Satire as a Literary Device for Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria: A Study of Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*

Mohammed Attai Yakubu[a],*

[a]Department of English and Literary Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract
This paper began with the definition of satire which is to ridicule the oddities of society for corrective purpose for a positive change. In this way, it becomes a vehicle for socio-economic development. The purpose of the study is to analyse Achebe’s use of satire in *A Man of the People*. Satirical passages were sampled and analysed using a simple expository approach. Furthermore, to justify Achebe’s deployment of satire in the novel and corruption as a major theme, there is a review of what other scholars have written on this cankerworm called corruption. The rot with the polity during the First Republic as well as the insincerity and dishonesty of our leaders has been exposed. Corruption has been described as the bane of socio-economic development in Nigeria. It has been discovered that literary texts that employ the device of satire can bring about the desired change in society. The writer is of the opinion that satire as a device in literature could be used to reshape Nigeria for socio-economic development.

Key words: Literary device; Socio-economic development; Corruption; Achebe; Satire; Style.

INTRODUCTION

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (Hornby, 2000), defines satire as a way of criticising a person, an idea or an institution in which you use humour to show their faults or weaknesses. Abrams (1981), defines it as:

The literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire “derides”.

This means satire uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself. Writers use satire to introduce humour in their works. A literary work that is satirical induces laughter. Satire ridicules the oddities of society in order to correct abnormalities and change society for the better. As writers create amusement through satire, readers are sometimes made to laugh at their own follies. It is used to mock people over the wrong things they do.

Satire has long been a device used by writers to send their massages to readers. We can say that it emanates from man’s tendency to use his imagination to portray the society. It is a very powerful tool because of its corrective purpose. As Abrams (1981) has observed, satire has usually been justified by those who practice it as a corrective of human vice and folly. So, it is a useful device by which writers can articulate their intentions very well.

All the three main genres of literature exploit satire. In prose, poetry, and drama, it is employed. Writers all over the world use it. European writers across periods have used it as a weapon for a positive change in their society. African writers such as Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Ferdinand Oyono, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Sembene Ousmane, Mongo Beti, Ayi Kwei Armah, Okot P’Bitek, among others have used it in their works.

According to Odion (2009), Clark in *The Wives Revolt* attempts to satirize the greedy and irresponsive disposition of the so-called leaders of the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta. These leaders collect compensation money on behalf of the community but such money only enriches a few, while the rabbles remain poor.

Literature is an agent of change. Satire as a literary device is targeted at political, economic and social reformation for the betterment of society.
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Literature as a subject inculcates in youths societal values. By ridiculing the oddities of society, children will imbibe virtues such as honesty, sincerity, and discipline to become good citizens of this country. Youths are the leaders of tomorrow. In society, there are the good, the bad, and the ugly. By making youths in the entire society laugh at the bad and the ugly, good behaviour and consciousness of doing the right thing at all times will be instilled. So, young men and women should be exposed to literary works that use satire.

1. SATIRE IN ACHEBE’S A MAN OF THE PEOPLE

A Man of the People is a highly satirical novel. By using Odili as the narrator, Achebe laughs at not only Chief Nanga but also Odili himself. Odili is presented in the novel as corrupt, egocentric, lecherous, shallow-minded, conceited, hypocritical, tactless, immature, vulgar, uncouth, unprincipled, insincere, and a confused idealist. Corruption is the main theme of this novel. Odili uses party funds to pay dowry. Palmer (1978) states that, “Achebe simultaneously uses the narrator Odili to laugh at certain institutions and people and he laughs at Odili himself”. So, the butts of attack in the novel are groups or organizations like Ego Women’s Party, the hunters’ guild, political parties, electoral commission, the media and the police; an institution such as the parliament; people like the villagers, government officials, the civil servants, and the police; and individuals such as Nwege, Josiah, Jalio and many others. The follies of all and sundry are exposed and laughed at.

The themes of A Man of the People are corruption, cynicism, thuggery, rigging of election and mediocrity. All these are negative tendencies against socio-economic development. So, the society which the novel mirrors is being lambasted over these vices so that there can be a change of behaviour.

