

Human Rights Abuse and Leadership Irresponsibility as Obstacles to Peace in Chimamanda N. Adichie's Short Stories

Yacoubou Alou

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Chimamanda N. Adichie's two short stories to show how the writer portrays human rights abuse and political irresponsibility as obstacles to peace and raises her fellow Africans' awareness on the conditions to meet to foster conflict mitigation and nation-building efforts. Drawing on postcolonial theory, the study has found that Adichie implicitly interrogates the causes of constant conflicts in Nigeria and suggests that a sound social justice, political accountability, and respect of human rights constitute viable passes to peace in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

Keywords: African Literature, Adichie, conflict, human rights, peace, violence.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Most of written African literature has stemmed from Africa's contact with the West. This does not mean that this literature was born after colonialism as the term 'post' in 'post-colonialism' may suggest. However, postcolonial literary productions depict the global mingling of identities, worldviews, and cultures as a result of the contact between the colonized and the colonizers. This literature started with writings that fire back to the negative and derogatory representations of the continent in what some critics term 'colonialist literature' (Nitonde, 2019, p.146). The dynamic of 'Writing Back,' as discussed by Ashcroft *et al.* (1989), from the periphery to the core becomes an incessant endeavor until the continent and its people cease to be disparagingly and pejoratively depicted in Western knowledge production as it appears in their writings and media.

Consequently, the task of representing the independent African nations becomes central to the writers who began reflecting the horrors their countries suffered following decolonization, and their writing is often imbued with a sense of despair and anger, at both the state of their nations and the leaders who replaced former colonial oppressors (Srivastava and Singh, 2016, p. 1). However, today more than ever before, many African literary figures have turned their ink to look inside of their society to cast critical portraiture of their political leadership and their preoccupations towards human rights, social justice as a contribution to peace-building not only for their fellow Africans but for humanity as a whole. These issues are more outspokenly depicted by the new generation of Nigerian writers. One of the most prolific of these writers is Chimamanda N. Adichie who has made an outstanding contribution to postcolonial literature thematically and stylistically.

In a related development, within the richness of themes treated in postcolonial African literature the most recurring ones include political corruption, war, civil conflict, and peace. In an anthology, Falola (2010, pp. 15-20) critically explores the representation of the themes of war and peace in contemporary Africa by highlighting the negative assumptions made by Western writers. Indeed, while Falola (2010, pp. 35-46) calls for a more positive representation of the continent as opposed to the Western misrepresentations which tend to reduce Africa and its populace to negative generalized biases, it is more objective to acknowledge that the continent continues to confront many societal ills which if not decisively dealt with would throw many people in insecurity and incessant crises. This task of denouncing, albeit, fictionally has become central to the works of many contemporary African writers including Adichie.

In her two short stories ('Cell One' and 'A Private Experience'), Adichie has artistically depicted the reason why conflicts thrive in Nigeria. 'Cell One,' for instance, represents juvenile delinquency and insecurity on Nigerian University campuses along with outspoken political and police corruption. 'A Private Experience,' on the other hand, narrates the ethno-religious violence and Hausa/Igbo, Muslim/Christian binary oppositions (Alou, 2017b, pp. 105-109) in Nigeria while it suggests that peaceful coexistence is still possible if ordinary citizens understand their dismal living conditions under irresponsible political leadership. Both texts depict a prevailing atmosphere of confusion, political leaders' insensitivity,

and blatant corruption as fuel for societal chaos. The narrative tends toward questioning the extent of the political leaders' implication in the mayhem in which the population vegetates.

