



INJUSTICE IN THE SHADOWS: EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF CORRUPTION ON MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES IN UCHE NNYAGU'S *AT THE CENTRE OF NO-MAN'S-LAND*

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ABSTRACT: *This article employs Marxist and Precolonial theory to analyse the themes of corruption and injustice in Uche Nnyagu's novel, *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land*. The novel is set in a postcolonial context. This study investigates the economic base and superstructure dynamics and focuses on class struggles, the exploitation of labour, and the commodification of social relations within the narrative. Nnyagu's narrative captures an evaluation of capitalist exploitation and class oppression and also illustrates how wealth concentration and economic power disparities foster a cycle of corruption benefiting the ruling elite at the expense of the masses. The novel not only critiques the lingering effects of colonial exploitation but also challenges the inherent injustices of both past and present socio-economic structures, and offers a perspective on the perpetuation of corruption and the struggle for justice in the society.*

KEYWORDS: Corruption, Injustice, Police brutality, Moral decay, Human right injustice.



INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a cancer that devours the soul of a society. According to Chinua Achebe in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, “Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today, alienates people from their friends, their relatives, and their country. It is the root of most of the problems we face today”. (3) Corruption and injustice have been entrenched in the fabric of Nigerian society, perpetuating a cycle of impunity and undermining the rule of law. Nigeria’s ranking in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index has consistently been low, highlighting the pervasive nature of corruption. As noted by African scholars, corruption has far reaching consequences, including perpetuating poverty and inequality (Osabuohien, 2020) and eroding trust in institutions (Ibrahim, 2018). According to Adejumbi, “corruption has become a way of life in Nigeria, with significant implications for democratic governance and human development” (Adejumbi, 2019). In the same vein, Mamdani, (2018) has argued that corruption is a symptom of a larger crisis of governance in Africa.

Injustice is the venom that poisons the heart of humans. Uche Nnyagu’s *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land* presents a stark exploration of corruption and injustice, set against the conditions of a society riddled with moral decay and institutional failures. The novel clearly portrays these themes and provides an emotional commentary on the socio-political landscape, reflecting broader global concerns about governance, equity, and human rights. Nnyagu intricately depicts corruption as an entrenched systemic issue, permeating all levels and sectors of society, especially the police force. From governmental institutions to local communities, the novel illustrates how corruption becomes a normalised part of daily life. This normalisation is not just a condition but a driving force that shapes the characters' destinies and the plot's progression.

Fiction as a Representation of the Society

The notion that fiction serves as a representation of the society, in other words, a mirror to the society is well-established in literary studies. Fictional narratives often reflect, critique, and interpret social realities by providing a lens through which readers can examine the complexities of human existence. Literary critics have said that literature is the mirror of society, and literature also includes fiction. This implies that writers deliberately build a plot to advance sociopolitical agenda. According to Abrams, "Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation" (Abrams, 1999: 134). This idea is echoed by scholars such as Terry Eagleton, who asserts that "Literature... comes from society and in one way or another reflects it" (Eagleton, 2008). Fiction offers a platform for questioning and exposing cultural paradigms, presenting and analysing vices or unfairness of a society while depicting characters as reflections of members of the society. Becker (2007) provides a helpful example of these analyses. According to Becker, fiction is treated as another means of ‘telling’ about the social world. To him, fiction has values and properties that are likely to be of important value to social experts. Again, he claims that fiction can be seen as ‘vehicles of social analyses’. Becker also talks of fictional forms as having a track-record for producing ‘exemplary works of social representation’.

In the same way, novels which are documents of fictions, are broadly detailed reflections of a society given their ability to offer some perception of the societal, cultural, political and economic realities. As put by Abrams (1999), “The novel can document society and its frameworks” (136). This is a valid viewpoint in regards to how novels can speak on ills of



society including corruption and injustice. In *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land*, the writer, Uche Nnyagu, successfully captures societal corruption and exploitation in the story. The major theme of the novel is the representation of corruption in the police force who are also government officials. The Nigeria Police Force belongs to the executive arm of government. The executive arm is responsible for enforcing the laws and policies of the government, and the police are the primary agency responsible for maintaining law and order, enforcing criminal laws, and protecting the public.

