
Socio-Political Decadence in Achebe's *A Man of the People* in Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* and Martin Akpan's *The Crumb Eaters*

By

ANWULI CHUKWUKAELO, Ph.D

*Department of English
Federal Polytechnic,
Oko.*

Abstract

*African writers from inception have a deepening susceptibility for social and political commitment as their texts depict socio-political events in their societies. It has become a weapon for reconstructing the battered and denigrated African image and an effective slingshot against colonialism. Now, it is being used as a veritable weapon to reflect and retract socio-political problems in African nations. Through textual analysis, this paper seeks to contextualise socio-political decadence, post-colonial frustrations, and how African writers, through their works, have shown commitment in reversing this situation. Achebe's **A Man of People**, Festus Iyayi's **Heroes** and Martin Akpan's **The Crumb Eaters** are used as study in this paper. These novels reflect three phases of Nigerian political history. Thus, a man of the people interrogates Nigerian politics immediately after independence, *Heroes* examines the political situation in the country on the incursion of military into politics while, *The Crumb Eaters* investigates politics and leadership in this political dispensation.*

The attainment of independence by African states became a huge irony, as it ushered in another era of "colonialism" and exploitation this time around, not by the former colonial masters, but by few members of African elite who stepped into the shoes of the departed imperialist. For almost half a decade of her existence as an independent nation, Nigeria has drifted endlessly and aimlessly under either a blatantly corrupt civilian leadership or an autocratic and despotic military junta. Nigerian for instance, has experienced several coups d'tat and counter coups d'tat; she has conducted several elections that are massively and blatantly rigged; she has witnessed many violent protest and communal clashes. Out of greed and selfishness of the leaders, the country was plunged into a three-year civilian was that devastated and crippled the entire life of the nation. This informed Orabueze's description of Nigeria as 'a crippled giant carrying a heavy burden on her head, a tottering child that is still cutting its milk teeth at forty' (Orabueze, 2005:115).

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Purpose of the Study

This paper aims at achieving the following purposes:

1. To x-ray and diagnose the political malady that has infected the womb of the Nigerian nation.
2. To elucidate the problem of politics of misplaced values and failed leadership and its far reaching tragic effect on the Nigerian society.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs New Historicism as its theoretical framework. New Historicism, a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt, designates a body of theoretical and interpretive practices that began largely with the study of early modern literature in the United States. New Historicism engages in historical, social and political questions concerning the position of men and women in relation to society and the sense of order represented in literary texts. It can be said to be an acetic approach to the study of literature. It shares a lot of interest and ideas with feminism. As Peck and Coyle posits, it “overlaps with feminism and Marxist Criticism in taking a questioning view of the past, looking at the production, consumption and status of literary texts” (Peck and Coyle, 1988:183). New Historicism investigates the experience of the poor, women and the dispossessed or disenfranchised, examine their individual lives in relation to the society and power.

Accordingly and in sum, there is general agreement that the primary concern of New Historicism is to unearth the issues of power as reflected in “texts” (Wilson, 1981:238). The novels will be examined based on the primary concerns of New Historicism. This is because they reflect different phases of Nigeria’s political history. Thus, Achebe’s **A Man of the People** interrogates the post independent polity in Nigeria, Iyayi’s **Heroes** examines the political situation in the country on the incursion of military into politics while Martin Akpan’s **The Crumb Eaters** investigates politics and leadership in the on-going democratic dispensation.

Socio-Political Decadence in Achebe’s A Man of the People

In this novel, Achebe offers a vitriolic comment on the degree to which acquisitiveness, unrestrained corruption and exploitation, have come to dominate Nigerian life. He discloses. “Within six months of Independence Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves to the nation’s wealth..., this was the situation in which I wrote A Man of the People” (Achebe 1975:12).

Achebe employs the irony of the satirists in order to ridicule and condemn the circumstances the novel evokes. The novel tells, in the first person, the story of Odili Samalu, a university graduate and secondary school teacher and of his romance with the honourable Chief Nanga M. P. and with political life in the country. The novel which deals mainly with the power struggle among the elite is thematically structured among images of “eating and sharing”. Eating and sharing thus becomes an all-pervasive symbol for absence of health and constructiveness in the body politics,

yielding an appropriate metaphor for exploring the corruption and the framework of the avarice and hedonism of the political class.

The main characters in the novel are Chief Nanga, the Minister of Culture, and the school master Odili Samalu. The two men occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum and their relationship defines the basic problems of political morality. Odili has a fastidious, theoretical view of public morality derived from his European type of education and he is found at the beginning of the novel thoroughly disillusioned with political affairs in his own country.

Nanga, the politician in power, occupies the other end of the political spectrum. He is a corrupt and insensitive Minister of Culture in a corrupt regime in an independent Africa state. In a country where the majority of the peasants and workers can afford only pails of excrement, the minister lives in a princely seven bedroom mansion with its seven gleaming, silent action water system. He only arranges for particular roads to be tarred, with an eye to votes in the next election and to ensure the arrival of this ten luxury buses supplied to him.

