
**REFERENCE AS A TECHNIQUE OF SUSPENSE IN CHINUA
ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD***

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ABSTRACT: *Chinua Achebe's literary texts have no doubt, provided interacting confluences of opinions and comments from both African and non-African critics. Not only from the tributary of literary criticism, scholars from other fields and persuasions, language, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and so on have also enjoyed the fertility of the texts of this writer who was adjudged the greatest prose writer of African extraction. Perhaps, however, no other aspect of Achebe's writing skill has received greater attention more than his narrative skill, his telling techniques, especially his masterful blend of Igbo and English rhetoric strategies. This paper further examines the language techniques of Achebe in one of his novels, Arrow of God. It examines Achebe's exploitation of reference in the creation of suspense in the novel. Suspense is a popular literary technique, usually realised as an inter-episodic linking device. But this paper examines it from a different pattern of linking strategy and in this manner uses it to characterise Achebe's literary idiolect. The theoretical framework adopted in the study is Discourse Analysis, a linguistic theory that examines how the various parts of a text are cohesively united as a whole. In applying this theory in the study, it examines how Achebe's unique reference patterns help in reading the novel as a text.*

KEYWORDS: *Reference, Technique, Suspense, Achebe, Arrow of God*

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe is one of the foremost African literary writers whose works have attracted and are still attracting extensive scholarly discussions. A novelist from the Igbo nation in Nigeria, Chinua Achebe, borrowing from Adebayo, could be described as "arguably Africa's most influential and most admired writer of post-colonial epoch" (8). Notably, not only from the ambience of literary criticism, Chinua Achebe's works have generated titles for discourses in other disciplines like sociology, anthropology, philosophy, language and so on. This is basically because from the tributaries of thematic conceptualization, sociological and anthropological definition of his people, portrayal of the philosophical views of his people as well as the skillful exhibition of the richness of the communicative features of the language

of his people Achebe's literary writings provide fertile grounds for varying kinds of discussions. As Gikandi once argued, after reading *Things Fall Apart* (Chinua Achebe's first novel), he realized that "literature was all about real and familiar worlds, of culture and human experience, of politics and economics, now re-routed through a language and structure..."(3).

From the perspective of language which forms the fulcrum of our present discourse, one may say, though not incontrovertibly, that Achebe's narrative skills, his telling techniques and masterful blend of Igbo and English linguistic strategies are the major aspects that have earned him great recognition. Achebe himself emphasizes the importance of effective use of language and skilful application of narrative skills in story telling. Borrowing from Eze's observations in his interview with Achebe, he (Achebe) revealed that "writing in general is a way of weaving what he called a second handle of reality"(26).

As a narrator himself, he really weaves with words and structures.

This paper, therefore, examines Achebe's exploitation of the technique of reference as a narrative strategy in the creation of suspense in his novel *Arrow of God*. Suspense is a recognized literary technique, usually realized through inter-episodic link. But in this paper, it is examined from a different pattern of linking strategy, with the aim of characterizing Achebe's literary idiolect. It is examined as capable of functioning sententially, both intra- and inter-sententially.

Theoretical Frame Work

The theoretical frame work adopted in this study is Discourse Analysis. Discourse Analysis is a linguistic theory that examines how the various parts of a text cohesively unite into a whole. Two basic concepts are involved in this definition, "cohesively" and "text". According to Halliday and Hasan, "the word text is used in linguistics to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole"(1). A text is larger than a sentence, or put in another form, made up of sentences. A text is larger because the parts, which the sentence is one, are unified. This unification is called cohesion. Still citing Halliday and Hasan, "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as text"(4). Thus, Benvenisten cited in Olateju states that "with the sentence we leave the domain of language as a system of signs and enter into another universe, that of language as an instrument of communication, whose expression is discourse"(8).

In this paper, *Arrow of God* is examined as a text because it contains features of cohesion which relate the parts cohesively. In applying the theory of Discourse Analysis to its study, the analyses focus on Achebe's peculiar reference pattern which helps in the reading of the novel under study.

The methodology adopted in the study is descriptive, where relevant excerpts from the novel are used to describe how reference as a linguistic strategy is used to realize suspense in the novel. Similarly, the effect(s) of such suspense in the creation of meaning in the novel is also evaluated.

