naturally end in meaninglessness.

Existentialists look at the futility and absurdity of what man calls life (Ifejirika, 2014). He examines and illuminates a work of art with reference to the futility of man's ambitions, expectations, and hopes and the absurdity of his life, "existence and

achievements in the areas of politics, wealth acquisition, fame,, life and family are valueless."(171). One may wonder if man really finds authentic existence as his life is compounded by anxiety, dread, guilt, choice, and the confrontation with the possibility of man's life being snuffed out like a candle any moment of the day. This is the central dilemma of human beings as portrayed in *When the Arrow Rebounds*. After the entire struggle by Ezeulu to remain the most superior among others in the society, he still lost all. Not even his own son, Oduche could trust his values and words. He destroyed himself in his bid to oppress or manipulate his entire people.

Cultural Views in *When the Arrow Rebounds*

Inasmuch as there is no single accurate history or a sole world view, it automatically follows that the culture of a particular people in a certain community is made up of conflicting sub-sets. To make this viewable, the popular or known and so-called standard culture is spurious for it is an undertone of the powerful institutions and the leading classes' choice, just like a bid to perpetuate it. The interest is now mostly on cultural context like struggle, anxieties, and politics of a particular period. One of the major hindrances to nationhood in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular today is insecurity occasioned by lack of unity, corruption, greed, ethnicity, and others alike. For any nation or country to achieve sustainable development, there must be mutual understanding and unity. Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu, knows and understands his people very well. He lives in their midst. He stands between his people and their spiritual existence culturally.

There are several functions that no other person performs except him. He pronounces punishment on anyone who goes contrary to the standing laws of the land. There are things

forbidden by the people, and anyone who goes contrary to it gets punished as the law claims, "Great Ulu who kills and saves, we implore you to cleanse our household of all defilement. Whether we have spoken it with our mouth or seen it with our eyes."(10). These are the words used to appeal and ask for forgiveness from the gods anytime anyone errs. It could be a collective offense or an individual one. Umuaro has a standing order. They respect and revere Python as god. Nobody should kill or hurt it. If anyone kills it, the person would carry out a burial rite on its behalf to appease the gods. This is one of the main points the whites stuck to in their stand against Umuaro: "We should destroy everything our Lord hates. Our example should start with the python. You address the sluggish python as your father. It's nothing but a snake that deceived our first mother Eve."(18). This was the main conflict in Umuaro between the natives and the whites. It is seen in the subversion of traditional religious systems and beliefs by the early Christian missionaries, with the assistance of the colonial military forces. In this regard, the Christian preachers encouraged their village converts to accept their own religious practices. Colonization brought with it discriminatory and oppressive policies aimed at checking and confining the blacks to perpetual servitude. One would realize that there was an existing culture among the people of Africa before the emergence of the whites, as argued by some Western writers. It is good to note that in Nigerian societies, there existed, and truly too, people who had a culture before the coming of the white man. In *When the Arrow Rebounds*, the case in realistic drama with arguably conservative tendencies to depict or represent life and life-situations as in a real-life situation, a sort of mirror held up to reality is proven. The whites delve into Africa, put a knife in what holds the people together, hence the confusion of who does what as one of them assert, "Go and

kill the python. Pinion the python. It's our enemy. Destroy the python as Adam did to the first paramour of Eve."(22). From the very beginning, man strives towards survival from numerous challenges, especially the ones posed by his immediate environment. Oduche, the son of Ezeulu embrace the white man's way of life as a result of conflict between himself and his father. He is the opposite of his father and opposes everything

that his father repeats as he says, "It is wrong to say that neither the Bible nor the Catechism asked us to kill the serpent."(20). Not only did Oduche join this new religious group, but he also carried out acts that undermined his father's position as Ezeulu. He imprisoned the sacred python. This is an abomination. Ezeulu is supposed to purify his house against this. Rather than this, he swiftly moved to self-defence;

I know the religious implications of Oduche's act. Every Umuaro child knows that if a man kills the python inadvertently, he must placate Idemili by arranging a funeral for the snake almost as elaborate as a man's funeral. But there is nothing in the custom of Umuaro for the man who puts the python into a box (29).

Ezeulu suddenly contradicts the tradition that he upholds. He refers to the Eze idemmili as a lunatic for sending a messenger to him to announce the abomination committed by his son, Oduche. This sends a strong signal to the people of Umuaro. Ezeulu defies the customs of the land and extends a hand of fellowship to the whites, thereby undermining the plight of his people. Not only did he send or allow the son to join the whites, but he also associates with the whites as he refers to Wintabota as his good friend, "So he is the messenger of my good friend, Wintabota" (30). This relationship is a betrayal. Umuaro men closer to Ezeulu warned him of the consequences of his double-edged game. In another development, Ezeulu travels to Okperi on a courtesy visit to his white man's friend and abandons the Ulu. This is against the tradition of the land. Ezeulu is aware that he is not supposed to leave his shrine to any other place, no matter the condition. With this his act, he decided to change the tradition of the land to suit his whims. Ironically, he maintains the position of Ulu's chief priest but goes against all that Ulu stands for. One of his kinsmen advised him to announce his withdrawal of friendship with the whites and strongly warned, "A man who brings ant-ridden firewood into his hut should expect lizards to pay him a visit. If Ezeulu is now

telling us that he is tired of his friendship with the whiteman, our advice to him should be: you tied the knot, you should know how to untie it."(40). It takes nothing to destroy society and rid it of peaceful coexistence.

