

Political Alienation in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

Saroj Kumar Shah

Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Correspondence email: thesunrise_saroj@aol.com

Received: October 01, 2024

Revised: November 05, 2024

Accepted: December 23, 2024

Online Published: December 31, 2024

How to cite this paper: Shah, S. K. Political Alienation in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. *Khwopa Journal*, 6(2), 90–99. <https://doi.org/10.3126/kjour.v6i2.73151>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/kjour.v6i2.73151>



Copyright© 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People, set in a post-colonial African nation, highlighting the social, political, and psychological impacts of European imperialism on indigenous African societies. In the novel, Achebe illustrates the political degradation in the country, where irresponsible and visionless leadership drives the nation into chaos, anarchy, and violence, hindering progress and prosperity. The novel explores how colonial remnants continue to invade and dominate the independent African homeland, leading to political alienation. Despite the end of colonial rule, psychological factors from imperialism persist, eroding the people's connection to their culture. Through the characters of Odili and political leader Nanga, Achebe portrays a limited and ineffective government, where neither the people nor the leaders show collective will or responsibility to revive the nation's cultural identity. As a result, people are unfamiliar with their culture and they are forced to live in a new form of slavery, pessimism and degeneration. Rather than having optimistic perspectives towards the decolonized independent nations, the self-glorifying dictators and their poverty, reflecting the harsh reality of post-colonial African nations, specifically Nigeria, struggle with the aftermath of colonialism in the form of corrupt leadership, identity crises, and political fragmentation showcasing the lingering effects of colonialism on Nigeria's political and cultural systems.

Keywords: African politics, Colonial legacy, Political alienation, Post-colonialism

1. Introduction

Achebe (1966) literary contributions are pivotal in understanding the complexities of post-

colonial African society, especially in Nigeria, particularly through his exploration of political alienation in his novel *A Man of the People*. The novel centers on Odili, a young, idealistic schoolteacher, and Chief M.A. Nanga, a corrupt and manipulative politician who represents the older generation, examines the generational power struggle in African politics. Through the interplay between these characters, Achebe illustrates the ongoing impact of colonialism, showing how post-independence Nigeria continues to suffer from the political and cultural remnants of colonial rule. This lingering influence leads to the alienation of characters like Odili and Edna in their own homeland, reflecting a broader societal disillusionment and struggle for identity.

Chinua Achebe, considered one of the most significant African authors writing in English, is known for his insightful exploration of African society's transition from colonial rule to independence. His literary works, including *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958), *No Longer at Ease* (Achebe, 1987), and *Arrow of God* (Achebe, 2013), often engage with the impact of colonialism on African identity and society. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe (1966) critiques the post-independence leadership of African nations, showing how the newly independent political systems often mirror the corruption and inequalities of their colonial predecessors. Achebe uses his characters to emphasize disconnect between the ruling elite and the masses, revealing how colonial influence continues to shape political and social structures. The narrative portrays a generation of Africans caught between tradition and the pressures of modernity, leading to a sense of alienation that pervades the novel (Achebe, 1966, 1990).

Achebe thought that writing should address current issues and represent the human situation, assisting in the re-education and regeneration of African identity in the aftermath of colonialism (Achebe, 1966). In *A Man of the People*, Achebe not only criticizes governmental corruption in post-independence Nigeria, but he also pushes for a middle ground where Africans can embrace change without sacrificing their cultural identity. By focusing on the hardships of characters such as Odili, Achebe emphasizes the importance of striking a balance between tradition and progress, ultimately advocating for a rethinking of African leadership and political accountability in the post-colonial era (Achebe, 1966).

2. Postcolonial Approach: A Theoretical Modality

Post-colonial studies began gaining traction in the Western academy after the Second World War, notably with Said's (1978) influential work, *Orientalism*. This book critiques the Western construction of the East, leading to the development of colonial discourse theory, which highlights how colonial narratives shaped perceptions and policies within both the colonies and their metropolises. While the term "post-colonial" originally appeared in literary discussions as a means of politicizing and focusing on New Literatures in English, it has since been widely adopted to represent the political, linguistic, and cultural experiences of societies formerly colonized by European powers.

