

RE-ENGAGING ALTERITY AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN SELECTED NIGERIAN NOVELS

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Abstract

*Since its inception, modern African literature explores several topical social issues such as those bordering on alterity, which suggests the social classification of being different in the society, and disillusionment experienced by Africans due to failed leadership in Africa. These have, consequently, created a huge gap between the privileged – ‘Self’ and the underprivileged – ‘Other’. Studies show how alterity has engendered disillusionment among members of the lower class. However, it is observed that disillusionment is not peculiar only to those in the lower class, but also experienced by a subclass of the ruling or upper class. This study thus examines the disillusionment of subjugated members of the new crop of leaders in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* and Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*. It adopts the postcolonial theory which interrogates the binary of the Self and the Other in the literature of former colonies. It is discovered that the selected writers have engaged their creative art to portray alterity and disillusionment as recurrent themes especially as it occurs among members of the elite class. While Ojaide’s characters fight the military and use democracy to achieve the change they want, Achebe’s characters find their relief in the uprising of the military.*

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, alterity, disillusionment, Chinua Achebe, Tanure Ojaide*

Introduction

Literature, as has long been established, mirrors the historical and social experiences of a society. It is an imaginative re-enactment or recreation of human events and experiences through words in order to achieve aesthetic pleasure, as well as, perform a didactic function. Jim Meyer (1997) suggests that literature does not only reflect and comment on society but also suggests ways in which the society can become a suitable haven for its citizens and thus all aspects of human lives are portrayed in literature. Brown Kanda (2001) also posits that literature, when combined with culture and other experiences in the society, not only presents impalpable subjects like alienation, assimilation and transformation in society but also reflects the palpable issues such as historical, political and social facts. As African writers focus on their society, each stage of their lives and struggles are sometimes explicated in their works. Their narratives capture their socio-cultural, political and religious involvements from pre-colonial to present day experiences. Bekhal Kareem (2017) corroborates this stance when he avers, “it seems that throughout the twentieth century African history (by implication African literature) has passed through different political phenomena such as colonialism and independence, to mention only two. This, definitely, has a great impact on every single facet of life; in particular, on the trends in authors’ literary works”.

Colonialism, being one of the experiences Africa had, has birthed several challenges that Africa is faced with. One of such is disillusionment orchestrated by the creation of a class structure in Africa. This is given credence by Imhonopi et al (2013), who assert that “colonialism and its agents succeeded in creating and perpetuating a new class structure alien to Nigeria and Africa; a class structure that is still reminiscent of the colonial project in post-colonial Nigeria”. Be that as it may, further division within this same structure also developed in the African society, over time, under the leadership of the new crop of leaders after independence, who took over the seat of power.

Indubitably, the concept of Selfhood and Otherness/Alterity has long been the crux of the postcolonial theory; with Selfhood entailing those in positions of power, leadership and financial control, and Otherness comprising those in subverted and disadvantaged positions. Alterity in Africa has, overtime, metamorphosed from that which suggests being the different and subverted being in the privileged Western colonisers and the subverted African divide. It now suggests being different, subverted and the Other in the relationship between the new African leaders who have replaced the Western colonisers as the Self or Centre and the underprivileged African who has been positioned at the mercy of the new African leaders as the Other or Margin. The Self that this study implicates therefore, suggests the African civilian and military leaders who have taken over leadership from the colonialists and have assumed privileged positions where they can engage their voices to dictate the turn of events, the scheme of affairs of the society and initiate societal change. These new crops of indigenous leaders in Africa soon replaced the leadership style and traditions of their white predecessors, who oppressed, exploited and marginalised their subjects. This trend further plunged the ordinary masses into disillusionment as their hopes of being alleviated from colonial oppression and exploitation were dashed by the new crop of African leaders who have assumed the status of the (new) Self in the continent. More so, it is observed that this disparity in class is also experienced among the new crop of leaders wherein a section of leaders who are in more advantaged positions in leadership marginalise those leaders who are not as advantaged as they are. This study observes that this crop of leaders who are being marginalised also get disillusioned as they face confusion, frustration, disintegration and estrangement most often because of their disapproval and non-support of the corrupt intentions and practices of other members of the new ruling class.

