



POLITICS IN THE NIGERIAN NOVEL: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *A MAN OF THE PEOPLE*

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ABSTRACT: *Many African writers have been influenced very much by politics. This may be due to the fact that, the African intellectual is part and parcel of the political elites. Achebe, one of the renowned African writers maintains that, politics and social affairs cannot be kept out of literature in Africa. This is probably because, by the virtue of its socio-historical developments, the African literature is heavily predicated on problems of socio-economic nature. However, the growing trend of political violence, thuggery and rigging among other vices associated with politics in Africa by the politicians and other key players in election conduct remains a source of worry to many writers. Considering the role elections play in instituting a democratic regime, if this trend is not checked or mitigated, it would mitigate, Africa's quest for a democratic culture which is necessary for good governance. Therefore, in this paper, Achebe's AMOP (1966) is critiqued in the light of the above scenario. In particular, the paper discussed Achebe's perception on the Nigerian politics of the 1960s and the link he establishes between politics and society. Furthermore, a functional approach towards combating electoral violence, thuggery, rigging, corruption and inefficiency in Nigeria is advocated.*

KEYWORDS: Politics, Election, Corruption, Good Governance, A Man of the People

INTRODUCTION

The evolving phases in African history Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial- have greatly affected or influenced the African writers' literary outputs. For instance, during the Colonial era, the writers' concern was with reconstructing Africa's image distorted and bruised by colonial intrusion.

During independence, their concern turned to that of social criticism (that is attacking and exposing injustice). This role latter turned to "acting" rather than reacting (Revolutionary). Achebe must be singled out for his imaginative recreation of Igbo societies in which his conception of the writer's' role keeps changing. Anthony Okoko remarks that "trends in Achebe's novel have been changed constantly from colonial to independence and then to post-independence time" (8).

Achebe's *A Man of the People (AMOP)* (1966) is a vitriolic attack on corruption, violence, thuggery and misrule of power in Africa society in general and Nigeria in particular. Achebe himself admits AMOP "as a rather serious indictment of post-independence Africa" (13). Heywood describes the post-independence Nigeria as a "cesspool of corruption and misrule after independence" (82).



Many critics have hailed *AMOP* as a form of premonition since all the fictional events explored in it really happened in different African country under the rule of corrupt and unscrupulous leaders. Emmanuel Ngara confirmed that, *AMOP* was the first novel published in English speaking Africa (60).

Ngugi expresses the same opinion when he notes that “what Achebe has done in *AMOP* is to make it impossible or inexcusable for other African writers to do other than address themselves directly to contemporary social realities of their audience in Africa and to tell them that such problems are their concern” (54).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Critical Realism as its theoretical base. This is a theory that reflects the novelist’s attempt to tell a story that is convincing to the reader. In other words, realism is an accurate and detailed documentation, a deep sociological perception and observation of the material facts of life. It is a movement against romanticism which began in France in the 19th Century by Emile Zola. Romanticism presents life as we would have it be, more picturesque, adventurous and heroic than the actual. Realism has spanned close to two centuries and therefore like Marxism, it is subjected to different and various interpretations. Different shades of meaning are therefore attached to the concept. These include fictional realism, socialist realism and romantic realism among others. In this study, our concern is with the fictional realism. This is a synthesis of fantasy and realism. Here, the novelist/writer gives a comprehensive and candid portrayal in an artistic manner. That is, facts are shaped by the creative skills of the writer. Abrams notes that the term “realistic novel is usefully applied to works which are realistic both in subject and manner throughout the whole rather than in part” (141). Gray corroborates this position when he notes that realism is best used for writers who show explicit concern to convey an authentic impression of actuality, either in their narrative style or by their serious approach to their subject matter (24). In this situation, the response of the perceptive reader after reading a realistic work would be the acceptance that, life is either joyless, lovely or empty.

Realism is thus, the basis of art. Criticism of the novel therefore cannot be meaningfully accomplished without reference to realism, hence our resolve to employ it in the analysis of Achebe’s *AMOP*. It is therefore hoped that, the realistic portrayal of a material is an effective mechanism to lay bare the human personality in the text. Other African realist writers include; Armah, Soyinka, Osuamane, to mention a few.

