

INDIVIDUAL AS A VICTIM OF THE SOCIETY IN NGOZI CHUMA-UDE'S *TEACHERS ON STRIKE*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the leadership and social issues in Africa and exposes leadership crises in political offices. It argues that bad leadership in political offices is as a result of peoples' inability to fight back, rapacity, excessive desire, ambitions, injustice and weak ideology. The researcher believes that African political leaders come to power with the intention to exhibit wickedness to their citizens instead of facilitating the exchange of quality ideas with their followers and to be worshipped as demi gods. Using content analysis approach of qualitative research method, this paper examines different patterns of exhibitions of corruption using the writer's creative experiences of her characters under oppressed society. Socialtheory is adopted for the analysis.NgoziChuma-Udeh's*Teachers on Strike*the two texts under study. This study observes that the major cause of corruption in Africa is manmade and for quality leadership to prevail in Africa, those concerned must be punished and must be made to understand their duties, responsibility and obligation as leaders. This paper concludes that the only thing that can bring transformation is justiceand equity done by the masses which will help pave way for sustainable development.

Keywords: Leadership, Corruption, Oppressed, Justice, Transformation.

Introduction

Literature as an integral part of any society has intellectual value. Writers try to have an impact by influencing people all over the world. David Ker is of the view that writers depict the society they belong as they portray the miasma of human life as it concerns the evil mindset of leaders and others vices. He writes: 'It is interesting to access the validity of West African novels as social documents, for if Literature is relevant at all, it is because we can obtain some picture of society and of life from it' (26).

Literature being a store house of human knowledge deals on individual's experience of reality, the general factors, issues that affect the society positively and negatively. Writers convey their own knowledge, wisdom and vision through written text. These are drawn from their experiences and relationships in the society where they find themselves. Therefore, writers put down their thoughts and experiences in form of fiction and non-fiction. Every society has problems but every area has problems that are peculiar to them. Achebe in the 'Novelist as Teacher' asked to know the relationship between African writers and their audience (readers). Achebe believes that the African writer is part and parcel of the society he writes and so believes that African writers write for Africans as his first two novels were mostly sold in Nigeria than any other place. A writer is a 'teacher' according to Achebe, as the writer tries to maintain a responsibility within his society. In 'The Novelist as a Teacher', Achebe defines his literacy plan as:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and

self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. (44)

A social problem according to Johnson Olawale in his article 'List of social problems in Nigeria', 'is any general behavior or condition that is prevalent among the majority in a particular society and has a negative effect on the society beyond what is seen as moral and just acceptable'. (Legit) Social problems include problems that 'reduce the standard of living beyond an acceptable level'. He goes ahead to list social problems in Nigeria as national identity, corruption, inequality, poverty, insecurity and insurgencies, tribalism, poor standard of education and illiteracy, high level of unemployment, domestic violence, high morbidity and mortality rate, bad leadership, numeric ethnic groups with lots of differences, high population and rapid population growth. Social problems are problems that affect a particular group of people. They are common issues we encounter daily which can tarnish people's image. Social issues ranges from peace and security, gender, race, human right issues, economics, politics to environmental issues. Different societies face different social problems.

Corruption which is one of the social problems is defined by Oladipupo as '... any conscious action or inaction, process or procedure, perpetuated by an individual or group that unfairly and unduly appropriates rewards, resources, or advantage to some individuals or groups at the expense of others' (8). He argues that corruption is dangerous because it affects a whole generation not only an individual. Oladipupo Ipadeola in *Research Report: Qualitative Study on the Patterns, Experiences*

and Manifestations of Corruption in Nigeria, said that World Bank defines corruption as ‘the abuse or misuse of public office for private gains’ (5).