Post-colonial literature often critiques the lasting impacts of colonialism, including political alienation, as demonstrated in Achebe's (1966) *A Man of the People*.

Post-colonial theory serves as a response to colonial literature and discourse, exposing the injustices and inhumanity perpetrated by colonizers. As Fanon (2005) writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding the people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (p.170). This highlights how colonial discourse sought to delegitimize indigenous cultures while asserting colonial superiority. Additionally, Bhabha (2012) argued that colonial discourse constructs the colonized as both "Other" and fully knowable, serving to justify conquest and the imposition of colonial administration (p.70-71). The concept of discourse, as articulated by Foucault (2013), links knowledge production to power dynamics, showing how colonizers assert control over narratives.

Post-colonial literature, which emerged after the decline of European empires, encompasses the complex interactions between imperial culture and indigenous practices. It serves as a form of resistance against imperial domination, enabling marginalized voices to emerge and critique oppressive structures. Stephen Salmon notes that post-colonialism encompasses a diverse array of subjects and critiques of Western historicism (Said, 1978). Ultimately, post-colonial theory gives voice to marginalized populations, highlighting themes of hegemony, economic influence, and the struggle for decolonization. Achebe's (1966) work, particularly in *A Man of the People*, reflects these themes, illustrating the political alienation experienced by individuals in post-colonial societies. As Fanon (2005) suggests, the struggle against colonial values is often met with mockery from the native, highlighting the deep-seated tensions and resistance embedded within the post-colonial experience. Postcolonial theorists, including Spivak (1994), highlight the need to amplify marginalized voices, arguing that the subaltern can speak only when given the opportunity (p.35). Thus, postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding the ongoing effects of colonialism and the complexities of cultural identity, advocating for the recognition of diverse experiences and voices in postcolonial societies.

3. Orientalism, Hegemony, and Discourse

Orientalism occupies a central position within post-colonial theory, closely related to key concepts such as culture, hybridity, discourse, and anti-colonial resistance. It represents the relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans, wherein colonizers viewed the latter as "Oriental" or "Other." Said (1978), a pivotal figure in post-colonial thought, introduced *Orientalism*, challenging Western stereotypes and attitudes. In essence, Orientalism refers to the European method of dominating, restructuring, and controlling the Orient through their own lenses.

Said (1978) states, "*The Orient was almost a European invention,*" describing it as

a place of romance and exoticism (p.1).

Said further argues that Orientalism developed into a systematic institution for managing and defining the Orient. Europeans often portrayed regions like Asia, Africa, and Latin America as primitive, exotic, and in need of Western intervention. This justification for colonization was reinforced through literature, travel guides, and other forms of writing, where Western superiority was emphasized over the so-called backwardness of the natives. Said (1978) notes, "*The idea of European identity as a superior one... reiterates European superiority over Oriental backwardness*" (p.7).

The roots of Orientalism date back to Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and extended into British and French imperialism until the Second World War. Said (1978) identifies notable figures like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Byron as practitioners of Orientalism, who perpetuated stereotypes of the Orient as irrational, emotional, and incapable of self-governance, contrasting them with the civilized, rational, and self-governing West (p.40).

At the heart of Orientalism lies the concept of hegemony, as defined by Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony refers to domination by consent, wherein the ruling class succeeds in imposing its values and interests upon the ruled. This concept is deeply intertwined with colonialism, as Western colonizers convinced the colonized of the supposed necessity of their rule. As Said (1978) observes, "*Culture... operates within civil society, where the influence of ideas... works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent*" (p.7).

Hegemony and discourse are essential elements of cultural studies. While hegemony represents the political and social dominance of one group over another, discourse encompasses both spoken and written expressions that convey meaning and reinforce power structures. Michel Foucault's theory of discourse posits that knowledge and power are inseparable, with discourse acting as a tool for exerting control. Foucault (2013) notes that "discourse is power," as it shapes societal beliefs and norms, often used by the ruling class to maintain authority (p.3).

