

Critiquing the Question of the Model of Governance in the Novels of Chinua Achebe

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The novels of Chinua Achebe appear to be critiquing the question of suitable model of government. *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* present before us the traditional model of governance while *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* capture democracy and military rule as the model of governance. In this paper, I examine all the projected models of governance in order to assess their success or failure. This critical enquiry becomes even more meaningful against the background of the political history of Nigeria in the postindependence era.

Let us first closely examine the model of governance of the traditional Igbo community portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. No individual had the absolute power to govern the community. The collective bodies like the men of elders and the men of high title had great responsibility on their shoulder. All the decisions were taken collectively and each individual had right to express his views on the issues brought for consideration in the village assemblies. It will be interesting to understand the proceedings of the village assemblies. Here we can recall how all the assemblies in Umuofia start with the thunderous echoes of Umuofia Kwenu. All the speakers use this slogan before commencing their speech not just to observe such custom or just to grab everybody's attention. But it is also indicative of their respect for the community as well as of their recognition of the power of the collective strength and their total submission to it. It is also worth pointing out how the decision on all the crucially important issues is taken collectively. It is true that the power of oratory influences a great deal the entire course of action here, but they have not one but many powerful orators. All the potential speakers are given full opportunity to speak their mind. And then finally some decision is arrived at which becomes the decision of the community and everyone is obliged to abide by that. The decision of

Umuofia to ask for a virgin and lad from the people of Bino to compensate the killing of their clan's man Udo, the decision of Mbanta to ostracise their own men for practicing the new faith, the decision of Umuofia to pay three hundred cowries to white man for the release of their clansmen and their final decision to launch a decisive battle against church and the new administration following Enoch's killing of one Egwagwu could be thought of in this regard.

It is also worth demonstrating how the community of Umuofia asserts its authority through the priestess of Agbala. It must be stressed that the priestess of Agbala is like any other woman in the community, but she becomes extremely powerful woman when she is possessed by the divine spirit to carry out the commands of Agbala. We find mention of two priestesses in the work--*Chika* and *Chielo*. Both of them are represented as extremely powerful women feared by one and all in the community. It is worth noting how Chika expresses her anger when Unoka goes to consult her to know the reasons for his failure:

'Hold your peace!' screamed the priestess, her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void. 'You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machet and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man.' (TFA 13)

It is important to note how a man of domineering personality like Okonkwo is left with no choice but to watch Chielo perform all her activities as a mute spectator. We can feel the degree of his helplessness as Chielo does not pay much attention to his request and he has to finally yield to her: "The priestess screamed. 'Beware, Okonkwo!' she warned. 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!'" (71). This episode raises a very important question in our mind.

Let us now turn our attention to the portrayal of democracy as the model of governance in *A Man of the People* in the light of the questions raised above. The most significant thing with reference to the role of the collective is reflected in the depiction of democracy in the

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novel. We can recall how the Prime Minister calls his government, “government by the people, of the people and for the people” (MOP-5). However, even a cursory reading of the text belies his statement all together. It will be worth investigating the nature and function of democracy represented in the novel.

The first question is whether the government is by the people. To put it differently, the question is whether the government represents the collective will in the real sense. This, in fact, prompts to investigate the portrayal of the election process in the novel. We see how all the politicians exploit their power of money to win the election. We can recall how Nanga comes to Odili with the offer of foreign scholarship and 250\$ to be elected unopposed. Besides, we also learn from Nanga how Chief Koko has given 1000\$ to Max for the same purpose. And later we find Max quite interestingly justifying his decision of taking money from Chief Koko: ‘Now you tell me how you propose to fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands a little.’ (128) Apart from bribing their adversaries, the politicians use their money in hiring people for violence against them. We can recall how many times Odili is threatened by Nanga’s men. It is interesting how Odili is bullied in his inaugural meeting in the assembly hall of the school where he taught:

I stretched my hand to take his. But instead of a handshake he smartly described an arc at my head and knocked off my red cap. The small crowd thought it was very funny and laughed boisterously. I decided to remain cool and dignified; I bent down to pick up my cap and to my greatest shock and mortification the rascal kicked me behind - not violently but enough to make me land on my two hands, to avoid landing on my head. (MOP 102-103)

It is interesting to see even an idealist like Odili has to hire three people for his safety. It is worth noting how Nanga goes on to terrorise Odili’s father and villagers of Urua by making a pompous show of his sheer power:

“The next day, however, the palaver came closer home. The local council Tax Assessment Officer brought him a reassessed figure based not only on his known pension of eighty-four pounds a year but on an alleged income of five hundred pounds derived from “business”. In the evening three local council policemen looking like “wee-wee” or marijuana smokers came to arrest him and in fact proceeded to manhandle him. I had to find twenty-four pounds fairly smartly;

fortunately I had just enough C.P.C. money in the house to cover it. I threatened to take the matter up and the rascals laughed in my face. ‘Na only up you go take am?’ asked their leader. ‘If I be you I go take am down too, when I done finish take am up. Turn you back make I see the nyarsh you go take fight Nanga’... The culmination came at the weekend when seven Public Works lorries arrived in the village and began to cart away the pipes they had deposited several months earlier for our pro-jected Rural Water Scheme. This was the first indication we had that the Authorities did in fact hear of our little ceremony. Which was some consolation. (133-134)

The biggest collective forum in democracy is the parliament and its portrayal in the novel goes on to question its utility itself. It is reduced to a meeting place of all the highly selfish individuals, completely alienated from the concerns of their community. The entire proceedings in the parliament appear to us nothing more than a melodrama:

“The Prime Minister spoke for three hours and his every other word was applauded. He was called the Tiger, the Lion, the One and Only, the Sky, the Ocean and many other names of praise. He said that the Miscreant Gang had been caught “red-handed in their nefarious plot to overthrow the Government of the people by the people and for the people with the help of enemies abroad”.

They deserve to be hanged,’ shouted Mr. Nanga from the back benches. This interruption was so loud and clear that it appeared later under his own name in the Hansard. Throughout the session he led the pack of back-bench hounds straining their leash to get at their victims. If any one had cared to sum up Mr. Nanga’s interruptions they would have made a good hour’s continuous yelp. Perspiration poured down his face as he sprang up to interrupt or sat back to share in the derisive laughter of the hungry hyena.

When the Prime Minister said that he had been stabbed in the back by the very ingrates he had pulled out of oblivion some members in tears.

They have bitten the finger with which their mother fed them,’ said Mr. Nanga. This too was entered in the Hansard, a copy of which I have before me. It is impossible, however, to convey in cold print the electric atmosphere of that day. I cannot now recall exactly what my feelings were at that point. I suppose I thought the whole performance

rather peculiar. (MOP 5-6)

The picture of violence drawn in the novel attracts our critical attention. We come to know about widespread violence unleashing chiefly in two stages; the pre- election stage and post-election stage. It is also important to note how politicians use violence as a weapon against their adversaries in the pre-election stage and how in the post-election stage; it simply explodes to create a complete disorder. The most awful instance example of political violence is portrayed in the report of the dramatic deaths of Max and Chief Coko.

Thus, *A Man of the People* captures complete failure of democracy. What is important to note here is the way people have turned apathetic to their own concerns. Here one can find the reflection of Robert Michels's foregrounding of oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy:

It is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over electors, the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says, organization, says oligarchy. (Michels 288-289)

Anthills of the Savannah captures a very gloomy picture of the military rule. Sam enjoys absolute power and rules the Kangan state in his own dictatorial fashion. We observe the way the voice of the collective in the novel has been simply silenced under the authoritarian regime of Sam. It is noteworthy how the visit of the delegation from Abojen simply unsettles Sam, as he feels threatened to see his authority challenged by the common people. It is also significant to note how this incident, in fact, gives rise to a chain of events throwing the Kangan state in a complete disarray. The important developments thereafter include Ikem's meeting with the delegation, Ikem's removal from service, his active involvement in politics, overwhelming impact of his lecture on the students sowing the seeds of large scale movement against the government. Ikem's arrest followed by his assassination, Chris's escape followed by his assassination and the overthrow of Sam's military regime. The point that needs to be stressed in this whole context is Achebe's assigning of role to the collective under a military regime. In the last chapter, I have already pointed out how Sam's excessive individualism and autocratic leadership does not leave any room for the collective voice. However, this is only

one side of the coin. It is equally true and significant how this gross undermining of the collective raises it to recognize its power and assume leadership role.

In fact, the failure of democracy as well as that of the military rule speaks volumes of the gross undermining of the collective. All the political leaders in democracy as well as the military leader portrayed in Achebe's novels are highly individualists completely immune to the predicament of the common masses. They only use power as an instrument for the accomplishment of their unfulfilled aspirations. Therefore, it will not be incorrect to maintain that the success of the model of governance for the traditional Igbo community as a guiding instrumentality to teach the postcolonial leaders the indispensable significance of the role of the collective and only then any model of governance can produce desired impact in any postcolonial state.

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