

## **Satire in Post-Independence African Novel: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ngugi Wa Thiango's *Wizard of the Crow***

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**Abstract:** *Post-independence African novel reflects disillusionment of writers with African reality. Corruption, mainly political, and of other forms is scrutinized by these writers in their fictional renderings. As such satire has become a favorite form of writing for them to express their disillusionment. This paper attempts to analyze Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ngugi Wa Thiango's *Wizard of the Crow* as political satires. This has been done by exploring different techniques these writers have used that qualify these works as satires. The paper aims at showing how these writers create a world that the desire rejects and how that world is related to African reality. It is to be noted that though both the works are satires, yet the methods used by the writers are not the same. While *A Man of the People* is written in realistic mode, *Wizard of the Crow* is a sort of fantasy where the author, apart from using traditional way of storytelling, has taken recourse of magic realism.*

**Keywords:** *Satire, African Novel, Political corruption, Realism, Magical Realism*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Pre-independence African novel reflects the quest for freedom from the colonizers. The authors during this time were busy in shaping a cultural nationalistic fiction as a means to assert indigenous identity. Such a literature was written when there was a hope-a hope that after independence Africa will prosper. Such a fiction therefore “tended to be dominated by a forward-looking optimism” (Pandurang, 17). As a result novels like *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe and *The River Between* (1965) by Ngugi Wa Thiango were written.

Such a hope, however, gave place to despair soon after Africa got independence. The change of guard did not help in bringing about a change, a change that Africa had longed for. The new indigenous ruling African class involved itself in practices that were not different from earlier colonizers. Corruption, snobbery and other evil practices left the people only disappointed. Sensing this, authors like Ngugi Wa Thiango, Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah had to relook at their roles as authors. They soon turned towards a mode of writing whereby they could express their anger and disappointment. This anger and disappointment replaced the earlier promises of nationhood and self assertion in their novels. Since satire has its roots in society and aims at reformation, these writers found such a mode more feasible and useful. Such a mode of writing was most appropriate for them to show their commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of their people.

### **2. CONTENT**

Both *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) are political satires. The novels present a world in the fictional rendering that resembles Nigeria and Kenya of their times. The former is associated to a new phase of writing by the author “in which he takes a hard look at what we in Africa are making of our independence- but using Nigeria which I know best” (Lindfors, 23). Similarly in *A Wizard of the Crow*, ruling class of Kenya “in nakedly treacherous alliance with imperialist foreigners... in total cynical disregard of the wishes of over fourteen-million Kenyans” (Thiong'o, *Detained* 10) is criticized. A greedy political class that is driven by the greed is projected by the writers as the main source of the corruption. It is the greed

of this political class that is held up to ridicule and shown as the main reason of mess in the post colonial Africa.

Though both are satires, the methods and techniques used by the writers are not same. Achebe has used a highly realistic mode while Ngugi has used a blend of realism and fantasy. However both create a world that the desire rejects. Achebe's setting and characters in the novel are realistic. According to Nahem Yousaf, "General definitions of satire presuppose that what is depicted will be exaggerated in order to act as a chilling warning of what might ensue....However Achebe stays so close to the mood of the country" (60) in the novel. Ngugi in the novel exaggerates what is depicted and makes his work a more chilling satire. By using magical realism, he mocks at the eccentricities of characters holding political ambitions. It is by extension of real to the world of impossibilities that he is able to make his political characters look buffoonish and absurd behaving in a strange manner.

Achebe's description of Chief Nanga as a politician, the ignorance of common masses and the complexity of other characters like Max and Odili himself, everything is realistic. The Machiavellian politics of Chief Nanga, the gullibility of the common people before politicians, the rivalry between the people, the use of cash to garner votes, all is possible in the real world. What makes the book a satire is its tone. Very often Odili, the narrator pauses and passes comments on the events happening in the novel with knowledge of pretensions of the politicians like Chief Nanga. The whole story is narrated in an ironic tone. The very title 'a man of the people' is ironic. Chief Nanga, who is called a man of the people is anything but a man of the people. This we know when we unravel the discrepancy between what he says and what he does; what he is meant for and what is acting for. The satire is not biting but bearable.

