

## Highlighting the Point of Substitutability of Leadership in Chinua Achebe's Igbo Novels

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The novels of Chinua Achebe appear to be commentating on various issues with reference to the whole question of leadership. One of the important points, in this regard, emerging in the Achebe's Igbo novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* is what I call *substitutability of leadership*. These novels seem to be advancing the argument that the question of leadership is largely contingent upon the situations or circumstances. In this paper, I highlight how in these two novels Achebe develops two contrasting characters who are not only foil to each other but they also represent two contrasting forms of leadership.

*Things Fall Apart* presents before us Okonkwo and Obierika as two potential leaders of the traditional community. On the one hand, Okonkwo is represented as a highly emotive leader while, on the other, Obierika emerges before us as a very rational kind of a leader. It becomes candid clear in this novel that Obierika could have grappled with the concerns of the community on some occasion in more effective manner. In this connection, one can think of the episode of the killing of Ikemefuna. It is indeed a very important episode in the novel raising various questions in our minds. Commenting on this particular episode Keith Booker has rightly observed, "The killing of Ikemefuna represents a pivotal episode in the novel" (Booker 70). Quite dramatically the people of Umuofia decide to kill Ikemefuna acting upon the oracle pronounced by the Hills and the Caves. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, one of the oldest men of the clan, informs Okonkwo all about this decision in advance. As a well-wisher, he goes on to suggest Okonkwo not to be party to the execution of any such decision, "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (40). This news, of course, pains Okonkwo a great deal, but he refuses to follow the advice of Ezeudu.

Neither he utters even a single word in protest against this divine pronouncement, nor does he stay away from the whole process of killing Ikemefuna. On the contrary he gives Ikemefuna the fatal blow without being moved by his cries for help, "...my father, they have killed me..." (43). It is this seemingly irrational act of Okonkwo, which makes John Povey critical of his character:

Okonkwo matches other tragic heroes who in their extremes are simultaneously the most heroic and also the most unreasonable of men . . . his heroism is based upon his unyielding sense of rectitude. (Povey 101)

Here it would be worth pointing out how Obierika becomes sharply critical of Okonkwo's active role in this whole episode. Justifying his act, Okonkwo tells Obierika that by killing Ikemefuna he has just obeyed the divine pronouncement while Obierika stands simply unconvinced by all such arguments of justification. Clarifying his position on this issue, Obierika quite forthrightly comments, "But if the oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (47). Obierika quite strongly feels that Okonkwo has committed a blunder and he will have to pay its price sooner or later. On the contrary, Okonkwo observes, "the Earth can not punish me for obeying her messenger" (47). As a matter of

Similarly, *Arrow of God* presents before us Ezeulu and Nwaka as two potential leaders. We observe in the novel how on many occasion Nwaka proves himself a better leader than Ezeulu. In this connection, we can first talk about Ezeulu's stand on the dispute over a piece of land between Umuaro and Okperi. Observing the convention, people of Umuaro get together to discuss the matter threadbare. Putting forward his forthright views on the matter, Ezeulu makes it clear, "If you choose to fight a man for a piece of farmland that belongs to him I shall have no hand in it" (AOG 15). On the contrary, Nwaka quite emphatically stresses the need for war with the people of Okperi if they do not withdraw their claim to the land. And for that he advances many plausible arguments and ultimately succeeds in getting most of the people in his favour. We shall return to his arguments and those of Ezeulu later while judging the oratory or the communication skills of these two rivals. However, it is clear for the time being that the people of Umuaro collectively take the decision to go for war over this matter while Ezeulu sticks to his intransigent position. And the important

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point in this whole episode is that the collective decision holds good in this case and the people of Umuaro do fight a war with Okperi going against the will of the chief priest. It must be stressed here that Ezeulu shows little respect to the collective decision and does not give a second thought to changing his position over the matter at any cost. Besides that he goes to the extent of witnessing against his own people over this matter in front of the district officer T. K. Winterbottom. Showing his amazement over this act of Ezeulu, Winterbottom observes, "Only one man - a kind of priest-king in Umuaro - witnessed against his own people. I have not found out what it was, but I think he must have had some pretty fierce taboo working on him" (37). One can hold that this act of Ezeulu goes on to reflect the stark integrity of his personality. However, in my opinion, this is simply emblematic of his highly individualist character. This only proves that, for him, nothing is more important than his pride and prominence, not even the interest of the community by any stretch of imagination.

The most controversial decision of the highly individualist chief priest of Umuaro is his postponement of the new yam feast. This unprecedented decision of the chief priest, in the history of Umuaro, takes everyone by bewilderment:

The news of Ezeulu's refusal to call the New Yam Feast spread through Umuaro as rapidly as if it had been beaten out on the *Ikolo*. At first people were completely stunned by it; they only began to grasp its full meaning slowly because its like had never happened before. (205)

The next important question is whether Ezeulu succeeds in communicating his vision to the people of his community. No, he does not succeed in doing that by any stretch of imagination. No doubt, he is a good orator capable of convincing people by his logical arguments. We can have a glimpse of this quality of Ezeulu when he quite dexterously settles the dispute over Obika's brutal treatment of Akueke's husband, "Ezeulu employed all his skill in speaking to pacify his in-laws. They went home happier than they came" (12). But if we put this particular episode aside, we do not find any instance in the novel where Ezeulu is able to successfully convince his people about his stand on all the crucial issues. Be it the issue of land dispute or his decision to send Oduche to the white man, be it the summons of Winterbottom for Ezeulu or the postponement of the New Yam Feast, on all the occasions he completely fails in satisfying his people with his arguments.

