

Postcolonial Disillusionment: A Historicist Reading of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

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Abstract

The primary purpose of Chinua Achebe's writing was to help the Nigerian people retrieve what they lost due to years of colonial exploitation. To construct a sense of dignity for African communities and nations, that educative purpose inspired him to reexamine social, political, economic, and historical realities of Africa. That concern obviously worked as a stimulus behind the production of *A Man of the People* in which Achebe pictured the failure of postcolonial leadership in a fictional country which in many ways coincided with post-independence Nigeria. The incident of the military coup at the end of the novel due to the failure of political leadership prophetically coincided with a similar incident in Nigeria only six years after its independence. This was mostly because of the politicians' indulgence in euphoria and self-interest. Due to the lack of a vantage political vision, the country experienced a disastrous collapse of economic, moral, and social values. National consciousness went through vulnerability in the face of rival tribal consciousness in a multi-ethnic state. In *A Man of the People* Achebe explores how the so-called man of the people fails to uphold the public interest for his indulgence in sexual motives and private politics. This paper seeks to approach Achebe's *A Man of the People* from a historicist perspective and examines how the author depicts the disillusionment of a postcolonial nation.

Keywords: historicist, disillusionment, historical consciousness, nationalism, national consciousness

Chinua Achebe's creative practice emerges out of the historical realities of his country, and broadly speaking, of the historical realities of Africa. History is one of the major sites in which he invests his wit and wisdom to diagnose the problems of contemporary Nigeria. So, apart from the mythopoeic aura of his literary works, they, of course, serve as a powerful metaphor of the political, cultural, ethnological, and historical realities of Nigeria and the disillusionment of the postcolonial generation. Achebe's little book *The Trouble with Nigeria* sums up the essence of his vision and enterprise as a writer which begins with a very coercive statement, "The Trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1). Only within a few years of independence, owing to the failure of political leadership, the country fell into the pit of disillusionment. In connection with this historical reality, *A Man of the People* reflects the Nigeria of the 1960s through the metaphor of a fictitious



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country with a hypocritical man of the people whose failure becomes inevitable because of his indulgence in sexual motives and personal interests.

Most African countries attained political freedom after the Second World War but beneath the euphoria of independence, they failed to navigate the hazardous years of nation-building through the implementation of political principles and social visions. It was mostly because “[D]uring the years of anticolonial struggle Africa’s nationalist leaders had a better idea of what they were fighting against than of what they wanted to replace it with” (Irele and Gikandi 797-98). This fatal pitfall plunged post-independence Nigeria, like many other African countries, into civil war, tribal rivalries, genocide, repeated military coups, and a morass of institutionalized corruption. Political independence could not bring social justice, national unity, peace, and economic security for the majority of the Nigerians. Rather, it brought internal segregation, inequality, and pessimism that overpowered the post-independence generation of Nigeria. Achebe’s novel, *A Man of the People*, may be read as a portrayal of the pervasive disillusionment and despair of a post-independence generation struggling for good governance and competent leadership.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe exhibits how Odili, a young school teacher and protagonist of the novel, resigns himself to social injustice, the duplicity of the politicians, and the impossibility of radical changes when he finds that the “postcolonial administrations stagger to an exhausted standstill, the economic defunct, the state bankrupted by reckless overconsumption and brazen government racketeering, while a power-hungry soldiery waits in the wings” (Wright 797-98). Obviously, low and split up political consciousness and tribal consciousness create vulnerability that lead the masses to cynicism, and in such cases, resistance slides into indulgence in corruption. This mutual failure of both the parties – the masses and the rulers – is delineated in *A Man of the People* which “is about the failure of leadership in postcolonial Nigeria” (Hossain 219).