The events and atmosphere in the novel match the Nigeria of 1960's in particular and Africa in general. Robert M. Wren writes in *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the novels of Chinua Achebe* (1981) about the political situation of Nigeria during 1960's evoked in *A Man of the People*:

Only the powerful could manipulate the political system....Although public services were in theory independent of the political system,...in fact political authority affected and manipulated services even to the lowest levels....Good things were withheld from any one perceived as the enemy, and penalties were assessed. A bureaucracy responsive to political pressure assured that only to the victors belonged the spoils. The system itself became the mechanism for despotic rule, and made despotism inevitable (98).

Chief Nanga, the crafty politician represents the elite ruling class of Nigeria indifferent to the issues of public. He is very inventive when it comes to rhetoric. It is the 'ends' that justify 'means' to him. Like a Machiavellian politician, he is always aware about his own interests. He is anything but a 'man of the people'. His primary concern is to safeguard his seat in the government rather than the welfare of people. He can adopt any corrupt means to come to power and retain his seat. His position as a minister in the P.O.P party is a result of his selfish, opportunist and corrupt means. That he is an opportunist is clear from the way he once hooted Dr. Makinde the ex-Minister of Finance. Being a famous economist, Makinde had suggested measures to avert the financial crises of the country because of "the slump in the international coffee market" (Achebe, *A Man of the People*, 3). The measures included "cutting down the price paid to coffee planters...." The Prime Minister sacked him and others who supported him for this proposal because "he was not going to risk losing the elections"(4) by doing so. To justify this, the Prime Minister later labeled Makinde and other sacked ministers as traitors. They were accused of planning to "overthrow the government of the people by the people and for the people with the help of enemies abroad" (5). During the vote of confidence in the parliament then, the sacked minister was humiliated. In an ironical and satirical tone we are told what Nanga did then to win favour from the Prime Minister:

"They deserve to be hanged," shouted Mr. Nanga from the back benches. This interruption was so loud and clear that it appeared later under his own name in the Hansard. Throughout the session he led the pack of back-bench hounds straining their lash to get at their victims. If anyone had cared to sum up Mr. Nanga's interruptions they would have made a good hour's

continuous yelp. Perspiration poured down his face as he sprang up to interrupt or sat back to share in the derisive laughter of the hungry hyena (5).

Being the Minister of Culture he himself has no regard for his country's culture. He prefers to speak in Pidgin English rather than in his own language. Even his children "who went to expensive schools run by European ladies spoke impeccable English..." (32)

Having an eye on elections he decides to get the road between Giligili and Anita completed and tarred. The narrator tells us that "he had ordered ten luxury buses to ply the route as soon as it was tarred." So the author suggests here that personal interests of African leaders are always above the public interests. Like him, Hon. Simon Koko, Minister for Overseas Training thinks that he has been poisoned when served coffee. His cook had brewed locally processed coffee because "The Minister's usual Nescafe had run out at breakfast and he had not time to get new tin." (35). In a satiric tone the narrator tells:

There was an ironic twist to this incident which neither of the ministers seemed to notice .OHMS-Our Home Made Stuff-was a popular name of a gigantic campaign which the Government had mounted all over the country to promote the consumption of locally made products... Cars equipped with loudspeakers poured out new jingles up and down the land as they sold their products in town and country. In the language of the ordinary people these cars, and not the wares they advertised, became known as OHMS. It was apparently from one of them the cook had brought the coffee.... (35)

The common masses that are responsible for the selection of politicians like Nanga are not above the reprove of Achebe. It is in fact they who are helping the corruption to thrive. Their complacency and connivance is responsible for the overall rot. In the beginning of the novel we are introduced to the type of society that votes corrupt politicians like Chief Nanga to power. Commenting on the audience that had assembled in the Anita Grammar School to welcome the minister, Odili indignantly says:

I felt intense bitterness welling up in my mouth. 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"(4).

