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ODILI, A VISIONARY YOUTH IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S "A MAN OF THE PEOPLE"

SACHDEVA EKTA

Kalimai Santar, Near Namdhari Dharmashala
Morar, Gwalior , M.P



SACHDEVA EKTA

ABSTRACT

The schema of a nation-state was spanking new for the African people when it was brought in to them by the European colonial rulers. At the cusp of independence in 1960, the Africans envision of a new enlightened nation where the subverted native values and civilization thrive once again. However, the native rulers fail to refurbish the nation to dignity. Instead of curing the clairvoyant wound, they imitate the colonizer upsetting the anticipation of the suffering masses. Years (1958-1966) involves publishing of Chinua Achebe's tetra logy tracing history of Nigeria from pre-colonial to post-colonial times: *Things fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God*(1964), and *A Man of the People*. *A Man of the People* is sardonic and a derisive analysis of society in intention holding up a mirror against the New Rulers of the postcolonial era in Africa manifest by disenchantment and disappointment thereby exploring Achebe's regenerative vision of an all-embracing and egalitarian society where the marginal people articulate freely. Achebe's fourth novel, *A Man of the People* was hailed as a novel with a farsighted end. It takes us back to the national politics and elections unprofessional conduct and fake promises made by leaders like Chief Nanga to harvest the best of the nation's wealth. Odili, the anti-hero ends up committing himself to the higher goal of the welfare of the people. Achebe creates Odili as partaker narrator of the novel who exposes the repercussion of the colonial rule. Achebe has adopted a inventive technique by introducing first person narration for the first time among his tetra logy. This paper attempts to shows how a flicker of hope is manifested in Odili Samalu, as a visionary youth, to reinvent Africa as well as to regain the lost dignity of his nation. Although all the first novels typify different kinds of manliness, Odili turns out to accomplish more than any of them, be it Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, Obi of *No Longer at Ease* or Ezeulu of *Arrow of God*.

Key Words: postcolonial, colonized, regenerative vision, egalitarian society.

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A Man of the People (1966) is a lampoon set in a fictitious African state which has just attained liberation. Snobbishness and pumped up egos, ineptitude and governmental ennui, rise in food and petrol prices and dishonesty, infidelity, bribery, hostility and unbridled gluttony are the order of the day. Chinua Achebe depicts the life of a post-colonial African politician, Nanga, who is part of the new elite that has substituted the former colonial masters. The political office won has been merely a device for the politician to amass wealth and control over a society being raided for the self interest of one man's voracity. The African people at the helm of affairs pursue the footprints of white men in their approaches, dealings and mindset thus dismantling the trust and desires in the sovereign Africa.

Critics have drawn a close similarity to the pigs in *Animal Farm*, an allegory by George Orwell; these political elite modeled a fashionable life for themselves at the cost of the ordinary folk. The novel interrogates the trichotomy of authority and leadership in the newly evolving nation state. The country has now passed in the hands of native people, but there is none of the worthy leaders to speak of, and the leaders are ruled by the force of unrestrained materialism, unchecked political corruption and unbridled self-centeredness. The worth of the leadership and the reaction of the people to that leadership form the core of the novel. The novel is a first person retrospective by Odili, from the rural community of Ananta. He is at conflict with Mr. Nanga, his ex-teacher, Minister of Culture, who enters as a Parliament accommodate in African country. Odili represents the dynamic youthful cohort and Mr. Nanga represents the traditional customs of Nigeria, often nicknamed as M.A. Minus Opportunity.

Odili has his own story to tell. At first wholly misanthropist about the political leadership of the country, Odili keeps a disparagement towards any kind of political activity whatsoever. Once he had complete faith in University-trained public-minded leaders who assured an economically feasible and politically steady unified nation in the Post independent period, but political trailblazers, of whom Chief Nanga is an befitting example, start hankering after the twinkle of greediness so as to increase their personal riches at the cost of the nation or public purse, thereby upsetting the cherished dream of its people. Odili proposes to justify his own actions and standards as he maligns the intentions of Nanga.