As literature captures the happenings of the society, this pathetic situation is well reflected by various African authors in their fictional works. Many writers have centred their works on the effects of colonialism, its aftermath and disillusionment orchestrated by the new crop of African leaders. But few have paid attention to the disillusionment experienced by a subjugated subclass of the ruling class which suffers frustration, estrangement, marginalisation and oppression in the hands of the more advantaged elite within the same ruling class. It is important to restate here, as a way of emphasis and clarity that the Self in this study refers to African leaders (civilian or military) who took over leadership and power after independence. This research, thus, seeks to re-examine alterity and disillusionment

from the perspective of a subjugated 'Other' within the Self in the African milieu with critical reference to Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*.

Postcolonialism, Alterity and the Nigerian Social Experience

Postcolonialism examines literature produced in and about formerly colonised societies portraying their various cultural, economic and political issues (Thamarana 2015; Javed 2016). Najwan Saada (2014) adds that the term postcolonialism denotes numerous interactions between the coloniser and the colonised. A clear understanding of postcolonialism then brings to the fore, issues of Alterity (Otherness). Tyson (2015) adumbrates this when he explains that those in power see themselves as superior to others not opportune to be in power. This presents a picture where the colonised/oppressed becomes the other/inferior to the Self which constitutes the coloniser/oppressor.

Nigeria, as a liberal and democratic nation-state, was seen as a beacon of hope when she gained her independence. However, her status of independence could not guarantee the country's survival as a result of the incapability of her leadership to handle it at the time. This led to wide social divisions and challenges, and hence made it arduous to engender a cohesive government (Osaghae 1998; Akinboye, & Anifowose 1999). Africa's fortunes have not been helped by the Eurocentric "First World"- "Third World" country divide. While "developed" countries like the United States of America, France, Germany and Italy, to mention but a few, thrive and develop at a fast rate, the "underdeveloped" African countries, to which Nigeria belongs, is left behind to grapple with poverty and lack.

Since independence, Nigeria, like most African countries has encountered several socio-political issues that have truncated her peace and stability. The country has at one point or the other found its way out of some crises only to end up in other forms of crises. These crises have been political, economic, social, ethnic or religions and have been the cause of the country's underdevelopment, which have frequently threatened its corporate existence as a united entity. All of these were as a result of bad leadership by African leaders whom Africans had high hopes in and whom they expected to understand their long time struggles enough to not let them down. On the contrary, this was not the case as the new leaders, who constitute the Self in this study, betrayed the faith reposed in them to do better than the Western imperialists. Instead, these new leaders amassed wealth for themselves while the masses lived in abject penury. Apparently, these new African leaders were not different from their former British counterparts.

The new elites, who took over power from the colonialists, lacked political tolerance and failed to play the political game according to the established rules of the same colonisers who had governed before them and instead saw independence as an opportunity to perpetuate their selfish and parochial interests through the politics of ethnic identity as laid down by the colonial imperialist (Akinsanya 2005). The new African leaders created a wide gap between the rich and the poor through their selfish

intentions, as they embezzled the nation's wealth. This betrayal created a sense of disillusionment in many Africans. According to Brian Atwood (1998), the magnitude of corruption during the era of the various civilian and military regimes cannot always be determined with precision because the trend, ways and means of illegal self-enrichment were not the same. The military, took over power having accused the civilian leaders of gross incompetence and corruption. However, their intentions were no better than that of the civilian leaders. Nigeria became a chessboard in the hands of the military, with various military personnel, at different times, attempting to seize power primarily to enrich themselves. The (new) Self, which is inclusive of the civilian and military leaders, became a disappointment.