Adichie's fictional rendition of obstacles to peace-building and conflict mitigation points at the lack of accountability on the side of political leaders and their irresponsibility to correctly address their countrymen's existential problems. After clarifying the concepts of peace, conflict, human rights, and accountability used in the present study; and outlining their relationship, this research work demonstrates instances of the depiction of these issues in the selected texts. The study seeks to reveal how the novelist implicitly interrogates the causes of constant conflicts in Nigeria and suggests that sound social justice, political accountability, and respect of human rights constitute viable passes to peace in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. It further shows the writer's contribution to a better understanding of the societal hardship faced by Nigeria especially in its nation-building efforts.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The word peace is an abstraction, an imaginative condition that can be observable. It entails a situation whereby people feel safe, express their happiness, and enjoy well-being. Galtung (1969, p 168) views peace as the opposite of violence. Notwithstanding, the conflict appears as a battle among people or even within an individual; this battle may be an open fight or an ideological struggle. When individuals compete over scarce resources, as biologists would say, people fight; conflict may occur when dispute over diverging ideas, values, needs, is not resolved. Conflict can escalate into an armed fight. Deutsch (1973, p. 15) observes that conflict arises whenever there is an incompatibility of activities between two vying parties with the interference, disruption, obstruction of one party to make the other party's actions less productive. That is to say, two groups fight over a particular issue. This is the type of conflict that this paper addresses not the dilemma type of conflict, which involves one individual struggling with his/her inner problems.

Human rights, on the other hand, are "rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination." (<https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/human-rights/>). These rights further include:

the right to a fair trial and presumption of innocence; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; freedom of opinion and expression; peaceful assembly; freedom of association; participation in public affairs and elections; and protection of minority rights. It prohibits arbitrary deprivation of life; torture, cruel or degrading treatment or punishment; slavery and forced labour; arbitrary arrest or detention; arbitrary interference with privacy; war propaganda; discrimination; and advocacy of racial or religion. (<https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/human-rights/>).

These concepts are used in this study with their understanding as the above definitions delineate. Sections 4 and 5 of the research reveal how some of these rights are violated in the writer's representation of the Nigerian justice system. Undoubtedly, this violation does not favor peace and security and it will inevitably create conflict and societal uneasiness.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Some critics fail to critically look at the postcolonial theory and criticism by limiting it to reading practices that are "preoccupied principally with analysis of cultural forms which mediate, challenge, or reflect upon relations of domination and subordination" (Srivastava and Singh, 2016, p. 1). While this understanding of postcolonial theory and criticism points at the works of early African writers like Chinua Achebe, Leopold S. Senghor, Camara Laye, and others whose major concern was the gaining back and reinvigoration of the deliberately distorted African cultures, postcolonialism cannot be limited to the aesthetics of 'writing back.' This theory would be better understood as an "attempt to understand the problems posed by the European colonization and its aftermath" (Culler, 1997, p. 130), especially in the way the continent was scrambled at the 1884 Berlin Conference leaving the new nations with a serious problem of identity and a feeling of ethnic rather than national belonging. These new nations have to cope with conflicts arising from diverse identities and ethnicities forced to live under the same political leadership. This melting pot would undeniably bring about the issue of security and peace especially when the leaders are careless and selfish. In a similar vein, postcolonial theory and criticism stress reading activities that "seeks to engage with the experiences of the colonized throughout the world" (Alou, 2018, p. 40) and "reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism" (McLeod, 2000,

p. 33). In other words, the theory not only looks at the unequal relationships between the colonized and the colonizers but also unravels the complexities and subjectivities found in the knowledge production coming from the former colonies.

The present study examines Adichie's texts from a critical perspective in two short stories: "Cell One" and "A Private Experience." A critical reading of these texts produced by a writer from Nigeria, a country 'with a history of colonialism' reverberates the socio-political challenges that the postcolonial world faces. The paper specifically seeks to demonstrate that the postcolonial condition is not an easy condition when it comes to the political leadership's implication to foster peace and a conducive living environment. In doing so, the researcher engages 'with the experience of the colonized' in Nigeria; this kind of reading activity constitutes an important aspect of postcolonial theory as stated earlier.

Methodologically, this research work draws on textual analysis. It undertakes a critical and close reading of Adichie's short stories. The paper mainly explores the novelist's representation of human rights abuse and political irresponsibility as elements that hinder peace and security in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The data in this study are sentences and phrases excerpted mainly from the primary sources and analyzed in the light of the aforementioned theories. No fieldwork, interviews, or surveys are carried out.

