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Injustice at the Periphery: An Exploration of Corruption in Uche Nnyagu's *At the Centre of No-Man's-Land*

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Abstract

Corruption and injustice are intertwined and pervasive issues that plague societies worldwide, perpetuating a cycle of oppression and undermining human dignity. Corruption, the abuse of power for personal gain, erodes trust in institutions and fosters an environment of impunity. Injustice, encompassing unfair treatment, discrimination, and inequality, further entrenches this cycle. The vicious cycle of corruption and injustice leads to political and economic instability, social and economic inequalities, erosion of trust in institutions, human rights violations, poverty and inequality in the society. This study explores how the novelist reflects corruption, injustice and oppression of the poor masses in a society where the common man is disregarded and exploitated by the various institutions and persons meant to safeguard his interests. This work shows a dysfunctional society and a government that has failed to protect the rights and liberty of its citizens. The African leaders abuse the powers of government but they are praised by their ignorant followers because of the crumbs they give to them. The post colonial criticism is adopted for the analysis of the text. The theory

analyses the ideological forces that press the colonized to internalise the colonizers values and at the same time, promote the resistance of the colonized people against oppressors.
Keywords: Corruption, Injustice, Exploitation, Brutality, Post-Colonial

Introduction

Corruption and injustice have long plagued the African continent, hindering its potential and perpetuating suffering. From the colonial era to modern times, corrupt leaders have exploited their powers, enriching themselves while their people suffer. After independence, the masses were expectant, they believe that things would get better with our own people in power but they were disillusioned, the elites that took over power after the colonial masters left were worse and could not represent the interest of the people. They only sought after their personal gains, and never cared about the masses they were meant to represent and protect. According to www.thecollector.com, Mobutu Sese Seko, the former dictator of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) bled Congo dry. Mobutu embezzled billions, amassing a personal fortune while his country sank into poverty and decay. His regime was marked by human rights abuses, electoral fraud, and nepotism. Nigeria's Sani Abacha, who ruled from 1993 to 1998 is a perfect example of leaders who abused their office. Abacha's regime was notorious for corruption, with estimates suggesting that he stole over $4 billion. His government was also marked by human rights abuses, including the execution of environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Idi Amin of Uganda regime was marked by human rights abuses, corruption, and economic mismanagement. Jean-Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic, who ruled with an iron fist, embezzled millions. Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, his regime was marked by corruption, nepotism, and electoral fraud. These examples illustrate the devastating impact of corruption and injustice on African societies, underscoring the need for accountability, transparency, and good governance to build a

brighter future for the continent. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh expresses the ills of these political leaders thus:

> "It turned out that a group of 'black power' elite cult had stepped into the vacated seat of the colonial masters. Those leaders started where their masters stopped. Theirs was the same, if not worse than the colonial pattern of politics. The ruling class was the product of the same evil they fought against". (131)

It is universally acknowledged fact that corruption is pervasive and pernicious phenomenon that has ravaged the African continent in general and Nigeria in particular, perpetuating underdevelopment, inequality, and social injustice. As Peter Lewis, notes, "Corruption has undermined economic development, perpetuated inequality, and eroded trust in institutions in Africa". In the same vein, William Gumede, observes that corruption has become a major obstacle to economic growth, social cohesion, and democratic consolidation in Africa. Corruption has become a systemic problem, entrenched in the fabric of African societies, and perpetuated by those in power.

African writers believed that the onus was on them to use their creative works to fight against corruption. Chinua Achebe had in "The Novelist as a Teacher" charged African writers to take on the role of a teacher in their works. A teacher is one who enlightens the other. As a teacher, African writers are to tackle serious issues like corruption in their creative writings. To Lawrence Perrine, a good work is not the one that entertains without reforming. He believes that a good creative writing should in addition to entertainment, educate the audience about society.

Nnyagu's *At the Centre of No-Man's Land* captures the oppressive nature of politicians and also the law enforcement agency. Injustice is a fundamental challenge that is affecting everything in the country. As a result of injustice, there is inequality, grand corruption, conflict and violence, many Nigerians are in absolute

poverty, many Nigerians have no job, children cannot go to school, hospitals and medical care is not affordable. Economic disparity is stark in Nigeria. Despite being the largest economy in Africa with a GDP of over $500 billion, poverty remains rampant in the country. Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, often linked to political power. Extrajudicial killings and police brutality, epitomized by the EndSARS movement, underscore the urgent need for judicial reforms. Systemic injustices lead to widespread human rights abuses, impacting the most vulnerable populations.

Conceptual Clarifications

Corruption refers to the illicit and unethical use of power or position for personal gain, often involving bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, or other forms of malfeasance. It can pervade various aspects of society, including politics, business, and public administration, and can have far-reaching consequences, including the erosion of trust, undermining of institutions, and perpetuation of inequality and social injustice. According to Johnson (2005), Corruption has to do with the exploitation of public office for private gain, involving acts of bribery, nepotism, embezzlement, and other forms of malfeasance.

