Review

Christianity as an Ideological Instrument: A postcolonial reading of Chinua Achebe’s Arrow of God

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This paper attempts to reveal how the Christian religion was used in colonizing African peoples according to Chinua Achebe’s Arrow of God. Colonists regularly use subtle and indirect ways to colonize people before and after independence; one of these methods was through ideology. The paper depicts the ways in which Christianity as an ideological instrument was used as a tool for colonization. Chinua Achebe, a major African postcolonial writer, has played a significant, though controversial, role in the fight against colonization and helping his country to regain its African identity. In this novel, Achebe has tried to create a new picture of African religion and has also described the process through which the white missionaries entered Africa and wiped out African religions.

Key words: Christianity, ideology, postcolonialism, arrow of god.

INTRODUCTION

The story of colonization has regularly been narrated in literary works. That is one reason why literature has a central place in postcolonial studies. However, due to the broad scope of meaning of the word ‘Postcolonialism’, postcolonial literature contains a body of works with diverse subjects. Based on Childs and Williams’ definition in ‘An Introduction to Postcolonial Works’, in this study the word ‘postcolonialism’ refers to the effects of the imperial power from the moment of colonization (Childs and Williams 1997).

The imperial power uses different ideological instruments to control the colonized peoples indirectly. Based on Althusser’s theory, ideological instruments make people accept the power of the ruling class and create people who are willing to be dominated. Education, religion, media are some of these ideological instruments which have a great influence on the lives of people (Loomba, 2001-2000).

One postcolonial writer who has struggled to depict the negative influences of such ideological instruments is Chinua Achebe. Chinua was born in Nigeria. His parents were devout Christians. His father was an instructor in Christian catechism in a church missionary society. Chinua had a strict Christian upbringing, but most of the people around him lived a traditional life. They performed all of their traditional and ethnic rituals such as offering food to their gods. They spoke the Igbo language and sang hymn in their prayer. Although they lived, according to Achebe, in the “crossroads of cultures”, where the majority of people had different styles of life, they could get along with each other and live in peace. Chinua started to learn English when he was eight. Until then, he learned his Igbo language and was proud of his culture and his native language (Chua, 1996).

The colonial situation of Africa had a great influence upon the life and education of most of the African writers such as Chinua Achebe and it became the subject of their novels too (Carroll, 1980). Achebe won a scholarship to study medicine, but after a while he gave it up and decided to study English literature, Religious studies and History. Among the courses of African literature for Nigerian students, he studied the works of Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene among others. The reaction of Achebe to the representation of African people and Africa in these novels has had a great influence on his novels. Achebe, of course, did not believe in the stereotypes that European writers have created about Africa in their works.

Hence, he has always been trying to create a new Africa, one which is closer to reality. As a writer he believes in certain rules and obligations. He believes that
in societies in which solidarity and community is more important than individuality, the didactic potential of novels is very important. Chinua Achebe in his essay “The Novelist as Teacher” highlights educating as one of the important duties of the novelist. The writer must teach his reader about his country and what he needs to know in order to avoid or resist the colonial power. There are two explanations about why the function of literature in Africa is to serve society. The first is that literature in Africa was largely produced as a counter-discourse to the presentation of colonial literature; hence, its sensitivity. The second is the understanding that it is the role of the writers and critics to be guides for their societies (Achebe 2007).

Achebe’ works cover a variety of subjects, but they express three basic themes. First, he always rejects the idea that Africa is considered as America’s foil. In his famous article “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's ‘Heart of Darkness’”, He stated that in European works like Heart of Darkness, the relationship of Africa to Europe is like the picture to Dorian Gray. Europe projects its deformities to upon Africa, so that it could always remain clean. Achebe gave a new importance to this matter in his novels. If Africa is not a foil to Europe, it must prove this matter by creating new alternatives for Europe's system of values and ideas. This stage forms the second theme. The third theme is the importance of literature in the social and political field. Achebe has always asserted that this is one of the most important roles of literature (Achebe 1988).

Being brought up in a Christian family with an instructor father, Chinua was intimately familiar with the ways which were used by the catechists to convert Africans to Christianity. In the novel under study, Arrow of God, Achebe has tried to create a new picture of African religions. He has also merged it skillfully with the entrance of Christianity and finally has depicted the crisis of African religions shattered by the white missionaries.