The postcolonial situation of Nigeria was unexpected to the confounded general mass. The fruition of nationalism was nipped in the bud. As a new nation, the Nigerians were tirelessly wrestling to fortify norms and values to define their national identity. Local politicians manipulated their goal and led the nation to a cavern of disillusionment and pessimism by hosting every possible sort of corruption and nepotism. Though, in terms of natural resources, such as, coal and oil, Nigeria is still a resourceful country and “approximately a third of Africa’s petroleum reserves are believed to rest under Nigerian soil,” it has remained one of the poorest countries of the world (Harmon 107). This is owing to its political leaders’ incapability of leading the nation as they were focused on private interests only. Post-independence Nigeria could not provide its people with food and other necessities. A tiny group

of politicians and military collaborators made a nexus with imperial interest and squandered Nigeria's wealth and opportunities. Unbridled corruption of this so called elite group consumed by unenlightened self-interests turned Nigeria into a "contraption where democracy, integrity and basic human rights were at risk" (Hagher 5). Even the educated Nigerians who should have voiced demands of justice, equality, and citizen rights took the side of the plunderers and empathized with their perversions, and inevitably jointly led postcolonial Nigeria to the margins of a failed state. So critical readers cannot alienate the texts of Chinua Achebe who believes in the "relationship between artist and his community" from the realities of the time in which they are produced (*Hopes and Impediments* 61).

Parallelism can be found between the fictional country of *A Man of the People* and Nigeria in many ways. While the people needed sufficient food, more hospitals, schools, better houses with better sanitation, and reliable communications, Chief Nanga indulged in luxury and extravagance, and in the accumulation of personal wealth. In the face of bribes and threats, Odili forms an opposing political party but is soon also overcome by his personal interests. As Nanga seduces his girlfriend, he pursues Nanga's fiancée for revenge. The fictional country in the novel metaphorically exposes the postcolonial realities of Nigeria. The novel became problematic for Achebe as its publication incurred the grudge of the contemporary rulers who thought that Achebe's words in part prompted the 1966 military coup in Nigeria. Immediately before its publication by Heinemann, Achebe was anxious: "I knew that the book was going to be problematic for me because of its criticism of Nigerian politics- very severe criticism." (*There Was A Country* 54). In postcolonial Nigeria, writing a book like *A Man of the People* was an extremely difficult and challenging undertaking. As a responsible writer, Achebe felt an urge to galvanize a new political consciousness that was required for collective transformative action.

A Man of the People came out of Achebe's commitment to his society because he maintained a belief that creative writers could hardly evade the social and political issues of their nation. It is the novel in which "the story comes to have mimetic and polysemous functions for Achebe dives straight up to the top and into the heart of Government to find out why the nation's hard-earned independence has within seven years become a sham" (Mezu 93). It is evidently an adventure of self-discovery because it exposed the historical realities in the midst of which the country was wrestling to form its ideology and national consciousness. Erupting national reality disillusioned the postcolonial generation of Nigeria. This picture of disillusionment is portrayed in the protagonist, Odili, a school teacher. Though fascinated by the rhetoric of his ex-school teacher, Nanga, now a minister of culture, very soon he loses interest in him when he discovers him to be a bundle of contradictions. Sixteen

years ago in 1948, in pre-independence Nigeria, Nanga was a poor school teacher and Odili was his pupil. Nanga's transformation from a mere school teacher to an influential minister invites us to look upon him "as a typological character, one whose development mirrors different stages in the evolution of the colony into a nation" (Gikandi 108). Nanga's subsequent calamity reminds the readers of the dramatic growth and failure of a bourgeois class of leadership in a typical post-independence country. Due to the lack of a concrete philosophical ground of political visions and indulgence to subjective interests, it failed to formulate a national consciousness and unite the people with the consolidated spirit of nationalism.

