

The Dialectics of Elitist Leadership in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born*

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Abstract

Leadership as a human endeavour and its impact on the people presents issues and disputations because certain leadership patterns are objectionable and antithetical to the common expectations of the people. These usually manifest in forms of tyrannical and autocratic leadership, bribery and corruption, selfishness and general abuse of power by the leadership. Elitist leadership is usually political, in which case the people more often entrust power on a few assumed would-be influential individuals. These personalities present to be good leaders but incidentally on embracing the privileges of office thwart the initial good agenda and mission. The African continent contends with such issues of bad leadership and failed expectation of dividends. Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah in their respective texts, *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* present perceived elitist leaders who ordinarily started well as individual members of their societies but shortly pursued personal goals. Using a philosophical method of argument on the trajectory of Hegelian principle of Dialectics; the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, this paper makes a literary analysis of the incidents and patterns of leadership in the two mentioned texts. Specifically, the paper investigates the chameleonic pattern in personality of the leaders and consequent failure of leadership, and sues for effectual leadership for the common good and for humanity.

Keywords: Dialectics, Leadership, Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis, Elitist Theory.

Introduction

Leadership in countries in Africa has presented the picture of an enterprise fraught with problems that most times culminate in bad, selfish, corrupt and undemocratic dividends. Countries like Nigeria and Ghana have over the years after their independence recorded unprecedented bad and ineffective tracks of leaders who were entrusted with the power of leadership by the people. This is in spite of the fact that such leaders are perceived to be elites who have through learning, effort, and assumed leadership qualities are seen as the best among others and are therefore elected on trust. Political power is usually concentrated in the hands of these few elites as seen in most political parties with the hope and expectation of fair representation of the majority that elected them into power. However, this expectation has usually not been met due to the abuse of office and privileges by the so called elites and trusted leaders who betray that trust and rather choose

to divert attention from the people to themselves. This situation births a nation enmeshed in poverty, bribery and corruption, autocracy and leadership crises. Alluding to the leadership challenge in African countries, Afegbua, et al, state that “most constituted governments in Africa have been undergoing serious and deepening politico-economic crisis. These problems generated by political, social and economic instability and the prevalence of ethnic, communal and religious crisis, which have bedeviled Africa, call our attention to the problems of leadership and governance in the content” (141). Countries in Africa experience conflicts in leadership caused by a multiplicity of issues including, the trusting to a fault of the elites and the constituting of power by inefficient minority. Evidences abound that show that the bulk of the political leadership in these two countries, Nigeria and Ghana, are in the hands of elites, who are a minority, especially those with political affiliations.

Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah are two African novelists who represent in their texts the elitist political leaders who on ascendancy to power thwart the people’s expectations and become larger than life through dictatorship and self-aggrandizement. Incidents in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* show Chief Nanga, a former school teacher and headmaster, who gains a political seat by mere opportunity and shortly afterwards becomes enmeshed in political power and money to the detriment of the common people. Similarly, the *Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* represents events under Nkrumah’s political party, the P.O.P. The Minister, Koomson on whom friends and relations reposed so much hope gets their hopes dashed in the height of his own selfishness. In one of these two scenarios, Achebe captures issues in governance in the wider society while Armah expresses individual, family and friends disillusionment and disappointment with their own who are in positions of power and authority.

Scholars and critics have widely explored burning issues of leadership failure, corruption and bribery, cultural heritage and others in the two texts. For example, dwelling on the magnitude of corruption in the text, John Chukwuma Ajakah in the essay “The Corruption Quagmire in Armah’s the *Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*” makes a satirical attack on the level of corruption in African countries, using situations in Ghana. Hence in this essay, Ajakah exposes corruption in the text as a common issue in Africa using Ghana as a typical example of African State reeking of with corruption. He observes that Armah reveals moral depravity in every stratum of society, using vivid descriptive images suggestive of stench and repugnancy. He further asserts that “corruption is the bane of a typical African society by dwelling on the politicians who usurp the power vested in them to pursue their pecuniary interests and bemoans the complicity of the public in the economic carnage and moral depravity saying that virtually everyone directly or indirectly aids and abets corruption” (John Chukwuma Ajakah Online). The problem of corruption is usually manifest at the highest echelon of the political leadership. However, everyone is deemed culpable in the corruption saga in the African system and it needs collective effort of all to combat it.