According to Sagay, Chairman of the Presidential Advisory Committee in Buhari regime, Corruption is a pervasive cancer that has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian society. He goes further to say that corruption has become a way of life in Nigeria, and it is the root of all our economic, social and political problems. He lamented that corruption has led to the diversion of resources meant for development, resulting in poverty, inequality, and social injustice.

Injustice, on the other hand according to Nkrumah (1961) is "A situation in which an individual or group is denied their rightful entitlements, including human rights, dignity, and respect." According to Cardinal John Onaiyekan, former Catholic Bishop of

Abuja, at the inauguration of the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) programme at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) in Abuja, " Silence is complicity. We cannot afford to remain silent in the face of injustice. We must speak out against injustice wherever we see it". Injustice indeed, is a pervasive plague that afflicts societies worldwide, perpetuating inequality and suffering. In Nigeria, for instance, corruption and nepotism have become entrenched, denying citizens their fundamental rights and perpetuating poverty. As Nnyagu poignantly observes in *At the Centre of No Man's Land*, the struggle for justice is often met with brutal force, leaving the marginalized and vulnerable to suffer in silence. The recent ENDSARS protest, demanded police reform and an end to brutality, are stark reminder of the systemic injustices that persist in Nigeria and globally. Nnyagu believes that until we confront and dismantle these injustices, we will continue to fail the most vulnerable amongst us.

Exploitation is defined as "The act of taking advantage of a person, group, or situation for selfish reasons, often in a way that is harmful or unfair" (Collins English Dictionary, 2019, p. 634). Brutality refers to the use of excessive or cruel force to inflict harm and there is often a disregard for the fundamental human rights of the individuals involved.

Post-colonial refers to the period after a country has gained independence from the colonial rule, often marked by a process of cultural, political and economic transformation. In Nigeria, post-colonial refers to the period after 1960, when the country gained independence from the British colonial rule. The pots-colonial experts in Nigeria have been shaped by its history, culture, and politics and continues to influence the county's development and identity today. Uche Nnyagu's *At the Centre of No Man's Land* explores the struggles and injuries faced by Nigerians in a society still grappling with the legacy of colonialism and corruption. The focus of post-colonial critic is to expose the mechanism and evil

effects of colonialism on the colonized as observed in *At the Centre of No Man's Land.*

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the post-colonial criticism. Post-colonial theory is a theory that concerns itself with the response from the colonised. Post-colonial theory deals with the concept of disillusionment. The former colonized believed that with independence that things will get better for them but reverse is the case as a result, they become confused at the outcome. The reality they face exceeds their expectations. Ulogu (2023), asserts that "post colonialism analyzed the metaphysical, ethical and political concerns about cultural identity, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, subjectivity, language and power" (89). Post-colonial theory offers a framework to examine theories that deal with human oppression, such as Marxism, feminism and African American theory. (91)

This theory exposes the ills of the society and our political leaders that have continued from the colonial masters. We see the abuse of power and intimidation in Uche Nnyagu's At *the Centre of No-Man's Land as* Ofo was intimidated and treated as a mere criminal. Jude, on the other hand, was incarcerated by his uncle because he wants to take over his father's land and properties but the law supports the rich and powerful. At Panti cell, Jude explains to Ofo that " They committed no offence. In this country, if you have no money, you are vulnerable. Some of the inmates have been here for more than a month without their cases tried. The unfortunate ones have been killed to exonerate the influential criminals" (65). From this excerpt, we see how disarray the system has become. Corruption and injustice has become the order of the day. The novelist exposes the ills of the society through his work in a bid to correct and draw people's attention on the need to have an established system where the human rights and dignity of the common persons will be respected.

Corruption and Injustice in Uche Nnyagu's *At the center of No Man's Land*

In the view of Uzochukwu Mike in his essay, "Challenges in Nigeria and Solutions on How to Solve Them," "corruption is at the root of many Nigeria's problem in totality. Corruption takes many forms and infiltrates all political institutions and economic sectors" (2). corruption is indeed a plague affecting Nigeria; it increases in accordance with the growth of the nation. This is why Ifeoma Odinye posites that corruption has become the order of the day in many societies today such as Nigeria and other countries in Africa. According to Odinye, corruption has led to poverty, depression, disillusionment, and hopelessness on the part of the citizen. She believes that "There has been gross mismanagement of public funds, loss of interest and indifference on the part of Nigerian government or leaders towards its subjects (10).

Uche Nnyagu's At *the Centre of No-Man's Land* aptly captures how corruption operates in the society. The literary work centres on the life and experiences of the protagonist, Ofo. Ofo is an electrical engineer who learnt his skills from his master for six years. He is dedicated to his trade and tries to be the best in his field of work. Through Ofo, the writer exposes us to a world riddled with corruption, crime and injustice. Ofo witnessed firsthand, the violent and oppressive nature of policemen whom at first sight he termed kidnappers and holigans due to their appearances and mode of operation. They made use of lethal force, stole, extorted and manhandled Ofo. The policemen bundled Ofo into their vehicle like a common criminal. Ofo questions this unlawful attitude in his mind,

> "...I have never been involved in any form of theft. But even if I were a suspect, was that a good reason for police to search me and take away my money? Was that not some real act of robbery? Were the police not supposed to be maintaining law and order in the society?" (20).

