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## A Political Analysis of *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe

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### Abstract

This present research paper is concerned with one of the most successful and political novelists in the twentieth century Africa named, Chinua Achebe, who could really depict the real situation of his country, Nigeria, in terms of political instability and corruption. Especially, in his fourth produced novel entitled, *A Man of the People* in which he portrays his birthplace as one of the most corrupted countries around the world during post-independence era. Achebe is a Nigerian author who writes about different aspects of his country during his lifetime and the reflection of his society could be noticed very clearly in his literary works; especially, in his selected novel. Achebe based his most prominent characters in his novel like M.A. Nanga and Odille on some political figures of his time that have a major role in the corruption in Nigeria. In this sense, his chosen literary text can be seen and read as political source for his country.

**Keywords:** Chinua Achebe, Corruption, Politics

### Introduction

It seems that throughout the twentieth century African history has passed through different political phenomena such as colonialism and independence, to mention only two. This, definitely, has a great impact on every single facets of life; in particular, on the trends in authors' literary works.

As an example, Chinua Achebe's literary works have profoundly affected by these political events. As stated by Anthony Chinedu Okoko that trends in Achebe's novels have been changed constantly from colonial to independence, and then to post-independence times (Okoko: 2006, p. 8).

Especially, in his selected novel entitled *A Man of the People* which portrays this transformation vividly. This is actually because at the very beginning of the novel, readers can notice and feel how Nigerians are controlled by foreigners like white people. In the middle of the story, it can be seen by the readers how both the ordinary people and leaders in Nigeria want and work so hard together in order to gain their independence.



By the end of the story, after natives gained their independence; readers could see corruption and the abuse of authority within the Nigerian society; in particular, their leaderships. Even though Simon Gikandi interprets Achebe's chosen novel in a more positive manner by stating that "the novel provided a new way of reorganizing African cultures, particularly in the crucial juncture of transition from colonialism to national independence" (Gikandi: 1991, p. 31), the end of the story does not have a decent and an upright result to the Nigerian people. This is, indeed, due to the misuse of political authority by politicians and uses it for their own interest, which leads to different serious leadership problems in Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular. Thus, on the one hand, African peoples' dream of having an ideal government and nation after their independence from British colonial has become disappointed. On the other hand, this issue has become the concern in most of Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe's literary works; in particular, in the above mentioned novel since independence.

Therefore, Achebe's novel is considered as an attempt to reflect the real leadership problems in Nigeria. This paper tends to explain how Achebe's novel depicts the nature of politics in Nigeria during post-independence period and how the leaderships utilize and exploit the independence for themselves.

### **The Historical and Textual Analysis**

Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian novelist and poet, was born in (1930) and died in (2013). In (1966), Achebe wrote his fourth novel entitled *A Man of the People* during post-colonial era, where humanity marginalized completely by authority people. Phenomenon like corruption became an obvious problem and issue produced by leaderships instead of improving peoples' bad living conditions.

In fact, African citizens were betrayed by their leaders. Hence, independence became uselessness for people and grace and blessing for leaderships. Achebe's selected novel is regarded as a political satire among his literary works.

According to Bernth Lindfors "Achebe's novel should be recognized as a devastating satire in which Achebe heaped scorn on independent Africa by picturing one part of it just as it was" (Lindfors: 2004, p. 278). Needless to say, the chosen literary text tells the story of a young ambitious teacher named, Odille Samalu, who hates his previous tutor called M.A. Nanga because of his being a corrupt and powerful politician figure. Throughout the course of the novel, Odille, the main character gets involved in the political affairs. At the end of the novel both of them are destroyed by a military revolution.

As mentioned before, Achebe in his most political novel *A Man of the People* highlights the political and social situations in his country (Nigeria) after the attainment of independence. Basically, Achebe aims to draw readers' attention to the fact that once Nigeria gains its independence, unprepared and incompetence political figures adopt



one of the most crucial positions in political sphere which is leadership position. In this perspective, Christopher Heywood describes the post-independent Nigeria as a “cesspool of corruption and misrule” (Heywood: 1975, p.82).

This quotation has been supported by Vachaspati Dwivedi who maintains that “Nigeria is a place where leaders who had fought for independence became traitors after attaining power, and sacrificed their country in exchange for middle-class comfort” (Dwivedi: 2008, p. 3).

These two quotations might imply the fact that selfish leaders aim to exploit the independence to a great extent which brings about different leadership problems such as nepotism, corruption, materialism and so forth which make the people of that area suffer from them very harshly. Anthony Chinedu Okoko has commented on such corrupted society as follows: “[m]aterialism, corruption, injustice and exploitation become the vague rather than the bane” (Okoko: 2006, p. 10).

This quotation might depict the author’s attempt to raise the issue of corruption in terms of politics and within the Nigerian society. Achebe really illustrates this predicament throughout his novel by using a character like Nanga, who wants to maintain himself in power in spite of his awareness of being ineptitude. The author here himself refers to this fact by using Odille’s speech in *A Man of the People* when he states: “[t]he trouble in our nation is that none of us had been indoors ... the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house” (AMP, p. 42).

Through Odille’s speech, Achebe tends to express how power and wealth can seduce ordinary people and make them greedy. Sunday Osim Etim points out that “[g]reed is the unscrupulous, uncontrollable desire to accumulate more and more wealth” (Etim: 2004, p. 293). Taking Etim’s idea into account, the desire to accumulate fortune makes the people lose their humanity features and be ready to do anything just to be wealthy and have the authority to oppress people.