Achebe’s Perception of African Political Leaders in *AMOP*

Achebe depicts realistically the nature of politics in Nigeria immediately after political independence in 1960 and the failed leadership by its elites at the helm of affairs. He attributes leadership failure by the emergent African elites (both the politicians and the military) in Africa to their lack of vision, uncontrollable hunger for wealth, inadequate grasp of social dialectics that are necessary for nation building. Achebe has reechoed similar view in his epistolary thoughts on Nigeria as captured in his *The trouble with Nigeria* (1983) where he asserts unequivocally that the most challenging issue in Nigeria’s quest for development is leadership failure. He said “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership to rise to the responsibility to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership” (1). In *AMOP*, we see in the likes of Nanga, a cultureless



minister of culture with half education, incompetently managing his ministerial position in a most corrupt and fraudulent manner. He and his colleagues are incapable of managing the affairs of the Country. Their inadequate education and lack of vision, it led to an outbreak of violence which results to loss of lives, army takeover of government and detention of politicians.

For Chief Nanga, and his likes, politics is not about satisfying the people's life nor provision of "good life" to the citizenry but rather an avenue to enrich themselves. For this group, the nation is thought of as a cake from which each group should try to get a share as large as possible. This same view was expressed by the Constitution Drafting Committee 1976, thus:

The Nigerian politics is primarily geared towards securing opportunity to acquire wealth and prestige, to be able to distribute benefits in the forms of jobs, contracts, scholarships and gifts of money and so on to one's relatives and political allies. Politics then becomes a shortcut to riches and personal fortunes. The nation's interest is lost to personal and group selfish interest (v).

A successful politician in a modern African state is thus regarded as an investment by his tribal group; he would be asked for jobs and scholarships or for help in local disputes. The more they spend on the people, they more they are celebrated. Stealing from the public coffers turns them into heroes deserving traditional titles and numerous awards. This situation is portrayed in the text where Chief Nanga MP an uneducated, corrupt and irresponsible leader tells us he is going to be awarded a doctorate degree. "They are going to give me a doctorate degree... doctor of Laws, LL.D so the Minister will become Chief the Honourable Doctor MA Nanga MP, LL.D... You no see say the title fit my name *pem*" (20 – 21). That is why sycophancy and the tendency towards acquisition of words has become a striking characteristic of our society. An upright man is regarded in Nigeria as a fool because he does not shine like the corrupt ones. Consequently, winning elections at all cost, as former President Obasanjo insisted and advocated for before 2007 general election becomes "a do or die affair". Nigerian politicians therefore employ all forms of fraudulent and violent means – rigging, corruption, destruction of election materials, murder among others to win election or capture state power and to retain it. This development destroys the foundational element of democracy – choice, consent, participation, accountability, rule of law and trust and the democratic culture of a nation. And as long as the contest and use of political power is characterized by greed, impatience and tolerance by the leaders, we cannot produce a credible national leadership capable of taking the nation to a greater height. It was for the scramble for power and position soon after independence that progressively degenerated into Nigeria's first coup in 1966 and Civil War in 1967. A song of celebration became a dirge, a comedy metamorphosed into tragedy, so to speak.

Achebe does not hold only the political class responsible for the social decay in post-colonial Nigeria. He holds both the leaders and the led as accomplices. He shows that, the corrupt and inept leadership exhibited by the leaders is supported and encouraged by the society as a whole "You chop, me self I chop, palava finish" (167). This follows that, when bad leaders do bad things with the willing complicity of a public, the public has lost the right to complain and that with the likes of Nanga at the helm of affairs, Nigeria in particular and Africa in general should not expect progress and development. Thus, bad followership encourages leaders to embrace all forms of crimes. Therefore, there can't be good leadership when there



is bad followership and vice versa. Other incidents involving corruption and misuse of public funds by the school-master-turned politician are many in the text. For instance, Odilli tells us that, in the ministers' residence "each minister has a residence of seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms, one for every day of the week" (41).