Said(1978) aligns his concept of Orientalism with Foucault's theory, arguing that Western knowledge of the Orient created a cycle of power and control. By constructing the Orient as inferior, Western powers justified their dominance and enforced their cultural and ideological frameworks on colonized societies. Said (1978) highlights that knowledge produced about the Orient facilitated its management and control: "*Knowledge gives power, and more power requires more knowledge*" (p.36).

Thus, Orientalism, hegemony, and discourse serve as mechanisms through which colonizers maintained control over the colonized, reshaping their identities and suppressing their cultural norms. These ideas are vividly illustrated in literary works such as Achebe's (1966) *A Man of the People*, where the collapse of native values under colonial discourse is powerfully depicted.

4. Politico- Economic Influences

Colonialism served as a means of political and economic exploitation, enforced through the imposition of Western religion, language, and military force. The British Empire positioned itself as an enlightened imperial center, establishing an "intermediate class" of natives who, though native in appearance, adopted colonial culture and became instruments of oppression against their own people. This system forced indigenous peoples to become mere spectators to the extraction of their natural resources, while their own cultural practices were devalued and suppressed (Achebe, 1958, p.190).

The colonizers' introduction of European language and literature, as part of a civilizing mission, greatly influenced the religion and culture of colonized peoples. Achebe (1958) reflects on the intersection of native and colonial cultures, rejecting the depiction of Africa as spiritually void (p.190). Appiah (2006) further asserts that no aspect of contemporary African culture has escaped the influence of colonialism, even in the postcolonial era (p.63). Said (1978), *Orientalism* identifies colonialism as a discourse of domination, where Europe constructed the "*Orient*" as exotic and inferior, justifying colonization and control (p.1-3).

The independence movements of the 1950s across Africa and Asia were united in their resistance to European colonial rule. Spivak (1994) highlights the silence of marginalized voices, particularly women, in postcolonial discourse, urging for their inclusion in discussions of decolonization (p.91). Fanon (2005) argues that colonial violence was mirrored by native peoples in their struggle for freedom, noting that violence became a key weapon in the fight against colonialism (p.37). However, even after independence, many former colonies faced division and internal conflict, as seen in the partition of India and Pakistan. Fanon critiques the continued cultural dominance of former colonizers, noting that even post-independence, native elites often perpetuated colonial structures (p.44).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his preface to Fanon (2005) *The Wretched of the Earth*, observes that native peoples continue to grapple with the lasting effects of colonialism, including internal conflicts driven by colonial legacies. He emphasizes that true liberation remains an ongoing struggle, as imperialist aggression continues to threaten the sovereignty of former colonies (p.8-22).

5. Decolonization

Decolonization, the final aim of anti-colonial resistance, is marked by violence as the oppressed confront the oppressor. Fanon (2005) asserts that decolonization is not a smooth transition but a complete replacement of one ruling class by another, often leading to further suffering as the social structure undergoes fundamental change (p.35). This process is not merely the end of colonial rule but involves continued alienation and disruption in the newly decolonized society.

Even after the colonial powers leave, their influence remains embedded in the

cultural, political, and psychological fabric of the nation. Ashcroft et al. (1995) emphasize that decolonization is an ongoing process shaped by the historical entanglement with colonialism, rather than a singular moment of liberation (p.49). Achebe (1992) and Gandhi (1998), both acknowledge the complexities faced by decolonized nations, where the psychological scars of colonialism persist long after independence.

Resistance plays a central role in the decolonization process, as native people react against the devastation caused by colonialism. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, African religion becomes a powerful symbol of resistance, as the Igbo community uses their traditional beliefs to reject the imposition of Western values, particularly through the character of Okonkwo, whose adherence to Igbo traditions stands in opposition to colonial forces (Achebe, 1958). African religion, in this context, is not just a spiritual practice but a form of defiance against the erasure of indigenous culture by colonial powers (Opoku, 1990, p.514). Postcolonial writers like Achebe and Boehmer emphasize the reclamation of native narratives through literature as a means to resist colonial ideologies. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe critiques the political alienation and corruption caused by colonial legacies, urging for the restoration of African cultural identity through literature. Boehmer (2005) similarly argues that postcolonial writers use their works to challenge colonial narratives and reaffirm the dignity of native cultures, a theme that Achebe consistently explores in his novels (p.189).