DISCUSSION

As Ashcroft (Ashcroft et al., 2007-2000) declared, the entry of Christianity in Africa was the cause of one of the most important cultural changes in the history of mankind. Its consequences were the spread of cultural and economic hegemony. The imperial historians tried to simplify the significant role of religion in the spread of imperialism. In the development of colonialism by means of religion, missions had a very important role. Critics of the role missions played in the process of imperialism claimed that missionaries played the role of a mediator among the indigenous people and the harsh government. Ashcroft et al. (2007: 128) said that missionaries besides spreading colonialism had an important role to play in providing education and literacy for people. But the point is that this education is an effective element in the spread of colonialism. One of the important points about postcolonial studies is its growing awareness of the role of religion in the construction and development of colonialism before and after independence. Different branches of Christianity like Catholicism or Protestantism used direct method like sending missionaries, or indirect methods like reshaping the minds of the people to maintain the practice of colonialism. It is presumed by the colonizer that all of the colonized are heathen as they do not belong to an established religion like Christianity and that their religion was mere superstition. Osterhammel, who studied various types of colonialism and the spread of European colonialism in The Bible and the Third World, says:

Ever since the Iberian and English colonial theorists of the sixteenth century, European expansion has been stylized grandiosely as the fulfillment of a universal mission; as a contribution to a divine plan for the salvation of the pagans, as a secular mandate to ‘civilize’ the ‘barbarians’ or ‘savages’ a ‘white man’s burden’ that he [sic] is privileged to carry, etc. these attitudes were always premised on a belief in European cultural superiority (Sugirtharajah, 2004: 4).

As there was no sacred text in the colonized religion the Europeans could easily reach their aims. Even when it was proven that their religious beliefs were rich and ancient, the colonizer felt the need for reformation. As Ashcroft (Ashcroft et al., 2007-2000) stated Christianity is a “religion of accretion” (188). It is always trying to absorb the cultures and practices of the colonized. For example in some African churches, the Christian and the pre-colonial religions were mixed. What is interesting is that the spread of Christianity in different parts of Africa took place much faster than its spread in Europe. One reason for this matter was the important role which the indigenous evangelists played in these lands. They converted large numbers of indigenous people to Christianity.

As the novel starts, Ezeulu is peering into the sky, looking for the moon. He is the chief priest of the African people. In the new moon, Africans have two festivals: the feast of pumpkin leaves and the new yam feast. Through these festivals, Ezeulu controlled planting, harvesting and the New Year feast. Although he was only the chief priest, he had a very important position among his people and had to make decisions for different occasions in the daily lives of the Africans. In fact the significance of religion in Africa is different from that of the colonizer. Although African religions are not a monolithic entity to deal with as they contain a vast scope of diversity, its nature in its different branches is the same. Samuel O. Imbo in his article “Okot p’Bitek’s Critique of Western Scholarship on African Religion” (O. Imbo 2004) considers the real implications of religion in Africa from Okot’s viewpoint. Okot claimed that in traditional Africa there...
was no word for religion and the reason is that religion was not separated from their lives. He said that to understand what religion in Africa is, we need only to look at common life in the continent. Their work, rituals in death and marriage, their interactions with the dead, are all considered as part of their religion. Okot believes that western scholarship is blind to this matter and presumes that Africans have no religion. This religion is like an "invisible man" in Okot's phrase. Western scholars confront it but because they choose to be blind, they cannot see it. Actually they were not interested in African religion, and their only purpose was to propagate their own religion.

At the first part of the novel, it seemed that Ezeulu had great power in his hands, but when he thought deeply about the nature of his power and the circumstances in which he could use it, he became anxious. Actually this power challenged his mind. He knew that he was the only person who could announce three important feasts without which people could not live, but at the same time he knew that he could not refrain from stating them.

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.... No! The Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival--no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare (Achebe 1964).

As Carroll stated in his book Chinua Achebe, the writer has chosen the best character to depict this dilemma. Ezeulu was a proud and obstinate man who sometimes tried to mix his own wishes with those of God and dominate over people (Carroll 1980). Ezeulu identified himself with Ulu and did not like to share his power with other great men of the village. Actually he was against the dialectic process of ruling over people and wanted to have absolute power, but it ran against the African political system. In much of Africa, decisions were made through the agreement of the chiefs of different tribes and these chiefs were effectively people's representatives.