Over time, these issues bordering on political maladministration and social marginalisation have triggered protests and revolts as seen in many strike actions spearheaded by the masses which constitute the Other in this case. Besides these protests which sometimes are met with deaf ears, some members of the subjugated Other have sought alternative measures in transforming their status from the subjugated Other to the Self. Such include engaging in politics to change this perilous situation. While some of them choose to struggle to protect and maintain their morality by not yielding to corruption, the others opt to join and partake in the sharing of the national cake. Those who find themselves in privileged positions (the Self) and decide not to be compromised in their quest for the desired change are then faced with a kind of marginalisation and estrangement which foster disillusionment by the oppressive and corrupt arm of the same ruling class to which they belong. This is evident in cases where contracts are not awarded to certain highly placed individuals because they are not 'loyal' to the government. This implies that there is an Other within the Self, and this Other comprises the few within the government who seek justice but are resisted and marginalised. This situation is aptly demonstrated in the novels under study.

Rethinking Alterity and Disillusionment in *A Man of the People* and *The Activist*

A Man of the People depicts the new post independent political set up. Bernth Lindfors (2004) suggests that the novel should be recognised as "a devastating satire in which Achebe heaped scorn on independent Africa...". The novel explores the levels of political injustice, exploitation and corruption in the Nigerian society, as well as the acquisition of material wealth through crooked means. It explores themes of disappointment and lamentation over the socio-political realities of post-independence Nigeria. The quality of leadership and the response of the people to that leadership form the core of the novel. Politics in post-independence Nigeria orchestrated disillusionment when the Nigerian (African) leaders in power took after the mould of the Western imperialists through their exploitative actions, expressed in oppression, maltreatment, segregation, discrimination, and cruel administration without recourse to human sympathy. The style of leadership was such that the well-being of the masses was undermined. The novel offers a potent commentary on corruption and its inherent machinery in the

post-independence Nigerian society. The independence of former colonies like Nigeria only gave room for the birth of a new set of black masters in place of old white masters.

The plot of the novel focuses on the interaction between two major characters – Chief Nanga, a corrupt and dishonest politician and Odili Samalu, a sceptic youth. Both of them represent divergent ideologies and typify the social groups to which they belong. Chief Nanga is the representative of a class of politicians, the neo-colonial elite, who having inherited power from the departing colonial masters try to retain the same at any cost. They retain the materialistic values of a money-grabbing capitalist system left behind by the colonizers. In the novel, the stress is on the individual, and the pursuit of materialism which have brought corruption, strife and cynicism. Odili is a typical instance of the alienated, visionary youth, who may be viewed or positioned as a ‘Self’ by virtue of the fact that he is a privileged product of the colonial educational system. In the words of Amir Hossain (2020), the novel presents Odili's resistance to an imperialist politician Nanga (another representative of the ‘Self’) who wants to resist the internal forces of colonial hegemony. Apart from these two categories, however, there is yet another category identified by Hossain – the common men, who are the cynical complacent electorate that are very well aware of the embezzlement of public funds by their leaders, but are reconciled to this kind of exploitation. Now at least, it is their own men who enjoy the fruits. Achebe's satirical stance in *A Man of the People*, hereafter cited as AMOTP, is at its best when he sums up the selfish attitude of the public thus; “Let them eat... after all when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide? Of course not... Besides if you survive, who knows? It may be your turn to eat tomorrow” (AMOTP p.145).

Chief Nanga and Odili are initially depicted at two ends. Chief Nanga's unscrupulous acquisition of power and wealth by deceiving people and Odili's abstinence from politics, are apt indicators of the moral decline in the political arena. As the novel progresses, Achebe reveals that even an idealist like Odili will not distinguish himself as an exception to the corrupt trend and would only become a typical or stereotyped neo-colonial politician like Nanga if thrown into politics. This is made evident as seen in the idealised Odili when he gradually succumbs to the temptations of political success and starts to imitate the attitude of Chief Nanga himself. The moral debasement in terms of the political and personal affairs of both characters is evident in the type of relationship that exists between Odili and Nanga. While Nanga is a realist who knows what the masses want and treats situations as the society expects, Odili is an idealist who is driven by his personal idea of how things should be addressed even though he later attempts to adjust to the realists approach.

