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Resistance and Regeneration in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake*

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Abstract

This research work focused on resistance and regeneration in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's*The Presidential Handshake. The Presidential Handshake* by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is shown as an effective means of re-orienting the people. It further demonstrates with adequate examples from the novel, how the author has done this, and to what extent she has succeeded. This study employs the content analysis approach to qualitative research. Marxism and Sociological Approach to Literature form the theoretical framework for exploring this novel. The main aim for using Marxism and sociological approach to literature is because of the author's belief in literature serving the needs of society and the people. *The Presidential handshake* connotes the negative notion of the people for politics. This study reveals that NgoziChuma-Udeh raised social issues in her novel which are relevant to the contemporary Nigerian society. These include socio-political issues like greed, exploitation, looting, and unemployment. This study will definitely contribute to the evolving corpus of critical literary discourse on the literary works of the author and African literature.

Keywords: Re-orientation, Literature, Nigerian, Politics, People, Society.

Introduction

The situation of Nigeria at the moment is one of bad governance. The rulers who assume leadership positions at the end of colonial rule loot, plunder and arrogate the wealth of the country to themselves. They even arrogate leadership positions to themselves, their family members and close relatives thus restricting and encroaching on the individual rights of the people.

The rulers connived to form triangular pillar of exploitation. Discrimination is the order of the day and while the citizenry suffer oppressive tendencies, there is also visible features of crumbling and infrastructural decay across the polity. Chinua Achebe (1983:23) made strong affirmation:

> Look at our collapsing public utilities, our inefficient and wasteful parastatals and state-owned companies. If you want electricity, you buy your own generator; if you want water, you sink your own bore-hole; if you want to travel, you set up your own airline. One day soon, said a friend of mine, you will have to build your own post office to send your letters.

This dark turbulence in Nigerian history has great impact on the people. It has drawn the attention of many writers who immortalise this painful chapter through literature. These words of literature show the significance of advocating for a change in society through changing the leadership patterns and also advocating for positive change. Resistance literature tends to encourage the people to fight for their rights no matter the situation they are passing through. This can be done or achieved through writers uniting with the people: the writers enlightening the people on the problems the bad rulers have caused them. Kolawole Ogungbesan

(1978: 17-18) notes the roles of a writer to the people. According to him:

> African writer must accept that his role need not be the same as that of the politician. As a citizen he must discharge his social obligations, he must vote, sometimes with his feet, throw bombs and serve in national assemblies. He must be ready, too, to face the consequences of these actions like other members of his society without seeking refuge in the privileged position of a writer …. As a writer, he must write as best as he could, dedicate himself to a writers' morality, which includes holding allegiance to individual human beings instead of race or cause. And he must be ready to face the consequences – 'the right to troop with those the world forgot'.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is a post-independence Nigerian writer who has always used her literary works to comment on the sorry state of Nigeria and act as the mouthpiece of the suffering people of Nigeria. Her literary works are steeped in social issues that affect the oppressed masses.

The Presidential Handshake (2013) is her second novel, sequel to her first novel *Teachers on Strike* (2005) where she made damning criticism against a callous governor who refused to pay salaries of teachers resulting to cacophony of disastrous consequences for the people and society. According to Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika (2015:54): "The Presidential Handshake is filled with hard-biting political statements, this time not just targeted at our leaders, but on the masses that blow the trumpet and beat the drum that made the atmosphere favourable and conducive for our leaders to steal and exploit our limited resources".

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake* typifies the masses who either through their ignorance or selfish interests

encourage the rulers' subjugation of their humanity. The masses who ordinarily should be bulwark of society, upholding cherished values are disappointingly corrupt. They are indeed hypocrites and partners in evil. The author indicts the citizenry who enrich themselves, angling for the looting and plundering of the common wealth of the people. The writer compares the thieving rulers and the collaborating masses as bed-bugs feasting on the blood of the innocent masses of society. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh roundly condemns dictators, criminals parading themselves as rulers. In the same vein, she lauds revolutionary characters like Nebe for their impact in the struggle to liberate Africa and the black race from the shackles of despotism:

> The teacher yearned to be free. Free like the birds. He wanted a utopian existence where freedom of thought and speech would be the guiding code. He yearned for a free egalitarian society where the air would be free and fresh as that in the aerial domain of the birds….
>
> The strong aversion for things done the wrong… He had stiff leftist principles and would never do something simply because it was public opinion. He would rather stand alone and stand his ground against a multitude of people no matter the circumstances. (3-4).

