



**Socio-Economic Marginalization in Chinua Achebe's Short Story
'The Voter'**

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Modern African Literature is concerned almost exclusively with the reality of African life. Most of the African writers have brought into light the world problems faced by the natives. In 20th century, short story became an important genre on West African Literary scene. The roots and development of African short story are found in oral tradition. It promotes in the reaffirmation of the traditional African culture. African Literature in English has added a new dimension to Commonwealth Literature. Most of the West African short story writers are the product of colonialism, cultural hybridity, marginalization, etc. There are so many West African short story writers whose contribution is noteworthy in uplifting the West African Literature. West African short story writers such as Ben Okri, I.N.C, Aniebo, Adewale Maja Pearce, Remi Aduke Adedeji, Zaynab Alkali, Obi B. Egbuna, Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa, Anthonia C. Kalu, Funso Ayejina, Ama Ata Aidoo, Abioseh Nicol, Kole Omotoso etc.

Chinua Achebe is a prolific modern African novelist and short story writer. The tragic consequences of the African encounter with Europe are the main theme of Achebe's novels and short stories. The attack of whites and their culture resulted in many social, economical, and psychological problems in the African society. The collection of short stories "Girls at war and Other Stories" depicts daily in post- colonial Africa and portrays the social and political stress of newly independent societies attempting to find a balance between ancestral traditions and demands of modern life.

The short story 'The Voter' unravels the lapses of newly introduced Western democratic system in Africa where the native people are innocent and do not understand the intricacies leading to corruption and manipulation. It also portrays the Umuofian society that is corrupt and confused in its social and economic values. The attraction of money and beautiful things had destroyed the sense of values of the traditional society. This story is a vivid political satire on the contemporary Nigerian society. It ridicules, deceitful and selfish Chief Honorable Minister Marcus Ibe, who takes advantage of the poor, ignorant elders of Umuofia voted for him. This story mainly centres on the protagonist, Rufus Okeke. Achebe attempts to uncover how the control of economic and political power is the source of incessant conflicts among ethnic groups.

Through ‘The Voter’, Achebe uncovers how British colonial rule dynamited the whole traditional values and morals existed in the Nigerian Igbo Society. The British colonialism eradicated the democratic Igbo political culture. Before the encroachment of the Western influence, Igbo communities and area Governments were overwhelmingly ruled solely by a Republican Consultative Assembly of Common People. After the independence of Nigeria in 1960, it was accepted that the Nigerian Igbo people will continue and implement their traditional practices and principles. However, the Nigerian Politics failed to sustain the traditional Igbo political practices. And it gave rise to an increasing disillusionment.

Being very popular man in his village, Roof (Rufus Okeke) like his other fellows, has not abandoned his village to seek work in the towns. He is an energetic young man. He accepts a new challenge as party organizer of honorable minister Marcus Ibe for the coming election. According to the villagers` point of view, he became, “a real expert in election campaigning at all levels – village, local government or national.” (14). When politics made its entry in his village he capitalized his strength by supporting Marcus Ibe. At the time of the second election, Roof, on Marcus’ instructions, bribes some of the local elders in order to ensure that they will vote for Marcus. At no stage in the story does Roof advise the elders as to why they should vote for Marcus or what benefit electing Marcus

will be to the community. Roof’s main concern is not the elders or those in the community but Marcus himself. There also seems to be no thought given by the elders as to what the consequences of their actions (voting for Marcus) might be. Like Marcus and Roof, the local leaders also are corrupt who are more concerned with receiving payment for their vote than they are on improving life in the village.

Umuofia people, in the last election, had elected Marcus Ibe, “a not too successful mission school teacher”, as their representative in the Capital. But the attitude of the elder people of Umuofia has changed. Even Rufus had warned Marcus Ibe about the radical change in the thinking of Umuofia. In the last five year, Marcus Ibe has acquired two long cars and has just built the biggest house in the area, which had been blessed upon by the Archbishop. The society of Umufoia is full of blunders –bribery, corruption, betrayal and hypocrisy. The attraction of money had destroyed the sense of values of traditional society.

PAP’s propaganda of the forthcoming election was in full force. Marcus Ibe “had drawn five month salary in advance”, (15) to distribute money among the voters. For Marcus Ibe, “Roof (Rufus Okeke) was the most trusted of these campaigners”. (16) Roof came to know that the elders of Umuofia do not accept two shillings. They retort Roof that “two shillings is shameful”. (17) Moreover, they said that “But today Marcus is a great man and does his thing

like a great man..... We have climbed the iroko tree today and would be foolish not to take down all the firewood we need”. (17) They just expected more bribe for their votes. This shows the passive and congested view of ignorant people of Umuofia about the power of vote. They are not aware of the power of their ballot paper. They don't think about the village's prospect. By offering three shillings each, Roof purchases the important votes which decide Marcus Ibe's political future. Everything was going on as per the election plan. For Marcus Ibe, “Roof was the most trusted of these campaigners”. (16) Suddenly Roof “received a strange visit from the leader of POP campaign team”. (18) The visit for the business purpose. The leader put five pound on the floor before Roof. With quick decision, he succumbs to the temptation of a bribe offered by the leader of the opposition party. He was told to vote for Maduka. While Roof having bribe of five pound, he was made to swear on a magic `iyi`. Now Roof has taken the oath to vote for Maduka. But he knew that the opposition party (POP) has no chance against Marcus (PAP).