In addition, it is important to note the differences between kidnapping and arrest. Though both concern the limitation of a person's freedom, these two notions are grounded in quite different legal frameworks, purposes, and mechanisms. Arrest is the detention of an individual by a law enforcement officer or agency generally as a result of a suspected crime or warrant. The officer has certain procedures to complete, for example, reading the rights of the individual and then securing him/her. On the other hand, kidnapping is the unauthorised and unlawful taking and confining a person against their will with intention of receiving ransom, which is achieved by the use of force or coercion in political or any other unlawful purpose. Kidnapping is one of the worst unlawful acts as it infringes on a person's rights and freedoms. Kidnapping and arrest are different in terms of legal power, aim, and conduct. It is important to grasp these differences in order to respect the principles of the rule of law, human rights, as well as the public order hence, the Nigeria Police Force Act and the Criminal Procedure Act which regulate the arrest of suspects, and unless one is being arrested at a crime scene or in exceptional circumstances, one has the right to request to see a valid arrest warrant signed by a magistrate or senior police officer before being taken into custody. It is lawful to ask to see the warrant before submitting to arrest. According to the Nigeria Police Act (2020), "A suspect shall be accorded humane treatment, having regard to his right to dignity of his person; and not be subjected to any form of torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment" (43). In the novel, the reverse is the case as Ofo narrated in the novel:

Soon, two of the men came to where I was with a handcuff. When I looked at their faces, I saw my death right in front of me. The men were heartless! They dragged me up and handcuffed me, not minding that I was bleeding profusely. "Please don't kill me" (Page 17).

The police officer replied:

Shut up! Na so you criminals dey always shed crocodile tears when you get arrested (Page 17).

The Nigeria Police Act (2020) states that:

If the person to be searched has a satisfactory explanation which makes a search unnecessary or other circumstances come to the attention of the police officer that make the search unnecessary, no search may take place. Before any search of a detained person or vehicle may take place, the officer shall give the person to be searched or in charge of the vehicle: (a) his name and the name of the police station to which he is attached; (b) the subject of the search; and (c) his grounds or authorization for undertaking the search (Sub sections 2 and 3).

In the novel, Ofo also complained:

After I had been searched, I saw the man who had searched and collected my money as he extracted some wads from the money and hid it well in his back pocket where his colleagues would not see it (Page 18).



Another illustration of corruption is where police officers prefer to collect *roja* instead of assessing the drivers' papers to be sure they are updated, and vehicles to be sure that they contain no contraband. Bribery and extortion by a policeman are criminal offences in Nigeria. The Nigerian criminal code and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission] (ICPC) Act criminalise corruption, bribery, and extortion. Section 10 of the ICPC Act holds that a public officer who solicits, accepts or obtains any gift, consideration or benefit... in anticipation of or for performing his official duties commits an offence. Nnyagu, using fiction as a mirror portrays this corrupt act of bribery through Ofo, the protagonist, as he (Ofo) narrates:

That day, the first group of policemen we met around Ugwu Nwasike roundabout in Ogidi had stopped us but our driver was very smart. He understood them very well so he only slowed down as if he would park, he brought out his left hand and gave the police officer money and he signalled him to ride on. I didn't look well to see how much our driver had given to the policeman. ...I noticed that at each checkpoint, the driver had to give police money before we could be allowed to continue our journey (Page 44).

In this regard, the goal of fiction is to expose the reality of the society while provoking people to think and change. Through such crucial themes, the novel demonstrates how fiction can act to engage with society and ignite change. These features enhance the representation of reality.

Aspects of Corruption in the Novel

The author is of the view that corruption permeates every sector in Nigeria. His novel *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land* is a vivid x-ray of contemporary Nigerian society. Different aspects of corruption as we have it in Nigeria as mirrored by the author would be highlighted in this paper.

First and major aspect of corruption portrayed in the novel is governmental corruption. At the heart of the novel lies a critique of governmental corruption and **police brutality**. Police Officials are portrayed as self-serving individuals who manipulate their positions for personal gain. One striking example is the character of Kabiyesi, a high-ranking police officer who gathers wealth through bribery. His actions epitomise the systemic rot in the security system.

Another aspect of corruption portrayed in the novel is political corruption. Nigerian political corruption as it constitutes a threat to democracy and good governance, as well as social justice. This form of corruption is also seen in Nnyagu's novel where the author brilliantly presents this subject in an enlightening manner. Of the facets of corruption described in the novel, the manipulation of the electoral process to the advantage of particular individuals is one. This is illustrated in a scenario where a young politician is locked up in jail through the period of votes to remove him from the race to give chances to his opponents. This scenario is a clear indication of some of the vices that have characterised political process and leadership in Nigeria through the years where leaders stick to any policy regardless of whether it is constitutional or unconstitutional. The young politician, who is one the characters in the novel said:

I see politics differently from my contemporaries. I believe that politics, as a game, ought to be played with the spirit of sportsmanship but my opponents see politics as a do or die affair... When I disappointed my opponent by not withdrawing from the political race, he ran back to his kingpins in the ruling political party called All Regressive whatever, their agenda for the country is simply doom (Page 88).