The Colonizers (the external enemy) are driven out of the land and now the nation has to fight the amoral politicians (the internal enemy). The novel represents the continuing process of crumbling effects which started with the colonial system, and echoes forth the perplexity and chaos of a society, which eyewitnesses a total collapse of values. In the absence of the colonial hegemony, native leaders emerge as centers of power antagonizing their own society and people. They are characterized as political aspirants in infringements of social aspirations. The politicians create incalculable suffering and despair following the opening elation, high prospects and hopefulness that welcomed independence. The disordered forces let loose by an abet administration presuppose a sweeping power over the Nigerian society once it gains independence. In his reasoned analysis of the wickedness around and assail on political corruption and thuggery, Achebe chooses to the use of an unconventional mechanism, i.e. an anti-hero, the narrator persona, Odili Samalu. *A man of the People* further explicates Achebe's statement.

"Europe conceded independence to us and we promptly began to misuse it or rather those leaders to whom we entrusted the wielding of our new power and opportunity" (Chinua, 1976:20)

In his essay, 'Novelist as Teacher', *Hopes and Impediments*, he implores "what we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us." (Achebe, 1988:43) *A Man of the People* is a work set for that mission.

The protagonist of the Novel Mr. M.A. Nanga is a minister in the West African state who acknowledges being a spokesperson of the common people of Natives. The idyllic preached by Mr. Nanga are very venerable. But the way in which he uses his political power for his self-exaggeration is far from reasonable. There is many an incongruity between his public behavior and the private:

"They were not only ignorant but cynical Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you as my father did if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth" (Achebe, 1966:2) Like a mainstream of politician Mr. Nanga is also very

corrupt and has amassed a large wealth. He takes a fat commission from the contractors like the British Amalgamated company and others: "I am getting them on never-never arrangement from the British Amalgamated."(Achebe, 1966:38)

Odili is an ex-student of Mr. Nanga. Being an educated youth he is different from others as he is aware of the scattering decay in his society at its political, economical and social levels. An ardent witness of national political situation, Odili renounces the opportunity to be posted in civil service and settle down as a teacher in a remote place, allow himself a little freedom of action. Odili's only motive in his formative years had been the acquiring of a scholarship for advanced studies abroad. Chief Nanga, his former teacher at school, visits and recognizes him thus offering him help in attaining the wanted scholarship. Odili is carried away by Nanga's appeal. Under Nanga's influence he reconsiders his attitude towards political idealism and accomplishing of political beliefs. However Odili's cordial relationship with Nanga comes to an quick end when Nanga entices his girl friend Elsie, consequentially there is hostility between the two and Odili plans to seduce Edna, Nanga's parlour wife, Edna, to retaliate his manhood. He clearly recalls, on the eve of chief Nanga's tour in his village the way the latter rose to power "a man like Nanga has risen overnight from poverty and insignificance to his present opulence (Achebe, 1966:33)". The prime minister promptly dismisses his cabinet colleagues afraid of taking the necessary but unpopular steps suggested by them to drooping economy. Being sensitive Odili feels deceived at the discrimination dealt to the honorable ministers. It is from that moment that he is chary of Nanga, self-appointed man of the people. "Somehow Odili has managed to remain untainted amidst all the surrounding corruption and his clear vision provides an undistorted view of a warped society" (Bernth, 1976: 62)