Let us first take the instance of addressing the people of Umuaro on the land dispute. We have already noted that Ezeulu is not in favour of war with Okperi whereas Nwaka is in its favour if the people of Okperi do not withdraw their claim to the land. Now we shall take a look on the arguments that both of them advance in support of their stand. To solidify his stand, Ezeulu refers to the story that he had heard from his father:

. . . my father said this to me that when our village first came here to live the land belonged to Okperi. It was Okperi who gave us a piece of their land to live in. They also gave us their deities – their Udo and their Ogwugwu. (AOG 15)

While Nwaka, on the other hand, offers a very plausible argument:

Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about the olden days. We know that a father does not speak falsely to his son. But we also know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers. If Ezeulu had spoken about the great deity of Umuaro that he carries and which his fathers carried before him I would have paid attention to his voice. But he speaks about events, which are older than Umuaro itself. I shall not be afraid to say that neither Ezeulu nor any other in this village can tell us about these events . . . My father told me a different story. He told me that Okperi people were wanderers. He told me three or four different places where they sojourned for a while and moved on again. They were driven away by Umuofia, then by Abame and Aninta. Would they go today and claim all those sites? Would they have laid claim on our farmland in the days before the white man turned us upside down? Elders and Ndichie of Umuaro, let every one return to his house if we have no heart in the fight. We shall not be the first people who abandoned their farmland or even their homestead to avoid war. But let us not tell ourselves or our children that we did it because the land belonged to other people. Let us rather tell them that their fathers did not choose to fight (AOG 16)

We can very well note here Nwaka's great logical bent of mind. First of all, he demolishes Ezeulu's arguments and then proves his point quite successfully. The effect of his speech on the people of Umuaro is simply bewitching and they show their solidarity with Nwaka on this issue. Besides, the way Nwaka quite intelligently makes Ezeulu appear

coward is also very interesting, "...we marry the daughters of Okperi and their men marry our daughters, and that where there is this mingling men often lose the heart to fight" (16). The point to note is that Ezeulu's mother was from Okperi. Thus, Nwaka proves himself better than Ezeulu in exploiting the art of rhetoric. To put it differently, Ezeulu fails in communicating his vision to his people as he lacks in power of rhetoric. Yes, this is what is more than obvious in this particular case.

However, the fact of the matter is that Ezeulu hardly bothers whether or not he is able to establish proper communication with his people. For him, communication only implies his announcement to the people of his community about his decision or his stand on any issue without explaining to them its rationale. In other words, he simply tries to impose decision on them irrespective of their acceptance of it. This is what he exactly does in the debate over the land dispute. He announces his stand on the issue and sticks to it even if the people of Umuro reject his suggestion and go with the Nwaka's argument.

Even on the question of Oduche following the new faith as well, Ezeulu does not try to explain to his people the need for such decision. We have noted how he has already made up his mind on the summons of Winterbottom for him before convening the assembly of the men of titles and the men of elders. He does never give any explanation for his friendship with the white man. On the question of the postponement of the New Yam Feast, he simply announces his decision without being able to satisfy his people with the logic behind that.

Thus, Achebe's Igbo novels appear to be making forceful suggestion about the substitutability of leadership. They seem to be pleading for different leaders for different situations.

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My discussion has also highlighted how these two novels have represented other potential leaders as completely antithetical to the protagonist leaders. In *Things Fall Apart*, Obierika emerges as a foil to

Okonkwo. Critics have not paid much attention to the outstanding potentialities of leadership in his character. We have already noted how he appears to be more rational and judicious than Okonkwo in his approach to some of the key issues of his clan and also of Okonkwo. Here one can call to mind how convincingly he disapproves of Okonkwo's role in the murder of Ikemefuna. Besides this, his reaction to the advent of the new faith and the new administration in the Igbo land is more balanced than that of Okonkwo.

Similarly, in *Arrow of God*, Nwaka emerges as a potential substitute of Ezeulu. We have already noted how, at times, he exhibits rare leadership skills. Here one can recall how his dynamism and art of rhetoric make him appear a better leader than Ezeulu on many occasions. In fact, with the portrayal of the characters of Obierika and Nwaka these two novels have fore-grounded the inadequacies of the protagonist leaders. Obierika embodies the element of reason missing in the leadership of Okonkwo, where as Nwaka embodies element of spirit and clarity missing in the leadership of Ezeulu. Thus, the presentation of Igbo leadership in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* categorically disapproves of extreme forms of leadership styles. It appears to have underlined the point that the individualistic leadership devoid of the "group power" can never accomplish its mission successfully. Similarly, the extreme form of emotive leadership devoid of the element of reason as well as the extreme form of rational leadership devoid of the element of emotion and spirit is bound to fail in dealing with the concerns of any community. Perhaps, the implicit suggestion evolving through the representation of leadership in these Igbo novels is that Okonkwo with a bit of Ezeulu in his character and Ezeulu with a bit of Okonkwo in his character could have grappled with the same set of circumstances in a very effective way.

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