The Presidential Handshake borders on the question of integrity. In the passing, we may also cite the example of Mazi Ike who lobby Nebe to help him become King. Mazi Ike offer Nebe the position of Traditional Prime Minister as part of the bribe. Nebe's rejection of the bribe is commendable as the narrator is supportive of Nebe's moral values. "…. The erroneous misconception of his society about the democracy dividends. The elders were more concerned with getting their chunk of the democracy dividends". (253).

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh has been most concise, consistent in dealing with the socio-political inhibitions which she successfully thematises in her literary works. She has been vocal, hitting the points not minding whose ox is gored. Writers and literary artists use literature to condemn, recreate the society from evil perils of societal malaise.

KolawoleOgungbesan (1978:18) opines:

> To this we ought to add that, over and above all, the writer must at all times look inwards, for the act of artistic creation is a lonely enterprise in which no one can take the place of the artist or collaborate with him. This is why, in the most profound sense, it is a moral and political act. The writer's individualism is not only the highest form of protest and insurance against tyranny – from any political system – but also the deepest affirmation of the most everlasting truth.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh admonishes her readers repeatedly to imbibe resistance as a cardinal virtue, for with it, we can end tyranny and most oppressive vices: "Good riddance!... Who cares about half-hearted, hardly fulfilled empty promises? …. Good riddance to very bad rubbish" (17). The writer also sums up the eternal truth – the people should guard their actions so that they donot fall victim to the oppressors and also become collaborators.

The writer lumps the praise singers and sycophants of bad rulers together. They are depicted as enemies of the people. They jettison the welfare of the people for material gratification, carrying the odious cross of tyrants who are manifestly oppressive.

The Presidential Handshake depicts Nigeria as slothful and exposes the overwhelming disillusionment and ineptitude that envelop the country. It is a sad commentary on Nigeria's underdevelopment and its inability to rise to the challenge of

nationhood. Suffice it to say that satire is a principal tool with which Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in this novel lashes at the multitudinous socio-economic and political malaise that affects Nigeria and the African continent:

> Life in the country had become an unnatural existence. Politics! Politics! Politics! That was what one heard at every corner. Politics had removed the flavor from the citizen's lives and the teacher wondered if there would ever be normalcy again in the day-to-day lives of the populace. Politics had turned the citizenry into proper unadulterated political animals, political animals in the negative directions as far as the teacher was concerned (5-6).

Exploitation of the poor and dispossession by the rich and powerful is rife in Nigeria. We read about the unsavoury situation when: "…. The sycophantic mob wielding the numerous gift items from the visitor had dispersed …. The teacher viewed the throng of people with utmost disgust. He hated sycophancy like a syndrome. As far as he was concerned, all who came to see the visitor had obsequisness as their ulterior motive". (27).

Hunger is highlighted by the writer as a blight plaguing the country. The writer personifies hunger as king reigning supreme. She also notes that hunger is a weapon of warfare against the poor. Poverty and suffering which are correlates of hunger, parades the land. Many citizens of Nigeria are poor. The pitiable situation is reinforced with the narrator describing the preponderance of gaunt and wrinkled faces on the streets. This sad scenario is inflicted by tyrannous, visionless and evil rulers whose rulership is endemic:

> The teacher desperately needed to get away from it all. The state of affairs in the country was viciously taxing his sanity. Everything …. Every bit of the national life

> seems to be on a fast track towards the absurd and the incongruent. Nothing made meaning to him anymore and any attempt on his part to seek value and meaning to life ended up in a more complicated cycle of emptiness and worthlessness. (2).

Ogunmola Adeniyi (2022:68) observes what he regards as the pervading sense of history in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's literary works as he links *The Presidential Handshake* with Nigeria tortured trajectory. This researcher disagrees with Ogunmola Adeniyi's view on the notion that it is the bad rulers and their collaborators that make history that Ngozi Chuma-Udeh novel inveighs against. Rather it is the people who resist social decadence that are heroes not the oppressors and their collaborators.

Chima Okafor (2018:14) notes that Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake* solidarity with Nebe in his quest to help the downtrodden and his resistance, revolutionary bias confers on him a label of commitment. According to Cornel Ujowundu (2018:152):

> In *The Presidential Handshake*, the novelist diverts attention from the ruling class to the people. Chuma-Udeh is of the opinion that we would have a Utopian society if the people and the government will forgo these selfish interests and work towards achieving an egalitarian society. She sees her writing as a clarion to the masses to support a good government and redirect bad ones for a better society.

To Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, selfish masses (collaborators) spur the rulers to loot and plunder the country. The rulers and their collaborators see governance as means of committing atrocities against the people. Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika's (2015:15) assertion is noteworthy:

> The president was full of lamentation on the state of affairs of the nation and what the people expect of him. From his perspective, it was the only reason he had invited teacher Nebe to join him in the task of re-orienting the mindset of people in the society for effective and good governance.

Teacher Nebe's realisation of the president's idea choosing him to help reinvent in the people the ideas of politics accepted the invitation from the president.

Like the Activist in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006), Teacher Nebe assumes the role of a change agent desirous of a better society. Teacher Nebe becomes a symbolic character in a society that lacks morality. Through Teacher Nebe, we can deduce that despite the poverty, corruption, vices, victimization, oppression, environmental degradation and exploitation, poor electoral system which have become part and parcel of our existence in Nigeria, the people can end their subjugation by saying no to oppressive rulers.

Nebe is not amused with the rulers' broken promises. Rather, his experience in the earlier novel *Teachers on Strike* (2005) has alienated him from politics and politicians. He sees politicians as demonic agents:

> Over the years, the Educational and Human Development sectors remained ignored and relegated to the background by the successive governments….
> Aristo's 'existentialist farm' reminded the fleeing teacher of the nation and its government dabbling from one political machination to another. The farm's travail in the hands of the destructive forces became synonymous with the wreckage and bastardization of the economy by the subsequent political leaders. The teacher heaved a sigh of sadness. (3 and 16).

Nebe is a hero that should be emulated. He is a man with high sense of morality. His rejection of several means of bribery offered him is a testimony that there still abound decent people in our polity. To Nebe, teaching is a noble profession not an avenue to exploit the people.

Note that the events in *Teachers on Strike* serve as foundation to *The Presidential Handshake.*
In *Teachers on Strike*, we see Nebe as an activist who fought the province governor knack for bad governance. While in *The Presidential Handshake*, Nebe is not only resisting bad governance but also recreating the mindset of the people on the need to reject negative patronage from the rulers. To Nebe, the problems of bad governance affect both the rulers and the ruled:

> The teacher had passed through hard times in the country. He has towed the path of war with humiliating governmental policies. He had been a major stakeholder in the struggles of the masses to rise above debilitating governmental actions and decrees but the nation's quandaries seem to be growing in intensity instead of diminishing. In his society, the poor are down trodden, though they do not seem to mind it anyway. If they do, they would not be shouting their heads off because a seeming oppressor came on a campaign tour. (25).

The Presidential Handshake dramatizes Nebe as a man of high conscience who believes that the present high rate of decay in the society will definitely not persist ad infinitum. To him, there is certainly going to be a change in the social and political order. In the same way, he believes that the exploitation of the masses will not continue unchecked. He believes that a social revolution is

imminent. And to prepare for the inevitable revolution, it is his duty to enlighten the people to become change agents.

The rulers are themselves afraid of the masses having revolutionary ideas that is why they use poverty as weapon to pauperise the people. To defeat the oppressive forces, the writer and the people must unite as proclaimed by Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika and Chike Okoye (2015:10):

> If the politician and activist could unite in one common cause like they did in the novel, we too could reconcile our differences and only then would we be ready to build the desired socio-political, economic and academic polity we are all in dire need of. But for now presently, we are hopeful dreamers like NgoziChuma-Udeh wishing fervently that our utopia metamorphoses into complete reality as soon as possible.

There is no doubt that Nebe achieved the desired result. His commitment in redirecting the mindset of the people helped to foreground the revolutionary perspective of *The Presidential Handshake*. Nebe's faith in the role of an individual championing social justice is and his belief in the need for positive change in post-colonial Africa on account of prevalent injustice and other socio-political contradictions is memorable. These indices verily enhance the overall quality of the novel.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's*The Presidential Handshake* explores the Nigerian society especially post-civil war and oil boom era which socio-political climate is characterized by despotism, corruption, exploitation, tyranny, oppression and other social inequalities.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is a committed writer. With wit she treats her subject which includes particularly the fate of the ordinary folks, the down trodden, the masses against vicious forces. The writer in demonstrating her avowed agenda of bringing change to the people

and society becomes the definitive and all-encompassing manifesto for resistance of the people. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh bears the burden of history by retelling or recreating how the less privileged in society are debilitated. Because of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's master class portrayal of Nebe's resistance ideology and the success of the resistance ideology, Chinua Achebe (1972:6) had her in mind when he remarked that: "a writer in the African revolution (in time of crises that is) who steps aside can only write footnotes or a glossary when the event is over".

