
The Novel and the Novelist: The Role of an Artist in the Post-Independence African State

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah in their novels A Man of the People and The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, respectively, deplored the betrayal of independence slogans. This paper shows how far fiction is used to portray reality of what happened in the post-colonial Africa. The new elite which is at the helm of the nation is a 'comprador bourgeoisie' which is concerned with the politics of self-enrichment while the conditions of ordinary citizens deteriorate. People's cynicism and abandon of their political affairs to this kind of politicians constitutes their contribution to the despicable political situation they are in.

Keywords: Colonialism; Post-Independence; Chinua Achebe; Africa

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On the occasion of Ghana's Independence Day, Kwame Nkrumah addressed not only those who had gathered in Accra but the whole continent of Africa expectant of independence.

At long last, the battle has ended! And thus Ghana, your beloved country, is free for ever... We are not waiting; we shall no longer go back to sleep ... Today, from now on, there is a new African in the world and that new African is ready to fight his own battle and show that after all the black man is capable of managing his own affairs. We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation. (Nkrumah 106-107)

In every country, independence was celebrated with similar passionate speeches expressing joyful expectations. Independence was a propitious moment of joy for everyone who had experienced the yoke of colonialism. It was a new beginning. Then, people "were ready...for big and beautiful things. Even those who were too young to understand it all knew that at last something good was being born...we were not deceived" (Armah 80; 85).

In the years after these celebrations, people began realizing that something had gone wrong because what was happening within the newly independent state did not match their expectations. Some countries seemed stillborn. Apparently, the new rulers had betrayed the hopes with which independence had been contemplated (Owomoyela 84). Novels of disillusionment started being written across the continent expressing resentful anger at what independence had turned out to be. Surprisingly, the failure to fulfill the hopes of the newly independent nation had already been anticipated by Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*.

In this essay, I look at the skepticism with which many people all over Africa regard the governments and their countries by looking at two early disillusionment novels, *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah respectively, that record disillusionment within fictional setups. A novelist, as an artist, tries to raise a revolutionary consciousness of the people by identifying false consciousness of the bourgeoisie ideology. Within the novels of disillusionment, a novelist plays this artistic role by showing the contradictions between the experience of the people and the predications of the ruling bourgeoisie. A novelist tells life not as preached, but it is lived and felt. To do this, a novelist creates an imaginary world, but the fictional characters are peculiar to a real society.

It is difficult to understand the literature of disillusionment unless we flashback to see what people thought independence offered them. Usually, the liberation struggle movement in a colony starts with the allegation that the colonisers have deprived the indigenous masses of their autonomy to control their own lives and resources. The *raison d'être* of the uprising is to show people the due of their efforts acquired resources which are rightfully theirs.

Frantz Fanon foresaw the problem which already exists in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. How does the latter restore power to themselves after they have taken it? For him, "the look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession- all manner of possession: to sit at the settler's table, to sleep in the settler's bed, with his wife if possible" (Fanon 30). The look of the colonised at the coloniser is then not that of revenge but begrudge. This assertion hints at how spurious the motivation for liberation struggle can sometimes be. The consequence of this is the failure of the oppressed to fight oppression because as soon as they take power, their practises will betray their theories of liberation.

It may sound fallacious to come to the conclusion that the problems faced by the newly independent countries are based in gradual self-enrichment rather than on national liberation. But still, it should not be ignored especially based on some characters of the two novels under consideration who engage in politics without any noble political agenda apart from securing their leadership positions in order to benefit from the national wealth at the expense of the ordinary people. In some instances, independence seems to have changed the expression of exploitation and created a new class to replace the white colonialists which Fanon calls the national bourgeoisie. Further, it brought neither peace nor prosperity; rather, it has created economic and social stagnations (Lazarus 51). The two novels I use in my discussion present leadership which is primarily concerned with self-enrichment rather than promoting the economic welfare of its people. In *A Man of the People*, the Prime Minister rejects an economic strategic plan to rescue the country which is at the brink of a

financial crisis. Instead of adopting the plan, he sacks the finance minister who has formulated it and instructs the National Bank to print fifteen million pounds. All this is done because the Prime Minister does not want to lose in the imminent elections (3).

