

A Man of the People and Hubris: Odili as Nanga's Nemesis

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Abstract

Hubris in Greek mythology deals with self pride and over confidence in an individual acquired over a time. Achebe's *A man of the People* is often read as a political novel that presents corruption and excesses of political leaders usually manifest in the use of political powers. Odili Samalu a teacher turned politician, and the Chief the Honourable Minister, Chief Nanga, a seasoned and corrupt politician overreached themselves in the pursuit of personal and political ambitions. Both become friends for a short while and get at each other's end. Each, subsequently through their social interactions and political activities develops excessive self confidence and pride otherwise known as hubris. Chief Nanga's hubris will be understood in his social and political activities with his people whom he holds to sway in his political constituency and particularly with his former pupil Odili who becomes his nemesis and his downfall. Using Karen Horney's Psychoanalytic social theory, the paper will make a literary analysis of Odili as Nanga's nemesis and catalyst to Nanga's hubris and consequential tragic downfall. The paper will specifically explore Nanga's political autocratic excesses orchestrated by Odili's deterministic idealism and resolve to avenge his humiliation by Nanga.

Introduction

Certain traits such as excessive self confidence and pride are acquired along the line of interactions with the environment. The individuals to be studied in this essay are shaped by the social interactions and experiences which are not traced basically to their biological traits. Thus, Odili and Nanga build up

their ego, pride and excessive self confidence along the line of their encounter with one another and other social events including the political adventures. Odili and Chief Nanga the two major fictional characters in Achebe's *A man of the People* both possess and manifest elements of pride and self-conceit. These manifest as hubris described as "an exaggerated pride, overwhelming self-confidence and contempt for others" (Owen 2000). These traits are evidenced in the social interactions and political activities of the key individual under study. Chief Nanga as a politician lives ostentatiously and lavishly. He wields a lot of political powers, amassed wealth and enriched himself beyond reasonable limits. Although Nanga is cheating the people all the time, he calls himself, "a man of the people" (Ernest Emenyeonu and Iniobong Uko 163). He equally has a way with women that make him to lure Odili's girl friend in his presence without minding the consequence. The rivalry between Odili and Chief Nanga is sparked off by this inordinate behavior of Nanga. It creates the feeling of humiliation in Odili who in retaliation, swears to give it back to Nanga.

Thus, reveling on the familiarity and closeness with Chief Nanga which gets him thinking on a lot of possibilities, Odili in his own words asserts, "my closeness to the Minister gave everything I said heightened significance" (*A Man of the People* 55). Odili's closeness to Nanga exposes his weakness and hubris and eventual nemesis. Karen Horney's Psychoanalytic Social Theory dwells on the social and cultural activities of the individual as a determinant of the individual's personality, whereby Horney suggests that "people do not choose who they become. People become the person that their culture and social interactions dictate that they become" (Wesley Meacham Online). Nanga's hubris develops along his interaction with Odili as a defense of his personal ego as Odili intensifies his resolution of vendetta against Nanga.

Scholars have studied *A Man of the People* under various themes and critical stand points including the political analysis of the novel. For example, Bernard Dickson in an essay "Political Transformation in the Nigerian Novels: A Postcolonial Study of Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Aluko's *Chief the Honourable Minister* and Akpan's *The Crumb Eaters*" in which he

examines the continued political excesses of the fictional characters in spite of the successive political transformational efforts of governments through political slogans. He indicates that “the recklessness associated with elections in Nigeria is further illustrated in the thuggery and brutality exhibited by contestants and political parties against their opponents during elections. For instance, Chief Nanga’s youth, Vanguard (Nanga Vanga) has the mandate to “annihilate all enemies of progress and to project true Nigerians” (Dickson 239). The essay highlights the fact that positive political transformation is still unattainable in the society. While the essay “Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe” reveals that “the world of *A Man of the People* is of course a perverse world ... where emphasis is on how best to “eat” money and the people’s notion of acquiring wealth is a negation of the traditional Igbo emphasis on hard work and judicious expenditure” (Ernest Emenyeonu and Iniobong Uko 173). Further exposition on corruption is highlighted by Kerth Booker who observes that “as we come to know the novel’s protagonists, the government’s Minister Chief Nanga defending his privileged position, the opportunistic teacher (and narrator) Odili Samalu, a population cynical and complicit we began to understand the sources of corruption and violence. Achebe focused on human foibles, and he makes us see them as part of the human condition” (Booker online). While making a historical analysis of the political events in the nation, the essay, “A Political Analysis of *A Man of the People*, postulates that Achebe highlights the political and social situations in the country after the attainment of independence. He writes, “Achebe tends to express how power of wealth can seduce ordinary people and make them greedy. Moreover Achebe aims to depict the reality of politician figures in Nigeria through Honourable Chief M.A.Nanga. Nanga pretends that he is a patriotic man and he is from the grassroot of his country...” (Bakhal Kareem 60). In the real sense, politicians like Nanga are rather proud and deceitful.