Marvis Thokozile Macheka in the essay “Post-Colonial African Leadership: A Study of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* and Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*

centers on the shift from democratic leadership to autocratic type of governance using textual analysis. The paper observes the poor socio-economic situation of an independent African society and notes that “the leaders abuse their posts to enrich themselves at the nation’s expenses” (14). The writer highlighted the continuity of colonialism after independence as occasioned by bad government as he further observes that “mostly the blame lies on endogenous factors such as corruption, nepotism, manipulation of media, mass apathy, politics of lies, demonization of democratic values, politics of deception and self-aggrandizement, ethnicisation of political and naturalization of election violence which in a sense, is not a fulfillment of expectations but, nightmare, an illusion that generated a false sense of survival” (15). The problem of bad leadership is therefore no longer with the colonial masters but has become an in-house and internal malady with corrupt leaders who act against their very own.

Similarly Aderinto S. I. Abiodun highlighted the issue of corruption in Ghana in the paper “The Socio-Economic and Political Implications of the Various Episodes of Ayi Kwei Armah’s Novel *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born*” as “exposing the destructive tendencies of the misuse of political power on the economy of most African countries” (23). It is unmistakable that most of the issues already raised around *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born*, are shades of corruption in governance and leadership. Whereas Kabiu Ahmed in “*A Man of the People* and the Deferral of Nation-Building” argues that usually both the leadership and the seeming opposition constitute an obstacle to nation-building, using the two key contenders in the text, Chief Nanga and Odili, he asserts that “the novel dramatizes the conscious and unconscious aspects of political motive within contending characters, Odili Samalu and Chief Nanga in their struggle for supremacy in a newly independent African country” (171). Incidents in the narratives indicate that in the long run, both individuals seem to play their personal scripts as both become ambitious and desire to better their lot rather than that of the country.

Away from the issues on characters, Saleh Ahmad Neimneh and Amneh Khahael Hussein in the essay “Intellectuals, Politicians, and the Public in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People: A Postcolonial Critique*” argue that independence is supposed to be a glorious period in the history of a nation, but it is presented in the novel as very gloomy. They observe that “*A Man of the People* symbolizes the rift between the native intellectuals and the politicians in a politically turbulent Nigeria and in the absence of an engaged public this national leadership in Fanonian logic is neither fully prepared for nor seriously engaged in issues of nationhood” (19). These and other works on the two texts under review have left a gap that will be filled by this particular paper. And so, using Elite theory of power and Hegelian philosophical argument of Dialectics, based on the three-pronged premise of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the paper ascertains the fact that the majority usually entrust power on the elite minority consciously in expectation of good dividends. Specifically the paper establishes the antithetical outcome of the expectations of the people as failure through the interactions and events in the texts. Based on these contradictions in the anticipation and eventual outcome, the paper draws from the fact of the

need for the majority to choose leaders based on antecedents of merit and efficiency rather than on political loyalty and association.

Theoretical Analysis

The thrust of this paper is the sociological and political framework of Elite theory of power and leadership with specific impetus from Hegelian Dialectic on its triadic prong of Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis. These modes of philosophical argument examine power relationship between the leaders and the lead where leadership is viewed as a process, and an intentional influence rather than a position of power. A better understanding of such intentional influence is captured by the Elite theory of Power propagated by pioneer social scientists, Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941). They popularized the concept of Elite “as a class of people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity” (Puja Mondal). These indices may include resourcefulness, influence or political alignment. The Elite is also described based on the notion that “every society holds a ruling minority, a group that controls and disputes the most important power sources” (Mathias Lopez). These usually are a class of politicians and privileged personalities or individuals.