The interaction between the two major characters Chief Nanga and Odili Samalu shapes the basis of the argument of *A Man of the People*. Both symbolize deviating dogma and typify the social group they belong to. Nanga is the delegate of a class of deceitful politicians, neocolonial elite, who wants to hold on to power, inherited from the passing colonial masters, at any cost. He is completely in the clutch of materialistic values of a money-grabbing capitalist system left behind by the colonizers. Odili is a typical example of an estranged, visionary, native youth - an artifact of the colonial education system. Odili had scholarships to secondary school and university without any benefaction and entirely on his merit basis which is commendable. Visiting to Europe was indeed the biggest education for him. "I wasn't going to sell my soul for it or beg anyone to help me."(Achebe, 1966:15).This shows him as a man of high morals and standards. He also fears being labeled as one of the snooty intellectuals, with hope, and a desire for post-graduate diploma from London. However, Odili never submits to 'lick any Big Man's boots,' explaining: "In fact one reason why 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"(15)

He is a curious blend of absorption and repulsion reminding the problem related to public and private principles in a society that has lost its traditional moors for materialistic temptations. This materialistic course voices rampant corruption, discord and skepticism in a society which is at the brink of breaking its bonds with the past entering in an age of chaotic administration with isolated individuals. It brings to the forefront various aspects of thoroughly degenerated contemporary society and offers a critique of Nigerian societies in all spheres of life. . The defeat of human values and dignity is mainly due to the exploitation of the natives by their own men to meet their selfish motives. The novel illustrates the ineffectiveness of the native leaders for what they make of their country when the power changes persons. Chief Nanga epitomizes the speculative tendencies of new political masters. The external forces were driven out and the country has native leaders and these minions are tempted to outwit themselves. This is how the corrupt government regime works. Independence has brought into work a new set of black masters walking into the shoes of the colonial masters in lieu of the old white masters.

The cordial relationship between Odili and Chief Nanga suddenly turns sour when Nanga sleeps with his girlfriend Elsie opening their relationship to be a casual one. Deeply hurt, Odili resolves to retaliate himself at the sexual and the political front too. Odili is meticulously critical of politics for the moral decline in political

arena. The political enmity is thus the result of sexual jealousy that translates into political rivalry. Nanga steals Elsie, Odili's girl friend and offers six girls to Odili the same evening, and ironically he is the Minister of Culture. "Just think of such a cultureless man going abroad and calling himself Minister of Culture. Ridiculous. This is why the outside world laughs at us" (Achebe, 1966:20-21). Claiming to be "a man of the people" - a representative of the common people - he pretends to solve the problems of natives thus misguiding them, however he is vilely corrupt politician living in the ostentatious magnificence on his ill gotten profits; he has amassed huge wealth through commissions that he receives from contractors. He has wife but plans to marry again as: 'his missus is too "bush" for his present position so he wants a bright new "parlour-wife" to play hostess at his parties.' (20) He is not a faithful husband, a leader, nor a teacher. Seemingly, in a motive to aspire for higher posts he is geared up for every kind of unprofessional conduct. In an election he buys votes. He is proficient in party politics and possesses all unfair tactics to deal crafty situations.

In contrast, spanking new out of university, Odili aspires to become "a full member of the privileged classes whose symbol was the car" (100). Odili's father, a District Interpreter was like the Supreme Deity for the natives; he also symbolizes spitefulness, materialism and corruption. He loathes his son's meanly paid occupation: "He would ... tell me [Odili] for the hundredth time to leave 'this foolish teaching', and look for a decent job in the government and buy myself a car" (28). The father frantically desires car which is the ultimate status symbol in the society. The cynicism and obsequiousness of the people is noticeable. "Every sensible supplicant knew that the lesser god must first be wooed and put in a sweet frame of mind ... [so] brought my [Odili's] father gifts of yams, pots of palm-wine or bottles of European drink" (25) for now people have become worldly wise. In determining people's preferences, money which brings in power plays a vitally substantial role.