The government represented by Chief Nanga has battered the economy to the state of doldrums yet the masses support and hail them. Nobody sees corruption as an economic or social evil. Odili, Achebe’s mouth piece in the novel says:

Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow up their gun powder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation. I wished for a miracle, for a voice of thunder, to hush this ridiculous festival and tell the poor contemptible people one or two truths. But of course it would be quite useless. They were not only ignorant but cynical. Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you… if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth (Achebe, 2009).

This is an attempt by the people to legitimise corruption. They glorify it and by the term “egunje”, (where you work is where you eat) many Nigerians see nothing wrong with it. Even those that denounce it are themselves guilty of it one way or the other. This form of behaviour is condemned in the above passage.

The government that is presented to us in the novel is that of mediocrity. A regime that sacks the minister of finance for proposing a reasonable way of dealing with the poor situation of the economy and orders the national bank to print fifteen million pounds is incompetent and inept. The events that occur in the parliament as narrated by Odili exposed the ineptitude of the government. The majority of those in the government are ill-educated and they see well-educated ones as threats to their political career. The Minister of Finance, a Ph.D holder in Economics and other elite in the government who agree with him to cut down the price paid to cocoa farmers are branded as traitors, conspirators, saboteurs, and a miscreant gang. They are mercilessly beaten and their belongings have been vandalized. This is a rotten legacy. This trend continues to the present day and should change for socio-economic development.

The Prime Minister along with the poorly educated members of the parliament has no regard for university education. The episode in the House of Parliament according to the narrator is shameful. There is the need to ridicule the self-seeking politicians that fill this country to the brim. As Pope has remarked, “Those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous” (Abrams, 1981). So, they should be ridiculed.

Achebe goes ahead to castigate the present regime that preaches what it cannot practise. They mount the campaign to promote the consumption of locally made products while they do not consume these products themselves. When Chief Koko takes the local coffee prepared by his cook, he thinks that he is poisoned. What an irony? The Minister’s usual nescafe has finished and therefore the cook uses some of the locally processed coffee bought from OHM—Our Home Made Stuff—was the popular name of the gigantic campaign, which the Government had mounted all over the country to promote the consumption of locally made products. Newspapers, radio and television urged every patriot to support this great national effort, which, they said, held the key to economic emancipation without which our hard-won political freedom was a mirage (Achebe, 2009).

This is an instance of government’s rhetoric. The government we see in the novel is insincere, dishonest and deceitful. The use of satire in this novel is an indication of the need for a change.

Nigerian government since independence appears to attach little importance to qualification when it comes to appointment especially the appointment of political office holders. A common saying in the country after independence was that it didn’t matter what you knew but who you knew. (Achebe, 2009). With boot-leaking, “godfatherism”, and lobbying, people get what they want for their selfish interest not for the purpose of service to the fatherland. So, qualifications are not a determinant of ministries that ministers are made to head. We have
witnessed an economist heading Ministry of Health and several other cases like this in Nigeria.

This is what Achebe has ridiculed in his portrayal of Chief Nanga who, as a Minister of Culture does not know the writers in the country despite the fact that they are few. He has not even heard their names. He has no idea of what book title is as he mistakes The Song of the Black Bird for a musician or a song. His ignorance is carried further when he takes authors like Michael West and Dudley Stamp as artists. Chief Nanga is thus a square peg in a round hole. We can see that the government at that time was surrounded by mediocrities. In a situation like this, we cannot witness a meaningful development. Achebe wants to change this situation through satire used in the novel.

In satire, there is hope for a change for the better; this may be short-term or long-term. The novel, A Man of the People, ends on a prophetic note. The novel was written before the first coup of January, 1966. At the end of the novel, it is stated that the “the rampaging bands of election thugs had caused so much unrest and dislocation that our young Army officers seized the opportunity to take over”. (Achebe, 2009).

In the past, the military as the most disciplined group in Nigeria could be a better option to the bunch of ill-educated politicians at the time more so, as the masses were cynical. Today, the situation is different but a lot needs to be done especially about our value system that sees nothing wrong with accumulation of wealth illegally. The situation portrayed at the end of the novel is a good lesson for every Nigerian politician interested in good governance. There is the need for the re-orientation of the Nigerian psyche because corrupt leaders are being worshipped and decorated with national merit awards and the local community chieftaincy titles. The country needs total re-shaping and re-moulding for socio-economic development. This is stated loud and clear in the novel.