Further on the lessons of *A Man of the People*, Charles Nnolim in “Literature, Literary Criticism and National Development, highlighting the corrupt nature of political office holds attacks the “ostentatious life style of ministers, abuse of power after looting the nations treasury, intolerance of opinions of those in opposing political camps, and blatant acts of bribery and corruption by

those entrusted to preserve the country's hard won independence" (Nnolim 43). These critical reviews all allude to the deteriorated political situation in the narrative, thus none has touched on the individual character traits of pride and over confidence acquired along the line of social interactions and subsequent repercussions. Therefore using the Psychoanalytic Social theory, this essay is aimed at establishing Chief Nanga's overwhelming self confidence otherwise, hubris, and eventual nemesis. The paper will specifically explore the fact that Odili is the architect and catalyst to Chief Nanga's developing hubris and consequent downfall. The conclusion will confirm the fulfillment of the natural law of cause and effect or of actions and repercussions as indicated by the tragic end of Chief Nanga.

Conceptual Issues and Nanga's Hubristic Syndrome

Psychoanalytic Social Theory is "based on the belief that social factors rather than biological factors are more influential to the development of personality. The central assumption in Psychoanalytic Social theory is that a person's personality is shaped through social and cultural conditions" (Wesley Meacham Online). This explains social and cultural factors as environmental activities which affect individual's actions. The social and cultural factors are not traits inherited from birth and therefore are not biological. Meacham further posits that Horney's emphasis is on "the environmental context of neurotic behavior as against Freud's emphasis on the biological context of the individual. This implies that Horney's views are less deterministic than Freud's and revolves round the social and cultural environment which can at least be changed where Freud's theory was tied to biological factors which cannot be changed" (Meacham Online). Karen Horney's psychoanalytic social factors are therefore not latent in the individual as in Freud's psychoanalysis, but acquired in the course of interaction.

Negative personality qualities of over conceitedness, extreme pride tinted with excessive arrogance have negative effects and unpalatable repercussions. These acquired traits are build up that trigger off hubristic syndromes including pride, arrogance and revenge which eventually make such personalities culpable as victims of hubris. Hubris is hereby described

as an acquired personality trait or syndrome such as “constituting a cluster of features (symptoms) evoked by a specific trigger (power), and usually remitting when power fades. Hubris syndrome is seen as an acquired condition and different from most personality disorders which are traditionally seen as persistent throughout adulthood” (David Owen Online). Whereas, *50 Years of African Novels*, describes hubris “in Greek tragic thought as any form of excess, whether in the vegetable, human, divine, or other realms is at the same time the triggering off of reversals, decline, suffering, the triggering off of tragedy” (A.N. Akwanya and V.A. Anohu 40). The tragedy of Nanga is in his nemesis. However, “the most important discussion of hubris in antiquity is by Aristotle in his “Rhetoric”. Similarly, it is recorded that “some poets especially Hesoid (7th) century BCE and Aeschylus (5th) century BCE used hubris to describe wrongful action against the divine order” (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Hubris takes its root in the Greek myth with instances of kings and others divinely punished for their wrong doings.

Hubris is equally associated with pride which triggers off tragedy and its consequent repercussion or nemesis. Nemesis in Greek mythology is “the goddess of avenging destiny, or avenging justice, she punished individuals, or at times whole communities, for wrongs they had committed by inflicting on them the same general kind of misfortune that they had inflicted on others” (Chapman 427). The narrative in the text depicts similar lines of event whereby the protagonist Chief Nanga a corrupt politician receives repercussion for his political excesses. Chief Nanga actually holds the people to sway with his seeming modesty. He praises the teachers and commends teaching as a noble profession, promising that “those of us in the Cabinet who were once teachers are in full sympathy with you” (*A Man of the People* 10). With this seeming show of concern and sympathy to the rural people, “everybody at the dais agreed that the Minister was quite exceptional in this respect – a man of high position who still gave age the respect due to it” (*A Man of the People* 12). It is within this prevailing relaxed and harmonious conviviality with the people that Odili surfaces and the situation for Nanga never becomes the same.