Explication of Key Concepts

There are concepts that remain primary in this study; reference, technique and suspense, and it is proper to delineate their uses within the context of the study.

Reference: Reference is a relationship that exists between objects, where one exists in a manner that connects or links to the other. It is one of the techniques for cohesion in texts. According to Halliday and Hasan,

what characterizes this particular type of cohesion, that which we are calling REFERENCE, is the specific nature of the information that is signaled for retrieval. In the case of reference, the information to be retrieved is the referential meaning, the identity of the particular thing or class of things that is being referred to; and the cohesion lies in the continuity of reference, whereby the same thing enters into the discourse a second time” (31, capitalization theirs).

This explanation is germane especially for its elaborateness. Therefore, from it could be deduced that reference is both semantic and cohesive. Semantically, it reveals the identity of a thing referred to; cohesively, it ensures continuity.

Reference could be endophoric (where what is referred to, is retrievable within the text) or exophoric (where the retrieval is situational or contextual instead of textual). According to Mey, “we use language to refer to persons and things, directly or indirectly. In the case of direct reference, we have names available that will lead us to persons or things... But when reference is made indirectly... we need to have recourse to other strategies, linguistic as well as non-linguistic in order to establish the correct reference”(52). The interest of this study lies in examining the possibility of suspense through reference. It focuses on Achebe’s use of reference in creating both cohesion and the feeling of suspense in the novel *Arrow of God*.

Suspense: This is a state of the mind that is characterized by anxiety, expectation, apprehension and tension. It is the expectation that raises apprehension and anxiety. Suspense is used in various ways especially in creative writing. In drama for instance, it could be where “a chain of cause is left in doubt, with tension being a primary emotion felt as part of the situation”(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/suspense). When used as a narrative technique, it involves anticipation of an outcome, an expectation that is held back by intervening variables. While it is commonly studied as an inter-episodic phenomenon in literary analysis, this study argues that suspense could also be realized both intra-sententially and inter-sententially through reference. Just as inter-episodic suspense generates in the reader such captivating experience as drags the reader on till the climax, sentential reference can also hook a reader with anxiety and expectation to the end of a sentence or paragraph. This could be through cataphoric and anaphoric references which hold a reader in expectation until the referent is retrieved.

Technique: Though popular in English language, suspense is derived from the Greek *tekhnikos* which means “of or pertaining to art, artistic, skilful (http://dictionary.reference.com). Technique is therefore a method or application of skill, and this is dependent on the user. Narrowed to language, it refers to the application of knowledge

of linguistic skills. Language is used in communication. In the act, the skill of the user comes to bear in an attempt to make the language respond to the domain of use. Borrowing from Bakhtin cited in Okechukwu, “language is never neutral; it can always be manipulated to change the auditor’s opinion. The good rhetor must embrace the responsibilities of discerning matters in their proper relationship and of properly conveying the matters thus discerned in order to guide the audience in making rightful choices” (568).

Reference is part of the general linguistic rules. However, users of language vary in the technique of its application according to the demands of the messages being conveyed. Therefore, examining the technique of applying reference to realize suspense in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* forms the thrust of this paper.

Text Analysis

A brief synopsis of the novel reveals Ezeulu as the leader of his people Umuaro. There was a land dispute between Umuaro and another community, Okperi. As the custodian of the culture of his people, Ezeulu had advised his people to leave the land for Okperi people as the original owners. His advice was based on what his father had told him. His people would not listen hence went to war with Okperi and lost. It was about the time when Christian religion and colonial administration were making aggressive incursion into the fabric of the African society. Although the colonial Administrator, Captain Winterbottom initially saw Ezeulu as a man of truth that could be worked with, both however colluded when Ezeulu refused to surrender the sovereignty of his people to the administrator. Ezeulu was therefore jailed, and while in jail, his traditional responsibilities to his people suffered so greatly. When he was released, he found himself into further collusion with his own people whom he believed abandoned him in his tribulation. The consequences of his grievance were colossal.

Thus, major incidents in the novel revolve around the culture of the Igbo people. This bears a great effect on the linguistic techniques in the novel. Let us therefore examine some excerpts from the novel to illustrate referencing as one of the linguistic technique adopted by Achebe in this novel.

