

Struggle to Liberate a Nascent Nation from the Corrupt Native Ruling Class and Create a Distinctive Postcolonial Identity: A Case Study of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Achebe's portrayal of postcolonial African society in his postcolonial novel *A Man of the People* with its societal struggles. A newly emerged native middle class played a somehow contradictory role as a social element in two different phases of colonialism, that is, colonial and postcolonial Africa. Initially, their discontent with the governance of colonial powers was principally voiced by this native class. However, the same social class reigned over these nascent African countries after independence. This privileged section of postcolonial native society replaced the 'European' masters in the native political power equation and kept intact the traumatic master-slave narrative of the colonial period. This research addresses the question of how Achebe is astounded by the degree of corruption, treachery and pretence of native politicians who governed the postcolonial African nations. It further expands on how Achebe, in this novel, puts in a conscious effort to create a distinctive African identity by eradicating these socio-political ills that were prevalent in postcolonial native society. *A Man of the People* depicts the disturbing influence of colonial experience on native people in postcolonial period and this paper aims to show how Achebe skilfully puts forward his belief in the role of national intelligentsia in the development of a new nation, as he thinks that it can significantly help in putting an end to this suppression of common men by creating a unique African identity across the world. Achebe's belief that mass uprisings by native intellectuals could be the best way to free native countries of the postcolonial era from dishonest native politicians has been a major finding in this research paper, as this novel transpires.

Postcolonial studies examine the impact of colonial rules after colonized countries got independence from erstwhile colonial powers. Identity crisis and the clash of cultures were some of the major problems the ex-colonies had to grapple with, as residues of the colonial periods. They were neither able to go back to the cultural identity and ethics of the time before the advent of colonial powers, nor could they manage to create and develop a completely new political and cultural character to replace the legacy of the colonizers. This research article aims to inquire Chinua Achebe's representation of postcolonial African society in his postcolonial novel *A Man of the People* with some of its major societal struggles, like finding a unique postcolonial African identity with the help of native intelligentsia.

If Chinua Achebe's trilogy *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* are considered to be true depictions of colonial onslaughts in Africa and its subsequent pitfall, his novel of later period *A Man of the People* could be examined as a distinctive attempt to present postcolonial reality of erstwhile colonies from a native's perspective. This novel essentially portrays a similar gloomy image of Africa during the colonial period with changes merely in colours and faces of ruling masters of the post-independent era. It

cannot be denied that socio-cultural conflicts in *A Man of the People* have strong colonial legacies since the protracted colonial experience of servitude and misery have caused political, moral, cultural and social decay in the country after independence. So, can't the native politicians be held accountable for not taking their nascent nation towards progress in the post-independence milieu? Onyemaechi Udu-mukwu, a researcher on Achebe, illustrates:

It is not as if history has remained immutable from the colonial era to the new dispensation. There has been a transition from one historical phase to another. But the irony is that even though the old colonial order has been replaced by the new, the nascent political system in Africa has proved incapable of guaranteeing the satisfaction of needs. (473)

He precisely describes native ruling class's betrayal of common native people's trust in them in developing their new nation as a "negation of the hopes of independence" (472).

A new native elite class, a product of the colonial education system with the knowledge of English language, became the most influential in these colonies in postcolonial times, which turned out to be a two-edged weapon. This particular section of native society used to take active part in freedom move-

ments and resistance against colonial forces during colonisation. However, they eventually seized the political space and governmental positions of their native countries from the colonial invaders in the postcolonial era without any significant changes in the master-slave narrative of the colonial period. Achebe's *A Man of the People* appears to be a fictional representation of this newly emerged socio-political trend in the colonies after the White masters' departure from African colonies. This novel also propagates how such social menaces can be eradicated through mass revolutions by common people.

So, independence from the colonial forces appeared to be unable to bring any notable changes to the social status of larger native masses and Achebe believes that one of the key reasons behind all these persistent social inequalities in the postcolonial era of Africa is the domination of corrupt native politicians who instantly occupied the power voids that were created after the exodus of colonial forces. Richard Little and Michael Smith aptly illustrate this sort of social dominance in the postcolonial native setup as a result of "... fundamental inequalities arising from differences of wealth, of access to resources and of cultural cleavages" (229). Native African politicians successfully sustained the colonial way of ruling common masses and employed all sorts of techniques to keep intact their control and dominance over the native people of the country—be it torture of rivals, clamp-down on any sorts of dissent, politics of propaganda, control of mass media or rule of fear and viciousness, as were earlier implemented by the western colonizers.