As a member of this emerging bourgeois class, Odili's mindset, reflective of Ngugi's idea in his *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, is molded by the growing bourgeois sentiment that Karl Marx describes:

half lamentation, half lampoon; half echo of the past, half menace of the future; at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core but always ludicrous in its effect, through the total incapacity to comprehend the march of history. (qtd. Thiong'o 86)

Odili wrestles to become a chronicler of the time and space which, if historically viewed, contributes to the formation of the fictional country into a nation. But the events and realities that Odili portrays from his own experience are more subjective than objective. He ironically thinks that he achieves insight during his contact with Nanga. In his words:

sitting at chief Nanga's feet, I received enlightenment; many things began to crystallize of the mist – some of the emergent forms were not nearly as ugly as I had suspected but many seemed much worse. I was not making these judgments at the time, or not strongly anyhow. I was simply too fascinated by the almost ritual lifting of the clouds. (Achebe *A Man* 39-40)

Though he claims that he achieves enlightenment through his contact with Nanga, in his ignorance, he has become a metaphor for the prevalent bourgeois sentiment and youthful rage. His failure to turn his insight into an intellectual discourse to fight back corruption around him proves him to be a failure. Besides, the way he addresses the crises is not intellectual either. Rather, emotionally treating the burning issue of the country leads him to this failure. He knows that he is fighting against Nanga but he does not know who or what needs to replace Nanga. In this regard, he is like the typical postcolonial politicians of Nigeria who lack constructive vision for the nation.

In the face of irrupting kleptocracy, Odili struggles to overcome the problems but fails as he lacks a far-reaching vision and ideology with which he can replace the leaders

like Nanga. Odili plays the dual role of protagonist and narrator, and ventures to depict the realities of the country retrospectively. So, “[T]o explicate and represent the pitfalls of national consciousness in Africa, the narrator wants us to read the rise and fall of Nanga as an allegory of the promise and betrayal of nationalism” (Gikandi 108). The realities that Odili thinks of begin to undergo a paradigm shift, and in the face of this transition, Odili cannot prove himself to be a fit reformer. Rather, he personalizes the realities by emphasizing his vindictive disposition which is wholly subjective. Thus, his political party with which he wants to lead the country to the path of democracy and good governance becomes a failure. Odili fails to become a man of the people and launches a counter-discourse against the hypocritical leader Nanga. He feels enraged by the thought that Nanga has snatched away his fiancée Elsie and deceived him. At one point of his political enterprises, it appears that he is not fighting to strengthen a political discourse; he is rather fighting against Nanga for his personal cause, taking revenge by seducing Edna, Nanga’s concubine, a kind of romanticization of the political ideals. Odili asserts:

The heat and anger had now largely evaporated leaving the cold fact that another man had wrenched my girl-friend from my hand and led her to bed under my very eyes, and I had done nothing about it – could do nothing. And why? Because the man was a minister bloated by the flatulence of ill-gotten wealth, living in a big mansion built with public money, riding in a Cadillac and watched over by a one-eyed, hired thug. (Achebe *A Man* 68)

Thus, Odili’s political discourse gives in to his sexual motive and defines his politics as private, rather than public. A critical inquiry discovers that his politics is problematic and it evokes questions regarding his leadership capability. Nanga, as a man of the people, might win the readers’ interest but his hypocrisy and betrayal of his post and position quickly disillusion them. Odili alienates himself from public politics after losing Elsie to Nanga and fails to unveil the shamelessness of the politicians and though he tries to overcome this subjective motive he cannot. In his words:

I saw that Elsie did not matter in the least. What mattered was that a man had treated me as no man had a right to treat another – not even if he was master and the other slave; and my manhood required that I make him pay for his insult in full measure. In flesh and blood terms I realized that I must go back, seek out Nanga’s intended parlour-wife and give her the works, good and proper. All this flashed through my mind in one brief moment of blinding insight – just like that, without warning! (Achebe *A Man* 69)

Thus, Odili’s vindictiveness emanates from his subjective motive that leads him to abandon public interests in a political issue. In this connection, it is relevant to know Achebe’s attitude towards the politicians of Nigeria as expressed in his *The*