Text 1

The first paragraph of the novel opens the vista of suspense through referencing in the text as it reads thus:

This was the third nightfall since he began to look for signs of the new moon. He knew it would come today but he always began his watch three days early because he must not take a risk. In this season of the year his task was not too difficult; he did not have to peer and search the sky as he might do when the rains came. Then the new moon sometimes hid itself for days behind rain clouds so that when it finally came out it was already half grown. And while it played its game the Chief Priest sat up every evening waiting. (AOG p.1).

The deictic subject of the first sentence here, “this”, does not presuppose any referent. It suggests spatial proximity, holding a forward relationship with the nominal group “the third nightfall”. Discoursally also, its use smacks of emphasis and specificity through verbal pointing. Other story tellers could as well prefer expression like:

it was the third nightfall...

Notice that this rewritten version neither points nor specifies. It rather takes the mental sight of the reader into the void of abstraction.

Therefore, the use of “this” in the beginning of the paragraph is both grammatically and discoursally significant. Grammatically, it is a demonstrative subject. Its discourse effect initiates curiosity in the reader as well as attracting attention to what it verbally points to, which is only retrievable by reading further into the text.

Furthermore, understanding the import of the nominal group, “the third nightfall” requires an exophoric reference to the cosmic count of the story teller. As we find, that there is no textual background about it. This is more so when it is related in forward relationship with looking for “signs of the new moon”. The two are only explainable experientially within the cosmology of the story teller’s setting. Through their manners of co-existence which continually point in forward direction, the story gathers its initial momentum.

Similarly, in the expression “in this season of the year...”, the linguistic choice is discoursally significant. The mind of the reader is led to raise question about the particular season which is referred to. The answer must wait to be recovered. It lies in contrast with another expression in the paragraph “he did not have to peer and search the sky as he might do when the rains came”. Of course this requires another exophoric reference to the weather count of the story teller’s society. The European and the American for instance do not count the season of the year. The Igbo, Achebe’s society, do not count summer and winter or autumn and spring. To the Igbo, if it is not rain, it is dry or harmattan. It is therefore in this manner of peculiar contrast that the reader could interpret why “his task was not difficult.” During the rains, the weather is often cloudy, the visibility in the sky becomes blurred, making it difficult for one to be able to see the tiny moon. Therefore, since “he did not have to peer and search”, the statement affirms the opposite weather, that is dry season.

Again, the manner of using personal reference in the paragraph is noteworthy. Notice that the pronoun “he” in the paragraph does not presuppose any referent. Rather, its cataphoric use suspends the anxiety of the reader till the last sentence of the paragraph where the referent is recovered in the proper noun “Chief Priest”. Before the introduction of the proper noun referent, the personal pronoun “he” had already been used six times in the paragraph. Such technique helps in building the episodic tempo of the story.

The significant reference technique extends to the second paragraph of the novel.

Text 2

His *obi* was built differently from other men’s huts. There was the usual, long threshold in front but also a shorter one on the right as you entered. The eaves on this additional entrance were cut back so that sitting on the floor Ezeulu could watch the part of the sky where the moon had its door. It was getting darker and he constantly blinked to clear his eyes of the water that formed from gazing so intently. (AOG p.1)

Notice that in this paragraph, it is through anaphoric reference that the proper names, “Chief Priest” in paragraph one and Ezeulu in paragraph two could be read as one person. However, this reference pattern is not simple as it requires a pause for both textual and contextual references. Textually, the demonstrative adjective in the group “his obi” links the two paragraphs. It is read paradigmatically with other such groups in paragraph one: “his watch” and “his task” which preceded “Chief Priest”. The knowledge of the meaning of “obi” in the context of the narrator’s culture helps the reader to associate it with the “Chief Priest” as well as Ezeulu. Ezeulu, an Igbo name, is a compound word; eze and ulu. Eze is a word for king or

custodian. Ulu is the name of a deity, hence Ezeulu means the priest or custodian of Ulu. Likewise, obi is an Igbo word for a head of the man of the house. Thus, it is only with the textual environment created through backward and forward referencing, as well as contextual reference into the world of the author-narrator that a reader can associate the linguistic choices of the story teller.