In a bid to improve their relationship, Chief Nanga offers Odili a scholarship to study abroad in England but, their convivial relationship is cut short all of a sudden by an unexpected turn of events. Odili is offended when he learns that Nanga has had a sexual affair with Elsie, his girlfriend whom Odili had brought to Nanga's house with a similar intention. Odili was not persuaded by Nanga's explanation that he assumed the relationship between Odili and Elsie was a non-committed one. Deeply

offended, Odili settles on taking revenge on Nanga not only on the political front, but also at the emotional front as well. Therefore, in his plans to avenge himself, seeks Maxwell's help and they form a new political party called Common People's Convention (C.P.C). However, Nanga being a clever politician who is still in power cannot be defeated so easily. Nanga declares: "I am not afraid of you. Every goat and every fowl in this country know that you will fail woefully...I am only giving you this money because I feel that after all my years of service to my people I deserve to be elected unopposed" (*AMOTP* p.119).

The founding of a new political party further suggests that Odili can be placed as a 'Self' but this time a weaker self (an Other within the 'Self') because Nanga's party is much stronger than Odili's new party. Despite all the persuasions and temptations to succumb to Nanga's leadership, Odili does not retreat. He sticks to his plans and proceeds with his party work campaigning against Nanga and his illiterate group. Throughout the election, Odili is incarcerated by Nanga until Chief Nanga is re-elected. Odili's close party man, Maxwell, is murdered on the day of election. The corrupt government of Mr. Nanga and others is overthrown a few months later by the military rule.

As evident in the Nigerian society, Odili is prevented from putting his strategies into action. At the public level, the unscrupulous political opportunistic attitude of Nanga is contrasted with the idealism of the confused and disillusioned Odili and at the private level the corrupt politician's sympathetic attitude and vitality could be contrasted with the estrangement and selfishness of the idealist. Setting aside his idealism, Odili is transformed into another Nanga, adopting his ways, if not his lifestyle. Although not initially given to violence, Odili has to, in the end, resort to violent actions in order to take on revenge against Nanga. Odili's unwillingness to apply stringent standards to his own behaviour leads to his involvement in violence. Even though there are evidences suggesting that Odili lost the right to his virtue, honesty has always been a part of his moral landscape. Odili's trials and tribulations have not brought him to any firm moral ground. He has, on the contrary, become cynical, unable to perceive the extent of his own ignorance. In the end, he comes to reconcile with his own image of a failed fighter even though there are certain vices that have penetrated the core of his moral fabric from outside.

Hence, the novelist exposes and responds to the pervading political woes through his characters, Nanga and Odili, who represent existing socio-political divides or classes in the novel. Both Odili and Nanga, as signifiers of the young educated Nigerian and a typical Nigerian politician respectively, are drawn to foreign cultures and are influenced by the emerging new forces of power and wealth. Just like the enlightened like Odili, the simple village folk could also see through the hypocrisy of politicians far more clearly. A simple 'bush' woman dismisses both Odili and Chief Nanga in one sentence: "They are both whiteman's people" (*AMOTP* p.107). This statement further gives ground for placing Nanga and Odili as belonging to the same entity called the 'Self'.

In Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, hereafter cited as TA, the European imperialists who may be seen as the 'Self' and the African leaders maintained a cordial relationship in Nigeria through trade. Ironically, the Westerners seized the opportunity and capitalised on the corrupt nature of African leaders to exploit Africa. The discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta of Nigeria engendered great business dealings between Nigeria and the multinational oil companies. Ojaide in *The Activist* portrays this relationship and the consequent state of disillusionment it brought the Nigerian citizens especially those from the Niger-Delta region. At independence and even more recently, the new crops of leaders, subsequently constituted as the 'new Self', who took over the seat of power, quickly showed their failings with involvements in corruption. These situations led to military interventions as the nation fell into the hands of the military at some point. In the novel, Chief Young Kpeke, Chief Goodluck Ede and many top military officers are involved in the bunkering business and those guards who are meant to protect the pipelines prefer fat tips from civilians in the bunkering business as they seek to improve their living conditions and climb further up the ladder of Selfhood. Failure of these pipeline guards to comply with these oil bunkers would see them lose out and run out of favour with those who are at the helm of oil exploration and bunkering. This joint collaboration among the chiefs, military personnel and guards may be interpreted as an emergent Self for the purpose of this study.