Gaetano Mosca, an Italian jurist and political theorist expounded the familiar thesis that “all human societies were always and everywhere ruled by a controlling social class and thus these are always divided between rulers and ruled. He believed that whatever the form of government, power would be in the hands of a minority who formed the ruling class” (Puja Mondal Online). This establishes the fact of a class of ruling minority. Hence, Mosca created a “society where men will necessarily struggle for preeminence with each other, and that this competition for... control of the means and instruments that enable a person to direct many human activities ...” (Raymond Barkley 97). This struggle is about power and authority over the affairs of the state and over the people. To give credence to this idea of power struggle, Aregbesola Oluwasegun posits:

Elite theory in political science and sociology is a theory of the state which seeks to describe and explain the power relationships in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority consisting of members of the political, economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power and that the power is independent of a state’s democratic electoral process through positions in corporations or on corporate boards, and positions with think-tanks or policy-discussion groups. (Online).

The fact arises therefore that a group of individuals emerge as political leaders holding power by occupying prominent positions. Such groups form a minority in society and the majority is excluded from political decision-making. This exclusion and intimidation of the majority in the affairs concerning them present serious problems in political leadership. This scenario is well presented in the narratives of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah depicting such influences

and powers by the elite minority. Worried about preponderance of failures of leadership by the elites, “Vilfredo Pareto theorized that over time a distinct psycho-social propensity-manifested by personality traits, mentalities, beliefs and actions become predominant in governing elites. These render them, especially their leaders, prone to bias, closure, rigidity and cumulating blunders” (John Higley and Jan Pakulski 2). The elites while relying and leveraging on the privileges of office in no time begin to derail from the set objectives of collective interest and get stuck in self-aggrandizement and personal interests.

Dwelling on the standpoint of Hegelian Dialectic in understanding the scenario, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines Dialectic as “a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides” (Online). Further elucidation of the concept of Hegelian Dialectic in *Philosophy: History and Problems* as a method posits that:

Hegel’s dialectic process exhibits a triadic movement. Usually this triadic structure of the dialectic process is described as a movement from *thesis* to *antithesis* and finally to synthesis, after which the *synthesis* becomes a new thesis, and this process continues until it ends in the Absolute Idea. What Hegel emphasized in his dialectic logic was that thought moves and that contradiction, rather than bringing knowledge to a halt, acts as a positive moving force in human reasoning.(Stumpf 329).

Hegel emphasizes a movement of thought or argument in arriving at a better acceptable position. Hence, the arguments in the narratives fit perfectly to highlight the ills of bad elitist leaderships and sustain the dialogue so as to arrive at a shift in the process. Hegel calls the dialectic method, the triad of “Being”, “Nothing”, and “Becoming” (Stumpf 239). The thesis postulates that “The most general concept we can form about things is that they are” (330). Hence, the thesis of this paper, the “Being”, is the fact of elitist political leadership in Nigeria and Ghana, and other African countries. Here, “the antithesis is contained in the thesis, Being” (331) whereby the fact of non-delivery of the expected leadership dividend is taken from the fact that the polity is rife with a select imprudent minority leaders. The argument further posits that the concept of “Becoming” is the unity of “Being” and “Nothing” ... It is one idea. Becoming is therefore the synthesis of Being and Nothing” (331). The argument of “Nothing” and “Becoming” taken from the texts of the discussion posit that there is failed political leadership in the African continent with the proposition for a better self-willed individuals that have the common interest of the people. Hence, “at each step, Hegel sets forth a thesis from which is deduced its antithesis, this thesis and antithesis then find their unity in a higher synthesis. In the end, Hegel arrives at the concept of the “Absolute idea”, which he describes in accordance with the dialectic method, as Becoming, as a process of self-development” (Stumpf 331). These arguments are set to underlie the process of ascension to good democratic, inclusionary and consultative kind of leadership to bad, corrupt and selfish political elitist leadership taking instances from the texts of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah. The synthesis will suggest plans for a better democratic and visionary leadership on the continent of Africa.