This novel appears to be Achebe's thoughtful effort to seek attention to the struggles and difficulties of postcolonial African society in realising its uniqueness and to create a distinctive identity that is different from the colonial period, which ultimately remains elusive. Achebe here tries to present post-independence native African struggles from a native's perspective to the rest of the world and this novel in discussion here is, as Walder aptly posits, a "... deliberate step towards overturning the assumptions of cultural and racial inferiority imposed by the colonizers and accepted by the colonized, a step towards showing that the African words, their languages, their ways of life, have their own integrity" (11). Odili Samalu, the central character in *A Man of the People*, challenges the White man's narrative of a helpless Africa, but at the same time, he finds faults with his own people too.

The main theme revolves around Odili, the protagonist in this novel, and his defiance against the corrupt native politicians who run the country. By the end of the novel, Odili fails to win his fight against native political menace in his country as he could not garner sufficient support of his own people. However, Achebe believes that it was not a wasted effort altogether and Odili's fight against political corruption in his country sows the first seed of mass revolution against the corrupt privileged native class that the country witnessed later.

A Man of the People is an attempt to represent all those evils that were prevalent in the postcolonial African societies and Achebe pens down the struggles of common native people against these socio-political menaces in this novel. Achebe, through this novel, suggests that mass social rev-

olution and brave struggles of a few educated and socially aware native individuals like Odili in this novel will be able to eradicate postcolonial evils like the power nexus of corrupt native politicians and bring about the much-needed changes in African society that people have wished for, throughout the colonial period of oppression and violent anguish.

The background of this novel is the postcolonial setup in an imaginary country in Africa, which appears to be a fictional representation of Nigeria to a large extent. Achebe believes that independence from colonial forces has not brought expected constructive changes in the lives of common native people. Only the white skin colour of the Europeans has been replaced by the black one of the ruling native class; common people are going through similar kind of suppression and violence as they experienced under the colonial rules. The suppression in question here also refers to social hegemony of such dominant native class and according to Upton et al., it denotes "political, economic, ideological or cultural power exerted by a dominant group over other groups, regardless of the explicit consent of the latter" (qtd. in Mda 6). So, these common people who were previously ruled by the western colonizers, are now being ruled and tortured in the hands of native rulers who act as nothing more than mere pawns of the former colonizers. Numerous examples can be marked in this novel that reassert this postcolonial reality. For instance, a trading company called 'British Amalgamated' (Achebe, *A Man of the People* 101) pays off the corrupt politician Chief Nanga, a Minister of Culture in this novel, to win a contract of a road construction deal in the country that has a value of millions of pounds, and in return of this favor he receives six expensive and luxury buses from this company. Here Chief Nanga acts as per the wishes of imperial companies just to satisfy his personal desires. Following is another act of his corruption that ultimately helps western business tycoons like, 'British Amalgamated' to economically stay powerful and relevant in this region. The local newspaper in this novel, called *Daily Matchet I*, writes:

...Chief Nanga, who had himself held the portfolio of Foreign Trade until two years ago, had been guilty of the same practice and had built out of his gains three blocks of seven-storey luxury flats at three hundred thousand pounds each in the name of his wife and that these flats were immediately leased by British Amalgamated at fourteen hundred a month each. (Achebe, *A Man of the People* 101).

Thus, such incidents reiterate that the common people of previously colonized societies could not gain noticeable benefits out of independence. Now, their own native people become their new masters who seldom shy away from implementing the objectives of their erstwhile White masters in their native land. As discussed earlier, these newly emerged native masters behave no more than mere puppets of imperial powers in return of monetary gains, so that they could continue living a luxurious life with the hard-earned money of native taxpayers.

Chief Nanga in this novel is a true representative of immoral native politicians in postcolonial Africa, who are not perceived positively by native intellectual people like Odili and alike. Odili calls him a 'cultureless man' who goes

abroad and proudly introduces himself as a "...Minister of Culture. Ridiculous. This is why the outside world laughs at us" (Achebe, *A Man of the People* 23). Odili also believes that Chief Nanga belongs to those native politicians who should be held accountable for leading the country down the steep slope of price hikes of everyday commodities by implementing kinds of economic policies that aim at bringing huge monetary benefits only to the ruling class and foreign imperial powers.