According to a CSO representative in Oladipupo’s report, there are three types of corruption which he defines in the following way:

We have three types of corruption in Nigeria ... We have **political corruption** that is seen within the government offices, where the head converts public funds to his personal use. **Economic corruption** deals with the business class when they compromise with the government official for example when a contractor connives with government officials, ... The **social corruption** is where you have decay in the spirit of good and moral. You see this also in the family circle (13)

The researcher will therefore group corruption practices in the text under study according to political, economic and social types of corruption for clearer view.

The text under study is chosen because most of the social problems listed above are all glaring in the texts. The stories provide snapshots of living standard in a place where Justice and decent way of life have crumbled to give way to corruption, poverty, unemployment, high mortality rate, bad leadership, poor standard of education and man’s inhumanity to man. They showcase characters that survive against insurmountable odds, abuse of power and domestic violence. These entire ethos are examined in the texts to show the contemporary and social issues facing the characters in the texts.

Social Theory

According to Austin Harrington, social theory arises from daily life experiences which is as a result of interaction between people and it can lead to formation of ‘political parties trade unions and organized mass action such as strikes and revolutions’ (6). He goes ahead in his book, *Introduction. What is Social Theory?* to define social theory as

...the study of scientific ways of thinking about social life. It encompasses ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behavior, about power and social structure, class, gender and ethnicity, modernity... and numerous other concepts and problems in social life. (1)

To George Herbert Mead who developed a theory of social behaviorism, social experiences develop ones personality. He believes that self is developed out of the experiences one encounters in the society. He is of the view that people help to shape their environment. Elliot Anthony is of the view that ‘relationship between self and society and possibility of social transformation’ are the major themes in social theory. The touch light is focused on the society and the societal issues that affect lives as according to Elliot, social theory has to do with social transformation, gender, class and other social issues. According to Devaun in socialtheoryapplied.com, the founders of social theory include Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bowdieu, Michel Foucault and JurgenHabermas. Social theory therefore is all about the society, individuals and the environment. It studies human beings and believes that man is unpredictable and can form associations depending on their experiences. Social Theory made the connection between individuals and the society

possible because social change depends on individuals in a certain society and people's will can change social systems.

The theory is suitable for the study because the text is all about the vices and social issues in a particular area. It also shows how the society, that is individuals dealt with the problems by transforming the situation at hand.

The Spate of Corruption as Depicted in *Teachers on Strike*

Chuma-Udeh treats many social vices that characterize injustice in African. She shows how corruption has eaten so deep into the system especially civil service that the masses decide to call a spade a spade rather than dyeing in silence. The issues of wickedness, fight against injustice and strike are illustrated in the text under study. This paper examines injustice, man's inhumanity to man, corruption, nefarious, villainous and malevolent acts as they are portrayed in *Teachers on Strike* through the live of Mr. Nebe. The text treats the reasons why the citizens suffer poverty, corruption, their experiences in their own home land, how these affect their self-definition and finally, the solution. This paper studies the complexities of strike and corruption, ending in the poor masses (teachers) challenging the government openly seeking for justice unlike stories in other texts where the citizens will always hide whenever the government barks at them. Corruption is a common issue in recent African literature, Adichie's *Americanah*, Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the thief*, Armah's *Fragments* and *Osiri's Rising* treat this predicament well. Definitely, their reasons for corruption are not same and the after effects of this deadly act and wickedness are different as well.

In *Teachers on Strike* (TS), the governor's decision to embezzle teachers' salary is propelled by selfish interest as he wants to be re-elected.

Why, he had meant to harm after all. He had only wanted to ‘invest’ their salaries into his election campaigns for a second tenure. He had hoped to compensate them later... He had looked at their salaries as insignificant when distributed to so many people but meaningful when used as a whole for a laudable investment. Investment as laudable as his election campaigns. (TS 115 – 116)

The heartless act of the governor made the teachers to be united the more and they unanimously stand their ground.