Textual Analysis of Antithetical Dialectics of Elitist Leadership

The texts under study present problematic leadership style manifesting shifts from hope and trust to hopelessness and disillusionment. This is because most leadership patterns are objectionable and antithetical against the expectations of the people. The antithesis or otherwise, the disputation and the contrast of ideas and events in the narratives placed side by side identifies a twist of movement and process from assumed form of leadership to eventual political leadership. The elitist leaders are expected by the people to respect these codes of contract, but the process of leadership changes in the course of leveraging the privileges of office. These mutations from the goals and motives of leadership for the general good to individual undemocratic reliving of self-aggrandizement and eventual disappointment of the masses are presented in *A Man of the People* and *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born*.

Chief Nanga, the teacher turned Minister first appears to the people as a conscientious leader, he is called a man of the people due to his initial personality as a politician. He gained the trust of the masses such that, “no one can deny that the Honourable M. A. Nanga M. P. was the most approachable politician in the country. Whether you asked in the city or in his home village, Anata, they would tell you he was a man of the people” (*A Man of the People* 1). So with this level of trust and accolade from the people, Chief Nanga begins the journey to political leadership. Prior to this, Chief Nanga had a good reputation as a teacher. This antecedent is revealed by one of his pupils, Odili, who narrates thus:

Sixteen years or so ago he has been my teacher in standard three and something like his favourite pupil. I remember him then as a popular, young and handsome teacher, most impressive in his uniform as scoutmaster. There was on one of the walls of the school a painting of a faultlessly handsome scout master wearing an impeccable uniform. I am not sure that the art teacher who painted the picture had Mr. Nanga in mind. There was no facial resemblance; still we called it the picture of Mr. Nanga. It was enough that they were both handsome and that they were both impressive scoutmasters. (*A Man of the People* 2-3).

As an impressive scoutmaster, Mr. Nanga possessed fine traits including, integrity as enshrined in the scouting motto and slogan “to be prepared always”. Mr. Nanga as a school teacher providing educational leadership presented good and people oriented leadership. To also affirm his famed humility, Chief Nanga while exchanging pleasantries with the teachers assured them of his resolve to take care of the teachers saying, “I am not as happy as when I was a teacher” ... I use to regret it. Teaching is a very noble profession ... You can rest assured that those of us in the Cabinet who were once teachers are in full sympathy with you” (*A Man of the People* 10). This speech from Chief Nanga as a newly elected Minister is simply but a revelation of the spirit of inclusion expected of good leadership.

Koomson in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* did not have any known prominent status before he ventured into politics. The least antecedent he had as revealed by the Man was that "Koomson was my classmate. He was not very intelligent, he was actually stupid" (*The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* 59). Even without any known intellectual prowess or educational experience, Koomson was able to command acceptance from the people. He simply enjoys the admiration and trust of the people who rely on him for their livelihood and financial empowerment. Thus, Oyo and her mother do not stop at reasoning but only believe that "Brother Joe", "His Excellency Joseph Koomson, Minister Plenipotentiary, Member of the Presidential Commission, Hero of Socialist Labour ... something about a boat. The way Oyo's mother tells it, he is just going to buy a lot of fishing boats and give them to her" (56-57). The Man who is surprised at the popularity Koomson is already gaining among his people expresses his surprise that "I didn't know Koomson had enough money to buy even one boat. Those things cost thousands ... I had taken a piece of paper to calculate Koomson's total salary since he joined the party. Now I dropped the paper and said, "oh I see ... I have seen corruption and public theft" (58). This ostentation and flagrant thrust of political power and wealth newly acquired plunges the politician into the antithesis of the real or actual expected leadership.