IV. HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE IN 'CELL ONE'

Postcoloniality, being the condition of the colonized throughout the world, is fraught with socio-political instability, hybridity, and the quest for self-assertion; some critics view it as a 'nervous and anxious condition' (Nnolim, 2009; Yohannes, 2012). Depiction of this condition appears in many works of literature including those of the new generation Nigerian writer, Adichie. In the two short stories set in contemporary Nigeria, she highlights unspeakable sources of conflict and dangerous threats to peace and peaceful coexistence. The two stories under scrutiny show how violation of fundamental human rights under irresponsible political leadership fuels conflicts and constitutes a stumbling block to peace. She calls attention to the way oppressive power wielded by the police inevitably leads to corruption and injustice and the ensuing atmosphere is that of insecurity and conflicts.

The aforementioned issue is typified in the short story, 'Cell One.' The narrative depicts how 'the right to a fair trial and presumption of innocence' is violated in Nigeria. The nameless, omniscient narrator, for instance, recounts how people are jailed without trial as it is the case with "an old man [who] had been pushed into his cell" because "his son was wanted for armed robbery, and when the police could not find the son, they decided to lock him up instead" (Adichie, 2009, p. 14). As unbelievable as this might appear, the imprisonment of the innocent father results from the police's failure to arrest the criminal son. This man's right to freedom and fair trial has been violated.

Furthermore, the writer metaphorically tackles the issue of human rights abuse and non-dignifying and inhumane police practice. This is typified with instances of corpses often dragged out from the cell. For example, talking about the main character, Nnamabia, says, "his second shock, a few days later, was Cell One, the cell beyond his. Two policemen had carried out a swollen dead man from Cell One and stopped by Nnamabia's cell to make sure the corpse was seen by all" (p. 11). The reckless killing of prisoners and the way the dead bodies are treated is evidence of the violation of people's right to life.

Another human rights abuse, more specifically the right to freedom from torture, appears when the narrator's cousin Ogechi is ill-treated by the police. The following passage decisively clarifies the point:

My father no longer delivered a monologue, as soon as we were waved on, on how illiterate and corrupt the police were. He did not bring up the day they had delayed us for an hour because he refused to bribe them, or the way they had stopped a bus in which my beautiful cousin Ogechi was traveling and singled her out and called her a whore because she had two cell phones and asked her for so much money that she knelt on the ground in the rain begging them to let her go since her bus had already been allowed to go. (p.12).

Further abuse of the right to freedom from torture occurs when the inhumane treatment of the ordinary citizens is hinted at with the police forcing prisoners like "the old man, who could not afford water, who had not bathed in a week, had hurried into the cell and yanked his shirt off and rubbed his frail back against the detergent-wet floor. The policemen started to laugh when they saw him do this and they asked him to take all his clothes off and parade in the corridor outside the cell, and as he did they laughed louder" (p. 16). Another instance of this type of human rights violation happens when sometimes "inside the sprawling station compound, two policemen were flogging somebody who was lying on the ground under the umbrella tree" (p. 17). The question that quickly comes to mind is where is the administration that is supposed to supervise these police officers. Nowhere in the narrative are we told whether the leaders have addressed these illegal actions on the side of the police. These instances of policemen's misbehavior and inhumane

acts point at the prevailing injustice which would not help achieve peace in Nigeria.

The bad behavior on the side of those who are supposed to protect the citizens and enforce law and order creates an atmosphere of insecurity and becomes a threat to peace. Nnamabia's mother, for instance, observes that these happenings "are symptoms of a larger malaise" (Adichie, 2009, p. 12). The larger malaise that she most likely alludes to is the prevailing corruption, a recurring theme in most postcolonial writings (Irele, 2010: 211). Indeed, we learn earlier in the narrative that the police are being bribed with money, jollof rice, and meat (p. 9) and prisoners "need money to buy [their] peace in the cell" (p. 10). Another malaise may stem from insecurity, human rights abuse, and the failure of the State to protect ordinary citizens from police abuse. People's fundamental rights are being violated and this creates a feeling of chaos that will put peace in jeopardy. People are no longer at ease as they witness this irresponsible violation of their rights, they feel justice has flown away from Nigeria.