The themes of corruption and injustice in *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land* resonate with those explored in other significant works. Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* digs into the political and social issues of postcolonial Africa, critiquing the failure of new leaders to uphold the communal values of their forebears. Achebe's portrayal of political corruption and social decay parallels Nnyagu's depiction of a society struggling with almost similar issues.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by Marxist theory which illuminates the power dynamics and economic exploitation underlying the experiences of Nnyagu's community in *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land*. Through a Marxist lens, the displacement and marginalisation of the people can be seen as a manifestation of capitalist logic, where the pursuit of resources and profit supersedes human well-being and dignity. Marxist theory provides a framework for understanding the economic and social inequalities depicted in the novel. It critiques the capitalist structures that perpetuate class struggle, exploitation, and corruption.

In the novel, corruption is depicted as a tool used by the bourgeoisie to maintain power and control. This is exemplified by the Chairmanship Election narration by the young political aspirant in the cell, where a political candidate engages in vote-buying and manipulation. This corrupt practice ensures that power remains concentrated in the hands of the elite, undermining democratic processes and perpetuating class divisions. Ofo and Jude's disillusionment with the political system reflects the Marxist view that true democracy is unattainable under capitalism, where the ruling class manipulates institutions to serve their interests.

Also, the novel portrays the election malpractice where 'the people's choice' is held in police custody so that the dubious candidate can win by openly buying votes and manipulating results. It also highlights the deeply ingrained nature of political corruption.

Aspects of Injustice in the Novel

Nnyagu's exploration of injustice is deeply knotted with the theme of corruption. The novel provides a harrowing depiction of how injustice manifests in various forms, from human right injustice to legal injustice, and the profound impact these have on individuals and communities.

1. Human Right Injustice: Human right injustice is a recurring motif, with corruption intensifying the divide between the wealthy elite and the impoverished masses. Characters like Jude who loses his father but his uncle takes away his father's land with the knowledge of his kinsmen just because he, the uncle, is rich and influential. In *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land*, Jude tells Ofo how he becomes an inmate:

As a kid, my dad told me that they had shared all their lands and I know all my father's lands. The following day, I rushed home and behold, work was going on in the said land. I was still standing at the place in confusion when about three men came from nowhere and abducted me. Everything seemed to me like in a dream when they threw me inside their vehicle and the driver sped off. The next place I saw myself was here (page 65).

The wickedness is further highlighted in the scene where a boy, an inmate, whose name was not mentioned was summoned by a police officer and taken out of the cell at midnight. According to Jude, the boy who has been incarcerated in the cell for over one week, is going to be killed not just because nobody from his family has asked of him but also:



They had asked him about the offence he committed that brought him into the cell and he told them that he quarrelled with a man on the road, ignorant of the fact that the man was a politician...he was a keke driver and that the politician's driver had taken his lane and as he tried to dodge, he fell into a ditch (page 83).

This clear representation of wickedness stresses the pervasive impact of human right injustice fueled by corruption.

2. Legal Injustice: Legal injustice is another critical theme. The police force as a system in the novel is portrayed as biassed towards the wealthy, with characters like Jude and Ofo facing insurmountable obstacles in their quest for justice. This aligns with Marxist theory, which argues that the legal system under capitalism serves the interests of the bourgeoisie. Jude's land dispute case, where bribes and influence determine the outcome, shows the injustice faced by the lower class. This corruption within the judiciary not only perpetuates economic inequalities but also undermines faith in the police and legal system, thereby highlighting the pervasive nature of injustice in a capitalist society.

Also, the novel illustrates a legal system tilted in favour of the lawyer. Ofo, Nzube, and Dr. Emeka seeking justice are often met with insurmountable obstacles, from pocket-seeking lawyers to bribing police officers. Ofo's own quest for justice after he is detained unlawfully showcases the futility of fighting against a corrupt legal system. Despite clear evidence of innocence, Ofo finds that bribery and influence dictate the outcome of his case. This corruption within the judiciary undermines the very foundation of justice, leading to a sense of hopelessness among the populace.

Victims of the System

Nnyagu also portrays the tragic fates of those crushed by the corrupt system. Characters like Jude, the handsome political aspirant, the keke driver and others who are young men wrongfully imprisoned for a crime they did not commit, highlight the devastating human cost of injustice. His story is a gloomy reminder of the lives destroyed by a corrupt judicial system and government that favours the wealthy and powerful.

CONCLUSION

Uche Nnyagu's *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land* is a powerful narrative that brings to light the pervasive issues of corruption and injustice. Through compelling storytelling and a good character development, Nnyagu not only criticises the socio-political systems but also calls for introspection and change through the characters. The novel serves as a plain reminder of the enduring impact of corruption and injustice, and the critical need for collective action to address these problems.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The novel, *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land* explores the impact of corruption, injustice, police brutality and the incessant arrest of innocent citizens as a cankerworm that eats deep into our today's society. Based on these findings, these recommendations are made:

1. Government should recruit educated police officers so that they can read their Code of Conduct, understand what human rights entail, and implement them.
2. The police officers should be paid a meaningful amount of money as salaries to help reduce bribery. The government should enforce stringent anti-corruption laws and ensure transparency.
3. There should be targeted training programs for public servants.

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