Another instance of reference in the novel is the conversation between Ezeulu, Akuebue, Edogo and some youths regarding how and why Obika was flogged by a stranger. This case was seen as a slight on Ezeulu's authority in the community. Part of the conversation reads.

Text 3

This is what I tell my own children" said Akuebue to Edogo and the two other boys. "I tell them that a man always has more sense than his children." It was clear he said this to mollify Ezeulu; but at the same time it was clear he spoke the truth. "Those of you who think they are wiser than their father forget that it is from a man's own stock of sense that he gives out to his sons. That is why a boy who tries to wrestle with his father gets blinded by the old man's loin-cloth...(AOG p.99).

In the first instance, it must be noted that the discourse setting of the excerpt is a narrative. There is a story by a teller to listeners about what he, the teller did or does. The listeners are people who do not belong to the same social status, psychology and age. Therefore, the psychological distance is implicated in the use of reference in the story.

The story begins with "this is what I tell my own children". "This" in the expression is a nominal demonstrative that has the syntactic role of Subject and the discourse role of proximity. Thus, the story should be accessible to all the parties involved. It is meant for everyone's consumption. In the Igbo society, certain stories are regarded as the exclusive preserve of elders. Hence, part of the saying in the Igbo stock of wise saying is that "an elder does not open his mouth so wide in public". But the story in this excerpt is common place. In this regard, consider the authorial interpretation "it was clear he said this to mollify Ezeulu". It means that Ezeulu's failure to tell his own children such stories is a mistake *ab initio*, a fundamental lapse that is responsible for Obika's misfortune.

Cohesively, also, "this" in the excerpt refers cataphorically. The listeners are to wait in anxiety to discover that which Akuebue tells his children. This strategy is in line with the narrative technique expected of an elder in the Igbo society. In the Igbo society, an elder's speech is usually dressed and garnished so as to attract pulsating attention. Thus it may amount to faulty rhetoric where an elder divulges the thrust of his speech in the first sentence. He should rhetorically draw attention to himself, hence the use of cataphor as this.

Furthermore, in the story itself, there is also a unique reference pattern. Consider the expression "those of you who think they are wiser than their father...". No doubt, considering the narrative setting of this expression, there could be paralinguistic gesture that goes with the expression. "Those" is a verbal pointer suggestive of distance as opposed to "this". In the story, the referent is psychological and not physical. It refers to a group of people. It is therefore for the listeners to place themselves appropriately, either as belonging or not belonging to the group. This collocates with the use of the indefinite or general "you" in the expression. In Igbo rhetoric, the use of "you" in such context as this excerpt is non-specific. It refers to both within and outside the immediate setting. It implicates everyone involved. In the text, it refers anaphorically to "the two boys". Exophorically, it refers to others who may

not be physically present, but who also fall within the same category of knowledge. So the “you” is an institutionalized exophora predicated on the structural exigencies of the context of the speech.

In the last sentence, it is needful to consider the expression “that is why a boy who tries to wrestle with his father...”. The use of “that” in this expression is also phoric. It is not a relative as in such expression as “I tell them that a man always...”. In the expression “that is why...”, “that is a deictic implicating psychological proximity between the boys and the knowledge in the expression. Contrast the first sentence and the last:

This is what I tell my own children (1st sentence)

That is why a boy who tries to wrestle his father...(last sentence)

Note that the last sentence contains a wise saying. Wise sayings are not easily accessible to the young. So the use of “that” accounts for the psychological or knowledge gap between the boys and the content of the idiom. Thus, with such technique, the boys are suspended in thought in attempting to unravel what the wise saying refers to.

On page 3, the novel presents Ezeulu as he waits to eat one of the traditional sacred yams to mark the new moon.

Text 4

As he waited for it to roast he planned the coming event in his mind. It was Oye. Tomorrow would be Afo and the next day Nkwo, the day of the great market. The festival of the Pumpkin Leaves would fall on the third Nkwo from that day. Tomorrow he would send for his assistants and tell them to announce the day to the six villages(AOG p.3).

