

## POST-COLONIAL GRATIFICATION AND CORRUPTION: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF ACHEBE'S 'A MAN OF THE PEOPLE'

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### ABSTRACT

Post-colonialism is borne at the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the speech of resistance which colonialism brings into being. The post-colonial literature shows the upshot of colonialism. It reveals the nostalgic self of the colonized. A colonized is bound to put up with the different disconcerting situations. He has to have high resistance and fortitude against lots of uncalled-for and inevitable conflicts. The postcolonial writers bring into light the suppression of a vast wealth of indigenous cultures beneath the weight of imperial control. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin pertinently assert, "All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved his problem". The primary concern of Chinua Achebe was his society, more precisely, the destiny of his people. Achebe, perhaps the most authentic literary voice from Africa, wrote not only to record the African, especially Nigerian, life but to analyze the reality experienced by the native people in different times and situations. In his view, the writer must be accountable to his society. To him it was absurd to think of art as a pure and autonomous entity coming into existence by itself in an aesthetic void. Accordingly, his aim was to make his fiction an instrument of awareness seeking to eliminate hydra-headed criminality and injustice. In this regard, the study is an attempt to show Achebe's endeavour to expose the rampant corruption and criminality in Nigeria to exert a decisive and positive influence on his people. For Achebe, the intrigues and contestation over power, especially within the civil service, assume a metaphoric significance in unraveling social contradictions in society. Achebe thus evaluates the various dimensions of power and how it is used to subjugate or tyrannize people. He evokes a consciousness, concerned with Manichaeism, alienation and characters that can adjust to the uncertainties of a postcolonial society with all the indices of underdevelopment, greed, corruption, bureaucratic, self-aggrandizement, tardiness, indiscipline, political instability etc. The study adopts the content assessment approach in order to unravel the constructive semantics and understanding of the post-colonial works.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-Colonial, Literature, Corruption, Nigeria, Metaphoric Significance

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## INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe has proven his worth among English-speaking African novelists by representing the African social and political environment in a thoroughly realistic way. His novels depict life within a particular historical background, and convey a sense of growing disgust and unrest within Nigerian society, a society that has started to emerge from the 'colonial complex' caused by years of denigration and self-abasement. *A Man of the People* (1967) is Achebe's fourth novel. It describes Nigeria in its post-independence phase, during which time the country became a 'cesspool of corruption and misrule' in the context of colonial-style social and economic development, a situation that resulted in conflict between the emergent elitist middle class and the general populace. Achebe's reputation as a novelist rests on his impartial understanding of, and ability to represent the Nigerian environment. His realistic characterization and diagnosis of his country's malaise has the power to inspire a revolution informed by African ideologies.

His works have primarily focused on "African politics, the depiction of Africa and Africans in the West, and the intricacies of pre-colonial African culture and civilization, as well as the effects of colonization of African societies" (Achebe, 1988b). His well-known literary critique *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"* (Achebe, 1988) is considered by many to be the most assertive, debated, and seminal treatise of its type. Achebe rejected Joseph Conrad as "a thorough going racist" who projected Africa as "a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (*Ibid*: 38). This said, the present paper investigates themes of corruption that appear in Achebe's novel *A Man of the People*, and describes various political and social corruptible acts that have taken place in Nigeria since its publication in 1967.

### The Title as a Window Into Heart of the Novel: A Man of the People

Were a book to be interpreted only by its title, one would have at first glance of *A Man of the People* have a clear understanding of what the novel is about or what Achebe set out to achieve with it. Yet, the title *A Man of the People* tells a lot about the context and content of the novel. A pure satirical work with sardonic and laconic irony, *A Man of the People* satirically presents a man of Africa (a unique and different man) and the people of Africa. In understanding the novel through its title, I will focus my analysis on the indefinite article 'a' – this word determines or qualifies Man in the title. A curious look at the word 'Man' and its usage is also important, as well as the people. In essence, one seeks to know why 'A Man' not 'The Man' of the Man of the people?