These kinds of politicians are uninterested in the advancement of the nation, but the perpetuation of their power even if it means the ruin of the whole nation. Such a decision and instruction will give citizens, who are uninformed of economic politics, an illusion that their own economic life has improved. However, it will not take long for them to experience inflation. Thus, leaders like this Prime Minister serve to provisionally soothe the ordeals of the people, but because they have only covered not destroyed the economic crisis, it will remain to be experienced.

Independence changed the White exploiting Black into Black exploiting Black, which proves accurate the vision of Frantz Fanon. He attributes the weaknesses and inadequacy of the post-colonial government to “the national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime which is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case, it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace” (119-120). It does not come to save the situation. In Armah’s words, this change of leaders “is only the change of embezzlers and the change of the hunters and the hunted” (162). In fact, independence means the transfer into the native bourgeoisie’s hands unfair privileges which were enjoyed by the colonial bourgeoisie. This is exemplified in the characters of Koomson in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People*.

Whether these fictional post-colonial countries are really independent is a question both novels ask. The novels show that many characters still depend on and regard their colonising countries and other Western countries as superior. When Odili is planning to apply for a scholarship in England, he says that “the most important thing was going to be the opportunity of visiting Europe” (Achebe, *A Man of the People* 17). Chief Koko is a Minister for Overseas Training (32). Armah notes that Regina Koomson plans to advertise her dressmaking enterprise with the emphasis ‘London Trained’ (149). This reveals a continuing admiration and dependence on the metropole countries. All those instances show that the newly independent African country deems itself inferior to the colonial country as it continues to depend and lives in awe of it. There is a problem with this because as long as this admiration persists, the coloniser will come back since the so-called independent state expresses a need not for collaboration, but to be shown a way.

Reading Armah’s narrative of Ghana with crumbling infrastructure, it is inevitable for one to condemn the new government of Ghana led by Kwame Nkrumah. In fact, Armah shows a society that is under destruction using images of the filth and a poverty-stricken population. However, Basil Davidson observes that

what the new governments were obliged to take over... was not a prosperous colonial business, but, in many ways, a profound colonial crisis. There was poverty and hunger in wide rural areas. Towns and cities grew hugely in size as rural people flocked to them in search of food and jobs, and often could find neither. Even before independence, the gap in living-standards between the few with money, houses, or good jobs, and the many who had none of those good things, was wide. (qtd in Lazarus 56)

Eventually, the independent African state could hardly meet the expectations imposed on it because of the crisis of an unequal society created or exacerbated by colonisation. The use of old structures is a very difficult issue that needs much tact to handle. The newly independent African nation could not lie its foundations in a vacuum. The bedrock of its structures has to be laid on some remnants of colonial legacies. However, those structures must be redefined and reshaped in a process of indigenisation for them to be in harmony with the new realities. A lack of economic power is a threat to the autonomy of the newly independent state as it runs a risk of turning back to the colonising country for financial assistance and this will consequently breed neo-colonialism. The continuity of this economic dependence can prolong the whole process of colonisation in new avatars through the agency of the ‘comprador bourgeoisie’. The process of indigenising the colonial structure must be done in full and honest consultation of the people. Since the whole movement of decolonisation was done in the name of the people’s good, then, the new structures must also be established by them and for them.

A new nation needs new ways of organising itself. In the case of Africa, it must find ways that are different from colonial structures which were accused of having been meant to oppress the Africans. If an independent African nation continues to function under colonial structures, it will be bound to fall into the same errors African liberation combatants accused colonial governments. Amid this situation, the artist's intervention becomes pivotal in order to open the eyes of the people to the political realities surrounding them for them to realise the blunders of their new leaders.

An artist does this better than anybody else because the artist's job is solely reflecting the experience of the people. The art of novels or dramas allows people to remember their experiences through a form of introspection, which eventually raises their awareness. In a word, the novel allows the people to examine their past. For Chinua Achebe, a novelist is an educator of the people (Lazarus 62). Eventually, the artist enlightens the masses ignorant or cynical about their political and economic realities in order to upheave them. Frantz Fanon opines that "to educate the people means to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them too" (159).