6. Political Alienation

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe (1966) delves into the theme of political alienation within a postcolonial framework, revealing how the legacy of colonialism continues to erode individual identity and collective agency. Through the contrasting characters of Odili, representing the new intellectual class, and Chief Nanga, embodying the corrupt political elite, Achebe highlights the deepening conflict between these two factions. The nominal independence claimed by the government fails to reflect the collective will of the populace, resulting in a pervasive alienation rooted in the remnants of European imperialism (p.1).

Achebe (1966) portrays this alienation as deeply rooted in the lingering effects of colonialism, which have left socio-cultural structures that continue to shape the physical and mental landscapes of individuals and communities. These structures perpetuate a duality wherein people are caught between their cultural roots and the allure of Western values glamorized during colonial rule. This tension is vividly portrayed in Chief Nanga's household, which symbolizes the blending of African and European traditions, reflecting broader socio-cultural negotiations between tradition and modernity (p.46-47).

Achebe (1966) encapsulates the disillusionment and chaos that define postcolonial African societies, rife with political instability and corruption (p.2-3). Odili, a cynical

university graduate, reflects on the moral decay of his surroundings as he navigates a landscape dominated by opportunistic leaders like Nanga. His disillusionment stems from the betrayal of his ideals of leadership and governance, as the initial promises of independence give way to widespread poverty and fragmentation of national identity (p.40). Odili's reflections on cultural expressions further underscore this alienation. His observations on a local artist's work highlight the pervasive colonial lens through which African art and traditions are often viewed, reinforcing the detachment of the educated elite, like Odili, from their cultural heritage and the populace they aim to serve (p.50-51).

Achebe (1966) exploration of political alienation further underscores the disconnection between the leaders and the people they claim to serve. Odili's journey encapsulates the frustrations felt by many educated citizens who anticipated a prosperous, unified nation post-independence. Instead, they confront a corrupt political system that perpetuates their suffering. As Odili observes, the once-promising dream of freedom has transformed into a nightmare of corruption and disillusionment, emphasizing the urgent need for authentic leadership that genuinely prioritizes the welfare of the populace (p.72).

The political landscape of the country is described as chaotic and rife with corruption, suggesting that democracy is at risk of collapse due to the relentless pursuit of power among parties. Odili notes the pervasive fear among citizens, particularly businesspeople, as widespread strikes and shop closures become common amid political turmoil. The Governor-General's rumored call for the prime minister's resignation adds to the sense of disorder, highlighting the paralysis of the political system in the post-independence era (p.101). Corrupt politicians like Chief Nanga exploit public trust while fostering an environment of self-interest and political apathy. Nanga's actions demonstrate a clear detachment from the needs of the people he represents, instead prioritizing personal gain and manipulating public sentiment. He dismisses accusations of corruption by labeling critics as discontented elitists, reinforcing the divide between political leaders and the general populace (p.119-20).

Odili observes that despite initial hopes for a prosperous nation following independence, the reality is one of chaos and anarchy, as corrupt leaders undermine the ideals of democracy. The villagers of Urua, while participating in elections, are portrayed as naïve and unaware of the manipulative dynamics at play, ultimately supporting leaders who fail to address their needs (p.135). The narrative illustrates a disconnect between village morality and national politics, leading to a sense of helplessness among citizens. Odili's idealism is challenged as he witnesses the brutality of political conflict, culminating in personal injury during a confrontation with Nanga (p.141-42). This experience further disillusioned him regarding the potential for ethical governance.

In *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Africa*, Kalua (2021) contrasts the reliance of African intellectuals on Western institutions with the common people's engagement

with local political figures, such as Chief Nanga. The narrator, Odili, criticizes the glorification of corrupt politicians who are celebrated despite their failures, reflecting a broader societal disconnect between intellectual elites and political leaders. While the masses prioritize tangible benefits such as improved infrastructure over moral integrity, Odili feels disillusioned by a system that values economic self-interest over democratic principles (p.3-5).

