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## The Development of Moral Values in A Man of the People

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**Abstract:** *A Man of the People* reiterates a new situation in a modern African state which is on its way to sever its ties with traditional past and expresses the opportunistic tendencies of newly emerging politicians in independent Nigeria. Achebe does not merely conduct a sentimental journey into the traditional past but takes a satirical stance to show how the traditional norms are exploited by the politicians to achieve their selfish motives. The novel takes up the matter of interference and dominance of the army in a society where democracy is still in its infancy.

**Index Terms - Capitalism, Post-colonialism, Neo-colonialism, Corruption, Power and Leadership.**

### I. Introduction

*A Man of the People* (1989) reiterates a new situation in a modern African state which is on its way to sever its ties with traditional past and expresses the opportunistic tendencies of newly emerging politicians in independent Nigeria. Achebe does not merely conduct a sentimental journey into the traditional past but takes a satirical stance to show how the traditional norms are exploited by the politicians to achieve their selfish motives. The novel takes up the matter of interference and dominance of the army in a society where democracy is still in its infancy.

*A Man of the People*, "a rare bird in the corpus of African novel," (Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel* 72) set in the postindependent Nigeria, in an unnamed African country, deals with the contemporary scenario, highlighting the problems in new set-up, thereby raising the issues of power and leadership in the emergent nation state. By employing the irony of the satirist Achebe ridicules and condemns circumstances which determine its moral pattern. In fact, the novel is "a rather serious indictment of postindependent Africa" (Achebe, *African Writers Talking* 13), a necessary stage in the development of the country.

The novel is a commentary on the history of Igbos roughly between 1890 and 1965, which deals with a crooked politician, a familiar third world figure, Chief Nanga; Edna, a young girl, he is grooming as his "parlour-wife" (88); and a young school teacher, Odili Samalu who has his own story to tell. Odili is obliged to enter politics when his girl friend Elsie is seduced by Chief - The Honorable M.A. Nanga, an M.P. and Minister of Culture. Odili's sole motive in his formative years had been the winning of a scholarship for advanced studies abroad. Chief Nanga, his former teacher at school, pays a visit, recognizes him and offers him assistance in obtaining the coveted scholarship. Odili is swept away by Nanga's charisma and for time being he sits at the feet of his political master. Under Nanga's sway he reexamines his attitude towards political idealism and implementation of political beliefs. However Odili's amicable relationship with Nanga comes to an abrupt end when Nanga steals his girl friend Elsie, resultantly there is hostility between the two and Odili plans to seduce Edna, Nanga's parlour wife to avenge his manhood.

Odili joins a newly formed political party, "Common People's Convention Party" - CPC (79), founded by his friend Maxwell Kulamo and prepares to contest Nanga's seat in the upcoming election. Initially his primary target is Edna and politics is of secondary concern, meanwhile, he falls in love with Edna and under the changing circumstances Odili engages himself in an education struggle promoted by the politico-economic scandal that brings down the government and his motives gradually become more pronounced. Finally he loses the filthy political battle but succeeds in winning the girl. Nanga, who lives in fabulous opulence with his corrupt and self-seeking practices, loses everything because the election proves rough and dirty causing such a chaos in the country that the army stages a coup and imprisons all the members of the government. *A Man of the People* is a bitter satire on modern Nigeria prophesying the way the country would go in future and recalls the political stand-off in the mid-nineties Nigeria between the late Chief Ma'sud Abiola, who had won the general election, and the late Somi Abacha, who nullified the election results and took over power, leading to commonwealth's decision to suspend Nigeria's membership.

## II. HISTORICAL CONNECTIVITY/ DICHOTOMY OF POWER

The work foreshadows the Nigerian coups of 1966 and shows the colour and vivacity along with violence and corruption of a society making its own way between the two worlds, the world of common people and that of elites. *A Man of the People* is a first person retrospective narrative rendered by Odili Samalu, a school teacher in his native village. At first wholly cynical about the political leadership of the country, Odili keeps a scornful distance from any kind of political activity whatsoever. Once he had complete faith in University-trained public-minded leaders who promised an economically viable and politically stable unified nation in the postindependent period, but political opportunists, of whom Chief Nanga is an apt example, start hankering after the gleam of materialism so as to increase their personal fortunes at the expense of the nation or public purse, thereby thwarting the cherished dream. Odili intends to justify his own actions and values as he maligns the motives of Nanga. Achebe portrays on a grand scale the infectious nature of corruption in Nigeria - in politics, in army, in civilian life. *A Man of the People* is Achebe's first attempt to completely dissociate himself from the solutions and figures he created earlier, he does not take sides or exhibit his preferences in the novel, "the story is telling itself", it is a dramatic telling (Khayyoom, "Method and Technique in Achebe's Novels" 69).