After this education, the people will be rid of cynicism and apathy because they will have understood that their salvation does not depend on an outside magic hand, but on themselves. Consequently, they will find it imperative for them to contribute to the politics of change. Moreover, they will understand that it is a responsibility not a favor for their leaders to respond to their needs because these leaders are there for their service, not for their exploitation.

The problem of local production deserves our attention when discussing the two novels under consideration. In *A Man of the People*, Chief Koko thinks that he is poisoned because of taking a local coffee (Achebe 33). Estella Koomson, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, says that local beers do not fit her constitution (Armah 131). The elite which has the purchasing power rejects local products while relishing the imported products. Ultimately, a country whose leaders and the elite never consume local products cannot have a strong local industrial sector because the imported products will dominate the local market thus obstructing the growth of local industries. They eventually will lack consumers and even those who consume their products have a lower purchasing power than those who consume imported products, which obliterates the local industrial sector because in most cases these industries are not yet strong enough to compete at the international level.

Social inequality is blatant in the disparity between leaders' and ordinary people's residences as questioned by Armah in his description of the Residential Area, a prestigious place for independent Ghana's nouveau riche whom we know that they are politicians.

UPPER RESIDENTIAL AREA... 'and what does it mean at all, the name?' he asked... the man turned the name over and over in his mind, thinking of an explanation that would not sound too foolish. 'it means a place where people live'... the driver... gave the man a swift look halfway... 'what do you mean, people?' he asked, 'that is what it says. A place where people, human beings, have their houses.' 'But then every area is like that. So, what is the use of the name?' (Armah 142-43). This quote confirms Frantz Fanon's view of the envious view held by the natives towards the settlers because as soon as the independence was achieved, the likes of Koomson, representing the new elite, backslid into class divisions and coveted assets which were previously owned by the colonisers. This disconnection of leaders from the people can be said to be true in many African countries where leaders, thanks to the advantages they get from their political positions, automatically become part of the elite and they consequently do not experience the quotidian lives of the masses.

These grooms' leaders like Chief Nanga who understand leadership as a game of exchange of votes for infrastructures between leaders and the people because they are not affected by the same realities. When Chief Nanga learns that the people of Urua are supporting Odili he sends seven lorries to cart away the pipes destined for 'Rural Water Scheme' in Urua (Achebe 133). This portrays a leadership that does not serve the people but uses them to obtain power. The leader knows well that the people dispense power through elections, but the people themselves are ignorant of this potential. The leader, aware of their ignorance, seizes this advantage to make the people necessarily do what he or she wants in exchange for what they want. Under normal circumstances, it is the duty of the leader to serve the needs of the people. Unfortunately, this kind of leadership gives room for the leader to use those needs as bait in order to invite people to see his power and their interests as inseparable.

This is intertwined with how connected the leaders and the people are because if they live under the same circumstances, the leaders will necessarily do something on the situation which is also affecting them. For example, Chief Nanga would not think of taking away the pipes if he did not have water in his own house; rather, he would do his best to bring water to his place as soon as possible. The narratives of Armah and Achebe have a unity of foregrounding “the basic lack of contact between the new ruling class and the ordinary people they aspire to rule” (Morrison 124). For Sekou Touré, “it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves of themselves” (qtd in Fanon 166). Thus, African leaders must be in touch with people for good governance to take place.

Achebe’s *A Man of the People* raises a twofold concern between the story and the storyteller in African politics. The reader comes across facts which may lead one to infer that what takes Odili into politics is not primarily his concern and care to enhance people’s lives, but his personal conflict with Chief Nanga (Achebe 72,76). For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, people like Nanga, Odili, Max and Political parties like the Common Peoples Convention should not behave in a radically different way because they operate within and in fact, espouse the same economic and social setup (qtd in Obi 409). Africans should answer the question, what motivates people to go into politics and what motivates their stories once they make it into the political arena.