Corruption is one of the myriads of challenges discussed extensively in Adichie’s *Americannah*. Adichie highlights many features of corruption that have eaten deep into the society (Nigeria) and which incidentally have forced many Nigerians like Ifemelu, Emenike, Ginika and a host of others into self exile in the name of studying abroad. Nigerians embrace migration as the only solution and alternative to solve the socio-political problems in Adichie’s novel. *Americannah* hinges its societal problems on joblessness, poor educational system, corruption and bad governance which in actual fact are same problems in the text under study.

Types of Corruption as Depicted in *Teachers on Strike*

Political Corruption

Teachers on Strike depicts the province governor of a particular state in Nigeria tormenting his workers – (teachers) who are in real sense civil servants. He converts public money to his and owes the teachers many months salary and never bothers to pay them. Mr Nebe, the hero is a teacher and the chairman of Teachers’ Executive body decides not to be bribed. Teachers are

owned for eight months salary yet the governor remains adamant and unperturbed. He siphons the public money because in the text, we are told that he embezzles money that is supposed to be used for infrastructure.

The roads have become a death trap. The Asphalts are broken in multiple deadly potholes. Some areas sharp as razorblade... walking barefooted would be a near rough suicide venture considering the rough state of the road. (6)

Nothing works in this province, no roads, no waters, no electricity and no good life. Life actually becomes a battleground for the masses. Young girls who are out of school turn to prostitutes while young boys become armed robbers. Mr Emeka Nebe was flabbergasted when he saw his bosom friend's (Mr Dife) daughter, Adaora in the night as a prostitute. 'Nebe was numb with shock' (TS 5). He could not believe his eyes and (he) 'shook his head in disbelief. What type of leadership is this? The action of the people in power is destroying the very fabrics of the society.' (TS 5) The people at the top careless for the masses and the social, economic and political consequences of their actions are enormous. It instills anxiety and weariness on the innocent citizens who find it difficult to take 'fish and meat these days' (TS 18). Mr Nebe wanders all over his community trying to ease off his discomfort. The governor's action is heartless and mean, this ugly situation leads to death of many citizens due to hunger, lack of money to get basic medical attention and other facilities in life. The governor is so selfish that his children study abroad and enjoy comfort with people's money. All the teachers live in agony as they helplessly watch their governor squander money to their own detriment. He insults teachers' executive members whom he invited to bribe. Heartless governor, he is so unconcerned with the people's

feelings that he tries to intimidate these teachers. One thing the governor does not know in *Teachers on Strike* is that though they embark on strike action at the expense of the life of innocent citizens, they never bordered because their suffering encourages them to do more.

Teja Cole in *Every Day is for the Thief* portrays different aspects of corruption where government procures overused and obsolete air crafts. 'The aviation authority failed to enforce a recommendation that all planes older than twenty two years be removed from service' (TS 138). One hundred and eight people died in the Sosoliso plane crash in 2005 due to poor air craft inspection by the government. Parents of the children involved were mad. According to Cole 'There are harrowing scenes of parents contending over the bodies of children burnt beyond recognition' (TS 137). Public officers have made Africa a shadow of itself. The rich get richer while the poor get poorer, the masses are exploited.

Social and Economic Corruption

In the text, Mr Nebe, Mr Dife, Ms Philo and the entire teachers in their district embark on endless strike because government refuse to pay them their many months salary. Ngozi Chuma-Ude narrates the decaying system of education in Nigeria. She regrettably looks at the nonchalant attitude of our leaders concerning civil servants especially teachers. The governor fails to understand the importance and significance of education and enjoy the privilege of sending their children abroad to school. They no longer pay attention to their workers and pleas of the masses as they believe that their children stand out in the crowd. Chuma-Ude captures the sorry state of our academic system.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh looks at a country that is in the verge of collapsing with very intensive strike exercise. Many people die

during this strike out of hunger and poverty. Government refuses to align with the masses and therefore lost the dedication and commitment of the people who on their own, fight for their emancipation. During the strike, many people were negatively affected, a lot lost their lives. Chuma-Ude puts it this way:

Nebe recalled gravely the high mortality rate of the teachers during the period. The obituary notices piled up like a heap in the garbage dump. Many more were down with debilitating stroke... The students were not left out. The boys had gone to the streets as touts, political thugs and robbers. The girls had turned to prostitution and some were kept as concubines by some politicians. And the schools have been converted into a habitat for miscreants. (TS 89)

The government is evil, villainous and nefarious, teachers were not paid for good five months and they were still teaching. 'Teachers had persevered. It was after the fifth month that this horrible strike action had become imperative' (TS 88). Teachers live in agony, many of them can no longer take care of their families and some become homeless as they can no longer pay their house rents, the government made teachers a laughing stock. Ms Philo, one of the teachers had it rough with her landlord. The landlord had wanted to sleep with her but she refused. He picks interest in her and disturbs her often, refusing the landlord's lustful overtures made the landlord mad and he feels insulted and disgraced but waited for the right time to hit Philo. The right time came when Philo as a teacher can no longer pay her house rent, he starts his lustful advances again, and Philo's refusal this time saw Philo homeless. He throws her

things out of his house '... Philo was standing in the road, her hair all over the place like a newly demented woman. All around her were her belongings thrown out on the street... Her belongings littered the whole road, causing an obstruction,'(TS 52-53) this shows teachers' level of suffering due to corruption and bad governance.

The executive members of teachers had a meeting with the governor but it did not end well. The governor wants to bribe them but they stood their ground and refused the money, the governor who could not believe it was aghast. He tries helping them by giving them more money to alleviate their problems but their reaction shocked the governor. He gives them a cheque of ten million naira each as bribe to call off the strike but instead of jubilating, 'The teachers wept!!!'.(TS 115) They all refuse to collect the cheques and one of them Mr Difehad the gut to tear the cheques to the amazement of the governor. They remember the death of many teachers and their families – Omena's children, Irukwe's wife, Ireka's boys and Philo's predicament and cannot bear their anger, the governor has actually pushed them to the wall, he had debased, degraded and demeaned them.

He stood up and handed the teachers representative cheque of ten million naira each... Philo was the first to act... walked up to Nebe's table and dropped the cheque given to her. The others followed suit... Dife looked down at his Excellency. Then with a slow, deliberate motion, he tore the cheques. (TS 116-118)

The nation's social life, political life and economy come to a halt as the masses are no longer happy. The girls that no longer go to school become irresponsible and unable to respond to obligation. Adaora, Dife's sixteen year old daughter becomes pregnant.

People's suffering, distress and pain made the house of assembly members to react and impeach the governor. He is punished for his wickedness, for being unfair and unjust to the masses. The masses troop out en masse to jubilate his downfall believing that Justice and equity have prevailed.

His Excellency, the Provincial Governor of Umma province and his Deputy have been impeached by the house of assembly for gross mismanagement of public funds, corrupt practices and unethical behaviours. The province Governor has also been disqualified from contesting in the forthcoming elections... The speaker of the House who became the acting Governor of the province gave immediate directives for the payment of the teachers' salaries. (TS 128-129)

The acting governor paid teachers their salaries immediately and Mr Nebe, the Chairman of the Teachers' Union called off the strike and 'The whole province was agog with happiness' (TS 130). They are happy because teachers' strike action has paid off. Justice was served because teachers refuse to be bribed as they insisted on the strike until every teacher is paid to the last kobo. The roads are death traps and the contractors who do the shabby works are not queried (TS 6). Constructions of schools are really poorly done.

