

**The Problem of Disintegration and Threat to Identity in Chinua Achebe's  
novel *A Man of the People***

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**Abstract**

The present paper highlights how the encounters between prime groups have led to the loss of traditional ideals. The paper is also concerned with the pomposity and egos of the politicians with selfish motives who promote and further their vested interests. The paper focuses on the problems such as bribery, incompetence and governmental apathy, prevalent in the said African nation. It also examines the society and culture of the said African nation caught in the grip of the fear of 'the outsider' in the form of dubious ideas from outside, which lead to the isolation of the public jeopardizing their very identity.

**Key words:** Disintegration, identity, traditional ideals, pomposity, vested interests, isolation, culture etc.

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novel *A Man of the People***

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This paper focuses on Chinua Achebe's novel *A Man of the People*, containing the story of an unnamed modern African country in the post colonial era. It is told by a school teacher named Odili, who leaves the teaching profession and enters town politics as the opponent of his former teacher-turned- politician named Chief Nanga, now a corrupt member of the ruling cabinet. The novel deprecates corrupt practices of African politicians.

Unlike earlier novels which were clearly set in Igbo villages, Achebe's novel *A man of the People* is set in a fictional African country. The novel without referring to a particular cultural group portrays problems such as bribery, pomposity and inflated egos, incompetence and governmental apathy, primitive loyalty, rise in food and petrol prices and corruption etc. it is about political disintegration. Odili an idealistic young man decides to challenge the government representatives. The novel draws attention to African culture, crisis, tradition, politics and the contemporary African mind objectively.

*A Man of the People*, says S. A. Khayoom, has a situational plot. The central importance is not given to the individual's confrontation with his own problems but the confrontation of the two divergent groups or culture. Here, in the novel, the hero Odili represents a set of values or people, who are the victims of circumstances. Though, the novel is focused on a few main

characters, it is concerned with the fate of the community and the individuals. The main characters contribute to the situation. It explores a new situation in a modern African state. It does not project only the sentimental journey of the hero but also projects the view of decolonizing the state. The lonesome journey of the hero depicts the African social reality. In the absence of the colonial hegemony, native leaders emerge as centers of power antagonizing their own society and people. They are represented as political aspirants in contraventions of social aspirations. S. A. Khayoom in his article “The Neo-Anthropological Novels of Achebe” observes:

He is greatly concerned with the two realities of social man- his individuality and group identity, the legacy of colonialism and the English language as the medium of expression of African experience and inspiration defining the relevance of colonial experience to the present (Agarwalla 124).

The novel exposes the follies of political leaders and also of the society. It shows the political, social maladies in the town politics of Africa. Achebe tries to define African culture in relevance to post-colonial living.

Like *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of the People* does not evoke the traditional life of Africa. It projects the picture of Africa in twentieth century, consequent upon end of colonialism. It presents the present state of the country as a continuation of colonial legacy in new forms and in new ways. Like *Things Fall Apart* Achebe’s *A Man of the People* is not a historical novel. It traces the decline of the African culture, the practices of corrupt political leaders and the crisis in the aftermath of transfer of power. It offers a perspective of the modern change that is taking place in Africa.

The locale of *A Man of the People* cannot be strictly geographically defined. The novel is set in a state of Africa. It presents the conflict of ancient customs with the new politics in Africa. It raises questions of sincerity, devotion, morality and modesty. It also depicts the unquenchable thirst to enjoy authority at any cost. The notion of the unity of the nation is in doubt. Individuality assumes more importance than unity or nationality. It is sadly enough a

deteriorating picture that emerges after the end of colonialism. It challenges the idea of freedom. It shows the shift in values. It does not mean that natives do not deserve freedom. It also does not state the controversial issue that colonialism is essential to preserve democracy and civilization. Odili pinpoints the shortcomings and greedy agenda of westerners. Odili argues with Jean:

Your accusation may be true but you have no right to make it. Leave it to us and don't contaminate our cause by espousing it.... I knew why she took so much delight in driving through our slums. She must have taken hundreds of photographs already to send home to her relations. And, come to think of it, would she-lover of Africa that she was-would she be found near a black man in her own country? (Achebe 55).

The society depicted by Achebe in the novel is modern, far from primitive and governed by social and legal system. The traditional values like unity, kinship, sense of belonging and common affinity have receded into the darkness, leaving the natives in object poverty. Loyalty to self has been dismantled. Needless to say, the loyalty to community has long ago been neglected. S. A. Khayoom in his article observes,

In the novels of Achebe there is a shift from the communal life to the individual consciousness and back to the ethnic group. The individual is vulnerable in isolation and introspection but is reabsorbed into the mainstream of the community (Agarwall 133).

Achebe has highlighted the setbacks of traditional culture responsible for the social and political evil of the modern African society.

Chief Nanga is an enemy of the people but he is ironically called A Man of the People. Chief Nanga is an example of a corrupt political leader, full of pomposity and inflated ego. He is villainous character. He misguides the native people. He seduces the girlfriend of Odili. He has several wives. He is not a faithful husband, a leader, nor a teacher. He always aspires for higher posts. To achieve it he is ready for every kind of malpractice. In an election he buys votes. He is an expert in party politics. Later he himself becomes a victim of that party politics. He is

defeated in the election by Odili and his group. A military coup takes place and the army captures power.