### A Man?

Who is the man in *A Man of the People*? Why 'a' not 'the' Man of the People? It is clear from the tone of the title through the novelist's use of 'a' that the author did not use 'a' in a numerical sense of singularity, but as a satirized coloration of a 'man' which, on a closer study of the novel, is representative of 'some men' or a particular group of individuals with homogeneous identity and behavioral patterns. First, it can be argued that 'a' man of the people in the novel title refers to the villain of the story and one can be at liberty to accept the sincere use of indefinite article

'a' by the author to simply mean a numerical reference to singularity of the person, i.e. one man. In this instance, the villain in the character of Chief Nanga fits the mode and description of 'a' man who is the man, but who is to be seen, known and accepted religiously as 'a' man of the people. Achebe puts the man – 'a man' in the mix, and thereby notifies his audience, from the onset, the conflict between him and the people.

From another angle, the use of 'a' represents masking of the 'man' in context of the novel and the story that plays out. In this regard, a man becomes generic of other men with similar characters in and out of the novel. Therefore, it is not just all about the villain Chief Nanga- for he is just a tool or human perspectives from which the story of 'the man figure' is told and represented. Thus, 'a man' in *A Man of the People* becomes a symbol representing many things as shall soon be discovered.

### **The People – Who are the People in a Man of the People?**

There is something unusual about the people in *A Man of the People*. It is the fact that they have been purposely linked with 'a man'. Traditionally, the concept of one man being for a people indicates the parallelism between a liberating hero and an adulating people. It is ominous therefore, that the people were linked with 'a' man. It suggests a rather unfortunate people, a people at the mercy of unknown, unfriendly, uncommon man; a man the people do not want or need. They do not have 'the' man, but 'a' man. Again, here lies the conflict and paradoxical play of irony between the people rightly and clearly identified and introduced, and 'a' man inconspicuously and incongruously identified and introduced.

However, since the novel was set in a fictional African country with closest resemblance to Nigeria, one can unmask the people in *A Man of the People* as the Nigerian people and by direct association and relation, the people of Africa. With 'a' man – unknown, unfriendly, disagreeable, of questionable characters on one hand, and unfortunate, helpless and hapless people on the other, tells the story of a nation or society at war against itself like the mother hen that drinks up its eggs and eats its chicks.

The novel provides deep insight into plights of a hapless people, who are defenseless against the onslaught of their supposed hero, leader or 'man', while at the same time analyzing and exploring the degenerative impacts of the supposed leaders of the people. *A Man of the People* is a classic case study of leadership in Africa. *A Man of the People* who is not for the People:

Once again, it is helpful to return to the novel title, like a compass, for direction to navigate the story. Since the novel has rich political elements of an independent African State struggling with its new democratic dispensation and experience, it can be argued that Achebe satirizes the democratic practices on display in Africa society.

### **Power and Related Themes**

#### A Portrait of African Leaders

Achebe's strongest subject of disillusionment in *A Man of the People* is the political class, ably symbolized by 'a man' of the people, Chief, the Honorable, M. A. Nanga, MP. In Chief Nanga, Achebe gives his audience a vivid portrait of a typical modern African leader. Again, the image of name comes to play here. *A Man of the People* is a Chief; he is the or a Honorable. Here is the confused mixture of the traditional African society with its modern incarnation. It is height of grand illusion of the African political leaders; their uncontrollable hunger of for titles, positions, power, recognition and ultimately personal aggrandizement.

The imagery of hounds, dogs, yelp, straining their leash, yapped and snarled hyenas is a strong portrait of political leaders in *A Man of the People*. Chief Nanga, the Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers were portrayed as hounds of dogs and hyenas that yelp, yap and snarl at themselves and at the people they ought to be accountable to. With this kind of leadership, the nation and its people could only be at the mercy of their leaders whose leash is straining and loosening, and the people shivered and cowered by fear into slavish submission.

Achebe exhibits the issue of administrative incompetence as a bane of development of African State. He indicts the emergent black administrative and their political class counterparts of social and technical incompetence in the art of state management because of their lack of political vision and will, their poor or inadequate socialization to have full grasp of social dialectics that are required and involved in nation-building.

