

LITERATURE OF POLITICS: OF DORMANCY OR DOGGEDNESS; FINDING MEANINGS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *A MAN OF THE PEOPLE*

BY

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Abstract

*Apart from Achebe's literary dogmas and polemics of the western influence on African native culture and history, there is no gainsaying asserting that he is also a gadfly who questioned and attacked Africa's socio-political intricacies and orthodoxies. Over the years, the African polity has witnessed innumerable issues as regards good governance and direction, ranging from maladministration, megalomania, corruption, tyranny etc; perpetuated by African political elites and the society at large. However this dangerous politicking has crippled our societies, thus questioning the stance of the African writer; a praise singer or a social critic. It is on this note that this paper seeks to explore the stance of African writers and the utilitarian relevance of literature employed as a weapon to demystify the political statusquo, as exemplified in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. Suffice to say this paper submits that African writers should constantly employ their writs as comrade in arms against the dangerous politicking of African elites and leaders. Their writs should constantly comment, prod and question the existing state of affairs in order to ameliorate the anomalies as epitomized by Chinua Achebe; else the growth we seek will remain an illusion.*

Keywords: Literature, politics, African leadership, social, critic.

Introduction

Literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here, a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics. Ngugi WaThiongo (xvi)

Literature has been widely acclaimed as a positive medium for reflecting our society; in fact the political realities of our time more often than not has placed literature on the pedestal of a photographer that captures those picturesque realities worthy of representation in our climes. This formidable attribute of literature has endowed the African writer with the choice of employing his writs to resonate and doggedly engage the realities of his epoch rather than being passive or dormant in the face of crises.

Politics on the other hand is not an obscure entity to humanity; it can be traced to the activities of the primeval men. The leadership conventions, decision making processes and the democratic posture of ancient states like Egypt, Rome especially Greece, are conspicuous evidences of the long standing nature of politics in our world. Suffice to say politics is as old as man; man is inherently ambitious and yearns for power, therefore politics cannot be separated

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from man. Needless to say the parodied notion of man as a political animal succinctly corroborates the foregoing. Thus despite the age long nature of politics, it is regrettably sad that what is obtainable in nascent democratic climes in Africa, especially Nigeria is grossly appalling to say the least; compared to their western counterparts. Apparently, in all parts of the world, it is not out of place to say corruption is ubiquitous, it is global in its impact; no doubt. Every country has had its own fair share of sociopolitical maladies, but in our beloved country Nigeria, it is an eyesore that since independence, the political posture of our country regresses on a daily basis; in fact, it is nothing to write home about.

Corruption in Nigeria thrives every day. Over the years, Nigeria has experienced myriad forms of corruption in its political terrain, which are basically leadership oriented. Nigerian leaders have become megalomaniacs; they indulge in bribery, looting, squandermania, money laundering amongst others. The moment the mantle of power and authority is passed down to them, they grow corrupt with power and mal-administer the country's resources thereby patterning a dystopian thread in the Nigerian economic and political fabric. These corrupt acts have thrown Nigeria into a pool of confusion and undermined her government.

It is against this backdrop that literature of politics is borne. Literature of politics in Nigeria emanated as a result of the Socio-economic and political issues that confronted Nigeria in her early years. Issues like colonialism, independence, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), oil boom and other socioeconomic and political matters that has dichotomized and intensified the class struggle between the bigwigs of the society (bourgeoisie) and the lower rungs of the society (proletariat). These Socio-economic and political developments in Nigeria in her early years prompted writers and scholars to implement their arts and writs as weapons for engaging the various issues that confront their immediate society (Nigeria) and their stifling effects on the masses. It is not farfetched to say several Nigerian writers in their preponderance have employed their writs as veritable tools for social commentary the likes of Wole Soyinka, Esiababobi, Femi Osofisan, Hubert Ogunde, Chinua Achebe, the list is inexhaustible. Despite their eloquence and rascality, Nigeria seems irredeemable. Now the question is while corruption and dangerous politicking perpetuates virtually all sectors of the Nigerian society, should the writer sit on the fence, or continue to doggedly employ his literature as a machinery for truth and change, questioning the methodology, manipulations and status quo of politics, demanding social change and the enthronement of political chastity, dethroning maladministration in all administrative strata?

Chinua Achebe answered this salient question when he affirms that:

An African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social issues of contemporary Africa, will end being completely irrelevant like the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames(54).

Still in the same light, Femi Osofisan succinctly corroborates Achebe as he stresses that:

If we must change our societies, if the theatre (indeed all generic forms of literature, oral and written) must fulfil its vocation as an agent of progress, the dramatists (writers) who create it have no option than to pitch their camp on the side of the common people and against the formidable agents of the ruling class (88).

These submissions are avid verities of who an African writer is or should be. A restless gadfly who is ready to use his work to provoke rather than portray; and that is what Chinua Achebe epitomize; a quintessence of literary doggedness. Thus, politics and literature are two different entities but from the vantage point of this paper and the society, they are two sides of a coin.