For bad leadership to occur, is it because people change when they become leaders or they enter the political arena with bad ambitions? Obviously, Odili’s view of politics is that it is primarily a means to achieve his personal goals. His motivation to venture into politics and his interactions with the people reveal that he is oblivious to the social, political, and economic issues which should worry new and young politicians. The politicians who are worth having are not those who endeavor to do politics for the sake of mere personal purposes, but those who do it as a vocation in response to the ordeals and needs of the masses. A good politician is one who comes to dress what needs redress.

After independence, the vacant positions of leadership were filled using those that we can call ‘men and women of the people’ whose political expertise and ability are spurious. From the novels under consideration, Koomson rises from the dock to the ministry and Chief Nanga, a Primary School teacher, becomes a minister. The danger with having these people in positions of authority may be that they cling on power and never plan to leave because such people who rose from nothing to high political positions have “no traditional positions to fall back on and no enough education to secure for themselves in any academically defined meritocracy” (Owomoyela 86). Achebe expresses this allegorically that “a man who has just come from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our nation ... was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say ‘To hell with it’” (Achebe 37). This comment is not far from the experience of the early independent Africa, and it is still relevant in some African countries where political positions are given depending on the political affiliation that one espouses. Ali Mazrui observed that

As Africa entered the first decade of independence in the 1960s, the number of politicians with experience in teaching was striking. In Ghana and Nigeria, thirty percent of the members of the legislatures were teachers. Most of them were drawn from rural areas. An observer of the Ghanaian scene argued that this heavy representation of teachers was ‘mainly attributable to the fact that the primary school teacher enjoys a position in the bush village which gives him a high social standing and great influence. (3)

The outcome of using unqualified people is the stagnation of all the affairs of the domain under their control.

The problem of brain drains and migration is appalling in the two novels. Koomson foolishly narrates the story of a professor who leaves Ghana after being disappointed by sleeping ministers who ridicule his lecture on economic growth (Armah 132-33). In *A Man of the People*, not only is the finance minister dismissed (Achebe 3) but also, we see the media contributing to the epistemic confusion by reporting doctored information. In both novels, one notices a kind of anti-intellectual campaign where reason is dismissed in favour of demagoguery. In addition, the press misrepresenting

facts reveals an ongoing despotism because, under normal circumstances, the press should be a medium for sincere communication between the leaders and the people.

The irony of Achebe's narrative is that the harms are done to the people but in the name of the people. This leaves the nation into a morass where politicians use the name of the people to serve the interests of a minority which they mainly constitute. Those who are able to shape the future of the nation are not given the opportunity to do so, but they find themselves as migrants who go to places where their credentials can be recognised. This leaves African leadership in the hands of those who are not willing to challenge the status quo but take advantage of it for self-enrichment. Thus, there is a need for the Africa presented in the disillusionment novel to create a politically conducive environment that facilitates and encourages dialogues between leaders and those who have a contribution to bestow as their input to the progress of the nation. This will change the antagonistic relationship between the politicians and the literati of Africa into a collaborative one.

On the other hand, both Koomson and Chief Nanga try to flee from their countries after the purges which topple their governments. Africa has seen many cases of leaders who after their terms seek asylum in other countries in order to dodge justice for crimes committed under their responsibilities. The recent case of Yahya Jammeh, formal president of Gambia testifies to this. Ayi Kwei Armah wonders, "how long will Africa be cursed with its leaders?" It is deplorable and ironic for a leader who has been the head of the country for more than a decade and end up leaving it due to the fear of justice he once purported to stand for. Africa should have leaders who are proud of staying home even when the terms of their powers have ended. If during their time in office, presidents plan to stay in their countries even after their leadership has ended, these presidents will promote infrastructures and facilities which will make him enjoy what he or she would enjoy abroad. For example, he would develop a reliable health sector to get good treatment without having to go away.