The Bell Oil Company depicted in the novel is an apt representation of Shell. The oil pipes owned by these oil companies, at one point or the other, explode and cause spillages which damage aquatic lives and farm lands in the Niger-Delta. The complaint and plea for a solution to these predicaments and government assistance are always ignored. Not even their chiefs and University dons could speak for them as they have been compromised with bribes from the multinational oil companies. The marginalisation meted to the Niger-Deltans are encapsulated thus

The government and the oil corporations brought in people from other states to fill the jobs in the industry that was destroying not only their environment but also their sources of livelihood. The area boys saw themselves as a reject caste thrown out of their paradise that had become a haven for others. They were a bitter group and they would die to wrest a few naira from the outsiders (TA p.48).

The above excerpt shows the consequences of a corrupt and unfair system wherein those at the helm of affairs care less about the indigenes of the land on which they carry out their oil exploration. Here, the government and oil corporations hired the services of external hands, undermining the presence of the local youths and depriving them of gainful employment. These youths see themselves as "reject caste" as depicted above. When they could no longer tolerate this marginalisation, the Boma boys in the novel took to arms as a rebellion to their neo-colonial oppressors. In the novel, Pere reveals that he discovers that many of the military officers are involved in bunkering, thus

The head of the military junta was himself a bunkering chieftain. He had associates who did the job for him to enjoy the huge profits. He had used the bunkering business as a means of favouring loyal officers or buying the loyalty of key ones whose loyalty he needed. Many of the generals had their own tankers taking crude oil to the spot market in Rotterdam (TA p.50)

It is obvious from the foregoing that there are two groups of loyal and disloyal officers within the emergent self, and it is the disloyal officers that, here, experience a kind of subjugation and marginalisation from their superiors. In other words, it is evident that the head of the military only favours those officers that are loyal to him and by implication, those officers who refuse to be part of his evil deeds are not shown such favours and are treated with some level of disdain, neglect and incessant posting to places where ordinarily they would not have been posted to, especially if they were loyal.

This struggle to change the recurring marginalisation and human exploitation is also depicted in the character of The Activist, who is the protagonist of the novel. He finds himself in a position to exploit his own people by virtue of his educational achievement and knowledge of the Whiteman's ways and exploits. However, despite his emergence as a member of the 'new Self' because of his exposure and connections, The Activist's refusal to join forces with the oppressive arm of the Self makes him an opposition to the oppressive arm of this 'new Self' and consequently he contends with a kind of estrangement. When asked to join politics by Pere, The Activist registers his non-interest, thus; "Why haven't you join dem for government?" Pere teased the Activist. "Me, they go fire me the first day I join dem; they go say I be rebel." They laughed. "I be rebel too-o," Pere told him. "If you no dey with them, you be rebel. No mind dem" (TA p.99)

Pere and the Activist soon find out that they shared same aspiration, which they previously did not disclose to each other. Their common goal was to either chase out the outsiders from their land or be treated respectfully by them as the owners of the resources that were being exploited. They also hoped they could cut off and weaken the untrustworthy insiders, who teamed up and conspired with the outsiders to perpetuate their horrid exploitation, as they are of the belief that the outsiders can succeed only when they have the support of some insiders. In a conversation between the two, Pere informed The Activist about Chief Ishaka not being part of the evil perpetuations of the other chiefs. He avers, "This chief was different from the other chiefs around" (TA p.99). This also portrays the dichotomy of the Self and the other even among the ruling chiefs as not all the chiefs are in agreement. It is apparent that Chief Ishaka is on the Activist's side judging from his disapproval to be part of the evil plans of the other chiefs. They wished that more of the chiefs would think of their people's interests and not of

their own pockets like Chief Ishaka. “What a change it would be, if many lecturers were like him”, Pere told himself after *The Activist* left (TA p.99).