Trouble with Nigeria where he makes a daunting proclamation that the trouble with Nigeria does not lie in its climate or water or soil; its trouble lies in its politicians' failure of leadership (1). Their persuasion concentrates on their personal benefits only and in this race politics serves as a tool for attaining their personal goal. In *A Man of the People* both Nanga and ultimately Odili are failures from the very inception due to their concentration on their self-interest. In this way, the novel serves as a metaphor to depict postcolonial Nigeria with its disillusionment that emanates from the dubious role of its political leaders who exercise all forms of tyrannical and hypocritical actions upon their people while ironically claiming to love and protect them. In this connection, Eze's evaluation of postcolonial African countries is very relevant:

Much of Africa lives in the delusion of racial innocence. It is the kind of innocence that encourages a Manichean oppositionary thinking that, on the one hand, arranges the world into good, us, and evil, our oppressors and those who fail to see how evil they are. On the other hand, the oppositionary thinking erects bogeymen against whose backdrop leaders of most African societies become tyrannical to their own people while claiming to love and protect them. (Eze 1)

Thus, Achebe's portrayal of the collapse of postcolonial leadership in Africa makes readers presume that Africa is not politically, socially, economically, and culturally as advanced as it is capable of being and the mood of disillusionment pervades his *A Man of the People*.

The title of the novel, too, fits into the larger social concerns of the 1960s in which Odili is inevitably involved. So, the readers' attention is fixed on him. Readers expect him to be a watchdog over Nanga, the self-declared man of the people, "who is expected to serve the interest of the people, not his own interest" (Izevbaye 45). His friend Max, with whom Odili tries to form a political party named CPC and compete with Nanga, vainly attempts to build up a socialist concept of a political idea. However, Max also does not hesitate to take a bribe from Chief Koko to finance the party and thus moves away from his political goal. Ultimately he is killed by Chief Koko in the political rivalry. His tragic end leaves the readers in utter hopelessness. His death in the face of all-pervading corruption, kleptocracy, and hooliganism predicts the futility of political discourse, democracy, and good governance in the post-independence country. But, to some extent, "[I]t is through the unfulfilled character of Max that the novel rises above Odili's sexual motives and private politics" (Izevbaye 46). But Max appears to be thoroughly incapable of involving the general mass with the political issues of the country, which leaves an aura of disillusionment regarding the uncertain future of the country.

Again, examining the vicissitudes of the character of Nanga from a teacher of Anata Grammar School to the Minister of Culture, readers can, in many ways, identify the fictional country in the novel with post-independence Nigeria and categorize this novel like other novels of Achebe as a historical novel. Nanga's dramatic change in life metaphorically parallels the formation period of Nigeria as a nation. He has been portrayed as a political opportunist, devoid of political ethics and morality. Bribery, corruption, and intimidation serve as a means of accumulating wealth for him. Nanga does not think that independence is a panacea where Odili, without having the capability to conceptualize sufficient knowledge of the colonial and postcolonial realities of his country, thinks that independence can cure the country of all evils. Nanga, who has a unique compatibility with the people whom he represents, considers it to be a tool for exploiting people. Odili's struggle for constituting a political discourse and reforming the country finally proves futile. His political discourse is based on his idealism that does not work in the country which is on the verge of chaos and confusion. His friend Max shows him the flickering hope at first while deciding to form a common people's convention party. But Odili gets frustrated when he finds that a corrupted young minister of the government is backing Max. Again, Odili gets his personal revenge intermingled with political rivalry by seducing Edna, Nanga's fiancée. Nanga's way of life and the deliberate game in politics can be interpreted as a kind of subjugation to the "thought system of the colonizer," which tends to continue its legacy in the postcolonial nation in the form of neo-colonization (Saaka 14). Odili's criticism of Nanga's ambitious pursuit turns ironically fruitless when he manipulates his political discourse with his subjective emotion to fight back the decadence of political leadership. Even in the scene when Nanga is going on with his political campaign, Odili with a view to exposing his hypocritical role, pushes through the crowd and reaches the stage. Nanga deliberately, with a view to creating a positive impression among the crowd about himself, gives him the microphone. Odili mistakenly thinks that he has got a chance to expose Nanga's corruption in public. As soon as he starts, "I came to tell your people that you are a liar . . .," Nanga slaps him and the crowd joins in (Achebe *A Man* 129). In the hospital bed Odili comes to know that the army staged a coup and Nanga along with other ministers is behind bars. Both the parties fail in their respective enterprises. The cause of the failure of both Nanga and Odili lies in their consciousness about their belonging to, as Fanon describes it, an intermediary class. Thiong'o, with reference to Fanon, defines this class as "[T]he class that took over power after independence was an underdeveloped middle class which was not interested in putting the national economy on a new footing, but in becoming an intermediary between Western interests and the people, a handsomely paid business agent of the Western bourgeoisie" (83). Odili's location in such social