Odili's visit to Nanga's house exposes the reality of corruption among the political leaders and paves the way to Nanga's perdition. Odili develops a mindset, as he muses, "it must be very enviable going to all these embassy parties and meeting all the big guns, I said in pretence innocence" (*A Man of the People* 41). Odili is overwhelmed by the glamour and luxury around Chief Nanga. This situation keeps him thinking. In his idealized self, he feels the politicians such as Nanga are opportunists who grab things they are not qualified for, as he said, "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 rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in ..." (42). Nanga leverages on the opportunities as a political leader to develop excessive self confidence as he embarks on corrupt practices with impunity, molesting and oppressing his perceived political opponents and demanding from people blind loyalty. The social malady and corruption especially as consequence of corrupt politicians like Nanga come to light as Odili gets familiar with the activities of Nanga, most of which he experiences first hand. He reports rightly that "my closeness to the Minister gave everything I said heightened significance" (*A Man of the People* 56). Odili's interaction with Chief Nanga makes him understand that leaders play politics with the people and make frivolous promises and excuses for non performance. For example Odili gets to know the deceit surrounding Nanga's declared intention and inability to build the road between Giligili and Anata already approved by the government:

I got to know a lot about this road which, incidentally passes through my village of Urua. At the time I was naturally sympathetic to Chief Nanga's plan for it, if not with his contempt for expert advice. But of course Chief Nanga said the fellow hadn't been appointed in the first place for his expertise at all ... so he has two good reasons for wanting the road tarred – next elections and the arrival of his buses. (*A Man of the People* 48).

There is always a self-interest and intention in the promises of politicians to the people aimed at retaining the political power which is a narcissistic propensity and a hubristic syndrome. The desire to see their world secured

by power and glory begins to take root in the individuals, such as the case with Nanga. Following this tendency of overwhelming desire for election victory as a developing process of acquiring hubris, Shodhganga writes that such situation represents “the Ibsenian metaphor of social realism highlighting the implications of human complicity in a post-colonial situation, in which political power derives itself from a solipsistic manipulation of the narcissistic impulses in human behavior and is directed to personal profit and gain, ...” (Shodhganga 219). The confidence and pomposity of the political leaders are manifest in the corrupt tendencies of Chief Nanga who along the line of pressure to clinch and win the electoral position indulges in other corrupt practices. Corruption and selfishness, and cheating of the masses among other social ills resulting in bad leadership are part of the nemesis of Chief Nanga arising from the acquired pride and recklessness. Thus these have come to the realization that “the minister is loathe to relinquish his new found position and riches” (148 Kerth Booker). The urge is acquired along the line as an enhancement of the self-ego and pride.

Odili as Nanga’s Nemesis

Odili’s familiarity with Nanga serves as a catalyst to Chief Nanga’s hubris and eventual nemesis. This means that Odili is Nanga’s inescapable agent of downfall whereby, his relationship with him causes Nanga to be seriously harmed intentionally as a punishment. This situation puts Nanga at the receiving end of Odili’s irked resolutions. Nanga’s hubris consequently develops along the line of his interactions with Odili. Prior to their re-union and invitation to his house, Chief Nanga the Honourable has been a happy politician who holds the people to sway, and enjoying his self-earned popularity and fame. The situation is captured thus:

In *A Man of the People*, the country is divided up into constituents, which amounts simply to spheres of influence. In each of these the parliamentary representative seeks to function as a divine form, who dazzles the people and commands their instinctive loyalty and obedience. This is what Chief Nanga finds unbearable in Odili’s challenge for

his parliamentary seat. He will take every measure necessary to retain the seat, but he thinks he deserves to be returned unopposed. (A.N Akwanya and Virgy Anohu 166).