As the story progresses, the conflicts of the story broaden. Nwaka, who was a famous man, defied Ulu and wanted to start a war. The other priests, instead of being united, were not happy with their secondary positions, so they supported Nwaka in this war. The god of python Ezidemili, who always wanted to have Ezeulu's power, incited Nwaka to start the war and promised to support him against Ezeulu. They were going to start the war over a piece of land. It was both a political and religious war which went on for five years and finally the white men put an end to it. In addition, the people of Umuaro had a grudge against Okperi, because its people readily accepted the white missionaries. Carroll believes that the author wants the reader to have sympathy with Ezeulu, so after talking about issues that challenge his mind and his clash with antagonistic priests, he depicts the start of the war (Carroll 1980).

In these conflicts, the white administrator also plays a role. When the author describes him, it seems that he is another chief in Umuaro. He is standing in front of his veranda and, through implementing a policy of indirect rule, he is controlling life in the region (and Africa at large). Here the author describes Africa from a white man's perspective and the reader is confronted with the Heart of Darkness and the stereotypes prevalent among white men.

The most exasperating was the little stream that always coursed down behind the ear like a fly, walking. There was another moment of temporary relief at sundown when a cool wind blew. But this treacherous cool wind was the great danger of Africa, beguiling the unwary European who bared himself to it and received its death-kiss.... He would wonder what unspeakable rites went on in the forests at night, or was it the heart-beat of the African darkness? (Achebe 1964).

It was interesting that when captain Winterbottom described the story regarding the start of the war, it seemed somehow to be an altogether different story, because the captain was narrating the story from his viewpoint which was totally different from that of the Africans'. After five years of war, the captain went in the village, broke the guns and turned into a legend overnight. He wanted Ezeulu to cooperate with him in his judgment on the piece of land. As the white administrators were for Okperi, when Ezeulu agreed with them about turning back the land to Okperi, they said that he was the only man to speak the truth and he subsequently became famous for "truthfulness". Consequently captain Winterbottom, built a friendly relationship with him. In reality the colonizers' strategy was to pretend that whatever is associated with them is truth and whoever is in agreement with them is truthful. Carroll believes that "telling the truth" is part of Ezeulu's plan to reestablish the greatness of Ulu. This is why when the war was about to start he said that Ulu would not support it and he therefore gained the support of the white men. Captain Winterbottom convinced Ezeulu into sending his son to the church. Actually this was a plan to expand the relationship between Ezeulu and the white missionaries. This plan had some results: first it absorbed a member of Ezeulu's family into the church; second, it weakened Ezeulu's power as the chief of an African religion.

One of the necessities of the church was studying the Bible and understanding it. The circulation of the Bible in the vernacular and encouraging common people to study it started with the Protestants. They claimed that the word of the Bible is incorruptible and inspired private reading and thought about it. Through this, the Protestant Churches started their work and founded their churches in the colonized countries. They were cooperating with the English and Foreign Bible Society. Their plan had three stages. First, they tried to eliminate the natives' "useless" and "heathen" practices, and then distributed
the Bible as the only savior from their misery and finally
they followed their program through ideologically loaded
educational and medical institutions. As Sugirtharajah
(Sugirtharajah 2004-2001) stated, “Protestants without
Bibles are soldiers without weapons, ready neither for the
conquest nor for defense”. These activists were made up of
a group of pious evangelical men and women who
believed that the spread of the Bible was a “divine
calling”. Besides they thought that reading the Bible was
the reason behind England’s power and success, so they
wanted to spread this success and distributes the values
of their beloved nation among what they believed to be
the miserable native population. The white men believed
that the colonized worshiped some of the characteristics
in the people who were ruling over them, so they tried to
use different colonial means such as the Bible to
supposedly disseminate these characteristics among the
colonized. Of course the ultimate purpose of this program
was really the transmission of Christian scripture rather
than the Christian faith. At the same time they did not like
to be seen as a biased group who merely wanted to
convert the natives into Christianity. They projected
themselves as a respectable group who were involved in
the harmless, disinterested task of distributing the Bible
(Sugirtharajah, 2004: 53, 55). The Society of the Bible
declared in its report in 1902:

May we not even say that, equally, our own revered
society stands as a monarch among the agencies to
which God has entrusted the spreading of the truth. She
is girded with His sword, and year by year as her
organization grows more perfect, she is able to wield the
weapon to better advantage. She goes forth in the
strength of the Lord… (Sugirtharajah, 2004: 57).