The novel questions the dichotomy of power and leadership in the newly emergent nation state. The country is now in the hands of native people, but there is no worthy leadership so as to speak of, and the leaders are governed by the drive of unrestrained acquisitiveness, unchecked political corruption and unbridled self-interest. The quality of the leadership and the response of the people to that leadership form the crux of the novel. Chinua Achebe's novels project Igbo life, culture and history in a pluralistic society/system where power is decentralized and is vested in small groups: The priests and medicine men representing religious power and the lords of village, men of title and elders constituting the temporal authority of the village. It reflects "breakdown in the continuity and unity of tribal life vested in the intricate balance between the pursuit of material things and observance of religious customs and traditions" (Killam, *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* 85).

The interaction between the two major characters Chief Nanga and Odili Samalu forms the basis of the argument of *A Man of the People*. Both represent divergent ideology and typify the social group to which they belong. Nanga is the representative of a class of unscrupulous politicians, neocolonial elite, who wants to retain power, inherited from the departing colonial masters, at any cost. He is completely in the grip of materialistic values of a money-grabbing capitalist system left behind by the colonizers. Odili is a typical instance of an alienated, visionary, native youth - a product of the colonial education system. Odili tries to resist the archetypal imperialist in the person of politician Nanga, however this turns out to be an unsuccessful attempt for he himself fails to resist the internal forces of imperialism.

Odili is a curious blend of fascination and revulsion reminding the problem related to public and private morality in a society that has lost its traditional moors amidst the fascination for materialistic temptations. This materialistic orientation has given vent to rampant corruption, strife and cynicism in a society which is at the verge of breaking its ties with the past entering in an age of isolated individuals confronting the chaotic administration. It focalizes various aspects of thoroughly degenerated contemporary society and offers a critique of Nigerian societies in all spheres of life.

In the beginning Chief Nanga and Odili are diametrically opposed to each other: Nanga is on his way to make inroads to power by winning the hearts of people, and Odili is scrupulously critical of politics for the moral decline in political arena. Achebe maintains that in the prevailing corrupt scenario if anyone is thrown into politics, he will not prove any exception and Odili substantiates the idea by personifying the archetypal imperialist politician like Nanga only.

As a representative of people, Nanga advocates the cause of native Africans and proclaims to be dedicated to ameliorate their predicament. "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.... 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" (4). Nanga's progressive viewpoint for the nativisation of African thinking, sensibility and language is no doubt commendable and praiseworthy but the way he manipulates his power and position for self aggrandizement calls forth ire and disgust. The contradictions between his public and private face are apparent, for instance, he is an uneducated man, proud of his ability to understand his people better than the educated elite, paradoxically accepts an honorary degree from a foreign University. In a country where people live in shacks and can afford only "pails for excrement," (40) he enjoys the luxurious living in a "princely [four storied] seven bathroom mansion" (41). The inherent contradictions in his personality are pointers to the moral debasement in terms of political and personal orientation and ideology.

The relationship between Chief Nanga and Odili exhibits their true/real fabric: Nanga's philosophy is that of survival whereas Odili is an ambitious youth without conviction. Their cordial relationship suddenly turns bitter when Nanga sleeps with his girlfriend Elsie declaring their relationship to be a casual one. Deeply wounded, Odili resolves to avenge himself not only at the sexual front but at the political front too. The political enmity is thus the result of sexual jealousy that translates into political rivalry.

Odili joins hands with Maxwell and forms Common People's Convention Party to contest election against Nanga so as to remove the very earth under his feet. First he tries to brainwash Nanga's wife unsuccessfully, then he successfully dissuades Edna from marrying Nanga on whom he had put the "bride-price" (141). Nanga attempts to influence Odili through his father by offering sponsorship to foreign scholarship and an amount of two hundred and fifty dollars to dissuade Odili from partaking into politics but Odili sticks to his gun, does not budge an inch and continues with his tirade against Nanga in canvassing campaign.

Being a shrewd politician Nanga knows the tricks of the trade and is a tough nut to crack. He ascertains his success: "I am not afraid of you. Every goat and every fowl in this country knows that you will fail woefully.... I am only giving you this money because I feel after all my years of service to my people I deserve to be elected unopposed" (119). Odili, uninitiated, does not know the power of money in politics. Neither he nor his party has sufficient funds to squander on elections. His impractical approach towards life contributes to his failure against the seasoned and mature politician Chief Nanga who is reelected with a thumping majority; however, the corrupt government is overthrown a few months later by the military coup.