Nanga who is supposed to be a man of the people ironically deceives the people. Hence, before now, “No one can deny that Chief 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). His acceptance as a man of the people was demonstrated by the mammoth crowd and lavish reception at his visit to Anata. This was heightened by praise song of the popular “Ego Women’s Party all adorned in Expensive Accra cloth whereby their soloist nicknamed gramophone sings, “She was now praising Micah’s handsomeness which she likened to the perfect, sculpted beauty of a carved eagle, and his popularity which would be the envy of the proverbial traveler-to-distant-places who must not cultivate enmity on his route” (*A Man of the People* 1). This popularity and glamour around Chief Nanga is also acknowledged in “Literature and Politics: A Review of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* and Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*” that “everything is going smoothly for Nanga until the appearance of Odili” (18). Chief Nanga’s political space was devoid of competition and rivalry before the arrival of Odili in the scene, and so he wielded unalloyed glory from his people.

However, in line with the working of nemesis, as a divine law of retribution for wrong doing especially hubris, Mark Rhodes portends that nemesis believes that “if some mere mortal was having all the luck or getting too much credit for things, she would find a way to smite the individual by sending bad luck and ill fortune in the direction of the offending person” (Mark Rhodes Online). Chief Nanga’s meeting of Odili at the campaign rally is an act of ill luck and ill fortune to Chief Nanga. This nemesis begins with the invitation of Odili to Nanga’s house in town:

It was the Minister himself who came back to the post-graduate question at the end of his reception without any prompting whatever from me. (As a matter of fact I tried hard

to avoid catching his attention again). And the proposal he made didn't seem to be offensive in any way. He invited me to come and spend my holidays with him in the capital ... if you come as soon as you close, you can stay in my guest-room with everything, complete-bedroom, parlour, bathroom, latrine, everything self contained you can live by yourself and do anything you like there, it's all yours. (*A Man of the People* 20).

This invitation comes from the Minister himself, perhaps done in good will but later to be his nemesis as Odili takes the advantage to hound him.

It is recorded however that "Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P, a post colonial politician and federal minister is thoroughly corrupt and pompous-typical of his class of emerging postcolonial autocrats. His nemesis, however is a former pupil turned rival, Odili, who retains the idealism of a sane, decent society and tries through politics to reinstate that ideal in place of Chief Nanga's" (Oguibe 28). Odili exhibits elements of pride and conceit in his pursuit of revenge and avenging Chief Nanga's excesses. Another major contention that leads to open and obvious rivalry and confrontation between Chief Nanga and Odili is the fact of perceived humiliation of Odili by Nanga who lures and sleeps with Elsie, Odili's girl friend before his very presence. This incident sparks off a row which establishes the ground for Odili's loathing and feeling of disgust with Chief Nanga. Odili narrates the incident:

It was already past half ten ... I hadn't thought it was so late. I rushed into the sitting room and made to bound up the stairs when I heard as from a great distance Elsie deliriously screaming my name ... I trudged up the stairs in the incredible delusion that Elsie was calling on me to come and save her from her ravisher. But when I got to the door a strong revulsion and hatred swept over me and I turned sharply away and went down the stairs for the last time. (*A Man of the People* 78).

The act is well crafted and schemed by Chief Nanga who chooses on his own to accommodate Elsie in his wife's room very close to his own room, whereas there are other rooms available.

This one act in spite of Nanga's apologies and promises keep Odili devastated, unappeased and threatening. He feels very humiliated as "recollection and panic followed soon enough, and then the humiliating wound came alive again and began to burn more fresh than when first inflicted" (79). In his reaction, Odili confronts Chief Nanga "you have won today, but watch it, I will have the last laugh. I never forget" (*A Man of the People* 81). Nanga however apologizes to Odili, "... But anyway I am sorry if you are offended, the mistake is mine. I tender unreserved apology" (80). Odili in his self conceitedness remains adamant to Nanga's apologies and attempted reconciliation. At this point, Odili embarks on a revenge mission. He thinks out what to do:

I was just flapping about like a trapped bird when suddenly I saw the opening. I saw that Elsie did not matter in the least what mattered was that a man had treated me as no man had a right to treat another not even if he was master and the other slave; and my manhood required that I make him pay his result in full measure. In flesh and blood terms I realized that I must go back, seek out Nanga's intended parlour wife and give her the works, good and proper. (*A Man of the People* 86).