Finally, as Sugirtharajah points out, the colonized said “at
first we had the land and you had the Bible, Now we have
the Bible and you have the land” Sugirtharajah (2004:
106).

Besides reading the Bible, going to the church was
mandatory. Stirrat (1992) stated that the church by
claiming to be the bearer of an unchanging tradition tries
to legitimize its position and to use this tradition for
domination. The church claimed to be the only real
mediator between God and human beings and it assured
people that the only way to truth and God is through the
church (Stirrat, 1992: 10, 15).

Ezeulu’s cooperation with the white administrator along
with the sending of his son to the church, made the
people of Umuaro think Ezeulu was responsible for the
entrance and continued presence of the white men. In
fact Ezeulu sent his son to the church to secure the
position of his religion and protect it against the unknown
power and knowledge of the white people.

Okot believes that there is no relation between the
teaching of the missions and the philosophy of life in
Africa and that in reality they sound meaningless to
Africans. Okot subsequently raises the question that
since Christianity was incomprehensible for the
colonized, why did they go to the church? He responds
that the colonized did not go to church for salvation from
sin. In fact, he believes they had no option, because the
only way to wealth and power was through the church
and these are the most important attractions of church for
the African people (Stirrat, 1992: 967).

One of the duties of the missionaries was to create a
sense of guilt among the natives for their beliefs and way
of life and in this way accelerate the process of change.
They also mixed biblical stories with historical events to
generate the belief among natives that the only way to
salvation is through the Bible (Stirrat, 1992: 67). Initially,
when Ezeulu wanted Oduche to go to the church he
refused, but after awhile he became so interested that he
wanted to gain an excellent command of the English
language and culture. The Bible had shed a new light on
the lives of native converts. They could interpret every
event of their lives through the Bible. As pointed out, to
broaden the scope of the ideological influence of the
church, the missionaries portrayed the values and rituals
of the natives as degenerate and evil and tried to inject
their own values instead.

At one point a missionary said that a real Christian was
a person who would dare to kill a python. Oduche wanted
to prove himself, so he volunteered to carry out this act.
To justify his action, he even cited a story from the Bible,
"It is not true that the Bible does not ask us to kill the
serpent. Did not God tell Adam to crush the serpent
which deceived his wife?" (Achebe 1964). Many
encouraged him, while Moses, another Christian and a
man of experience, wanted to prevent another clash
between Christianity with African tradition. He spoke
against killing a python, but the missionary did not heed
his words and in order to encourage Oduche, he told him
that he would give him an honorary name, Peter after
Saint Peter. When Oduche trapped the python,
 everybody blamed Ezeulu and said that he forced his son
to go to the church. What his son committed was
considered as an insult to Ezidemili and his God, python.

Ezeulu confessed that he had wronged his son,
Oduche, by sending him to church. The white men were
becoming more powerful, so as to be ready to resist the
Europeans, the Africans had to know their ways. This is
why Ezeulu wanted his son to be his eyes and ears in the
church and learn the ways of the white men. However, he
did not think that the instructions of the church could
influence his son.

He was not sure what to make of it. At first he had
thought that since the white man had come with great
power and conquest it was necessary that some people
should learn the ways of his own deity. That was why he
had agreed to send his son, Oduche, to learn the new
ritual. He also wanted him to learn the white man’s
wisdom; for Ezeulu knew from what he saw of Wintabota
and the stories he heard about his people that the white
man was very wise. But now Ezeulu was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Ezeulu had already spoken strongly to his son who was becoming stranger every day (Achebe, 1964).

He was not worried about his son alone. What the missionaries were doing in the church was so effective and powerful that it was leading to something else. Ezeulu was afraid that the prophecy of his gods that white men would take over the land from them was being fulfilled. Hence, he thought that it would be better to keep his son in church.

What would happen if, as many oracles prophesied, the white man had come to take over the land and rule? In such a case it would be wise to have a man of your family in his band (Achebe, 1964).

As has been discussed, one of the main tasks of the missionaries was to replace traditional beliefs and values with the Christian ideology. Thus to achieve their purpose, they tried to interpret everything in a way that worked to their benefit. In the novel, Ezeulu asked about the meaning of the ringing bells in the church and it was interpreted as the call for Africans to release their own rituals and beliefs and go to church.