To make the work vivid and realistic, the writer has employed identifiable places and locations in Nigeria which constitute his physical setting. Ofo is an engineer based in Onitsha. Onitsha is a commercial city in Anambra state, south east of Nigeria. Then, the Panti police station where he was taken to is one of the "terrifying" police stations in Lagos. Panti police station is notorious for the belief that certain ills as presented in the novel are committed in the police station. The novelist did not mince words in presenting realistic facts about the dreaded police station in particular and the activities of policemen in general. The fact that Nigerian police are corrupt is so realistically x-rayed by the author in the novel. It is a common saying in the country that "Police is your friend". That is synthetic irony, which is a situation where a person or entity deliberately performs action that profusely contradicts their true beliefs or intentions, usually with the aim to achieve a specific aim. One wonders the kind of friendship that exists between the police and the masses when the sight of police profusely sends fear down the spines of people. In sane climes, people are happy to go to police because justice would certainly be obtained but here in Nigeria, the reverse is the case.

The novel details unwanton corruption and exploitation of the common man by the supposed law enforcement agency that is meant to safeguard and provide security for the people. At *Panti* cell, Ofo is accused of being a criminal who connived with Bright to dupe a company of twenty million naira, and that he also dragged his neighbour Ebuka to *Panti* to pay for his crime. The police put him in a cell even when Bright could not identify him as an accomplice. Ebuka was set free as a result of the bribe that Dogba, the leader of the police that went for the arrest and his team have collected from the uncle.

Corruption is deeply rooted in our society. According to Olawoyin, in West Africa, Nigeria is rated the 2nd worst country out of 17 countries leaving only Guinea Bissau behind (Olawoyin, 2018).

Corruption would never leave the country as long as the politicians are above the law. In the novel, a young man was incarcerated for over a week because he had a quarrel with a politician. This young man is a *keke* driver who has a misunderstanding with the politician and the politician vowed, " I am going to ensure that you rot in the cell so that in your next world, you will never forget your senses at home when you go out" (84). And this became true because the young man never left the police detention alive.

In Ofo case, even with a legal representative, the police deny him bail and the officer had to call *Oga Company* to enquire if he (Ofo) should be released or not. In his defence, he says " ...Oga company nobi ordinary person. He follow get this country." (76). It is a common saying that no writer writes in a vacuum; a good novel must mirror the author's society. Even as it became so vivid that Ofo was innocent and not guilty of any crime that brought him to the Panti cell, the police refused to grant him bail because he is a commoner and not among the "aristocratic" in Nigeria. The statement made by one of the police officers that "Oga company nobi ordinary person" immediately clears the air on who are who that own Nigeria. The Nigerian police are friends to the affluent whom they are always willing to assist to malign the poor masses. The police remain loyal to the rich because of the financial gains they receive from them.

The novelist presents a realistic society where the good, bad and ugly co-exist. He does not paint pictures of things that are far off but through his work, mirrors the society. The writer presents that even in the midst of bad, good also exists. Ofo, interacted with a well cultured and disciplined officer who spoke in a very polished Queen's English. Obviously, the police officer is a university graduate. Ofo believed that he is probably a graduate who opted for the police force because of high level of unemployment in the country. The fact that such a person is in the police force is a clear indication that there are still few sane people in the police force.

However, in Ofo's view, such people became police officers as a result that they had no option as there are no other job opportunities for them. The officer offers to assist him and "he did not mince words to tell him that *Panti* was a lion's den and that he should fervently pray for divine intervention" (53).

The political parties and politicians only seek their gains, according to one of the inmates, " There are no good people in Naija politics now because the wicked evil ones in politics have made politics dreadful. If you have good intention for the nation, the bigwigs in the politics would not allow you to have your say" (89). This summaries the issues Nigeria is facing today, and this affirms the claims that Chuma Udeh made," that a group of 'black power' elite cult had stepped into the vacated seat of the colonial masters". The writer advocates that we should not sell our conscience for crumbs. He calls for the masses to be patriotic and not sell their votes as a result of poverty.

Conclusion

The writer has a role to play in the society. It is the duty of the writer to educate the masses by drawing their attention towards salient issues that affect them. The importance of a writer to the society cannot be over emphasized, they are the watch dogs of the society. Through literary works that expose the ills of the society, they try to correct wrongs. The writer presents a realistic society and there are a lot of lessons to be learnt from this text. Combating corruption and injustice in the society is the duty of any meaningful citizens to ensure the progress of a country. The writer has exposed these issues and also what led to Ofo's incarceration, which is picking up a phone used for stealing and it was traced to him. This singular act has lead to all his predicaments in the text. This is one of many issues to note, for the other inmates, some did absolutely nothing to warrant an arrest. This calls for the society to stand up against practices that hinder the development of our dear country, Nigeria. It calls for accountability towards our political

leaders and even the common office clerk. The writer has exposed the root of these vices and it is now left for us to adopt adequate measures to tackle this menace.

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