Odilli tells us that in Nanga's residence:

All I can say is that on that first night there was no room in my mind for criticism. I was simply hypnotized by the luxury of the great suite assigned to me. When I lay down in the double bed that seems to ride on a cushion of air, and switched on that reading lamp and saw all the beautiful furniture a new from the lying down position and looked beyond the door to the gleaming bathroom and the towels as large as a *lappa* and had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one forever" (41 – 42).

The man who lives in the luxury of these houses continues to amass even more and more property while the poor people in the village get poorer and poorer. What interest the novelists are the features of a society in which exploitation can go on for so long without any one raising a finger; in which the leader continues exploiting when they have far more than they need.

Corruption as observed in Nigeria is strongly influenced by material and other imperialistic attitudes inherited from the British colonial system of administration. With this kind of situation, Achebe maintains that the nation and its people will only be at the mercy of God. Just as Hiv/AIDS breaks down immune system making the body system to be susceptible to ills and sicknesses so corruption breaks down the structure of the economy making it easy for the nation to be infested with all forms of deficiencies and crimes. Numerous state institutions have become dysfunctional because of corruption or corrupt practices. Corruption endangers good governors and democracy.

Political Parties and Electioneering

Modern democracies are necessarily representative and election cannot function properly without a party system in normal circumstance. Political parties are therefore critical in a democratic setting as they perform several functions including provision of platform for contest, aggregation and articulation of interests and opinions of citizens with a view to translating them into public policies, education of the electorates, recruitment of politicians to public offices through elections among others. Elections are important elements of democracy because democratic governance is given concrete expression through them. Elections are therefore used as vital instruments to elect those who will be in authority and champion the course and welfare of the citizenry as well as promoting peace and stability in the state and country. However, the conduct of election in itself does not constitute democracy as it may be characterized by all sorts of manipulations and inadequacies. Therefore, for an election to be adjudged free and fair, decisions and activities at the levels of legislation, constituency delineation, voter's registration, civic and voter's education, party primaries and nomination, electioneering, safety and distribution of electoral materials, voting, collation and declaration of results among others should be transparent and devoid of any illegitimate interference and influences.



In the text, just as it is currently experienced in Nigeria, political parties have progressively failed to perform these assigned roles. They do not only become avenues of causing disaffection, victimization but also of coercion, manipulation and oppression of both their opponents and electorates aided by security agents and the party leaders. They also fail to offer the electorates coherent manifestoes and ideologies.

Achebe presents two political parties in the novel: Peoples Organization Party (POP) and Peoples Alliance Party (PAP). These parties seem not to have a coherent ideology or manifestoes. The third, Common Peoples Party (CPP) to be formed by Max which proposes to be for the masses with socialist ideals to save the country from the grip of corrupt politicians is stillborn due to Max's elimination by Chief Koko. Achebe may be inferring here that, formation of political parties is not the direct solution to political impasse in Nigeria or Africa.

In AMOP, not only Odilli but also his parents as well as relatives and villagers become victims of Nanga's thugs (Nangavanga) whose aim is to "annihilate all enemies of progress and project true Nagaism" (126). Odilli attempts unsuccessfully to expose Nanga's corrupt nature but fails. He reports that:

By this time blows were falling as fast as rain on my head and body until something heavier than the rest seemed to split my skull. The last thing I remembered was seeing all the police women turn round and work quietly away (158).

Odilli's failure to expose the corrupt nature of Chief Nanga and his consequent brutalization by the people shows the fate of those who want to bring change to the dysfunctional societies but are easily outnumbered by villains. It further indicates the lack of confidence by the perpetrators in the electoral process to deliver favourable outcome to them. The consequent refusal of the police to intervene in Odilli's brutalization is a further indication that there is connivance between the politicians and the security agents. The improper use of security agencies during elections is one of the factors that breed electoral violence and impediments to free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria. The politicians exercise considerable influence over security agencies due to their power and wealth or affiliation to the ruling party or incumbent government. That is why, in many places and situations, the perpetrators enjoy the support of the security agents. It therefore shows that, for Nigeria to develop, the leaders should uphold the rule of law rather than the rule of fear.

