



READING A MAN OF THE PEOPLE IN BETWEEN THE LINES

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial literature narrates the atrocious colonial epoch. It can be taken as the history book as it depicts how the European first confiscated the native land and then gradually assaulted the native culture, native religion, native social, economic and judicial system, etc. Apart from these, the most important characteristics of the postcolonial literature, especially, novels are the depiction of how nationalism has emerged from that exploitation; how the quest for independence, the quest for a good government after independence and the quest for identity are felt. Achebe's novel, A Man of the People, makes a close reading of independence to investigate if it has brought any change to the life standard and the psyche of the people and to which extend people have succeeded to maintain that sovereignty which is achieved after a great struggle. The reader just needs to read the novel in between the lines to investigate the life of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular after independence.

KEY WORDS: postcolonial, independence, politics, leaders, cynicism of the people, failure.

Chinua Achebe is an eminent Nigerian novelist, poet, essayist and short story writer. His novels like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* explore the colonial epoch, while *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of Savannah* explore the postcolonial epoch. They make the reader think if independence has brought any changes to the life standard of Nigerians in particular and Africans in general.

In his fourth novel, *A Man of the People*, Achebe has given kaleidoscopic picture of dirty politics and corruption of the postcolonial Nigeria. It has secured its place in the African literature as a classic–timeless and seemingly more relevant with the passage of years. It is a political satire that comments on the postcolonial situation in Nigeria and a serious novel that

deals with the abuses of power by postcolonial political leaders (Booker, 138). Karl Maier begins the *Introduction* of the novel in a very satirical manner stating the declaration of the Governor of the year 2000 that some stern actions would be taken against the officials if they have been caught taking corruption.

The problem was not the bribe itself, the governor explained, but the timing of its acceptance. If the bribe came after the contract, the particular project at least would have been completed. (Achebe, Man VII)

Thus, the hypocritical Governor has no objection for taking bribe, but he emphasises on the proper timing and methodology for it. Mr Nanga embodies the attributes of this factual Governor. Like a chameleon, Mr Nanga changes his look, his manners and speech according to his surroundings. He has developed several political strategies to grip ignorant people in his well designed web. He represents dirty political pandemonium and proves that “the politician, who is usually less qualified than the bureaucrat-professional, dominates the post-independence political and social situation, while the bureaucrat-professional is co-opted as an ally by the politician for economic and prestige purposes” (Mutiso 35).

The novel depicts the strategies that a politician uses to win election, acquire power and how common good is put on the altar of sacrifice in order to please Mammon once the power is achieved. Media and press, the two powerful weapons of the independent *Nation*, have failed to bring about radical and reformative changes and to maintain transparency between the elected and the electorate. Odili recalls the year 1960 when the People’s Organization Party was the governing party, and the Government was facing financial crisis. The Minister of Finance suggested cutting down the price paid to the coffee planters. The Prime Minister didn’t agree as he didn’t want to take any risk when the election was round the corner. So, the National Bank was targeted for fifteen million pounds. The very next day, by evening, he broadcast to the *Nation* and declared the dismissed ministers as conspirators and traitors who had teamed up with foreign saboteurs to destroy the new *Nation*. Thus, the PM misrepresented his opponent to retain his power and take the people in confidence. He said to the horde that the dismissed ministers were caught “red-handed in their nefarious plot to overthrow the Government of the people by the people and for the people with the help of enemies abroad” (Achebe Man 4). The editorial of the *Daily Chronicle*, an official organ of POP said,

Let us now and for all time extract from our body-politic as a dentist extracts a stinking tooth all those decadent stooges versed in text-book economics and aping the white man’s mannerisms and way of speaking. We are proud to be Africans. Our

true leaders are not those intoxicated with their Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard degrees but those who speak the language of the people. Away with the damnable and expensive university education which only alienates an African from his rich and ancient culture and puts him above his people . . . (Achebe, Man 4).

Speech is always a very handy and powerful tool that the politician uses to create his influential and long lasting image in the mind of the people. Addressing to the people, the Prime Minister said, “From today we must watch and guard our hard-won freedom jealously. Never again must we entrust our destiny and the destiny of Africa to the hybrid class of Western-educated and snobbish intellectuals who will not hesitate to sell their mothers for a mess of pottage . . .” (Man 5). On the other side of the same coin the readers are told how these double standard politicians are fascinated by the foreign education and things. Mr Nanga, who is now the Minister of Culture, is pursuing a foreign degree and his children are studying in a convent school. Mr Nanga has a rare gift of making people feel that there is not a drop of ill will in his entire frame, even while he is saying harsh things to them. He uses this influential dexterity of oratory and flattering speech as a weapon to win power, friends and followers that can be seen in the following dialogue between Mr Nanga and Odili:

Why did you not tell me when you left the University? That’s very bad of you, you know.