Odili's obligations in the political actions makes him fully conscious that by hiring bodyguards and using party funds to buy a car can land him in danger .He compromises with his idealism and he sets out his real motives by winning Edna and contesting an election against Nanga so as to expose him publically. His analyzes himself when he faces Nanga at the rally; his deportment is entirely turned around of the one he had at the beginning of the novel. After his political makeover, Odili promises never to be corrupted by bourgeois benefits of which "the car was the most visible symbol" (100). The portrayal of Odili is exemplary of the educated elite which are in conflict with the professional politicians in Africa with little or no education. Their main need for acquiring a political position is only the fidelity for the party and politics provides them with social mobility, prestige, wealth and power. The conflict between Chief Nanga and Odili problematizes this struggle for power in the affairs of the nation state. Achebe here satirizes a world where the title of Chief for the Honorable M.A. Nanga, M.P. is just a travesty, for being a corrupt politician he is simply interested in the greater share of 'national cake.'(11) At this position in the narrative we can understand Odili's condemnation of the country's politicians. It is classified with his new-fashioned perception that an ordinary man could be beguiled by authority. Unmoving, the politicians similar to Mr. Nanga ,good-looking they may be, stand for as morally wrong .As a realistic account, men similar to Mr. Nanga receive bribes along with exercising the currency to construct apartment house blocks.. They also create forged start to the inhabitants regarding potential ransack. Besides, they are re-elected.

The concept of self-worth has undergone an adjustment where the moral scruples do not cause any inconvenience to human conscience. Nanga has seduced Odili's girlfriend Elsie. And just then he comes to realizes and decides to enter politics to wreak retribution. . Odili decides to crusade against Nanga in his own constituency. He forms a new party C.P.C. with Max and his friends, to form a new era of cleanliness in the politics of Nigeria. For Odili, his revenge, his new political ambition, and the girl are all seemingly mixed up. Nanga persuades Odili to desert Politics and even entices him with the offer of scholarship for studying abroad. But when he fails to induce, Nanga let loose his thugs upon him, beating him nearly to death. At the foundational campaign congregation, Nanga's men laugh at Odili in front of a crowd and Edna's father intimidates him with a machete with the suggestion to withdraw his nomination:

“My in law is like a bull ... and your challenge is like a challenge of a tick to a bull. The tick fills its belly with blood from the back of the bull and the bull does not even know it is there. He carries it wherever he goes – to eat, drink or pass ordure. Then one day the cattle egret comes, perches on the bull’s back and picks out the tick ...” (p.97).

But being cultured, very soon he becomes pensive, reflective and self- critical.

“How important was my political activity in its own right? It was difficult to say; things seemed so mix up; my revenge, my new political ambition and the girl.” Surely, he had more noble missions to be accomplished: “true, I had other advantages like youth and education”, he adds “I needed all the reinforcement I could get”. At this moment “ although I had little hope of winning Chief Nanga’s seat ,it was necessary nonetheless to fight an expose him as much as possible”(99).

This does not restrain him from working to accomplish self- advancement in a situation where fair play and righteousness are enquired. Odili’s progress in his moral upliftment is remarkable and continuing. He feels that to fight an unmerited government is necessary to use a similar set of tactics he realizes that it is indispensable to soil his hands a little to win a filthy war. The change for the better in the character of Odili is gradual.

Odili’s idealism, political beliefs, association with the new political party for personal gains and finally his feat in winning over Edna demonstrates him to be a product of western mould. The socio-political postcolony rendered in *A Man of the People* makes it urgent for the newly independent nation not only to detect the woe but also to offer the refurbishment of nation's health and Achebe has tried to give course to the pointlessly advancing Nigerian society in an absolute manner. The changes wrought in Nigerian life during the twentieth century are revealed against the background of evolving socio-political realities which are for a deep concern for the masses ,their plight and predicament along with the problems in which they are trapped neck-deep. Therefore, it can be inferred that Achebe offers the power centre that has failed to live up to the expectations of the masses and at the same time the writers have tried their best to give a positive direction to the Africans for the times to come via their fiction. The expected need of the hour is to reorganize the precedence to attain real African nationhood. The pan African vision is for the ideal Africa of the dreams that espouses the view that the strength of the black community can be restored only in the form of eventual amalgamation of the race.