Looking at the novels under discussion, one realises that they both end in putsches. The night of 14 January 1966 that Achebe was launching *A Man of the People*, there was a military takeover in Nigeria, and he was consequently accused of treason given the sequences of his new novel which ends in a *deus ex machina* military coup. To this Achebe comments that "Military takeovers are not always bad in themselves.... the Nigerian situation left no political solution. The political machine had been so abused that whatever measures were taken; it could only produce the same results. We had got to a point where some other force had to come in" (qtd in Morrison 125). Unfortunately, most novelists, like Achebe and Armah, who expose the corruption of their countries end up in exile to save their lives.

Both Achebe and Armah show people's contribution to the mess that their political system has become. For Achebe, the people have become cynical and apathetic. They do not care whoever is emptying the national coffers; their take on the matter is "'let them eat' ... 'after all when the white man used to do all the eating did we commit suicide?'" (Achebe 144). In *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the teacher whose despondency has led him to seclusion replies to the man, who tells him that he has chosen his lifestyle, that "it is not a choice between life and death, but what kind of death we can bear, in the end.... there is no salvation anywhere" (Armah 56). Of course, both novelists expound on the corruption of the politicians, but also they show people's inactivity as their contribution to their sufferings. These are people who do not show any political interest at all while their political and economic situation worsens.

Even the man who, all along Armah's narrative is portrayed upright, his position promises no salvation because although he does not dabble and in fact abhors corruption, he does nothing to proselytise his rectitude among the corrupt society around him. Jago Morrison opines that the main effect of *A Man of the People* "is precisely to confront its middle-class Nigerian readership with the immanence of their own failure" (129). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the people to initiate the change from within themselves especially when leaders fail to exhibit good policies for the advancement of the nation.

The broad masses in both novels are either inert or ignorant or both. "They are petrified in their mauvaise foi, waiting for providence to sweep crumbs into their mouths. Thus, in their constant adjustment to the status quo, they develop no vision of alternative structure" (Obi 408). Achebe shows that the politics of corruption is mainstreamed in a way because some people live in hope that one of

their sons might bring them their share in the future (Achebe 97). This politics is not regarded as evil as it is but as the only way of doing. Therefore, this kind of politics carries a risk of being the epitome of what a future African leader regards as the ideal. In case this danger comes true, Africa would be plunged into a long-lasting misery. Consequently, there is a need for a didactic voice of the artist in order to raise the awareness of the people and remind them of their role in regulating how governance is exercised.

African independence sought to restore the rights of Africans denied them by colonisation. Nevertheless, the politics presented in the literature of disillusionment proves that some rights that independence struggled to bestow remain an illusion. In fact, one may say that some leaders understood independence as the ability to be welcomed to the table with other nations which translates that they wanted “to attain humanity in the oppressor’s camp” (Ngũgĩ 57). Now that Africans have realised that oppression and looting are the same whether it is done by a white coloniser or their fellow African embezzler, there is a need to participate in changing leadership structures that occasion the catastrophe of African politics shown in the novels of disillusionment.

Thomas Sankara once said that “dialectical materialism defines human society not as a natural unchangeable fact, but as something working on nature. Humankind does not submit passively to the power of nature. It takes control over this power” (Sankara 6). This is an invitation to every African to see that the future of Africa is not fixed in any kind of predestination, but can change depending on how Africans want it to be. In my view, the people themselves should redefine their forms of governance, either directly or indirectly through an effective representation. For example, Makonnen was convinced that socialism had failed in Ghana precisely because the Convention People's Party leaders who preached socialism were more deeply capitalistic than westerners, and ‘you can't build socialism without socialists’ (qtd in Ogede 113). Africa must then find its own forms of governance suitable to its people’s realities rather than living in mimicry and pretense of practising politics it does not have in the field.

This essay has argued that the role of an artist is to raise the awareness of the masses in an effort to bring about a revolution that will bring post-independence African politics out of what the novels of disillusionment deem a failure. I have argued in line with Achebe’s contention that his position as an author is to use literature to amend the blunders of the nation. He believes that the “beneficent fiction calls into full life... the total range of imaginative faculties and gives ...a heightened sense of ... personal, social and human reality” (Achebe, *The Novelist as Teacher* 104). The analysis of African politics was done through the lenses of fictional instances portrayed in Achebe’s *A Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

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