The instances of reckless killing and imprisonment without trial mentioned above constitute sources of insecurity that the selected text represents. This state of affairs represents many cases of this type of human rights abuse carried out by the Nigerian justice system and this happening does not make justice prevail. The author uses irony to better capture the chaotic situation Nigerian justice finds itself in. This irony appears when Nnamabia believes that "if we ran Nigeria like this cell [...] we would have no problems in this country. Things are so organized" (Adichie, 2009, p. 9).

V. POLITICAL IRRESPONSIBILITY AS AN OBSTACLE TO PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN 'A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE'

Studies on peace, conflict, and justice have mainly been the field of sociologists. However, African men and women of letters have artistically depicted these issues in their craftsmanship to raise awareness on what can put a country on the verge of collapse. Alou (2017b) has convincingly found that in her short story, 'A Private Experience,' Adichie has used her characterization not only to point at postcolonial identity dilemma but also to implicitly reflect "her proclivity towards telling a single, unbalanced, story in her identity narrative and her underground Biafran activism" (p. 105). To support this claim, Alou (2017b) has demonstrated how the writer has represented the Hausa as illiterate, violent, and fanatic people who are ready to kill once they feel their religion is attacked; as opposed to the Ibo who are more educated and tolerant. This kind of stereotypical representation of the biggest ethnic group in Nigeria does not foster peace and nation-building efforts.

In a similar vein, while Alou (2019) has found that Adichie's representation of religion/ethnic-based conflict in Northern Nigeria points at the lack of education, it falls short to stress that conflict occurs because of political irresponsibility. As the story represents, the masses are left to cater for themselves under the whim of blatantly corrupt political leaders. Instruments of law enforcement such as well-trained police and a well-structured justice system are ridiculously lacking. Another threat to peace originates from colonial structures. Indeed, conflicts may stem from "the imposition of colonial rule and the attendant disruption of ethnic and national cohesiveness in favor of a mosaic of colonies and later so-called nations" (Owomoyela, 1993, p. 6). This disruption of ethnic and national cohesiveness, which is often marked by conflict is better captured in Adichie's short story, 'A Private Experience.' Alou (2019) in an attempt to explore how Adichie has demystified ethno-religious cleavage and Hausa/Igbo binary opposition fails to examine the repercussion of political irresponsibility, which fuel violence and jeopardize peace, represent a keen impediment to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. In 'A Private Experience,' while the author uses the theme of ethnic and religious conflict to craft her narrative, this theme is reinforced through well-thought motifs with the most important one being violence and political irresponsibility.

Adichie explores the theme of violence to call attention to what could be a threat to Nigeria and its nation-building efforts. This thematic concern manifests itself in several ways. Upon a close reading of the text, the reader contemplates how the two main characters of the story (Chika and the anonymous Hausa woman) witness overwhelming mayhem as the Hausa crowd hunts the Igbo Christians in Kano, a Northern Nigerian city known for its business, Islamic culture, and overpopulation. Alou (2019) pinpoints that "the story invites the reader to reflect on the historical, political, and religious conflicts between Igbo Christians and Hausa Muslims in Nigeria represented respectively by Chika and the market woman" (p. 20).