With this resolution, Odili is set to accomplish his mission. Odili's determination to pay back Nanga by wooing Edna, Nanga's intended wife gets him into politics and into becoming Nanga's political opponent as he seeks to displace his parliamentary seat.

This impulse to revenge is described by Akwanya as a "proverbial saying about a thief taking, and taking too much for the owner not to notice" (109). Akwanya further observes that Odili Samalu in *A Man of the People* is first roused to action when he feels outraged by Chief Nanga, but in being trusted aside by this opponent at the first encounter, he discovers his true vocation,

which is to take over when the struggle is ended ... (Akwanya 108). Hence, the tune of the struggle is in becoming Nanga's political rivalry and competing for his political seat, and in scheming to take over his intended wife, Edna. This decision is one too many for Odili. In defense of his political space, Nanga intensifies his crude nature in the fight. The turn of event whereby Odili throws caution to the wind in battling Chief Nanga, saw him fall victim of the wrath of Nanga's ego as he oppresses and treats him as a political enemy. This oppression projects Nanga as a rough beast. Hence, *50 Years of the Nigerian Novel* records that:

Nanga's approach to political practice is hereby constituted as an ideology. In the course of the campaign for parliamentary elections in which Odili's party is to take part for the first time, the nature of this ideology is forcefully brought out. Its business consists of putting the wool over the eyes of the people while transferring public money into one's own coffers for use in building up real estate and other kinds of business enterprise. The tools in its arsenal include bribery and massive levels for the smothering of the opposition, and when these fail, unbridled violence. (Akwanya and Virgy Anohu 168).

This unbridled violence is the bane of Chief Nanga's hubris which develops alongside the effort to contend with pressure from Odili.

As Odili forms a political force with Max and other younger ones they accuse the "outgoing government of all kinds of swindling and corruption. No one among them swore vengeance, no one shook with rage or showed any sign of fight. They understood what was being said, they had seen it with their own eyes. But what did anyone expect them to do?" (*A Man of the People* 139). Even though the revolution and protest do not elicit violence from the people as they become apathetic and cynical, the repercussion of wrong doing otherwise nemesis still catches up with the politicians. The invasion of the polity by a military coup eventually leads to the death of Chief Nanga. We learnt that "the rampaging bands of election thugs had caused so much unrest and dislocation that our young Army officers seized the opportunity to take over. We were told that Nanga was arrested trying to

escape by canoe dressed like a fisherman” (*A Man of the People* 165). Eventually the heating up of the polity and eventual break down of order occasioned by Odili’s political interest and opposition lead to the end of Nanga’s political career and eventual death. He does not only lose in politics, he also loses his intended parlour wife to Odili. Thus, it is of the view that “the novel ends with a military coup which is presented in a positive light but to the advantage of Odili for now he is free to marry Edna because Nanga is out of sight” (Roshid Hassan Pelpuo, et al. 19). This realization of Odili’s threat comes as a result of the interaction developed along the line with Chief Nanga. Thus, hubris, manifesting as self confidence, self-conceit and pride allows Nanga to pursue his political interest unreasonably, thus, his final nemesis.

Conclusion

This paper x-rayed the social and political events in the text using Karen Horney’s Psychoanalytic Social theory. Specifically, the essay explored the corrupt practices of Chief Nanga who along the line of interaction and dalliance with Odili acquired overwhelming confidence and pride that left him with unpalatable consequences. It equally determined the role of Odili as a catalyst to Nanga’s hubris and eventual tragic end. In the long run Chief Nanga’s hubristic actions presented him “as a very embodiment of mediocrity, political unreason, social injustice, and moral turpitude ... He is a Machiavellian Schemer who destroys his opponent in a bid to be returned unopposed” (R.N. Egudu 62). This account of Chief Nanga’s political personality culminated in the oppression and deceit of the people. He is then visited by the law of retributive justice orchestrated by Odili’s overreaching deterministic ambition and vengeance. Eventually in the turn of events, “the idealist and Populist are involved in a love-hate affairs to a point where they are forced to pursue political revenge for personal wrongs and indulge in violence and Mayhem” (Chiptee 239). At the very last, the political system was collapsed as Chief Nanga fell victim of Odili’s ambitious vengeance which came to fruition through the military coup that saw Chief Nanga dead. Finally, Odili ended up marrying Edna, Chief Nanga’s intended parlour wife.

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