The baneful effect of the political corruption on the freedom of expression is also commented upon. It is in fact the corrupt politicians like Nanga who manipulate media for their publicity and false propaganda. When Chief Nanga, during the gathering in the school refers to the gathering as "mammoth", the journalist accompanying him like a clown realizes what Nanga meant and starts preparing an impressive report that could boost the Ministers public image. Later Mr.Jalio, the Editor of *Daily Matchet* comes to Nanga's home only to get money in lieu of not revealing something that could land the Minister in trouble. Commenting on his moral irresponsibility Odili says, "he drank two bottles of beer, smoked many cigarettes and then got a dash of five pounds from the Minister....(67)

Similarly in *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi creates a political world inhibited by the leaders who are detached from the masses. Set in the fictional Free Republic of Aburiria, the novel creates a kind of dystopia, inhibited by corrupt and morally degraded ruling class, similar to many African nations of the time of its publication in Gikuyu. The ruling class headed by the Ruler in the novel is corrupt. They frame policies and invite foreign investment only to amass their wealth. They are shown as sycophants and eccentrics. With the help of magic realism, Ngugi mocks at this class of people. The ministers of ruler Machokali and Sikiokuu, in order to show their loyalty to the Ruler had undergone surgeries to make their body parts larger. Machokali admitted himself in a hospital in London "to have his eyes enlarged, to make them ferociously sharp...so that they would be able to sport the enemies of the Ruler, no matter how far their hiding places"(13).The eyes are "enlarged to "the size of electric bulbs...dwarfing his nose, cheeks, and forehead." For this devotion the Ruler gives him "the Ministry of Foreign Affairs...."(13) Another minister Silver Sikiokuu after admitting himself in a hospital in Paris "had got his ears enlarged so that,...he

would be able to hear better and therefore be privy to the most private conversations ...all in the service of the Ruler”(14). For this devotion for the Ruler “he was made the Minister of State in the charge of spying on the citizenry. The secret machine known as M<sub>5</sub> was now under his direction (14). The Ruler himself is shown as a mocking figure because of his strange illness. After his body swells, all around Aburiria spread the rumors that the Ruler was pregnant. After his return from America the Ruler's body becomes like a balloon and his legs “hung in the air, his head touching the ceiling and his whole body gently swaying” (650). Tajirika who is the chairman of the Marching to Heaven is rumored to have become ogre with two mouths. By such a character portrayal to produce an image of “grotesque” by making the characters deformed in their shape, Ngugi laughs at them and makes them the objects of ridicule. Not only this, also the disputes over meaningless things between the ministers, their plans to intrigue each other and to win favors from the Ruler, all are used by the novelist to “demonstrate how postcolony has been turned into a stage for bizarre self-gratification; an absurd display of buffoons, fools and clowns...”(Ogude,57).Such a self-gratification is shown to have its effects on the common people or working class represented Kamiti, Nyawira and hundreds of those who make long queues to get jobs in Tajirika's office. Their lives are miserable and are conditioned by the policies of ruling class. Kamiti who has got his Masters degree from India is forced to beg at night and search for the job during the day. Disgusted with reality he faces, he wants to live far away from the society. However his relationship with Nyawira who is the leader of the Movement for the Voice of People compels him to stay in Aburiria and both are entangled into its complexities.

Scatological imagery is used in the both the novels. It serves the purpose of creating the degraded world that the desire rejects. In *A Man of the People*, Odili refers to the pails that the people afford for their shit while thinking about the well furnished mansion of Chief Nanga. In a news paper, he finds a notice urging people to provide pails for excrement. He also refers to the pit-latrines people in Anata and other places would use. In *A Wizard of the Crow*, scatological words are used in abundance. Also the olfactory imagery associated with the corruption is used in the novel. Kamiti changes his clothes in a public latrine. Tajirika uses a bucket of shit in the police camp and uses it as a weapon to make a hostage drama threatening an attack with it if he is not separated from the Wizard of the Crow who was also there. The foul smell in the novel is associated with the money and corrupt politicians. When kamiti goes to Tajirika's office for demanding a job, he feels a compelling smell there. Also the money which he receives from Tajirika smells stink. Such imagery however is used to draw our attention to the moral decadence and corruption.

### 3. CONCLUSION

It can be said that both the novels are able to create a feeling in the readers “which is compounded of amusement, contempt, disgust and hatred...” (Highet, 148). Throughout the novels, this emotion is sustained and at the end the reader is left with a moral judgment detesting the corruption and all that represents it. It is this feeling Gilbert Highet has described as the cardinal test to judge a literary work as satire.

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