Even though, Odilli ends up in hospital defeated, which makes Chief Nanga's party to gain the electoral victory easier, he does not regret his actions because the aftermath of Nanga's victory is unrest, chaos and military intervention. Like everywhere in Africa, the ruling party as seen in the text is not tolerant of opposition. The politicians are anti-intellectuals. They plot against them in government and rubbish members of parliament who are educated, honest and understanding. This is seen as another of Africa's present problems. As minister of culture, Nanga denounces the western educated Africans claiming that, "a University education alienates an African from his root and ancient culture" (4). But the villagers are far from understanding this fact. Though corrupt in his ways Nanga, like other corrupt politicians is cunning and finds it easy to influence people. He enjoys the loyalty of those he exploits. At the beginning of the text, we see Chief Nanga at the height of his popularity "No one can deny that Chief the Honourable M. A Nanga MP was the most approachable politician in the



country. Whether you ask in the city or in his home village, Anata, they would tell you that, he was A Man of the People” (1) says the narrator at the beginning of the story explaining the enthusiasm when Nanga visits his village. He returns the praise of the crowd by flattering them, by putting on an act of humility and by offering help to one of the villagers, Odilli to show his generosity. This pretended benevolence to Odilli is a calculated attempt to win him over to his side and then strengthen his party and retain his hold on his constituency. He also speaks to the people in pidgin English by expressing local values and hopes. He appears to be a man from the grassroots, and ironically A Man of People. Chief Nanga therefore, becomes representative of politicians in Nigeria who have become rich by bribery and corruption and who lack political morality.

The Electorates

In every democratic setting, the electorates elect those who will represent their interest at the government level and chart the course for their socio-economic development. In *AMOP* Achebe perceives of the Nigerian electorates as being apathetic and cynical to their political leaders. Odilli says:

The people themselves as we have seen had become even more cynical than their leasers and were apathetic into the bargain. Let them eat was the people’s opinion after all when white men used to do all the eating, do we commit suicide? Of course, not. And where is the all-powerful white man today? He came, he ate and he went. It may be your turn to eat tomorrow. Your son may bring home your share (161). Furthermore, Odilli informs us that “to tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself as they would ask you if you thought a sensible man could spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune place in his mouth” (2).

This cynicism, Achebe maintains encourages the corrupt politicians to be more corrupt, in post-colonial independence Nigeria. It is a further indication of the people’s belief that, politicians have a right to exploit the country’s resources for their personal gains. Achebe maintains that because the electorates have lost their will and power to fight and resist any form of oppression, due to corruption, oppression and suppression, they have become like the “think nothing people” in Okara’s *The Voice* “who are like logs in the river that float and go whither the current commands” (35). They are people who are easily swayed from one party to another. No matter how strong willed, they give up in the face of material temptations. Party politics has been reduced to a bread-and-butter game where monetization of political process is the bedrock of loyalty and support. This has eroded the aim of democratic system. Max symbolizes this group. Nanga tells Odilli; “Your good friend Max has more sense than you. He has already taken his money and agreed to step down for Chief Koko” 9133). This situation encourages and fuels the fire of corruption among the politicians. It can then be seen that corruption thrives in a country where there is no discipline and strong moral principles. Consequently, it weakens the economy of that country and creates mass poverty and a bottomless gulf among citizens.

Military Intervention in African Politics

Military rule typifies authoritarianism. It is usually affected by way of forcible takeover of state power by way of coup d’état. Authoritarian regime can be humane or despotic. In any



case, no military regime is justifiable and, for that matter preferable to democracy. In *AMOP*, Achebe seems to present military intervention in Nigerian politics as alternative to the political impasse in post-independence Nigeria. For in less than six months after its publication, the military struck in Nigeria. It was as if the novelist through the novel subtly but suggestively invited the military. Thus, enter into the Nigerian social psychic, the concept of militiocracy through coup plotting by a class of people who have no business in governance. The involvement of the military in the administration of the country was due to the failure of the political class to properly direct the affairs of the country. The intervention was greeted with much enthusiasm as people hoped that it would redirect the affairs of the country towards attainment of good life by the restoration of law and order and provision of social justice. However, it can be observed that generally, the army restores only temporary order as the situations that lead to the intervention are still unresolved despite the military coups. Notwithstanding, the reaction against the corrupt regime will at least serve as a deterrent to similar excesses. Odilli knows that nothing has changed and that the will of the people has not been solved;

No, the people had nothing to do with the fall of our government. What happened was simply that, unruly mobs and private armies, having tasted blood and power, during the election had got out of hand and ruined their masters and employers. And they had no public reason whatever for doing it. Let's not make mistake about that" (162).