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, through *The Presidential Handshake,* punctures the distorted perception of the masses who thought associating with political office holders will fasten their access to the commonwealth. We notice the visit of Agaba Junior, Mama Adi and Ojiugo to Nebe who erroneously believe that visiting Nebe is a gateway to their prosperity.

Agaba Junior desires illegal license to import petroleum oil into the country, Mama Adi desperately desires a job slot which she intends selling to unemployed persons at exorbitant prices. On her part, Ojiugo desires an illicit sexual affair with the president. Nebe's ability to reject the requests from Agba Junior, Mama Adi, Ojiugo, the Youth Wing of Uma, Mazi Ike, Akuika and Osoenigwe is testimony of Nebe's legendary status which Chinua Achebe (1983:2) acknowledges as inspirational leadership:

> I am not here recommending ruthlessness as a necessary qualification for Nigerian leadership. Quite on the contrary. What I am saying is that Nigeria is not beyond change. I am saying Nigeria can change today if she discovers leaders which have the will, the ability and the vision. Such people are rare in any time or place. But it is the duty of enlightened citizens to lead the way in their discovery and to create an atmosphere conducive to their emergence. If this conscious effort is

> not made, good leaders, like good money, will be driven out.

The enlightened Nebe thus initiates an avenue to help the people. He helps UcheAdi to get the petroleum oil license, helps the old man sell his land to enable him take care of his sick son. He assists SarikiOgbe Hausa (leader of the Hausa community) to procure land. Through his positive assistance, Eze Uma is made a first class chief. The high point of his support to the people is helping Mama Eze (the widow) and the innocent woman accused of being a witch.

By helping the help seeking persons without receiving financial gratification from them is positive sign of bright future for the society. In a society like ours where gratification of whatsoever guise is used to attract favour, Nebe's rejection of SarikiOgbe Hausa's cows, one million naira bribe provided by the Under Bridge Market Traders, the undisclosed parcel from the Okada Riders Association is a proof of Nebe's outstanding quality, note his comment:

> The teacher looked at these men and the package they placed on the tables. How do you begin to explain to them that the pouch contained not money but the blood of hapless citizens who would continue to die as long as that market existed? How do you explain to them that what they were telling him to do was tantamount to the cold-blooded murder of many more to be horribly crushed and mangled on the jinxed spot? Why had the society reduced every variable to money and nothing more? Money…. Money…. Money…. That is what he got to hear every microsecond of the money. Money was valued far above human life, money was valued far above the human soul, and money was valued far above the sanctity of the human spirit (146).

Acknowledging Nebe's role in reinventing the mindset of the people, the president shows his appreciation:

> I felt it is time to instil into them the fact that they should not wait for what the government will do for them but look rather for ways of improving the system …., the reorientation of our people is a task uphill which only the most dedicated souls could achieve and that is where you come …. to prove to our people that governance is not about useless sentiments and pilfering home all the money in the economy and I thank you of doing just that. You have helped redirect the mindset of our people to a great extent within the last few weeks …. (348 - 349).

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh as a feminist highlight the fears of women, she is of the notion that there should be equality of the male and female gender. She is forceful to liberate women from shackles of oppressive society. Philo and her sisters gang up to defeat their father's enemy in a court. This is a feature of feminism. To Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, the task of liberating women from human and cultural inhibition is a call to duty. KaluUka's (1978:19) earlier postulation of writers in the mold of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is important here:

> …. that the story of such oppressiveness being a historical fact, the true and serious artist must not merely wrestle with this history in the 'privacy of his imagination' and soul, but must engage actively in the elimination of its debilitating and destructive effects within the socio-cultural context, at the 'mass revolutionary present' which means that he must take up arms against the flood of misfortune and take the tide when it serves – which is now; that the writer must be fully aware of the African past without letting it

> arrest his mind, purpose and direction, by imprisoning him in unalterable bonds.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh with her consistency, and commitment to using literature to redirect and recreate society is free of Wole Soyinka (1968:15) indictment of African writers:

> For the situation in Africa today is the same as in the rest of the world, it is not one of the tragedies which come of isolated human failures, but the very collapse of humanity, nevertheless the African writer has done nothing to vindicate that he is even aware that this awful collapse has taken place. For he has generally been without vision.

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