Odili accepts an invitation to be Nanga's guest in the capital city and there, sees at first hand the extravagant life lived by senior members of government, as extravagance supported largely through defrauding the people by a very thinly disguised system of bribery, corruption and nepotism.

Odili later on discovered how bad Chief Nanga is, things fell apart and he joined another political party. Power at all costs became central to political life. Elections become a mockery of democracy with thuggery, violence and rigging allied to British commercial interest. "Now you tell me how you propose to fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands a little" (Achebe, 1966:74). The thuggery becomes so extreme that the army stages a coup and locks up members of the government.

Socio- Political Decadence in Iyayi's Heroes

At the end of Achebe's: **A Man of the People**, there is a convincing predication that there will be a military intervention in politics as a means of cleansing the nation and preventing it from plunging into a precipice. Thus in the wake of the first coup d'tat and counter coups in Nigeria, the men in uniform had at various times, unimaginatively harped on the same tune as the motivation for their over-throw of the civilian government that is, the love for the country. On the contrary, the soldiers have never achieved the litany of objectives that brought them to power. Some of the elements of social decadence that they would eliminate include corruption and outright – embezzlement of public fund, tribalism, greed and lack of vision on the part of the leaders. Yet they turn out to corrupt all proceeding governments. Thus according to Adekunle Olowonmi "the purportedly redemptive mission led to ruinous albatross on the political terrain" (Olowonmi, 2008:57). In Nigeria, tribal sentiments, selfishness and greed for wealth brought about the civil war that crippled the nation for three good

years. It is against this backdrop that Iyayi's *Heroes* emerged to educate the masses that the civil war that engulfed the entire nation was nothing more than an inordinate quest for absolute power, material possession and monetary gains on the part of the military leaders.

Heroes, Iyayi's vision of the Nigerian civil war is essentially a historical fiction reflecting the true heroes of the war and the atrocities that plagued the populace for good three years. Iyayi says there was no rationale for the war except that the leaders were merely struggling for supremacy while using the ordinary people as tools of war. Through Osime, Iyayi, stated that "he had come to see the war as the result of the struggle for power between individuals (Iyayi, 1986: 123).

The story revolves around the principal character Osime Iyere, a journalist and political correspondent with "City daily News", who had earlier thought that the war was being fought to safeguard and ensure the unity and identity of the nation. Osime wished for the overthrow and defeat of the Biafran forces by the federal troops whom he thinks are the true peacemakers: "Soon we shall be rid of these inconveniences. The federal troops will come and drive these Biafrans away and then everything will be different. There will be no cruelty". (Iyayi, 1986: 37). But it later dawns on him that the federal troops are as vicious and as cruel as the Biafran troops. He realised that this war is fought not for the state of national unity but for the military leaders to get hold of the national wealth therefore, increase their individual wealth.

As far as the novel is concerned, the civil war was a matter of attrition and material waste occasioned by class struggle. The novel raises a number of moral questions about the war; its leaders and consequences on the masses.

Socio-political decadence in Akpan's *The Crumb Eaters*

The Crumb Eaters, a recent voice on the African literary scene follows the tradition of post-independence. A common emblem of this literature is its open expression of disillusionment of the fruits of independence and socio-political problems ravaging African nations. Thus, ***The Crumb Eaters*** does not only express this disillusionment but violently indicts the political depravity that has become the norm on Nigerian political scene. Des Wilson captured vividly the sober picture of Nigerian political scene in the introduction to the novel. In his opinion, the *Crumb Eater* is "a tragic comic and satirical tale of the nightmarish Nigerian political system" (Akpan 2008: xviii). Through the principal characters, Akpan exposes how Nigerian politics have completely emasculated the entire political system and corruptly enriched themselves and leave the system crippling. Winning nomination in "government" parties has been a do or die affair and a robust means of smiling to the bank by the "king makers". In Nigeria, securing a party's nomination largely depends on how much a candidate has doled out to the political 'deities' in the land. Mr. Sylvester Ndoyo exemplifies this in his style of campaign. He is referred to as "the correct guy" (Akpan,

2008:60) because he has consulted the musketeers not only with wine but with crisp naira notes. He lamented to his wife in a rhetorical manner:

The people are out for a kill... Do you know that so far I've bought and distributed to party elders and supporters in the ninety villages of the local government, one hundred and fifty live goats... (Akpan, 2008:49)

Besides the monetary offers, Mr. Ndoyo sold his business centre and turned in the proceeds to Chief Ebie to receive the federal allocation as council chairman. The phenomenon of godfatherism is another emergent ugly feature of politics in Nigeria. Relying on their wealth, they secure party nomination for candidates of their choice, sponsor their election, including manipulating the electoral process.

Conclusion

The forgoing discussion has revealed the tragedies of the traumatised collective soul of a country, due to betrayal of the policy and the asphyxiation of democracy. The writers use their text to reprimand, castigate, lampoon, satirise and cajole their homeland, its rulers, people and their national and cultural idiosyncrasies and maladies. The texts reveal that the ideal dream of independence in the country has fizzled out. What the country requires therefore, is a leadership that recognises the problems at the root of the national life, a leadership that harnesses the political will to solve myriads of problem bedevilling the country.

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