Well, . . . I know how busy a minister . . .

Busy? Nonsense. Don’t you know that minister means servant? Busy or no busy he must see his master. (Achebe, Man 8)

By such flattering words Nanga creates his image of being a man of the people and seeks a place in their heart. At the same time such special favour from the Minister of Culture changes the attitude of the people towards Odili all of a sudden. That is why, Achebe satirically writes, “A common saying in the country after Independence was that it didn’t matter *what* you knew but *who* you knew” (Man 15). This chemistry between Mr Nanga and Odili is disrupted when Mr Nanga seduces Elsie, Odili’s girl friend, to fulfil his sexual appetite. Odili befriends with Maxwell Kulamo, Nanga’s political opponent and thus, he shakes hand with the enemies of his enemy which generally happens in politics. In order to take revenge, Odili aims at two things: first to challenge and defeat Mr Nanga in the coming election and second to win Edna, Mr Nanga’s would be second wife. Max and Odili are forced to take money and withdraw their names from the election. Mr Nanga says to Odili,

I am only giving you this money because I feel that after all my years of service to my people I deserve to be elected unopposed so that my detractors in Bori will know

that I have my people solidly behind me I know those irresponsible boys have given you money. . . . We know where that money is coming from . . . We will deal with them after the election. . . . As for you my brother you can eat what has entered your hand . . . Your good friend Maxwell Kulamo has more sense than you. He has already taken his money and agreed to step down for Chief Koko Take your money and take your scholarship to go and learn more book; the country needs experts like you. And leave the dirty game of politics to us who know how to play it . . . (Achebe, Man 108-109).

This is how the work goes on before and after election. The mainspring of political action is “personal gain” (Man 105). People are promised for their social and economic progress. But after election everything would be volatized from the mind of the power hungry politicians, except their own share from the national cake. The “Primitive loyalty” (Achebe Man 7) among these “politicians are” as Mutiso believes, “a new tribe of their own creation in the new nations” (50). “Independence can never become a boon for a country with such a state of affairs” (Ahmed 130). How a *Nation* can progress if she is considered a national cake. For vote, the politicians would give many temptations to the people and promise to conduct various projects -- the road project, for instance, in the case of Nanga. Now the project file would carry out a long journey, pass through many tables, to reach its final destination. Each and every table would demand its own share i.e. commission from that national cake and the person with big belly would demand for a big share, for instance, Chief Nanga receives ten per cent on contracts. Finally, a grand project would be accomplished but the quality would be compromised. The poor ignorant people, intoxicated with “NANGAISM” (Achebe Man 103) remain indifferent to what happens to their Earth Mother. They have nothing to do with the following promising words of the citizen enchanted before independence.

I will return home to her – many centuries have I wandered –
And I will make my offering at the feet of my lovely Mother:
I will rebuild her house, the holy places they raped and plundered,
And I will make it fine with black wood, bronzes, and terracotta. (Achebe Man 73)

There was a time when the native agreed for a collective endeavour to fling away the colonialist to make their Mother free from the foreign rule. The Nationalism emerged in Africa from the centuries old exploitation of the natives by the colonialists. At the cost of their lives they aimed to make their Mother free from the chain of the foreign rule. The promising words mentioned above show the readiness of the nationalist to protect the dignity and chastity of his lovely Mother. His keen desire and strong determination to rebuild the

Nation in the form that can stand with dignity in the changing world and his enthusiasm in his vision for his *Nation* in future can be noted here. But the condition of the *Nation* and the psyche of the people after independence contrast to that revolutionary zeal of the freedom fighter. Achebe regrets on seeing the postcolonial Nigeria. It seems that people have forgotten the promises they had made to their black Mother. She is waiting with a hope that a day would certainly come when her infant son will grow up, comfort her and repay her for the years of shame and neglect. Achebe feels pity for the Mother pinning for the son who has turned to be a chief Nanga, under whose domination life is at stake; the *Nation* itself is at stake and there is nothing but chaos and anarchy wherever the eye reaches. The *Nation* is facing the unbeaten problem of depression on the one hand, while on the other hand the income of the politicians, like Nanga, goes on increasing by leaps and bounds. This situation demands for a collective venture to face the challenge of depression. Instead, these so-called ‘man of the people’ are busy in campaigning before election. The campaigning is but to bring forth the drawbacks and corruption of the opposite political parties and to take the people into confidence. They can go to any extent for the votes of the people. For instance, Max belongs to CPC party. In a campaign, addressing to the people, he says,