The drum of carelessness beaten at this point sounded so loud that even the deaf could hear. To make the situation worst, Ezeulu's refusal to eat the remaining three seed yams in his barn called for cocerns. In line with the tradition of Umuaro, there should be no old yam left in Ezeulu's custody before anyone harvests new yam. Ezeulu decided to delay and halt the activities that should usher in the festival of new yam. He was abandoned at Ukperi, where the white man imprisoned him. In retaliation, he decided to allow their farm products to rot away as a form of punishment. This oppression paved the way for the whites in Umuaro who utilized the opportunity to delve and destroy the long tradition in Umuaro; "It is now 4 days since the new moon appeared in the sky. It's already grown big. And yet you've not called us together to tell us the day of the New Yam Feast."(54). His response caused massive disillusionment; "Are you out of yo,ur mind, young man? Go back to your villages now and wait for my message. I have never needed to be told the duties of the Priesthood."(55). At this

juncture, Ezeulu totally failed in his social responsibility, and anarchy became the order of the day. Those in the whiteman's religion with Oduche quickly informed their leader who ordered each of them to harvest their new yams and bring to church for prayer and sprinkling of holy water, after which they should go on, harvest, eat or sell their yams without fear; "The Christians are telling people to bring their yams to their own god so they would have the immunity to harvest them without any harm." (68). People of Umuaro lost confidence in Ulu and Ezeulu; they abandoned their tradition and switched over to a new culture.

Social Disillusionment in *When the Arrow Rebounds*

In chronicling contemporary African experiences, most African playwrights have shown a keen interest in the effect these experiences have had on people as a group, and on individual members of these communities. One theme that has engaged their attention and which has featured in many writers works is the issue of alienation. The word alienation has a legal application meaning the action of transferring the ownership of anything to another person or a state of being disliked. Ordinarily, there was a conscious attempt on the part of the playwright to turn down the Christian teachings. This they viewed as another arm of colonialism intent on negating the cultural values of the black man. There was also a move in this manner to refute the idea that the black culture was evil and barbaric. The idea was being spread by the white man and inculcated into the early converts for a firmer grip on their consciousness.

The playwright at that time succeeded greatly in asserting the viability and usability of the Nigerian cultural values, which was gradually being eroded by the colonial master's doctrine. The most prominent is

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, which Emeka Nwabueze adapted in *When the Arrow Rebounds*. Nwabueze sought to achieve this herculean task by representing in his play characters that have a warm association with their societies. He created prototypes that were attuned to their environments, to their culture, and to their contemporary society. His characters lived out their full aspirations and participated effectively and efficiently in the dilemmas of the environment of their particular historical stage. Ulu's chief priest, Ezeulu, planting his son amidst the whites reflects this. He reaffirms, "I want one of my sons to be with these people. If there's nothing in it, he will come back. But if there's something, he will bring home my share. The world is like a masquerade dancing. If you want to see it well, you don't stand in one place" (25). From the above classification, Ezeulu's statement falls within the present study. This is an alienated voice from an individual who has a problem with his society because it failed to conform. He is spreading his goodwill and expanding his tentacles in case of anything. This is rather too patronizing, highly chauvinistic, and over-skewed in his favour. He never thought of counter-balancing responsibilities or attitudinal behaviours and expectations from the community or society. Umuaro follows his steps without questioning his decision. This highlights the importance of critical thinking. The culture of the land is manipulated. Ezeulu alters the tradition's history to suit his narrative. Social life is essential. The goal of every Umuaro is to create a society where all are happy. The failure to maintain this relationship leads to their downfall. An underlying unity of structure runs through the various patterns of African traditional society. These patterns as suggested, have all been shaped by a fairly unified historical experience, shared cultural impacts from external sources and above all, by a large degree of interaction of one culture

with another. Ezeulu ought to respect Eze idemmili accordingly. Rather than sustain his position as chief priest, he stands tall, insults and sends ill words to Eze idemmili for questioning him; "Go back and tell Eze idemmili to eat shit. Tell Eze idemmili that Ezeulu says he should go and fill his mouth with shit"(27).