## III. POWER AND CORRUPTION

Odili represents the entry of the intellectuals into politics; the intellectuals of Nigeria prove a disastrous failure distinguished by nothing more than opportunism and timidity. Since Odili belongs to this class, there is no reason to expect wonders from him. One thing that makes him important is a strong sense of honesty and he does not befool himself as often as he might. When his motives are not clear, he is the first to admit it, he might have tried to cover it up, but basically he is telling himself the truth about his motivations and when his performance is weak, he is the first to admit the clumsiness of his action, and he goes into all sorts of superfluous analyses, but basically he is honest to himself. This is what makes him more important than the average intellectual in Nigeria. He stumbles into political activism, but he doesn't do too well and at the same time, he doesn't end in a dustbin. Thus, the false promises, political intrigues along with bribery, thuggery and chicanery sum up the political malaise:

*A Man of the People* is verily the grammar of post-independence Afro-Asian politics, for all the pettiness, chicanery, corruption, cynicism ... [and] the shameless surrender to 'Kama', 'Krodh', 'Lobha' all the budget of evils in present day politics. (Iyengar, "Contemporary African Literature," *Indian Literature* 288)

Therefore, the novel holds a mirror to the rottenness that had overtaken the Nigerian socio-political scene at the verge of chaos. However, Odili is not naive as to what can happen to one who dabbles in politics and gradually changes for the better towards the end.

Here the focus shifts from social corruption to political corruption. The focus is on the false promises and intrigues at the hustings and the ministerial pomp, self-seeking and lasciviousness in the citadels of power. The novel is a scathing attack on political opportunism, "a bold piece of writing, puncturing with the needle of satire the bloated bladder of ministerial pomp and hypocrisy" (Sivaramakrishnan, "The African Mind" 25). Achebe attacks privileges of power through "a man of the people" (1) i.e. Chief Nanga. Basically *A Man of the People* satirizes institutions and individuals by pinpointing the crippling and corrupting influences of power, position and money. Being a brilliant satire it not only satirizes the corrupt practices of Chief Nanga but brings forth the predicament of supposedly ideal Odili who gradually succumbs to the political temptations and starts resembling Chief Nanga in attitude, and subsequently fails amidst the prevailing corrupt political ethos. It resembles the degeneration of the animals who drive out men in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). With great stylistic virtuosity Achebe projects Odili as his mouthpiece against corruption and also exposes his gradual susceptibility to corruption. Deliberately the language has been vulgarized to indicate the indiscipline of Odili's mind. In this context a suitable point is made:

A common saying in the country after Independence was that it didn't matter *what* you knew but *who* you knew ... it was no idle talk. For a person ... who simply couldn't stoop to lick any Big Man's boots it created a big problem. In fact ... I took this teaching job in a bush, private school instead of a smart civil service job in the city with car, free housing, etc., was to give myself a certain amount of autonomy. (17)

Chief Nanga epitomizes the opportunistic tendencies of new political masters. The loss of human values and dignity is mainly due to the exploitation of the natives by their own men. These politicians exploit the natives to meet their selfish motives. The novel illustrates the incompetence of the native leaders for what they make of their country when the power changes hands. The external forces were driven out and the country has native leaders and these upstarts are tempted to overreach themselves. The situation demands sagacity and political will otherwise they will have a sudden fall from the height, however they fail in realizing the hopes and aspirations vested in them and there is strong note of dissent and agonizing ennui at the mess that these political representatives led their country into. *A Man of the People* is a "scathing denunciation of the political corruption of the new governing classes and the cynicism of the masses" (Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel* 72).

#### IV. APTNESS OF THE TITLE

The novel derives its ironic title *A Man of the People* from Chief Nanga - a seasoned corrupt politician, the Minister of Culture - a perfect embodiment of the one who believes in personal gratification of ambitions and is skillful enough to turn a deaf ear to the aspirations and hopes of the people. This individualistic streak is marring the real African personality presenting a sad spectacle of the rise and fall of the bleak politicians who in their newly achieved independent state have completely failed to realize the dreams of the natives.