Therefore, lack of competence could only lead to failure of government and governance which eventually give way to the only alternative; the institutionalization of corruption in the corridor of power. In *A Man of the People* one is confronted with the likes of Chief Nanga with half-education incompetently managing ministerial position in a most unscrupulous ways. Bribery became the order of the day with political leaders negotiating, compromising and selling off their country's resources and potentials in return for kickbacks from contracts awarded through their ministries and political favors, to foreign experts and nations.

Politics, then becomes, a shortcut to riches and personal fortune. Odili said of Chief Nanga's switch to politic from teaching profession as a move with cash price. In corruption, the people and the political class find a common ground. Urua people decided to vote Odili in place of Chief Nanga not because of any political ideology or better option, but because they believed Odili would bring them their piece of the national cake. Political power at the top, then becomes, the symbolical cake, of which everyone scramble to have a share. The national interest is lost to personal and group selfish interests. Central to these extremes of the distant and unknown man-leader and alienated and forgotten, as well as politically apathetic people is the factor of power. This power belongs to the people and ought to be held in trust for the people by the leader(s) for common good of all. Ironically, what we see in *A Man of the People* is acquisition, management and retention of power for personal political ends. A sheer abuse and misappropriation of power, not for common good of the people, not for social justice and development, but for social oppression, political suppression and patronage by political class of Chief Nanga and his ilks.

The power of the people exercised through electoral franchise is turned against them by those who they have handed it in trust. In one sentence, *A Man of the People* is an indictment of post-colonial Africa political system. Chief Nanga and his fellow ministers exemplified this in their political activities as the government of the day and also in the build-up activities to the next general elections, where the violence and ruthlessness became political order.

In *A Man of the People*, one is confronted with the unpopular political philosophy of African politics and politicians that is opposed to beneficial use of power for the good of the people, save random, selective and manipulative use of power to earn political points and patronage. It is a case of who gets what, by any and all means, a case of winner takes all, winning at all cost – a do or die affair – that has defined African political terrain in the last five decades.

At the brink of destruction, political leaders in *A Man of the People* practice politics of bitterness. The ruling party has zero tolerance for opposition. The politicians in *A Man of the People* are anti-intellectuals. They plot and scheme against the intellectuals in government. They rubbished members of the parliament who are educated, honest and upstanding.

Violence became expressed in thuggery and all sorts of intimidation to undermine opposition's efforts. Campaign grounds became battle field and polling booths became slaughter house where politicians and political thugs wielded dangerous arms. Political Apathy and Cynicism of power to fight and resist any form of oppression, having been distanced and cut off from the center of power geographically and systemically. They have become like the proverbial lamb being led into the slaughter house. The apathy of the people emboldened the politicians and fuelled the fire of corruption among the political class)

Also, evident in the political landscape is the failure of the middle class – the educated and those are not involved in politics, but have been called to duty to rescue their nation from unscrupulous leaders; to offer a viable option and alternative to politics of corruption. Achebe also points to disillusionment among this group of hopefuls, the Odilis and the Maxes of Africa who could not live up to the expectations of the people, rather they let the opportunity of redemption slip off their hands by corrupting power of material wealth and opportunity of personal fortune. Ideological positioning and their high moral ground collapsed at the contact with political corruption of Chief Nanga and its likes. CPC, the party formed by Max and Odili became stillbirth and could not live up to its billing. Not even the enlightened; the educated could be the man of the people.

Max and Odili's actions beggars the question- where is the political party that we do will of the people and be "the man of the people"? CPC lacks firm ideological base and it is founded on foundation of straw and rooted in fiscal indiscipline as typified by Odili using party funds, Max colluding with ruling party, collecting money from Cabinet Minister and compromising his ideological stance and standard, setting up double standard and himself and eventually losing his life. These political characteristics features are theorized by Achebe in *A Man of the People* a bane of African politics till date.

Eustace Palmer argues that Odili would eventually become like Chief Nanga if has same opportunity. He argues that the novel is not all about political corruption, but the corrupting power of privilege and position and money as exemplified by Max. This underscores the idealistic and grandstanding philosophy of African intellectuals whose stances no matter how strong will soon give way in the face of material temptations.

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