The motto of Chief Nanga is 'do the right and shame the devil'. But he acts totally contrary to his beliefs. Odili believes hypocrisy made him a successful politician. He is a kind of person who can mould himself according to the situation for his personal gains. While addressing the public he preferred not to speak to his own kinsmen in English but he speaks in vernacular language. He has learned from his experience that speeches made in vernacular languages are liable to be distorted. But at home he always speaks in English or Pidgin. His children go to expensive private schools run by European ladies and speak impeccable English. In his library there is a set of an American encyclopedia and also books by other European writers. He also discusses with a team of experts advising the government on how to improve his public image in America. As Odili opines, "we have all accepted things from white skins that none of us would have brooked from our own people" (Achebe 44).

Nanga and Odili are representatives of the old and new generations. Chief Nanga misuses democracy for his personal gains but Odili wishes things to be done the right way to advance democracy.

The novel depicts the notion of primitive loyalty. The people do not aspire to choose a good leader to serve the people, but the selection is based on religious or ethnic considerations. In spite of knowing the corruption and immorality of chief Nanga, they support him and elect him as their leader. It creates chaos and ends in a military coup. Good people like Max and Odili fall short of strategies of winning elections. Max is murdered and Odili is beaten till he becomes unconscious. The military coup seems to have the only alternative to corrupt rule and a hope to ensure peace and democracy. As Odili opines

Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gunpowder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation. I wished for a miracle, for a voice of thunder, to hush this ridiculous festival and tell the poor contemptible

people one or two truths. But of course it would be quite useless. 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 2-3).

Achebe's characters do not grow in a traditional sense. In the novel the focus is on action of the characters rather than on the growth or development of characters. There is a conflict of tradition and modernity and also of community and the individual. The novel projects the complexities created by colonization and decolonization. Odili is the victim of this change. Achebe highlights threat to identity and the weakening of the cultural roots of Africa both by colonialists and the native neo-colonialists. There is no change in the plight of the countrymen. It is difficult to make the difference between the colonial and postcolonial situation of the country. The political leaders blame the Western influence on one side but on the other side they take support of Europeans.

Odili Samalu narrates the story objectively, adopting an ironic tone, starting from the title itself calling an enemy of the people, A Man of the People. The most eligible and faithful Minister of Finance is proved a corrupt person. He is called a West-influenced intellectual. He is forced to leave his position and is harassed publicly. But the irony is that those who proved him wrong including Chief Nanga enlist the support of Westerners. For instance, Chief Nanga has a major role in blaming the minister of Finance. But he appoints an American consultant to the government.

Chief Nanga is planning to visit the United States. A university in far away America is soon to honour him with a doctorate degree. The hypocrite who always breaks the law becomes the doctor of laws. Odili says "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 23). But people like Chief Nanga do not care for the outside world. He is concerned with how to retain his hold on his constituency. As minister of culture, Nanga's duty is to safeguard the culture of his country which entitles him to be A Man of the People. He misuses his power. Odili

decides to fight Nanga by forming an opposition party braving the offer of bribes and violent threats.

The irony of the novel is that Odili considers himself pure and selfless, but in reality he enjoys the company of chief Nanga and takes his support. He turns against Nanga not because of his corruption or deception but because Nanga seduces his girlfriend.

Knowledge, power and education are used to abuse others. The native product, knowledge and values are undervalued. The irony is that the government runs a gigantic campaign to promote OHMS-Our Home Made Stuff for local consumption but the campaigners themselves favour the use of foreign products.

The issue of fear from ‘outsiders’ or Western influence is used by the rulers as a ploy to distance themselves from the main problems of the community. The slump in the international coffee market creates a serious financial crisis. The minister of Finance is a first rate economist with a doctorate in public finance. He has presented to the cabinet a complete plan for dealing with the situation. But the Prime Minister is not ready to cut down the price paid to coffee planters at the risk of losing the election. The Minister is sacked from his post on the false charge of his foreign connection. To hide the inefficiencies and weaknesses of others he is charged to be corrupt and dishonest. It is broadcast that “the dismissed ministers were conspirators and traitors who had teamed up with foreign saboteurs to destroy the new nation” (Achebe 4).

The Prime Minister makes a mockery of democracy. He proclaims to the people that the Miscreant Gang has been caught red-handed in their plot to overthrow the government of the people by the people and for the people with the help of enemies from abroad. He made his infamous solemn declaration:

From today we must watch and guard our hard own freedom jealously. Never again must we entrust our destiny and the destiny of Africa to the hybrid class of western- educated and snobbish intellectuals who will not hesitate to sell their mothers for a mess of pottage....”(Achebe 6).

The weapon of emotional blackmailing is always used to divert people's attention from reality. The natives are confused. They fail to recognize the difference between good and bad. As Odili says the citizens are "dead from neck up". They are ruled by the native political leaders after independence from the West.

Thus, the novel is a tragedy of civilization as well as the political freedom of the country. What we have in the novel is the political, social, moral plight of the country after independence. It makes us compare the colonial and post-colonial situations. It strengthens the idea that one form of Western political imperialism has ended paving the way for a new form of native imperialism. To conclude, in the words of Odili, the trouble with the new nation is:

A man who has just come in 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 new nation-as I saw it then lying on that bed-was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say "To hell with it". We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us- the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best-had scrambled for the one shelter our former ruler left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loudspeakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that the next phase- the extension of our house-was even more important and called for new and original tactics; it required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house (Achebe 37).

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