Furthermore, another crucial issue that Chinua Achebe also intends to represent through the character of Chief Nanga is the politician leaderships’ intention and deed in Nigeria during post-independence era. As Mavis Thokozile Macheka states that “[t]he leaders abuse their posts to enrich themselves at the nation’s expense” (Macheka: 2012, p. 14).

Readers are led to believe that the leaderships and authority people use the resources of Nigeria for their personal prosperity rather than for their Nigerian citizens, who worked together in gaining this independence during the colonial time.

Moreover, Achebe aims to depict the reality of politician figures in Nigeria through Honorable Chief M. A. Nanga. Nanga pretends that he is a patriotic man and he is from the grassroots of his country; particularly, by focusing on the importance of Nigerians’ local values and customs while giving his speech at Anata Grammar School. However, in reality, Nanga is not only a man of corruption and lack of political morality ideas, but



he also gathers his wealth through various types of corruption such as bribery and intimidation. Jusús Varela Zapata has described Chief Nanga as a person who is against being clever and uneducated (Zapata: 1993, p. 215).

This quote seems to imply that the political figures in this novel like the above mentioned one is more concerned about making money. In other words, it can be said that material is much more important than education for them. Taking Zapata's comment further, Nigerian leaders who assume the political positions after the Europeans have left are unskillful, ineptitudes and semi-illiterates. This is because of their ambition of having power and authority through wealth. Thus, it can be said that they were not suitable for ruling a country and taking care of the people, who really in need to have skillful and well-educated sovereigns in order to serve them.

Basically, Nigerian people believe that they could have an upright life, equality, security, and justice by the attainment of independence. However, because their new leaders follow the same colonial forms of oppression, their dreams have been vaporized. Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden claim the people in charge of African economies have been influenced by western values, which promote the individual over the collective, and therefore are neglecting historic African cultural values (Pieterse and Duerden: 1972, p. 97).

In addition, this is also because of the dilemmas of corruption experienced by Nigerians. Achebe utilizes different types of this dilemma in his novel. For instance, when Nanga offers Odili an opportunity for having a better job, he tells him that: "[b]y the way Odili, I think you are wasting your talent here ... people must press for their own share of the national cake" (AMP, p. 13).

Actually, Corruption has become a normal phenomenon and practiced by post-colonial Nigerian society. In this respect, Mavis Thokozile Macheka claims that "[t]he society realizes the hypocrisy of its leadership but it is silent about it" (Macheka: 2012, p. 15). This view has also been supported by Bernth Lindfors by stating that "people were willing to excuse the extravagances of their leaders" (Lindfors: 1996, p. 24).

This idea has been developed by Sunday Osim Etim claims that corruption is supported and encouraged by society as a whole, which enables politicians to use public money for personal means (Etim: 2004, p. 294).

The practice of corruption by both politicians and common people, on the one hand, implies that they all forget about their great aims of building a new, democracy and equal country that they have before independence time. On the other, it is the reflection of peoples' belief in politicians' right to use and exploit the country's resources for their self-interest because of their struggling for gaining independence.

As it has been mentioned earlier, Achebe paints a vivid picture of spreading corruption as an inevitable epidemic in almost all fields of life, like economy and social life, to mention only few. Education, of course, is not far away from that disorder. Essentially,



Achebe's depiction of education in his novel is to demonstrate the effect of political on education in Nigeria during that period of time. Therefore, he refers to it in different scenes throughout *A Man of the People*. One of the explicit scenes is when Nanga gets a doctorate title from an American university, Achebe writes that: "They are going to give me doctorate degree ... 'You no, see say the title fit my name pem,' said the Minister with boyish excitement, and we all said yes it suited him perfectly" (AMP, p. 19). The reflection of this quotation is that education seems to be used as a means to maintain his position even if it is apparent to him that he is incompetence. Márta Roman has pointed out that education is regarded as a political mechanism by leaders to boost their personal gain (Roman: 2002). Taking Roman's speech into account, it might be true that even the most crucial and necessary thing in such type of government and society has been corrupted by political figures.

While, on the other hand, Achebe refers to education as a good means for some intellectuals, who intend to change the corrupt political condition and build a new democratic Nigerian society. Odili is a good example that Achebe provides in his most political novel. Odili is an intellectual young figure, who aims to have a pure country. In other words, a country without corruption, compromises, and favors. According to Márta Roman, the process of learning enlightens Odili to see the realities of his society and political system (Roman: 2002). This clarifies that education helps him not only to increase his understanding in political, but it also helps him how he could deal with it.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, this research paper has explained *A Man of the People* can be a political intervention in terms of leaderships and society in post-colonial Nigeria era. Achebe portrays very obviously the chaos that might be produced by independence. Achebe does not only depict the abuse of leaders' posts, but he also proves this dilemma by referring to different characters in his novel such as Nanga. This paper has also shown that the main goal of political leaders is to enrich themselves and look at their peoples' needs as secondary thing. Moreover, corruption becomes approved by the majority and politicians have used education as a means for their promotion. It can be said that independence does not improve neither political nor social situations in Nigeria, but it becomes the source of evil for them.



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