Against this background of narrative radicalism, Nwabueze has evolved a narrative style in which nature is viewed, things, actions and situations are emptied of all fringes of cultural realism. The

characteristic nature of these events is their commonality rather than purely individualistic character. This play is vitally engaged in the creation of a new social order in the search for social values, stability, good governance, social liberation and the spiritualization of man. The spirituality of man is the primary reason for the totality of religion in man's life. The ancestors are respected because they are our predecessors, our elders, and above all, they exist in the spiritual state in which they know more than we do since they can see in the dark. Ezeulu twists the narrative of his people;

Oduche imprisoned the python in his box. Perhaps that's what the white man taught them to do. Do I care? Even that lunatic who calls himself Eze idemmili sent a stupid messenger to deliver an insulting message to me. I know the religious implications of Oduche's act. The custom of Umuaro is well known and does not require the priest of Idemili to instruct me (29).

Man's essentialist view of himself and his society is the primary reason for the pervasive nature of religion. This essentialism extends to culture and finds expression in the art, the ethics and morality, the literary and religious traditions and also the social traditions of the people. In *When the Arrow Rebounds*, the traditional intellectual playwright assumes his proper place in the tempo of events. Nwabueze felt that he must dramatize the inner conflict that

tears at the very heart of traditional Africa itself; the rivalries between men, clans, villages and even gods provide another point of conflict that was by itself independent of and yet affected by the external factor. At a more sophisticated level, *When the Arrow Rebounds* is the story of man's relationship with his god, and the agony of a priest who interprets his own vengeful will as that of his deity and is destroyed in the process;

There's little matter which we've decided to bring to you. It's now four days since the new moon appeared in the sky, it's already grown big. And yet you've not called us together to tell us the day of the New Yam Feast. By our reckoning, the present moon is the twelfth since the last feast. Our intention is to find out (55).

All studies of the priest and his function in African societies reveal his role as spiritual leader, intermediary between men and the deity, and above all, divine spokesman and bearer of all the people's spiritual burdens. He is in close contact with the deity and maintains a rigid regimen of spiritual preparedness that enables him to transmit the deity's will to his people. His ministration is required at all stages of man's rites of passage.

Ezeulu's role as Ulu's chief priest or "arrow of God" imposes upon him the heavy burden of the decision to eat or not to eat the sacred yams. At no time does he see himself as separate from his god. He is the arrow in the bow of his god, half man, half spirit. This theme, as indicated, is borrowed entirely from African theological thinking. The whiteman is also an instrument in the hands of the gods, each moment of Ezeulu's

confrontation with his enemies, his friends and his god breaths the authenticity of that history and that past whose dignity Nwabueze has promised to restore. The

Christians exploit a crisis between the chief priest of Ulu, Ezeulu and the Umuaro people to precipitate a massive deflection of the citizens to the new religion;

When you spoke against the war with Okperi you were not alone. I too was against it and so were many others. But if you continue to refuse to call the feast of the New Yam, it would sound as if you are trying to desecrate the land. You may go and mark it on that wall to remind you that I said so (58).

Umuaro people are aware of the reason behind the three leftover yams. They believed it is the handiwork of the white man. All their plea to Ezeulu to save their harvest fell on deaf ears. This act not only counters the damaging distortions of colonialism but also gives vent to the despoliation of African cultures and religions by colonialism. This play is a social work. A deeply human

exploration of the forces that shape our choices and destinies. Umuaro people faced immense pressure to make decisions based on external expectations. It is crucial to hold onto one's ability to choose. It is through choice that one asserts one's true self. Ezeulu's refusal to perform his duties to avert hunger and famine in the land spurred the people towards a new wave;

Ezeulu, there's another important information I want to share with you. The thing is eating food in my belly and that is why I've decided to come to see you however late so you can do something about it. There's a new campaign among the Christians against Ulu. The Christians are telling people to bring their land to their own god so they would have the immunity to harvest them without any harm (68).

To the greatest surprise of Ezeulu, his son Oduche confirmed this. His reason for sending his son Oduche was defeated. He could not believe such. Many Umuaro moved towards the direction of the new religion, harvested their yams, presented them in the church, and ate the new yams without harm. This marked the new wave of choice in Umuaro. His people abandoned him and his god. They heaved a sigh of relief as a wave of social change overtook their land.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the death of Obika, when most Umuaro indigenes have economically or socially moved on with the new religion in the society, goes further to lend credence to the futility and absurdity of what men call life. So, an existential critic or analyst would examine and illuminate a work of art in prose, drama or poetry, dreams, with reference to

the futility of man's ambitions, expectations, and hopes, and the absurdity of his life, existence, and achievements in the areas of politics, family, life, wealth acquisition, fame, and educational achievements.

The question is, can man really find authentic existence when his life is compounded by anxiety, dread, guilt, loneliness, choice, and the confrontation with the possibility of man's life being snuffed out like a candle any minute of the day? In this view, around the world without sense, all choices are possible. By choice, Ezeulu sent his son Oduche to be his eye in the new religion; in return, by choice, Oduche decided to keep all he heard from the new religion away from his father, Ezeulu. This mars the entire situation and leaves Ezeulu in shambles. All his plans failed. Umuaro abandoned Ezeulu and moved on with the new religion as their choice.

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