These two characters run for their lives as they are caught in a deadly riot which begins with an incident whereby an Igbo man inadvertently drives over a copy of the Holy Koran. Right after this incident, the reckless killing spreads out and the two women find an abandoned small shop to hide because as the Hausa woman whispers, the Hausa rioters are "not going to small-small shop, only big-big shop and market" (p. 46). While the two women are hiding and speaking, Chika thinks that and that is what is happening on the ground, "Hausa Muslims are hacking down Igbo Christians with machetes, clubbing them with stones" (p. 46). At the pick of the havoc, people randomly run for their lives like Chika who runs "not sure if the man running beside her was a friend or an enemy, not sure if she should stop and pick up one of the bewildered-looking children separated from their mothers in the rush, not even sure who was who or who was killing

whom” (p. 48). Thus, Violence remains an overarching motif in ‘A Private Experience.’

As the narrative suggests, the turmoil stems from political leadership irresponsibility due to the political leaders’ failure to create jobs and foster education to ordinary people because the insane killing starts:

when a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran that lay on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. The men nearby, men who sat around all day playing draughts, men who happened to be Muslims, pulled him out of his pickup truck, cut his head off with one flash of a machete, and carried it to the market, asking others to join in; the infidel had desecrated the Holy Book. (p. 48)

What this passage entails is that the Hausas’ idleness and old political and ethnic tension explain what seems to be incidental and coincidental. This old tension fed by religious and political agendas could have been resolved with a caring and responsible political leadership to help peace prevail. Violence explodes because of the absence of caring political leadership which is supposed to stop the havoc and the civil unrest.

There is no wonder, Adichie has aesthetically contributed to African narratives dramatizing the fact that the insecurity and conflicts that we witness in various places in the continent stem from those at the helm of political affairs. Indeed, it is sad to realize that Achebe’s (1983, p. 1) rather rhetorical claim is still valid when he regrettably observes that:

the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.

This lament is unfortunately heard from many other sources as the current tensions between the Mali government and the ECOWAS leaders typify.

In truth, the ongoing state of insecurity in many places in Africa stems from structural issues in the postcolonial states. Indeed, to some extent, Obah-Akpowoghaha *et al.* (2013) have found it right when they contend that to build peace we need to have a “number of strategic leverages established to form a formidable state structure (rule of law, democracy, human rights, and security) and the creation of potential force for peace to thrive within civil society and other social networks or human endeavours” (p. 6). However, Adichie’s representation of conflict and peace in Nigeria casts doubt on Obah-Akpowoghaha *et al.*’s (2013) contention about the efforts towards conflict resolution when asserting that “the main challenge to Africa is lack of assured means of [sic] finance these efforts; especially peace support operations need huge funding” (p. 9). This study has revealed that Adichie’s narratives can be compared to those of her elder, Achebe, in the way her stories have “bitten to the core, swallowed and regurgitated contemporary Africa’s miseries and expectations” (Srivastava and Singh, 2016, pp. 7-8).

VI. CONCLUSION

While it is realistic to acknowledge that “old colonialists and their behind-the-scenes manipulations of African affairs have not quite faded away” (Owomoyela, 1993, p. 7), the paper reveals that African writers (represented by Adichie) are more and more concerned with African affairs as managed by Africans themselves. Cognizant of the negative consequences of self-flagellation, they tend to demonstrate that the West is not all to blame but corrupt and blatant African leaders are responsible for many conflicts that the continent witnesses. Adichie’s work appears as a stunner marked by astounding realism and meaning wrapped in a well-crafted narrative. The author calls attention to the issue of insecurity and what threatens peace in Nigeria.

By discussing Adichie’s representation of injustice and human rights abuse in Nigerian society, the paper argues that if well established, justice can repair wrongdoings and it can prevent conflict from occurring. It further suggests that there is a pressing need for human rights reinforcement and leadership accountability in the peace-building process.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, the study has found that Adichie implicitly interrogates the causes of constant conflicts in Nigeria and suggests that sound social justice, political accountability, and respect of human rights constitute viable passes to peace in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The textual analysis reveals that peace is possible in a religiously and ethnically diverse society when the political leaders understand their responsibility to correctly handle the affairs of the State. Alou (2018) quoting King (2000) observes that “people have to work to make social justice a reality because injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (p. 191).

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