Summary of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

A Man of the People captures and reveals the intricacies of politics, love and the story of nascent Nigeria; and it was written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in 1966. The story is narrated by Odili, a young teacher in an unnamed African country run by greedy and corrupt politicians. His own former teacher, referred to as both "Mr. Nanga" and "Chief Nanga," is now an elected official and the Minister of Culture of the country. When Chief Nanga comes to visit his home village, he and Odili meet again, and Chief Nanga invites Odili to stay at his home in the capital city while the Chief makes arrangements to help Odili study abroad. Despite his dislike for Chief Nanga's politics and his way of doing business, Odili is somewhat charmed by the man. He is also attracted to a young woman, Edna, who travels with Chief Nanga and is supposed to become the Chief's second wife.

Odili accepts Chief Nanga's invitation, and spends time with him in the capital city. Odili learns that Chief Nanga lives in luxury as a result of his corrupt practices and knows very little about culture, despite his position. Odili has had an affair with a young woman, Elsie, whom he brings to Chief Nanga's home with the intention of spending the night with her. However, she sleeps with Chief Nanga instead. Chief Nanga doesn't understand why this makes Odili angry. Odili decides he will take revenge on Chief Nanga by seducing Edna, the young woman Chief Nanga plans to marry.

Odili becomes involved in a new political party that seeks to replace the current ruling party. As he becomes more and more opposed to Chief Nanga, Odili decides to run for office in an attempt to take Chief Nanga's position. The members of the new party believe they will provide more effective, more honest government. However, Odili learns the people of his country are quite cynical. They expect politicians will take bribes and make themselves rich. In fact, many of the people Odili meets are primarily interested in getting a share of the money gathered by corrupt officials.

Odili struggles with a number of moral decisions as he wages his campaign, for example having to decide whether to take money as a payment for withdrawing from the election. He tries to show the people the present government is lying and stealing, but no one seems to care. In fact, Odili is threatened and bullied as he tries to run his campaign, and his father and his village are punished for his actions.

Odili realizes he is genuinely in love with Edna, and his desire for her is no longer just a result of his wish to get revenge on Chief Nanga. Edna, however, feels obligated to marry the Chief because he has given her family money and her father is pressuring her.

Odili decides to attend the event that launches Chief Nanga's campaign, where Odili is recognized and beaten nearly to death. During the weeks of his recovery in the hospital, things change in Odili's personal life and for the entire country. Although Chief Nanga's party wins the election, the aftermath is unrest and chaos, and ultimately the military overthrows the

government. Then the people of the country come forward and talk about how terrible the former government was, despite their support for the same elected officials when they were in power. Edna stands by Odili through his recovery, and eventually his family makes arrangements for Odili to marry her. Odili is sad to learn of the death of his friend Max, who was killed by a former government official, but reflects an honorable death is about the best one can hope for in so corrupt a country.

Meanings in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

1. Citizens Complacency and Complicity with Politicians

A popular aphorism admits that the people get the leaders they deserve. This statement is the crux of Achebe's narration in *A Man of the People*. The people of Anata and his environs are not completely innocent, in fact they are complacent and corrupt just like Minister Nanga, Chief Koko and their fellow racketeers. In similitude to modern times, the citizens of Minister Nanga's constituency in the story are archetypal to Nigerians (the electorates), who most times have the power to change the narrative and rewrite their history but are debarred from saying the truth and exercising their rights as bonafide members of a democratic state because of sheer greediness. Achebe captured this in many instances for example, in the words of Couple, a former policeman who rebuffs Max for telling the people of Urua the excesses of the ruling party. Couple argues that:

We know they are eating but we are eating too. They are bringing us water and they promised us electricity. We did not have those things before; that is why I say we are eating too (135)

This statement by Couple shows the level of complacency and naivety that beclouds Nigerians. The people of Anata, Urua and other surrounding villages know that Minister Nanga is corrupt but they deem it fit to let him plunder their resources thus leading them into poverty. It is appalling that this is what is obtainable in Nigeria today. As electorates Nigerians have the power to dethrone any corrupt government, but they would rather wallow in silence or rather sell their vote for a piece of cake; just like the fictional people of Anata and Urua; this is the trouble with Nigeria.

Even when genuine aspirants and patriots who are fed up with the status quo stand up to unseat or protest the greedy cabal, the people instead of throwing their weight behind them will open themselves up to manipulations from the incumbency; thus prolonging the odious circle. This is the case of Odili Samalu in the story, a young patriot who sees the need for a total revamp of the political status quo. He stands up to oppose Minister Nanga, but he was rejected and humiliated by the people. Odili's narration at the climax of the story captures this:

He slapped me again and again, Edna rushed forward crying and tried to get between us but he pushed her aside so violently as she landed her buttocks on the wooden platform. The roar of the crowd was now like a thick forest all around. By this time blows were falling fast as rain on my head and body (152).

Odili further bemoans this when he observes that

The people themselves, as we have seen have become even more cynical than their leaders 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 did we commit suicide?' Of course not. And where is the all-powerful white man today? He came, he ate and he went (156).