As a leader himself, *The Activist* stands out amongst others as he has the welfare of his people at heart unlike the other group of corrupt leaders. Others who made up this relative new and marginal Self are Ebi, Mrs. Taylor, Pere, Chief Ishaka, Omagbemi and some area boys. They fight for change and in doing so, for their land. As they fight for their course they are alienated from the larger group of leaders or (new) Self who seek to embezzle public fund. This can be seen in the treatment given to them both by the government and those who are part of the new Self or neo-colonisers.

Ojaide portrays these alienated and disillusioned ones not as cowards but as members of the society who are committed to changing the society for good. *The Activist* constantly turns down attempts to turn him against his ideology and even against his own people. The excerpt below is an example of an instance:

Bell Oil company wrote a letter inviting the *Activist* to give lectures on American and Nigerian university experiences; a comparative perspective. The topic was specifically tailored to suit him, but the tortoise cannot be caught in a trap! The *Activist* did not respond; he wanted the oil company to interpret his silence as a refusal to give the lectures. But so persistent were the oil companies in their effort to win over recalcitrant elements in the Niger Delta that they reminded him with another letter. They thought the staggering amount of money he would receive for a public lecture that he did not need to prepare hard for was more than enough to knock him senseless. But he was a sturdy man that however big a bribe was could not overwhelm. He had never been desperate for money and fortunately he was doing very well in his business. He wrote back thanking the Bell Oil representative who had extended him the invitation that he would not be disposed to give such lectures. The matter was closed (TA pp.179-180).

Despite such attempts at making the *Activist* relax his strict principles, he stands his ground as he seeks change. Through protests and newspaper editorials the desired turn of events such as a change in leadership came for the Niger Delta region; a change the *Activist* achieved by becoming the governor.

Conclusion

We can deduce from the study that the selected writers have engaged their creative art to portray alienation as a recurrent theme in their novels. However, this subjugated other among the elite represented by *Odili* and *The Activist* find themselves fighting against several odds to achieving social

change. This has caused estrangement and disillusionment to honest elites who resist the corrupting influence of the new African leaders. The study suggests that alienation is not only experienced by members of the lower class but also by select members of the elite class as portrayed in the novels studied. In *The Activist* these elites (estranged Self) are The Activist, Omagbemi, Chief Ishaka, Ebi, Mrs Taylor and Pere. These characters spoke against the corruption in their land. They moved from passive observers of the ills and social vices inherent in their society to active advocates for a better and sane society. On the other hand, in *A Man of the People*, the few elites (estranged Self) who seek change are Odili, Max, Eunice and Joe. Their antagonist Chief Nanga is corrupt and embezzles public funds. Odili becomes an active politician in a quest to overthrow Nanga.

While both novels portray alienated characters and their reactions, it is noteworthy to see some contrast in how the different authors present their ideas. For Ojaide, the alienated elites seek justice for their entire community and not their personal glorification as seen in *A Man of the People*. These marginalised and estranged elites believed that their efforts can turn events around and redeeming the masses from the harsh hands of their oppressor (native leaders). *The Activist* ends with the desired change made possible through the constant struggles and resistance of the alienated and disillusioned. In contrast, Achebe presents a different picture. Odili's fight for power was based on his personal desire to avenge Chief Nanga for sleeping with his fiancée. Unlike *The Activist* who wanted to save his people from their indigenous oppressor, Odili lost his vision and began to act like Chief Nanga. He slowly joined the course he was fighting against, in the end he conscripted public funds which he used for his marriage. Achebe also portrays history in the end through his introduction of the military intervention; an allusion to Nigeria's 1967 coup de etat. While Ojaide's characters fight against the military and use democracy to achieve the change they wanted, Achebe's characters find their relief in the uprising of the military. Despite these differences, both novels depict the alienation faced by a group among the African elites who desire change in the community they find themselves and how they fight to achieve social change.

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