Odili is an ambitious youth with opinions and approaches that are in a, a perpetual process of modification and flux. He advances the disagreements of his individual position with what is ventured as a novice searching for the ‘correctly’ technique, for him and for the nation. Odili accepts, as no idle talk, the common saying that “it didn’t matter *what* you knew but *who* you knew” (15). He is prepared with some stipulations, to work within this situation to achieve positive political influence and reckon self-advancement.

Odili is an idealist who has gathered knowledge about the soreness as well as anguish of his beneficiary citizens and has known how the complete system fetters fraudulent politicians and the well-off .But the reality is that his nation is, at the present, without stately regulation. He has observed the inhabitants in a new-fashioned appearance. The wide-ranging inhabitants have no alternative but to experience and remain for a newly-fashioned administration.

Odili’s center of attention on revenge keeps him unfaltering despite mortifications brought on him by his headmaster, Mrs. Nanga, and Nanga’s followers; he had a genuine desire to destroy Nanga and the corruption he represents. At this point he wants to expose Nanga for his misdeeds in the hope that there “may be someone who would get up and say, No, Nanga has taken more than the owner could ignore!” (p. 100). Odili joins a newly formed political party, "Common People's Convention Party" - CPC (70), founded by his friend Maxwell Kulamo and plans to contest Nanga's seat in the approaching election. Initially his primary target is Edna and politics is of secondary concern, meanwhile, he falls in love with Edna and under the altering circumstances Odili takes on himself in an education struggle promoted by the politico-economic disgrace that brings down the government and his motives gradually become more articulated. Finally he loses the filthy political battle but succeeds in winning the girl. The Prime Minister unilaterally signs up his old cabinet. But as the commotion still subsisted, the army stages a coup and tosses the leaders in jail. Military coup overthrows

the government seeing chaos in the town. 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, and 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. He is aware of the decay that is spreading. The extravagant lifestyle of his erstwhile teacher did not color his judgment. It restates that no political order is enduring and the old order is to be obliterated to make the way for the new. The novel ends with a positive note: "The fat-dripping, gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime just ended....You chop, me self I chop, palaver finish" (137). It is portended that a new school has been established in the name of Max, the martyr, where the readers can pin their trust on the rejuvenation of Africa's cultural ethos. The killing of Max by the thugs of chief Koko, who is in league with Nanga, is symbolic of a new dawn on the Nigerian cultural horizon. The novel ends with the prayer for involving each and every individual of the society in the nation building process. Odili Samalu, the protagonist, mediates Achebe's vision that individuals must not "give up because ... this is a necessary stage in our growth" (Duerden & Pieterse, 1972: 13).

Conclusion

To conclude, Achebe attributes the failure of post-colonial Kangan society to the failure of the leaders who dissociate themselves from the public cause and their problems. He suggests the need for struggle and vigil to checkmate the assault of power on human dignity and liberty. He also impels his countrymen to recreate a new egalitarian and socialist society through collective effort to sustain its unity and integrity. Indeed, group awareness and collective effort can take away the real enemy of Africa. Hence, it rests with the enlightened individuals, like Odili, who have deep empathy and harmonious association with the people, to create new dimensions and values for a new social and political array. To alleviate the problem and restore the nation to dignity, Achebe thus endows the marginal people with veins of valor thereby accentuating that the true liberators are the people themselves. The novel has a prophetic end with people occupying the centre position and their role as important as the enlightened elite's. This was possible due to revolts by Odili which encouraged countrymen to take bold steps. By denouncing the idea of European cultural and political domination, resolution is made possible by extending unions across class, gender and political hierarchies. Out of the disfigured past, the Africans must construct a glorious future, not in terms of war, but in terms of social progress and cultural growth. Achebe leaves the novel open-ended, for an impasse in the political system has reached and military intrusion is certainly not a feasible solution for the problems of political ascendancy. At the close of the work Odili begins to have a sense of what is to be done and his enlightenment allows the leeway of a new vision for Nigerian politics.

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