realities hinders him from thinking beyond his material acquisitions and becoming a reliable man of the people.

Odili wrestles to produce a post-independence discourse but it is manipulated by subjective impulses, which contributes to the dysfunction of his post-independence nation. His incapacity to perceive the liminality of his discourse leads him to nowhere. He lacks the intellectual potential to master the surrounding realities to his own interest as well as the interest of the people. He intends to fight against the bourgeois with a bourgeois mindset that cherishes a longing for personal comfort and delight. This dichotomy contrives his resistance against the corrupted politics of his country and leads him to disillusionment. On the other hand, Nanga's wealth and prosperity metaphorically connote the political bankruptcy and narcissistic political behavioral traits of many post-independence African countries with repeated military coups due to the failure of the political governments. Odili's fatal limitation lies in his incapacity to overcome the passivity of the people who are not politically conscious. Throughout the novel people do not show any significant consciousness about the political realities of the country. Odili is incapable of providing the people with a political discourse and convincing them that his politics is dedicated to the interest of his country. A disposition of elitist bourgeoisie has segregated all the political figures of this novel from the people. Thus, Achebe's *A Man of the People* is conspicuously about the African elite who "failed to cultivate African humanity in the face of new dispensation that has effectively neutered all traditional guardians of morality, law and order" (Eze 3). Hence, a close perusal of this novel reveals that if a nation desires to run smoothly towards peace and prosperity it must take proper care while electing its leaders. Otherwise, the people will simply turn into an apparatus that the corrupt politicians use to attain their corrupt goals.

A historicist approach to the text reveals that Odili, in many ways, poses as a representative bourgeois politician of the first Republic of Nigeria and lacks worthwhile political ideas and vision. To lend weight to this view, readers' attention may be drawn to the dichotomy of the enterprises of both Odili and Max who grumble about Nanga whose tactics they ironically end up following in contriving their political enterprises. This fatal pitfall makes space for the Army that appears to be the only hopeless hope of the people for their salvation from political corruption and repression. Yet Achebe sticks to his hope for the time when Africa will rise above all these banal pitfalls and resonate in democracy. His findings of the factors that instigate the military coup in post-independence Nigeria are tinged with philosophic profundity. It is also suggestive in Achebe's narrative that a generation with true historical consciousness may lead the country towards hope, absence of which envelops it with disillusionment.

The fatal pitfall of anticolonial struggle lies in the lack of adequate introspection of tradition and past history, which inevitably compels the postcolonial generation to carry on the legacy of the former colonial masters without interrogating. Lack of introspection of the history and tradition mars the vision about the future and it is true “where there is no clear vision about the future, the people perish especially when they are plagued by an unthinking and pestilential leadership” (Tsaaior xiv). Through the presentation of an intensive diagnosis of the historical realities, Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, thus, offers a seminal critique of the 1960s postcolonial situation of his country and exemplifies how effective dialogues between the artist and his community help produce the political aesthetics of a nation.

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