Odili describes as "primitive loyalty" what he discovers to be Chief Nanga's change of status, being now a politician by the flamboyant convoy and extensive show of jubilation by the mass of people who trooped out to welcome the Minister on his visit to Anata. He remarks:

As soon as the Minister's Cadillac arrived at the head of a long motorcade the hunters dashed this way and that and left off their last shots, throwing their guns about with frightening freedom. The dancers capered and stamped filling the dry season air with dust. Not even Grammar Phone's voice could be heard over the tumult. The Minister stepped out bearing damask and gold chains and acknowledging cheers. (Achebe 8).

The ordinary people go out of their way to organize a resounding welcome ceremony using their meager resources in anticipation of rewarding dividends. Ironically, the poor masses impoverish themselves more.

A similar scenario plays out as the family of the Man anticipates and prepares the reception of Koomson in their house. The man and his wife in spite of their level of poverty are happy spending a lot of money making expensive shopping and preparing food so as to impress on the Honourable Minister who plans to visit them, a situation captioned thus:

The day before, going into the shops with his new money in his pocket, he had had the uncontrollable feeling somewhere in the back of his mind that the expensive things he was buying would deepen the agony of his next Passion Week. When he had asked for all that white man's food, the beautiful long rice in the packet with thousands of miles from rich people's countries, and the New Zealand butter, he had known it was stupid to be feeling so good just because he was buying these things he could not in the end afford,

yet he could not help the smile that came to his lips and spread this feeling of well-being over all his body. (Armah 115)

In both instances, the poor majority are shown to derive joy in adding to their suffering to please the so called elitist leaders all in the expectation of being rewarded for their effort. This action receives confirmation by Gaetano Mosca and Max Weber's postulation in *Elite Theory* that "emphasizes the ways in which tiny minorities out-organize and outwit large majorities adding that "political classes" Mosca's term for political elites usually have certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority over those they govern" (John Higley Online). This superiority mentality is the result of inferiority complex and submissiveness of the majority who over-reach themselves to endorse the presumed leaders, hence, Odili's notion of "primitive loyalty".

Hegel's Dialectics presents the contradiction in the process of attaining leadership status and the actual delivery of the mandate. Thus, Chief Nanga the teacher-assumed Minister and Chief Koomson the nonentity and member of Presidential Commission present the contradiction of expected and failed leadership as political leaders. Chief Nanga relishing the juicy election and appointment as Minister becomes the opposite of the apathetic teacher and minister he had presented in the beginning. He desires money and power over every other need and fails to provide the needed leadership for the people. He intimidates the people using his political powers and callously withdraws his help from the Urua people for merely having their son Odili as his political opponent. Odili has refused Chief Nanga's offer of money and scholarship in order to withdraw from pursuing his political ambition. Nanga plots a punitive action against Odili for insisting on contesting the election. He ensures a development of "anonymously removing" Samalu Hezekiah his father as chairman of P.O.P from office for subversive, anti-party activities" (*A Man of the People* 148) and accusing him of tax evasion. This is intended to intimidate Odili and his father. Chief Nanga goes on to the consternation of the villagers, to molest the villagers too when "seven public works lorries arrived in the village and began to cart away the pipes they had deposited several months earlier for projected Rural Water Scheme" (149). This singular act of swooping on the people and renegeing on the promises made to them is the very antithesis of the expectations of elitist leadership. Bernard Dickson captures and condemns this scenario noting that "Chief Nanga employs coercion and intimidation to make the Urua community to renege on their promise to vote their son, Odili instead of Chief Nanga" (UUJEL 238). This among several incidents and behaviours of the leadership impinge on the very soul of the people, causing disappointment and disillusionment.