The bell continued ringing in its sad monotone. Nwafo came back to the _obi_ and asked his father whether he knew what the bell was saying. Ezeulu shook his head. "It is saying: _Leave your yam, leave your cocoyam and come to church._ That is what Oduche says."Yes," said Ezeulu thoughtfully. "It tells them to leave their yam and their cocoyam, does it? Then it is singing the song of extermination"(Achebe, 1964).

One day Akuebue, Ezeulu's friend, came to visit him and remind him about the limitations of his power and the fact that he was still considered responsible for his judgment over the land and for sending his son to church. Again Ezeulu's concerns about the nature of his power made him anxious. Meanwhile the direct rule of the colonist was changing into indirect rule and they were planning to choose a king for each region. It was a hard task in Igbo because there was no central authority there. Captain Winterbottom called this situation chaos, but actually many African societies had a dialectic form of life in which a central characteristic was its unitary and collective nature. Choosing a king would turn it to a dictatorship and this was the main purpose of the colonizing country. In any case, Africans felt that there was no escape. According to the novel, they were sure that with time their customs, values, rituals and identity would be wiped out by the power of white men, and they related this power to God and in this way justified whatever that was going to happen.

As daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs. I know that as I say it now it passes by your ears, but it will happen. The white man has power which comes from the true God and it burns like fire. This is the God about whom we preach every eighth day (Achebe, 1964).

When Ezeulu was in prison he thought about his position and became sure that Ulu was using him to take revenge on the people of Umuaro, because they rejected him. Ezeulu's nightmare foreshadowed this situation too; his people called him the priest of a dead god and spat in his face. He understood that to protect the African religion he had to maintain the unity of his own people and then think about the white missionaries. He was offered to be king, but he rejected the offer and was kept in prison for a longer time. The longer he was kept in prison, the more he was exonerated from guilt. Therefore, it seemed that white men were unwittingly acting as his allies and helped him to appear powerful and determined in his purpose. He wanted to prove to his men that he was not responsible for the entry of the white men. After a while his people came to visit him in prison and grew to appreciate him.

When he returned to his house the great men of Umuaro visited him and wanted him to announce the Feast of New Yam, but he did not. He said that he had three yams left and could not announce the feast before eating them. Ezeulu was aware that if he did not announce the feast, the people would lose their produce, but he was inflexible. His friends said that he was helpless, because he could not act against Ulu, but his enemies said that he wanted to take revenge from them because it was an important day for the people of Umuaro and a time of crisis for himself. After the entrance of the white missionaries and their administrative authority, relations among the African people gradually weakened. The Africans were divided into two groups (the followers of Ulu and the followers of the Christian God) and as they knew that ultimately power was in the hands of the white men they were not willing to keep their unity and were more inclined toward the Europeans. Ezeulu, as the chief priest of Igbo, thought that this situation was vital for the African religion so he decided not to accept his people's demand.

The missionaries of the church, who had been trying to create division and discord among the Africans, took advantage of the crisis and announced that Africans could offer the yams to the Christian God in order to be protected from Ulu's anger. The people of Umuaro were quite happy with the suggestion so they harvested their yams and offered their gift to the Christian God. In subsequent years they harvested in the name of the Christian God too.

From the beginning of the novel, there is a tension. On the one hand, Ezeulu was deeply concerned and thought that the entrance of the white missionaries was a sign of the destruction of African religion. On the other, people of different regions in Africa were losing their unity. The administrators treated Africans unjustly and delegated power only to specific regions and chiefs and this matter led to discord. Although Ezeulu in one way or another tried to protect the African religion and his people against these powers, he was defeated in the end. Not only was
Ezeulu’s son converted to Christianity, but also all the Africans dedicated their product to the Christian God and became Christian.

CONCLUSION

Christianity as an ideological instrument gradually changed the mind of African people and made them view their religion to be little more than superstition. Ezeulu, the chief of the African religion, lacked the ability to formulate a strategy to keep his people united. The white missionaries, who had been trying to create division among Africans and draw them towards Christianity, took advantage of the situation and finally converted most of the Africans. However this conversion was not a simple change of religion but in fact it was to increase the white man’s hegemony.

REFERENCES