Achebe (1966) highlights a cultural tension: educated elites are often alienated from the populace, who prefer politicians capable of delivering immediate benefits. The political landscape is influenced by the legacy of colonialism and ongoing capitalism, as leaders like Nanga continue to embody colonial values despite their promises of indigenization (p.100-01). This creates a complex dynamic where the populace tolerates corruption if it leads to improved services. An ex-politician's statement captures this sentiment: "*We know they are eating, but we are eating too*" (p.125). The superficial adoption of Western culture by leaders like Nanga perpetuates colonial values under the guise of independence, exemplifying a detachment from the needs of the people they represent.

Achebe's (1966) narrative concludes with a bleak perspective on the nation's future, where the absence of public morality leads to private loyalties becoming the prevailing values. The lack of justice and accountability in the political sphere highlights the stark realities of corruption, where individuals must rely on personal connections rather than collective action for redress (p.149). Achebe critiques this reliance as a product of deeply embedded colonial socio-cultural structures, which hinder the development of a cohesive and just society. Moreover, Chief Nanga's household embodies the ongoing cultural negotiations of postcolonial Africa, with its blending of African and European traditions. This duality symbolizes the unresolved tension between nativism and Westernization, as individuals and societies grapple with identities shaped by colonialism and contemporary global influences (Achebe, 1966, p.46-47). Odili's reflections on the local artist's work illustrate the challenges of interpreting cultural expressions through a colonial lens, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity and understanding in postcolonial discourse (p.50-51).

7. Conclusion

In *A Man of the People*, Chinua Achebe redefines the history of postcolonial Nigeria, contrasting it with the colonial narrative that justifies colonization. Through the characters of Chief Nanga and Odili, Achebe illustrates a yearning among the colonized to return to pre-colonial freedom and control, while also highlighting the political alienation and chaos that mark post-independence Nigeria. The novel portrays the disillusionment with independence, as corrupt leaders like Chief Nanga exploit the people, while intellectuals like Odili struggle with alienation. Achebe presents the failures of both the political and intellectual classes, showing how Western economic, political, and cultural influences continue to dominate. Independence is depicted as

a myth, as internal conflicts and external forces hinder national prosperity. The novel explores colonialism as a vicious historical cycle, which goes on and on, and the people are mere victims of this system which is beyond their control. Hence, Achebe seems subtle in the depiction of the failures and the ill-fate of the educated Nigerians, he still sounds hopeful that out of the failures and tragic conditions of his heroes, new possibilities are sure to come.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that this article has been developed out of my Masters' degree thesis of English Literature submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University in 2008. Literally, looking back I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Jiva Nath Lamsal, Assistant Professor at the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University for his invaluable supervision and useful guidelines during my thesis writing. Similarly, my thanks extend to the members of Research Committee of the Central Department of English who had undersigned my thesis for the final approval. Because of this now it is possible to publish in the form of the article.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest

References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Achebe, C. (1966). *A Man of the People*. Heinemann Educational Books. <https://www.amazon.com/Man-People-African-Writers-31/dp/B00VY1USGA>
- Achebe, C. (1987). *No longer at ease* (Vol. 3). Heinemann Educational Books.
- Achebe, C. (1990). *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. Penguin Publishing Group.
- Achebe, C. (1992). *Colonialist Criticism*. In *Critical Theory Since Plato* (pp. 1197–1198). Harcourt.
- Achebe, C. (2013). *Arrow of god*. Penguin UK.
- Appiah, K. A. (2006). *Is the post-in postmodernism the post-in postcolonial ?* In P. Mongia (Ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A reader* (pp. 55–71). Oxford University Press.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (1995). *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Boehmer, E. (2005). *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Fanon, F. (2005). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press.

Foucault, M. (2013). *Archaeology of knowledge*. Routledge.

Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge.

Kalua, F. A. (2021). *African Intellectuals in the Post-colonial World*. Routledge.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage.

Spivak, G. C. (1994). "Can Subaltern Speak?" In Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Ed.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (p. 93). Harvester Wheatsheaf.