Impact of Corruption

Impact of corruption according to Ganiyu, Rasaan Omokeji et al in their article, 'Socio-Political and Economic Impact of Corruption in Nigeria' are grouped into **sociological, economic and political.**

Corruption causes a lot of damage to human psyche and it makes upright citizens sick. The rate of Corruption is alarming and it gives room for wicked act, fraud, moral decadence, selfishness, dishonesty, heartlessness, kidnapping, prostitution, nonchalant attitude towards work especially civil servants, mal-administration, lack of integrity, dedication and commitment towards work, armed robbery and cripples one's talent. In the text under study, people sociologically lost their decency due to the corrupt administration that refuses to pay teachers their salary. Young girls and boys go 'haywire'; girls become prostitutes and give birth to bastards while boys become armed robbers and thugs. Those boys (thugs) that threw Philo's property out of her house are students. Government is so wicked, callous, inhuman, nonchalant, selfish, dishonest and heartless that they charge 'Teachers Union with sedition'(TS 33) after owing them for eight months. But these teachers never thought of any civil disorder against the authority, what the governor wants is to give them a bad name to crucify them – what a wicked act. How does he expect these teachers to feed, treat themselves and their family members? Heartless governor who tells the teachers executive members that he does not care what happens to them because his own children are studying abroad and whatever happens concerns the teachers and their own children (TS 42). As far he is concerned, his fate and that of his children are secured. To him, the masses can go to blazes; all he is interested in is his second tenure which is in actual fact what he wants to use the teachers' salary for.

Corruption makes people lose their moral decency and this is exactly the problem with the governor and his top management workers. They attend parties with University students often. They have lost their moral standard; they are armed robbers and have no shame. They sleep and party with under graduates who

are between the ages of eighteen to twenty five years. These girls have already lost interest in studying because they pay in 'cash' or 'kind' to get the grades they want. No more commitment, no more seriousness, no more dedication. In *Love of an Angel* (LA) the author writes:

Do you know that some institutions are trying to legalize sorting? Lecturers, some of them though not all will stand before a class without fear of anybody and be declaring the amount for A, B, C, D, E in alphabetical order. Even carryover and incomplete results have different values and prices. ...what about sexual harassment on the part of the lecturers?(LA 149)

In the text again, human and economic development become too low that chaos becomes the order of the day. This badly affects the economy of the said district as their standard of living drops drastically. Top government officials exhibit political powers to the detriment of the masses. The governor in owes teachers eight months salary because he feels that he can do it. He had absolute power to do it. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. He believes that he can rig the election to bring himself back to power during election.

Conclusion

The issue in our society is that people do not bother to know how one becomes rich and those that embezzle government money are not punished rather you see them in their very expensive cars moving freely and are recognized in the society. Corrupt officers are not brought to book and so they see no reason why they should not want to steal more as they are not contented with whatever they have. The major problem of these corrupt officials is greed. They are so greedy that they are blind

folded by their quest for money and people around them are not bordered because they are equally looking for meansto steal their own money instead of reporting them.

These people disregard the cries of the masses because they involvethemselves deeply in corruption. Corruption is basically at every nook and cranny. In the text, the governor tries bribing the executive members of Teachers Union, using their money to campaign and using the masses money to train his children abroad are all corrupt practices. But thank God for the masses in *Teachers on Strike* who refuse to be suffocated by half-baked politicians. These politicians cannot kill their intelligence, hope and aspirations, teachers refuse to be intimidated.

The masses in the two books under study take the bull by the horn as they revolt and give it back to these corrupt officials. Teachers went on strike and refuseto be bribed or resume even in the face of hardship and death. They fought the government until justice is theirs. The house of assembly members impeached the governor.

Who do we run to for justice? Definitely not the police and lawyers therefore the masses believe in handling their cases themselves and that was how justice prevailed in the two texts. Strikes last as long as government does not want to satisfy the masses, it is shameful that government tries to bribe the executive members. The society can only be free of corruption if our officials shun bribery and corruption like teachers executive members in *Teachers on Strike* did and if the masses can individually deal with corrupt officers. If justice is meted out on corrupt officers by the masses as seen in the text under study, sanity will be brought back to the society.

This work therefore concludes that we create our problems and our solution depends on us as we hold our destinies. The only way to solve corruption in Nigeria is justice by the masses for posterity. Once the corrupt officers are dealt with by the masses, it will deter others from following their part.

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