Notice that the pronoun “It was Oye” in this excerpt has no textual antecedent, nor a forward referent. Rather, it creates context of direct speech report. But there is no accompanying quotation marks to indicate the speech as direct. However, when it is put into consideration that the passage’s context is a report of a mind setting, then, the story teller as omniscient is seen as reporting an incident directly. The expression “he planned the coming event in his mind” overtly betrays the psychological setting of the story.

Again, in the expression “It was Oye”, “Oye” is a dialectal variety of “Orie” which is a market day, just as Afo and Nkwo. It is noteworthy that market days serve as mode of calendar count in the Igbo society. In this regard, “It was Oye” serves the same purpose as “The day was Oye”. In any case, the question remains, which day is Oye, or what is Oye? With such question, the psychology of the reader becomes alert towards unraveling this as it reads through the remaining parts of the story.

Furthermore, the use of “tomorrow” in the next sentence creates further anxiety in the reader. “Tomorrow” is usually relative in sense depending on the time proxemic distance between the day of the speech and another. For instance, a speech on Monday has Tuesday as its tomorrow and not Sunday or Wednesday. Therefore, a speech on Oye has Afo as its tomorrow according to the Igbo calendar. But where the story is reported through a third person, which is the narrative point of view of the novel, Oye should have Afo as its “next day” and not its “tomorrow”. Notice the use of the past tense in the expression “It was Oye”, suggesting that the story is being reported after the actual day that the event occurred.

Therefore, the sudden introduction of a psychological setting which resulted in the use of the direct speech pattern is capable of arousing the curiosity of the reader. .

On page 125, the novel presents the story of Akuebue's visit to Ezeulu his friend..

Text 5

Akuebue planned to visit Ezeulu soon after the morning meal, to rejoice with him for his son's new wife. But he had other important things to talk over with him and that was why he chose to go so early- before other visitors in search of palm wine filled the place. What Akuebue wanted to talk about was not new. They had talked about it many times before. But in past few days, Akuebue had begun to hear things which worried him greatly. It was all about Ezeulu's third son, Oduche, whom he had sent to learn the secrets of the white man's magic (AOG p.125)

Notice the chain of reference in this excerpt and how it ensures cohesion and at the same time raises the anxiety of the reader. Let us take the messages of the excerpt one after another..

- a) Someone (Akuebue) planned to visit another person (Ezeulu). The reason is overtly stated: for the two to rejoice over Ezeulu's third son's new wife.
- b) Sentence 2 contains backward reference to the first sentence. Akuebue had other important things to talk over with Ezeulu. Notice that the use of the third person pronoun in this sentence creates ambiguity in reference: "*he* had other important things to talk over with *him* and that was why *he* chose to go so early..." (italics for emphasis). Who is the "he", and who is the "him"? However, since the passage has Akuebue as the performer of the action, the subjective "he" therefore refers to Akuebue, and "him" refers to Ezeulu as the receiver.

However, the major notable reference in the excerpt is the use of "other" in the second sentence as a comparative reference to "rejoice" in the first sentence. It shows that what Akuebue intends to discuss with his friend does not only concern Ezeulu's son's new wife. The question becomes; what is this other thing? Unfortunately, the retrieval of the referent is not quick. It is only recovered after holding the anxiety of the reader to the last part of the sentence. Before then, there were other pulsating references:

They had talked about it many times before. (What does it refer to?)

Akuebue had begun to hear things which worried him. (What are those things?)

It was all about...(What is it?)

The last part of the last sentence saves the tension as all is found to be referring to Oduche being sent "to learn the secrets of the white man's magic".

CONCLUSION

So far, the paper has examined some excerpts from the novel in an attempt to describe how reference could be manipulated not only to ensure cohesion but also to create suspense. Suspense as a device in discourse helps in sustaining interest as well as propelling the narrative chain. However, what is significant in Achebe's use of suspense in the novel is that, functionally, most of them anchor on the Igbo rhetorical strategy, such that there is the recourse through exophoric connection to the world view of the author-narrator. A good case as identified in the study is in the use of such linguistic pattern in creating both physical and psychological proximity. Also, with such pattern, Achebe is able to gladiate back and front, textually and extratextually in his fusion of the messages of the novel.

There are several other instances of sentence and paragraph suspense created through reference in the novel. The paper has only used the extracts as data for illustration.

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