Achebe's novels of postcolonial period are not merely stories of African people's struggle to deal with extant socio-political ills in the immediate post-independent era. Rather, they are the tools to build a collective sense of African national identity and uniqueness among the native people after independence, not merely confined in political borders. In Frantz Fanon's words, "National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension" (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 247). Likewise, Achebe also believes in forming a unified African identity that every native should be proud of, regardless of the fact that they stay in any African nations or elsewhere. In his opinion, a sense of belonging to African nativity should be of supreme importance in the postcolonial era to build an exclusive native identity that was lost during the colonial ambush on African soil. It would be worthwhile to briefly discuss here Edward Said's concepts of 'imperialism and colonialism' and its impact on newly independent nations in postcolonial era, as explained in his *Culture and Imperialism*. He defines 'imperialism' as a powerful tool of "...the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory;" (8) in general. Although the setting of the novel in discussion here is post-independence, the country and its people continue to be treated somehow subordinate and less progressive in the western consciousness. In this novel *A Man of the People*, Western characters like John, Elsie and Jean represent this predisposed point of views of erstwhile colonial forces that Said terms as 'dominating metropolitan center' (8). Instances of such discriminatory attitudes of white characters like John, Elsie and Jean towards the natives cannot outrightly be overlooked in this novel.

In postcolonial times, the westerners tend to be fairly vocal about social issues like racial intolerance, casteism and inequality all around the world. Yet, their treatments of most of their former colonies are still not without prejudices, which seems to be a deliberate approach to a certain extent. According to the colonial powers, the pretext of invading the colonies was merely a mission to civilize and enlighten the so-called uncivilized native populace, but it proved to be nothing more than a disguise, as they gradually captured and controlled this land politically and economically. Even after the departure of colonial powers from the African soil, their presence can still be felt in this part of the world in the form of imperial powers who indirectly continue to legalise the presence of several aid agencies and UN schemes in these colonies. Again, Edward Said aptly speculates this notion: "...almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, 'equal' and fit" (96). Consequently, the notion of

African nation has emerged to counter this western viewpoint about erstwhile colonies at large. Chinua Achebe is one of the pioneers who intentionally continues to represent the narrative of national consciousness in regard to social lives of native people in most of his novels like *Things Fall Apart*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and *A Man of the People*.

His works also incorporate the idea of 'Pan-Africanism' and 'Negritude', which are indispensable to inspect the notion of nation in the postcolonial African setting. Ania Loomba, an eminent postcolonial critic, rightly argues that the idea of a nation "... takes on another meaning, a sense of shared culture and subjectivity and divisions of nations as political entities" (176). The critical writings of Frantz Fanon, another distinguished postcolonial scholar, are also believed to add fuel to the development of the national awareness and liberation among the people of the colonized societies- a consciousness that gave rise to several counter colonial movements like Pan-Africanism and Negritude. Both of his much-famed books, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Mask* are exemplary in voicing black consciousness that teaches to fight against all sort of colonial humiliations and to stand for own rights. Fanon talks about creating a genre of native 'national literature', as he believes that it would be one of the most effective means creating a national consciousness among African natives. These movements, namely Pan-Africanism and Negritude, were initiated as a conscious articulation of pan-national ethnic camaraderie and a demand to bring an end to imperialistic authority and western supremacy in the African part of the world. These movements celebrate blackness in a positive light, as opposed to western prejudices, which according to Loomba is "a distinct racial-cultural way of being" (176). Correspondingly, Achebe's literary works propose similar Pan-African realisation that does not need to be confined in one native nation of the postcolonial period. These two movements were significant chapters in the advancement of African consciousness all around the world like, in France, The UK, The USA, Canada and definitely in the African continent. These literary movements first came into being in Paris in "...1930s, '40s, and '50s that began among French-speaking African and Caribbean writers living in Paris as a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of assimilation" (Britannica). More non-western writers of postcolonial period like Chinua Achebe incorporated the notions of these movements in their writings and made conscious attempts to challenge the substandard status of the Africa and its people, as earlier represented in western narratives of historians, writers, missionaries and travellers of Europe and America.