Such disappointments are revealed on the individual and family levels of relationships. They depict the insensitivity of the leaders to the people's plight and echo their lust for power and money. Koomson, after all the promises to provide fishing boats for Oyo and her mother reneges on the ground that spending thousands of pounds for a boat is expensive and may attract peoples' condemnation. He mutters: "there is a lot of money to be made in it, but start something, and fools will start shouting slogans at you" (*The Beautiful Ones* 136). All these are mere deceit as Koomson and his wife Estella spend even much more for their comfort. This is quite in contrast

of a man whose house arouses in the poor the desire to admire the beauty as exclaimed by Oyo that “there were things here for a human being to spend a lifetime desiring ... Things of intricate and obviously expensive design...” (144). With these expansive comforts, Koomson and his wife denied Oyo and her mother what could have been their life changing opportunity. Their disappointment is obvious although “even the old woman seemed gradually to have resigned herself to the knowledge that what Koomson had come offering her was not the rainbow that would forever end the darkness of her life and her daughter’s life” (152). Even after Koomson deceitfully framed allocation of a boat to Oyo, the boat is seen to be dysfunctional. It was observable that “what happened was that from time to time Koomson would remember the ones who were supposed to be for the eyes and ears of the prying world, the owners of his boat, and send one of his drivers with some fish for Oyo’s mother or for Oyo herself” (152). The meanness of the politicians is unmistakable in Koomson who cannot extend kindness freely to the people but rather glories in rationing or apportioning small inconsistent portions to the people but would go all the way to satisfy their personal wants. That is why Koomson and his wife Estella can afford “foreign exchange for the sister in London who has fallen in love with a Jaguar, and who is going to kill herself if she can’t have it” (149). This shows a typical self-focused African leader who is enmeshed in favouritism. Against a situation as this, Aderinto S. I. Abiodun observes that the “character of Koomson in the novel depicts the way African politicians siphon public funds to enrich themselves at the expense of the ordinary people” (23). But this insensitivity to the plight of the common people forms the bedrock of the leaders’ nemesis.

The narratives confirm the fact that political elites appropriate to themselves the common treasury for their selfish ends. The continued oppression and exploitation of the people build up resentment. The discontentment was so strong that “everyone after the coup began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime, at its graft, oppression and corrupt government” (Achebe 166). Such feelings of spite and relief come about as these mindless and autocratic leaders are overthrown. For example, the people made a caricature of them and expressed joy and support of the army. Similar expression pervaded Ghana as Nkrumah was toppled in a coup. The people expressed “their loyalty to the new men of power singing old songs with the words changed from the old praise for Nkrumah to insults for him” (158). Both Chief Nanga and Koomson exited offices in a *coup d’état* in most humiliating manners, to the excitement of the masses, “for Chief Nanga himself was arrested trying to escape by canoe dressed like a fisherman” (Achebe 165). The news of the coup in *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* mocks political leaders and big party men who are being arrested and “placed in something called protective custody - already a new name for old imprisonment without trial” (157). It is evident that most elitist political leaders end up badly as they are usually caught up in the web of their greed. It is a precarious situation as it seems commonplace that the politicians show their true selves as soon as in power, in a vicious cycle. This by extension is a continuation of the Africa’s way of life since not even the coups have solved the problem of corrupt leadership.

Conclusion

Leadership as a process recycles and does not leave a space, as it establishes constant fear of the people on the recycling of a minority power-thirsty leaders. The thesis of the dialectics is that elitist leaderships are resourced, able, and capable of quality leadership. While the antithesis proves that such leaders turn the fortunes of the state against the masses as soon as they ascend positions of leadership. The synthesis advocates that leaders should be schooled in the art of leadership through self-study, education, training and experience. It is like saying that elites, especially political elites who get into leadership as party loyalists or by political party alliance are not likely to make good leaders. This paper therefore, posits that the problem of corrupt and failed political leadership can get better when the citizenry collectively participate in the election process, and when eligible electorates begin to endorse individuals with manifest common interest, desire and will-power, rather than endorsement on the basis of influence and party loyalty as it has been the case in the African political space.

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