Achebe's comic tone in the novel about contemporary Nigeria is frequently uncertain and even forced, if not exactly strident, vehement and hysteric. Frantz Fanon's views about the passing on of power after independence to an entrenched and corrupt set of people have been echoed by Partho Chatterjee:

Chief Nanga ... and his colleagues, senior ministers of government, and their rivals in other political parties have produced ... the atmosphere of material acquisitiveness unrestrained by traditional concerns amidst political corruption. (Qtd. in Killam, "Chinua Achebe," *African Writers* 27)

Chief Nanga along with other ministers represents what Achebe describes as "the fat-dripping, gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime" (149). The novel depicts an atmosphere where there is no national voice but only a confusion of competing voices. The neo-political set-up has landed Nigerian state in "a cesspool of corruption and misrule" (Singh, Satyanarain, "Chinua Achebe and the Dynamics of Change in African Sensibility," *Indian Journal of English Studies* 55). The neo-politician is unable to prioritize his course of action, for him, only ambition now is to grab the privileges of their former masters and Ayi Kwei Armah designates them as "Black Masters, White Shadows" (qtd. in Rao, K. Damodar, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* 36). Achebe satirizes this class of black masters who initiate and behave like the colonial masters. Earlier the Africans were betrayed by the colonizers and later by their own native leaders. This political opportunism and prevalent corruption has resulted into serious ill-consequences like exploitation, despair, anguish and agony in the contemporary Nigerian society forcing the country into a gloomy situation.

Nanga, like Koomson in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1981) is a corrupt politician representing the new generation of Nigerian politicians. He is a prototype of the political leaders who privilege on power that the neocolonial politics offered them. The novel explores the contemporary scene through such politicians where the black politicians fail to realize the aspirations of the people into reality. It is a pertinent picture of the rise and fall of black leadership. It reiterates that no political order is permanent and the old order paves the way for the new.

Chinua Achebe's specific concern is not related to "what politicians say or do but with the absence of a counter-vailing tradition of enlightened criticism and dissent [which meant that] a writer who must be free [has] no choice really but to run great risks. And we had better know it and prepare for it" (Ohaeto, "Setting Up More Structures: Education, Culture, Politics" 221).

The villagers have blind reverence for Nanga and cannot see through the corrupt ways of Nanga. The novel in a way holds common people responsible for the prevalent anarchy and chaos in the socio-political sphere. The work powerfully presents the degradation of values and is a kind of dirge on the civilian rule paving the way for a succession of coups and change of government at regular intervals in Nigeria. Hence, apart from the category of politicians, there is another category of common men, the complacent electorate who have reconciled to

the prevalent state of affairs. Though fully aware of the fact that the politicians are swallowing the country's fat, they are ready to compromise, for it is their own people who are enjoying the fruits instead of any whiteman, who is now out of sight. Achebe portrays the selfish attitude of the people in a satirical manner:

'Let them eat,' was the people's opinion, 'after all when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide? ...

Besides, if you survive, who knows? It may be your turn to eat tomorrow. Your son may bring home your share. (145)

Thus, "all the three sections of the society, namely the politicians, the intellectuals and the masses presented in the text are still mentally colonized" (Ravichandra, "A Journey Through History" 234) with the blurred vision and the novel reiterates the need to decolonize them. Having examined the stresses and strains in the indigenous Igbo society in the wake of the colonialist's power, the novel manifests the subsequent problems faced by the educated classes in modern Nigeria, like the denunciation of values, the corruption of the new governing classes in the corridors of power, as well as the cynicism of the masses.

## V. MENTAL COLONIZATION AND TRANSITION

The process of acculturation of Africans into whiteman's culture has led to identity crises. In the portrayal of literate Igbos like Odili, Achebe introduces "individuals standing at the juncture [crossroads] of traditional Igbo culture and westernization. They are men in transition" (Richards 83) alienated under the impact of western education. Odili epitomizes the mental colonization of literate Africans. His idealism, political ideology, affiliation with the new political party for personal benefits and finally his triumph in winning over Edna exhibits him to be a product of western mould. However, Odili fails in fully internalizing the western values for he is still clutching to his traditional roots and he himself confesses, "I had not always disliked Mr Nanga. Sixteen years or so ago he had been my teacher" (3).