Odilli may be suggesting that two wrongs can never make a right for military regimes are logically illegal and against the interest of the vast majority of people who are being oppressed and that even pure military regimes have been unable to prevent coups and counter coups or even civil war. Odilli's assessment of military regimes in this light must have been based on military coups in other African countries as Nigeria had not experienced a coup when Achebe wrote *AMOP*.

The collapse of the Nanga regime is a result of a conscious effort by a group of socialist intellectuals led by Max. Though the future is uncertain as the problems remain unsolved, the concern of this group is the plight of their country. This is the only group that holds promise for the country because, unlike everybody else, they are under no illusion. They know what they want and go after it. This is a patriotic group that provides us with the hope for the future. The punishment (detention) of Nanga teaches us that, for a nation to prosper, proper care must be taken when seeking or electing leaders, otherwise corrupt politicians will always have their way and citizens will simply be a means by which they can fulfill their corrupt goals.

AMOP ends on a prophetic note. The first coup in Nigeria (1966 led by Kaduna Nzeogu) which led to the assassination of the then Head of States JFU Aguiyi Ironsi and a host of others mirrored in it shows the relevance of literature and particularly novel to the society, especially the society it reflects; the Nigerian society and by extension the African society. *AMOP* is like a reference to Igbo proverb in the text. It helps us to know where the rain began to beat us and then we can begin to know where we dried our body. Lindfors remarks that "Achebe's *AMOP* has the ability to inspire a revolution, a revolution that aims towards true independence, that moves towards the creation of modern state, a revolution that is informed with African ideologies" (18). *AMOP* has therefore, become a reference in historical study of



African politics especially the post-colonial and independent period. It has entered the threshold of the African timeless classics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

AMOP is Achebe's realistic depiction of the nature of politics in Nigeria immediately after independence in 1960 and how the leaderships exploit the independence for themselves. Achebe shows that, the main goal of Nigeria leaders in post-independence Nigeria is to enrich themselves. He therefore, portrays Nigeria politics during this era has been characterized by corruption, thuggery, violence and inefficiency. This is epitomized in the text by Chief Nanga who, despite his ineptitude like many other politicians in Nigeria today, wants to perpetuate himself in power.

However, to highlight the poor political visions and corrupt nature of the emergent political leaders towards building a Nigeria nation state is not to deny that, they made some important contribution to the foundation and development of Nigeria. For one thing, they kept Nigeria one as an entity. For another, the Nigerian nation is still in existence and has potentials and opportunities for greatness, if only its leaders could guide it in the right direction.

Recommendation

Politics in Nigeria has always engendered conflicts, violence, corruption, threats to national unity, security and sovereignty. What then is the way forward in this scenario? The following policy recommendations are proffered:

1. There is need for reform in the nation's electoral system by government to create the condition necessary for free and fair elections. This is because, absence of free, fair and credible election breeds corrupts, irresponsible, irresponsive, brutal and repressive rules.
2. The capacity of the relevant agencies such as the political parties, the National Assembly, the Judiciary, INEC and Civil Service society among others will by the Government to curb the actions and actors should be strengthened and sustained.
3. All participants in the nations electoral process must observe and respect the rule of law to avoid frustrated electorate resorting to violence.
4. The unrestricted means of acquiring illegal wealth with impunity in the exercise of political powers must be checked.
5. Politicians should conduct their campaign on the basis of issues rather than attack on personality or mobilization of religion ethnic and regional sentiments.
6. Party thugs should be checked. A law banning or prohibiting them and punishment of the offenders of that law should be severe enough so as to serve as deterrent to others.
7. Only credible politicians with clear manifestos or with clear ideology should be voted into power.



8. There should be a law against party switching (defection) by all elected officers during the period for which they are elected as recommended by the Uwais Electoral Reforms Committee, 2008.

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