2. SATIRE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Corruption is a three-headed monster that has threatened the very fabric of our society this is why it is the major thematic pre-occupation of African literary works of the post-independence era. It is inimical to socio-economic development of the continent. Corruption is not a new song but it cannot be over flogged. It is on the lips of everybody: in church, mosque, and at home. It has become a scholarly topic for seminar and conference papers as well as journal articles.

The following scholars have given it a serious attention: Akubo (2009) sees it as one of the economic problems, which have plagued the Nigerian society in the past and present. So, as an economic problem, it is detrimental to socio-economic development of Nigeria. He further says that corruption in Nigeria has grown enormously in variety, magnitude and brazenness since independence till date. Indeed, it is a deep-seated national malaise pervading both the public and private sectors. It is thus imperative to make those who involve themselves in corrupt practices look ridiculous by using satire as a tool for them to change.

Olowo (2009) in his own submission observes that:

There is no country in the world where there is no corruption. What is disturbing however, in the Nigerian situation is its persistence and pervasiveness so much that the conclusion is being drawn that everybody in Nigeria is corrupt in varying degrees and that corruption in Nigeria has become a way of life.

This is an indictment of our society. And the picture presented here is similar to the way Achebe has painted Nigeria in A Man of the People.

According to the Political Bureau (1987) corruption has become a household word in the Nigerian society – from the highest levels of the political and business elite to the ordinary person in the village (Ahmadu, 2009). The author further adds that this state of corruption in the high places is not only disastrous but has far-reaching effects on the survival of the nation. This is bad news, and the trend has to be reverted.

Osalaye (2009) points out that:

Corruption no doubt has been the major clog (sic) in the wheels of our socio-economic advancement. To be fair, respective government had formulated laudable policies, at least on paper. Problems, however, always come at the implementation stage. Most of the people that are entrusted with the implementation of such policies have, almost all of the time seen such a call to service as a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to loot on a grand scale.

If not when corruption is seen as an enemy of progress that all and sundry should join hands to fight, we cannot experience sustainable development in our society. Through satire as a device, writers can contribute their own quota towards the elimination of corruption.

The issue of corruption is so worrisome that the government and eminent personalities have expressed concern over it. His Excellency, Olusegun Obasanjo, a Nigerian ex-president says:

As we all know, corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten into the fabric of our society at every level. It has caused decay and dereliction within the infrastructure of government and the society in physical, social and human terms. Corruption has been responsible for the instability of successive governments since the first Republic. Every coup since then has been in the name of stamping out the disease called corruption. Unfortunately, the cure turned out to be worse than the disease. And Nigeria has been the worse for it. Nigeria’s external image took a serious bashing as our beloved country began to feature on top of every corruption index (Usman, 2006).

Nobody has ever denied the existence of corruption in our society and none has come out to say that he or she is guilty of it. We beat about the bush on the issue of corruption hence no serious measures have ever been taken to tackle it head-on. Writers should use satire as a weapon to ridicule those guilty of corrupt practices.

 Honourable justice Emmanuel Ayoola observes that:
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Public office serves some Nigerians as opportunity to loot the treasury and accumulate massive wealth, which are then laundered. Some Nigerians who have served as Councilors, Local Government Chairmen, Commissioners, Governors, Ministers, Senators and Representatives etc. have acquired huge and immeasurable wealth not in any way commensurate with their positions and legitimate income (Akubo, 2009).

Political opportunism as described above is too numerous to mention in Nigeria. We are aware of Abacha loot. Furthermore, the ongoing Arms Probe, otherwise called Dasuki Gate is a good example. Money meant to prosecute Boko Haram insurgency is diverted for personal use. Public treasury is looted for the purpose of electioneering campaign. In Nigeria, politicians see election as a game of life and death. The oath of office becomes a graft to amass wealth. All these are pertinent materials for satirical works.