Marcus Ibe is the leader of People Alliance Party (PAP). His party competes with the opponent Progressive Organization Party (POP), “which had been formed by the tribes down the coast to save themselves from the political, cultural, social and religious annihilation”.(15) Though POP knew that the POP leaders have less chance of getting elected in this election, they tried

to split the voters by offering money (bribe) to voters. On the polling day, though Roof is in dilemma, at last his instinct provides him solution. He tears the ballot and cast one portion for each candidate. “He then lives the voting booth as jauntily as he had gone in”.(28) Roof succumbs to temptation and accepts bribe from both Marcus Ibe and his opponents. Roof is one of those examples who become engrossed in not only economical corruptibility but also moral corruptibility as well. All these changed cultural practices and political system is the outcome of the influence of British Colonialism that disrupted the democratic system of Igbo political culture. Through the story `The Voter`, Achebe condemns the foreign influence that has intensively eroded the traditional values and integrity. He depicts the decay of moral as well as the loss of the political values. It has been shown that while having bribe the leader of POP compels Roof to swear on a magic `iyi`.

Marcus Ibe, Minister of Culture, had exploited the masses by misusing the political power he has deprived of the basic human rights by giving them bribe and have left them stranded and depriving them of a better future. Now he has two luxury cars and has built the biggest house `Umuofia Mansion` in the area. On the other hand the natives have neither water nor electricity. But for his own house, Marcus has installed a private plant to supply electricity. He doesn't improve the positions of his villagers. He is engrossed in the materialistic world. This shows the

elected leaders selfishness and political corruptibility.

Marcus Ibe, one of the modern political elite and Minister of Culture has built the biggest house `Umuofia Mansion`. As a politician Marcus has made sure that his life has improved in comparison to those who live in Umuofia. He has built himself a new home with running water yet his constituents don't have the same access to water as Marcus does. Though it is not explicitly stated that Marcus has inappropriately obtained his property the fact that he has ready and easy access to large amounts of money suggests that he may be corrupt. According to F. Odun Balogun, "Marcus Ibe's corruption is promoted and protected by churchmen who opened Ibe's mansion built with money, fraudulently acquired. While the corrupt politicians receive the spiritual blessings of the elites of the church, their illegal wealth are protected by the legal elites". (1991:75-76). Marcus Ibe ,on whose hands the fate of Umuofia rests, looted all the natives and usurped political power for personal gains and denigrates the poor masses.

According to Achebe, the trouble with Nigeria is simply a failure of leadership .The corrupted leaders like Marcus Ibe just indulged in personal gains are of no use. Rather they are the stigma on society. The hallmarks of true leadership are lost by these corrupted politicians. Achebe throws light on the crumbling of African societies in the 1960s.Marcus Ibe failed in defending the poor, dispossessed, less- privileged class,

and the wretched of the earth .Achebe portrays the victimization of the naives at the hands of the political leaders and modern elites.

Regarding African society that disturbs the coherence and solace, are the aspects like racism, social exclusion, deprivation with reference to some tribal classes. Due to economic marginalization, some individuals or groups belonging to lower strata of society are totally excluded from the economic opportunities. It generates adverse atmosphere in the society as well as country in terms of human rights, deprivation, poverty, and isolation. Achebe has shown poverty as one of the reasons of desolation and misery. Through this story, he has exposed the grim realities of the contemporary Nigerian society. The Nigerian people, modern elites, and political leaders have lost dignity during the colonial period .They have been dehumanized by the European imperialists.

Multiculturalism promotes social equality among masses. Education shapes human life and leads to the path of career. Obviously education divides people in to educated and uneducated. But, educated people like Marcus Ibe makes misuse of the knowledge and exploit the masses. Lack of education and economic exploitation are the two reasons of social inequality. The Voter explores the themes of socio-economic corruption, moral decadence and degeneration in the post independent Nigerian society. Elections are nothing but a farce and mockery of democracy. Chief the Honorable in `The

Voter` displays diverse forms of intrigues, deceit and corruption in electoral campaign, voting process. Both-the candidate (Marcus) and the voters are exposed by the writer. Huge amount is spent to attract the voters and voters in turn try to extract from him as much as possible. It is a shameful thing for Democracy. Radical changes and stern actions are essential to make elections transparent. The voters' greed for money keeps the village again away from all the primary facilities such as water, electricity etc. Marcus may not ever come to know about this betrayal, but will Roof be ever able to forgive himself.

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