Whether it is POP or PAP they are the same . . . They want to share out the wealth of the country between them. That is why you must reject both; that is why we have now formed the CPC as a party of the ordinary people like yourselves . . . Once upon a time a hunter killed some big-game at night. He searched for it in vain and at last he decided to go home and await daylight. At the first light of morning he returned to the forest full of expectation. . . . He saw two vultures fighting over what still remained of the carcass. In great anger he loaded his gun and shot the two dirty uneatable birds. You may say that he was foolish to waste his bullet on them but I say no. He was angry and he wanted to wipe out the dirty thieves fighting over another man’s inheritance. That hunter is yourselves. Yes, you and you and you. And the two vultures – POP and PAP . . . (Achebe, Man 115).

Here lies the reason for the failure of all the four republics of Nigeria every time within a very short duration. Not a single word of Max shows his concern for common man. It is articulated with a clear intention to blame the opposite parties and to claim the vote in his favour in the impending election. In order to do away with his opponents like POP and PAP, Max tells the people that they must be like that hunter who wipes out the dirty thieves fighting over another man’s inheritance. Last time the people of Anata enjoyed their share from the national cake and now, Max believes, they must make way for the people of Uruna.

But the federal system demands annihilation of *I* and *Mine* and centralization of *We* and *Our*, which has never happened in the postcolonial Nigerian political history.

By the end of the novel Odili's nomination paper is seized by thugs before it reaches at the Electoral Officer, Max is killed by Chief Koko's thugs and Koko is killed by Max's girlfriend, Eunice. Thus, Mr Nanga wins election unopposed. After that victory he disbands his private army which in turn revolts against him. A reign of terror and violence begins. Ultimately the military coup throws him away and comes to power. "The imperialists have been replaced by new rulers, and the general population has no choice but to suffer and wait for a new government" (Dwivedi 3). Here lies the tragedy of the Nation. A Nation suffers only when the citizens are inactive and indifferent. The citizen plays a great role in the Federal System and in the democracy. Cynicism of the people is equally responsible for the political upheavals. On seeing the accession of the military coup people say,

Let them eat . . . 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. But we are still around. The important thing then is to stay alive; if you do you will outlive your present annoyance. The great thing, as the old people have told us, is reminiscence; and only those who survive can have it. Besides, if you survive, who knows? It may be your turn to eat tomorrow. Your son may bring home your share. (Achebe, Man 133)

The words mentioned above provoke the reader to rethink the definition of independence and to rearticulate the definition of the government. When we utter the word independence, the first image that emerges in sub-conscious mind behind our closed eyes is that of dawn challenging to the pitch dark that however terrifying its empire may be, it is bound to collapse every time and a new life certainly opens its petals to fill this world with its fragrance. New life, new enthusiasm, new desire and new vision fill the air with new story of cheerful present, bright future and make the people forget the atrocious past. The independence comes with the formation of new government – i.e. the Government of the people, by the people and for the people. The very definition itself shows the constructive role of the citizen in the framework of the *Nation*. But the end of the novel shows the impossibility of establishing order in the state – which is more due to the indifferent attitude of the people than due to the corruption of their leader (Devi 40). The people about whom Achebe talks have nothing to do with the fall of the Government. They are insensitive and indifference to the prowling of their black Mother by such power hungry politician. They have a shameful hope that one day, like the uitlanders, various military coups and their own

selected members, they would also have their share from the national cake. Achebe writes, “And as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nangas of this world will continue to get away with anything” (Man 59).

The condition of Nigeria after independence is like that saying, ‘old wine in a new bottle’. The colonialists are flung out from Nigeria, but the colonialism as a concept is yet practised by men in power after independence in a new form called neo-colonialism. Macheke satirically writes, “. . . the worst elements of the old are retained and some of the worst of the new are added on to them”. In Das’ words, “Nigeria had become a free nation but the change was only a nominal one: it remained a victim of colonisation like many other Third World Countries where colonialism did not end with independence but continued in other guises” (126). She further writes, “There are no attempts made to show that having received power in their hands, the Nigerians were capable of transforming the condition of their country and people.” (141). In Achebe’s observation, “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership” (Trouble 1). Had they follow the norms of the Federal Government balancing liberty, equality and fraternity, there might have a different scenario of the *Nation*. There might be the tenor of carnival instead of dirge in the narration emerged from independence. Thus, the novel narrates the story of failure of the Federal Government and all the four republics and recurrence of the history of coups and counter-coups which are invited by the selfish political leaders and cynical people.

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