From all that have been said about corruption, it is more than obvious that it is an impediment and impairment to socio-economic development in Nigeria. It is an enemy of growth and development. For society to develop, corruption should be flushed out. Wars against corruption should be complimented with satire in literary works. In Africa and Nigeria in particular, people are not ready to tell bad leaders the truth. They are treated sacredly. Palmer (1978) speaks of African writers thus:

One of the puzzles of African literature is that our verbal humour never seems to carry through to our writing. Perhaps we take our leaders and ourselves far too seriously to expose them publicly in a comic novel, although we are quite prepared to caricature them in private. However, African intellectuals are becoming more ready to laugh at aspects of their society – witness the publication of four satirical novels: A Man of the People, Mission to Kala, The Interpreters and the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born.

Corruption has lingered in Nigeria that what is required is an aggressive attack on the corrupt people. A reinforced satire especially on television and radio, where action is involved is needed for this purpose.

Satire should be used in literary works to re-orientate and change the psyche of Nigerians. Youths in our schools and the leaders must be made conscious of their roles.

Through entertainment in the form of drama on television, radio and literary works read in schools, satire can be a vehicle to send massages of patriotism, selfless service, and good citizenship to the entire nation.

Nigerian leaders across the three tiers of the government might have not shown good leadership for youths to emulate. Therefore, the type of leadership that youths give in youth organization and student unionism is a replica of the leadership we have in this country. For example, on 9th February, 2009, there was a call on F. M. 94 to investigate the activities of National Association of Nigerian Students. The president was accused of corrupt practices.

Examination malpractice is another monster which is related to corruption that may destroy our society if not checked. Satire should be employed to perform this task. The effects of examination malpractice are many. Ogiagah (2009) has noted that education is an instrument per excellence for effecting national development: hence any defect will place the nation in a serious predicament. Examination malpractice may result in getting the wrong people in the right places. So, Nigerians witness unscrupulous engineers who build houses and bridges that are collapsing, and doctors who kill rather than heal. All these cannot make society experience socio-economic development, and thus, they should be controlled. Through satire, virtues such as hard work, honesty, sincerity, perseverance, patriotism, etc. can be instilled in youths for growth and development of society.

3. FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of satire in A Man of the People, this study has the following as its findings:

- Satire is a literary device that can change the fortune of society for good.
- It can make leaders to be conscious of criticism and of being ridiculed, thus the tendency for them to perform according to expectation.
- It can bring about the desired socio-economic development.
- It is a device that can pass across the messages of patriotism, selfless service, and good citizenship.
- Satire is a tool for the reformation of society.
- It inculcates in the children and youths virtues such as honesty, sincerity, discipline, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a study that is targeted at providing short-term and long-term solutions to the poor socio-economic condition of the country, below are some useful recommendations:

- Short television and radio dramas that are satirical should be produced. The sketches can have corruption, bad governance and examination malpractice as the butts of attack.
- The supervisory body of our secondary schools should recommend to students, literary texts that expose human folly and by implication extol virtues. This will dissuade them from vices and mould them as good citizens.
- Literature is an agent of change. The task of literary artists nowadays are those of social, economic, and political change. Writers should therefore use satire as a weapon to fight against economic, political, and social ills to change our society for the better.
- The government, through National Librarian Association, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), and departments of English in tertiary institutions should sponsor the mounting of readers’ clubs. Non-governmental organizations should also intervene in this area. The clubs’ main business should be works that are satirical.
- Literature should be made compulsory at the secondary school level up to senior secondary one (S. S. 1).
CONCLUSION
All in all, literature can bring about the desired change in society; although in the present day Nigeria, it may not be a change through coup from civilian administration to military regime as we see in A Man of the People or Ayi Kwei Armah’s The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. But it can be a change for political, social and economic development. Furthermore, tender minds are receptive, so, satire as a device for corrective purpose can instill in youths social and moral values as well as firm discipline. As leaders of tomorrow, youths should be moulded to become good citizens. As a subject, literature entertains and educates. It should teach youths proper conduct and societal norms. This can be achieved through satire which ridicules the corrupt people in society. By attacking vices scathingly, virtues will be inculcated for socio-economic development.

REFERENCES