It seems that Achebe also follows the same line of thoughts as could be observed in most of his novels. *A Man of the People* is not an exception either. As a matter of fact, the entire novel revolves around this theme, which is to instigate the sense of a unified national consciousness among these natives after independence, putting aside all sorts of prevalent tribal and local affinity with the goal of creating a distinctive native African identity. Additionally, this novel also represents Fanon's concept of 'national liberation' from all kinds of subordinations and suppressions hurled at native

common masses by the colonial rulers during colonization and subsequently, by the ruling native society in post-independent scenario (*The Wretched of the Earth*). In *A Man of the People*, a common native Igbo man like Odili Samalu gathers the courage to constantly challenge such ruling class like Chief Nanga, the extremely corrupt and one of the most powerful politicians of the country, too.

Achebe is a postcolonial critic, teacher, writer and political analyst, which are some important social roles that he undertakes in the capacity of being a representative of Nigerian intelligentsia to infuse a sense of pride in native cultural consciousness among the people of Africa (Nnolim 41). His literary works tend to be conscious commentaries on the political, societal and nation building of an African country in the postcolonial time. Achebe, in his collection of essays in *Morning Yet*, explains this notion that apart from being a novelist he also wishes to help his native "society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (qtd. in Gikandi). This is also a noteworthy instance of Fanon's another postcolonial concept from *The Wretched of the Earth*, that is, the importance of national intellectuals in the rebuilding of erstwhile colonies after the departure of colonizers. He believes that his role is more than being a novelist and that is to educate his people, as he puts forward in one of his essays called "The Novelist as Teacher". "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfection was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them" (qtd. in Miller 8). Hence in *A Man of the People*, Achebe tries to resurge Africa as a continent that should be proud of its rich cultural legacy and which needs to form a unique native identity, different from westerner perception of considering all natives as nothing more than an uncivilized crowd incapable of individuality. The first step towards this direction, according to Achebe, is to get Africa free from the control of native immoral politicians who have kept intact the colonial legacy of torture and oppression of the common people in postcolonial Africa.

Chinua Achebe appears to visualize the real predicaments of common African people in his writings. If his novels of the colonial-era represent the native experience of colonial domination and the brutality of European colonial forces in Africa, his postcolonial writings show the reality of life in postcolonial African nations. It can be inferred here that Achebe, in his writings, depicts postcolonial Africa as merely a new version of the colonial experience of Africa with only change in skin colour of the ruling class. If resistance to colonialism was mainly voiced by this English educated native class during the colonial period, the same class, on the contrary, occupied the power vacuum created after the exodus of the colonists, essentially replacing the colonizers in the government and keeping intact the master-slave narrative. One of the main aims of this paper is to examine Achebe's representation of postcolonial native society in his novel *A Man of the People* with its societal struggles and the study reveals that he consciously and repeatedly attempts here to point out one of the main postcolonial dilemmas that nothing much has improved in the lives of native common people,

except their ruling class who are corrupt native politicians in this context. As represented in his writings, the new native politicians who run the country after independence continue implementing a suppressive way of governance in postcolonial Africa following the footsteps of the colonizers. These native politicians usually resort to divisive and violent techniques of governance such as, rule of horror, propaganda politics, suppression of opposition, torture of opponent into submission, control over the media and the likes to rule the native African societies. Such techniques of subjugation are similar to those which were vastly implemented by the colonial powers previously. It can be argued that Achebe in this novel sharply illustrates the consistent struggle of native intellectuals of the postcolonial period to create an African exclusivity, different from the colonial period to counter these forms of suppression. *A Man of the People* represents Achebe's portrayal of postcolonial African societies and their fight to form their own individualities, unlike the colonial era which represents them as mere masses to the West. As mentioned, a major goal of this paper is to investigate the representation of postcolonial predicaments of the native society in this novel and at the end it would not be an overstatement to say that Achebe depicts a gloomy picture of this society as the political space of the nascent country in this novel has been taken over by native politicians with ulterior motives. However, it can be concluded here that in *A Man of the People* Achebe's hope of creating a distinctive postcolonial native identity lies in the struggle of native intellectuals who, he hopes, will topple the current corrupt government and bring about the much-needed changes for the betterment of common native people.

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