Here, Achebe paints a vivid picture of our complacency and complicity with corrupt politicians. The people cheered and joined Minister Nanga in beating Odili to a pulp when he seeks redress for them. Suffice to say leaders cannot lead in isolation, if the led are not in support. They can only gallivant oppressively when the led are complicit in crime with them.

2. Corrupt Politicking and Self Aggrandizement

In recent times, corruption and self-aggrandizement have become part and parcel of the Nigerian political terrain; and in *A Man of the People*, Achebe flaunts his critical positions on the corrupt stance of Nigerian politicians as exemplified in the characters of Minister Nanga and Chief Koko. A clear instance of corruption is observed in chapter four in the selfish intentions of Minister Nanga as regards provision of social amenities to his immediate society. Odili captured this in his narration when he said that

But none of these things was real to me, only his saying that he had order ten luxury buses to ply the route as soon as it was tarred... So he had two good reasons for wanting the road tarred - next elections and the arrival of his buses (46).

This observation by Odili unearths the reason why most of our politicians delay projects meant for the benefit of all; just like Minister Nanga they do this to for their selfish gains especially for election purposes. The rights of citizens are curtailed because of an individual caprice. The sad thing is despite the glaring intentions of these politicians, the citizens still vote them into power. Nigeria today is littered with abandoned projects; especially bad roads just like the case of Anata and Urua. These inadequacies lead to accidents and loss of lives on a daily basis, but our politicians are less concerned, therefore submerging the society into an inert chasm, thus leading to a spiral of physical and mental anguish on the citizens that seems to linger; hence the dictum by Adam Smith "No Society shall surely be flourishing and happy of which by far the greater part of the members are poor and miserable" (np).

Another topical issue captured by Achebe which is typical to the Nigerian polity is self-aggrandizement. Just like Minister Nanga the average Nigerian politician is preoccupied with amassing unnecessary wealth at the expense of the masses. Today in Nigeria, our politicians own private jets, luxurious cars, numerous edifices (the list is inexhaustible) and we have bad roads, unstable power supply, poor educational infrastructures amongst others. In the story, Minister Nanga who lives in Bori, lives extravagantly, he owns chains of houses rented to the privileged but the people of Bori reek of poverty. Achebe bemoans this through the characterization of Odili who narrates the bad situation of Bori:

As dawn came my head began to clear a little and I saw Bori stirring... I saw beggars sleeping under the eaves of luxurious department stores and a lunatic sitting wide awake by the basket of garbage he called his possession (76).

3. Political Gangsterism and Hooliganism

One reoccurring issue in the Nigerian polity is the use of political thugs to threaten and terrorize citizens or any form of opposition. Nigerian politicians employ thugs to maim and even kill people they deem can pose threat to them. Over the years cases of thugs invading citizens abode to maim, or cases of thugs snatching ballot boxes during elections amongst others is innumerable; even the just concluded presidential elections and guber polls is no exception.

Achebe as a gadfly of his society, displays his authorial intentions on gangsterism and hooliganism in *A Man of the People*. Minister Nanga and Chief Koko are Nigerian archetypes. Chief KoKo killed Max, who is Odili's friend. A shrewd lawyer who like Odili is bent on changing the political narrative of his society for good. Achebe captured this at the revolving part of the story when Odili says:

But as soon as he highlighted from his car, one of Chief Koko's jeeps swept up from behind, knocked him over, and killed him on the spot. The police most of whom turned out to be disguised party thugs (155).

In addition Odili himself was almost lynched to death by Minister Nanga's thugs. He was aslo framed to have possessed contrabands which were planted in his car by the thugs. Achebe employed these scenes as a reminder of our realities in Nigeria. He takes his reader on a journey across the travails of Nigeria, reminding us of notable Nigerians who have been killed or deprived of their rights as bonafide members of a democratic state as a result of selfish politicking; the likes of Dele Giwa, Ken SaroWiwa, MoshoodKashimawo Abiola amongst others; and recently the unfathomable killing of innocent protesters across Nigeria, seeking to end police brutality and enthrone good governance. Needless to say Nigeria is lost land seeking to redeem herself. No sympathy from the political elites, no regard for human life, no iota of service which they profess during political rallies and campaigns, a total aberration from good governance, which is supposed to form a mutual correspondence between the state and her citizens.

Inferences and Recommendations

Thus far, this paper has dissected Chinua Achebe's compelling satire *A Man of the People* as a literature that demystifies the Nigerian existing state of affairs, one that decries the decadent threads conspicuous in the Nigeria polity. It brings to the fore, the various forms of vices that plague our land, it comments on the different schemes employed by our leaders to plunder our resources, it also pointed out the role of the people in politics as well; albeit it gives a ray of hope that Nigeria can be great again through the characters of Odili, Max and Eunice. Consequently, this paper is a clarion call to our writers to continue to use their literature to constantly interrogate the social maladies prevalent in our societies until our land is liberated from the shackles of corrupt politicking.

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