Thus, the postcolonial politics as rendered in *A Man of the People* manifests the inconceivable damage done to the indigenous society. The simple agrarian society of ancient Africa has undergone a sea change only to become a society comprising of more self centered and degenerate individuals who cannot look beyond the boundary walls of their selfish dispositions. The alchemists are politicians like Nanga who recognize spirituality as an ornamentation that only a wealthy man can afford. The poor man in the country is so much encumbered by physical ailments and poverty that he loses the ability to distinguish between good and bad. Thus, the politicians woo the rich by persuasion and flattery and give the poor working class, not exactly what they deserve, but something that is enough to keep their body and soul together. The rich will never be disappointed because they get enough and the poor will never rebel as they are never given the opportunity to complain. The moment they are ready to topple the existing government, a conniving politician like Nanga would soothe them with words and money, and ironically this will keep the poor masses silent till the next election campaign. Hunger is a driving force, whose strength postcolonial politics recognizes fully:

Keep the poor masses hungry for sometime and when they complain throw at them packets of food and generous words that will take them back to their initial stupor. Pacify the rich man and deceive the poor is a principle by which the politicians of the postcolonial world function. (Fanon, "Towards a Post-Colonial Metanarrative" 99)

A finest display of this policy is exhibited in the novel where a society trampled down by poverty measures good only by the immediate benefits in cash or kind. The people find no fault with the politicians' money-making-practices, as long as they too have some share in the wealth. The ex-policeman pinpoints this degeneration of values quite succinctly:

We know they are eating ... but we are eating too. They are bringing us water and they promise to bring us electricity. We did not have those things before. (125)

A scramble for the "national cake" (12) is at the heart of *A Man of the People*. "For men like Nanga nation is a cake from which each group should try to get as large share as possible" (Gakwandi 78). Exhibiting generosity Chief Nanga asks Odili to come to the capital, take up a strategic post in the civil services and thus press for his share for the national cake. "Ethnicity therefore gets a superior claim to that of national integration. The ethnic matrix of values, however, is not applied to the nation, which is thought of as no more than a cake to be eaten up" (Juneja, "Post-Colonial Novel" 19).

As an early postcolonial disillusionment novel, Achebe enumerates Nanga as a fraud, not only as a politician, but as a pseudo-champion of authentic African culture and cause. Though splendidly dressed in traditional robes, he hankers after the western things, thus he practices phooey idealism. The so-called champions of independence such as Nanga carry on the destruction and plunder of their own nation. It is disappointment with the people - more serious in the long run than the criminality of the Nanga - which exemplify the bitterness in the post-independent Africa. The loss of the balance between the spiritual and material values, and the loss of "moral centre" results in the emergence of corrupt people like Nanga, whom Achebe qualifies as the "most monstrous off-spring produced by the tawdry union of Europe and Africa" (Innes, *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* 62).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Odili's transformation from a pure idealist to a man inflicted with sexual jealousy finally ends in the filth of postcolonial politics. He turns confused with very little of his idealism intact. In other words, Odili's trials and errors have not brought him to any firm moral ground, rather he has embraced the follies and flaws of colonial system in an effort to refute them. He falls a pathetic victim to the system, where Nanga's magic mantras reign supreme and ignorance seems a bliss.

Odili begins the novel idealistically, opposed to Nanga and contemptuous of the villagers: They were not ignorant but cynical. He ends in the novel guilty of most of the same moral errors and even the same crimes as Nanga's, he is guilty too of the same errors as the villagers: ignorance and cynicism. (Colmer 101)

Thus, the idealism of Odili is juxtaposed to postcolonial opportunistic streaks. Throwing the idealism to winds, he gets transformed into another Nanga, adopting his ways, if not his life style. The vices penetrate to the core of his moral fabric; violence was never acceptable to Odili but in the end he too resorts to violent actions. Chief Koko's death is undoubtedly fair example of poetic justice but it is certainly a blatant murder that neither his own village community nor the imported code of legal justice would support or defend. Honesty has been a part of Odili's moral landscape and a slightest adherence to honesty would have lifted him from baseness and hypocrisy of postcolonial party politics. The antagonist Odili can see through the framework but prefers to stand on the quicksand of the corrupt politics by switching over to Nanga's corrupt strategies and political propaganda.

Therefore, *A Man of the People* is a scathing attack on political opportunism. It depicts the extent to which the traditional values are turned upside down in the aftermath of independence resulting in gloom, uncertainty and disenchantment. Achebe however, leaves the novel open ended, for an impasse in the political system has reached and military intervention is plainly not a viable solution to the problems of the political governance. The coup in the novel serves as a symbol of abolition of false regimes constituted by politicians like Chief Nanga and thus, the arrival of coup ensures a way, a hope, a path for better future. At the close of the novel, Odili begins to have a sense of what

is to be done and his enlightenment allows the possibility of a new political attitude with a vision. It reiterates that no political order is permanent and the old order is to be destroyed to make the way for the new.

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