

## THE QUESTION OF POWER AND CORRUPTION IN SELECTED AFRICAN LITERARY TEXTS

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the pervasive issues of corruption, insecurity, moral decadence, and abuse of power in contemporary African governance as portrayed in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). These works critically examine the socio-political challenges and moral decline that plague post-colonial Africa. Achebe critiques the post-independence African elite, accusing them of corruption, irresponsibility, hypocrisy, and lack of vision. His novel follows the protagonist, Odili, and employs irony and satire to expose the leadership failures embodied by Chief Nanga, whose title, "A Man of the People," is laced with irony, given his corrupt and selfish nature. Similarly, Armah focuses on Ghana during Kwame Nkrumah's regime, a period marked by corruption, immorality, and lawlessness. Through satirical devices, Armah critiques a society overwhelmed by filth and moral degradation. Both authors vividly depict the masses' dissatisfaction with bad leadership and highlight how these societal flaws have eroded trust and stability. Using post-colonial theory as a framework, the study analyzes how these texts address the socio-political and economic realities of African societies. It argues that literature plays a vital role as a therapeutic tool to inspire reflection and learning. By exploring the flaws of leadership and governance, literature offers a platform to educate people, encouraging them to avoid repeating past mistakes. The study concludes that Africa's systemic challenges—corruption, lawlessness, and abuse of power—can only be addressed through awareness and reform inspired by literature. Achebe and Armah's works serve as powerful critiques of governance and calls for change, demonstrating that literature can foster awareness and accountability in society.

**Keywords:** Power, Insecurity, Government, Corruption, Therapeutic

### Introduction

The study of literature transcends ordinary knowledge, broadening intellectual horizons and encouraging deep reflection on life and human experiences. Literature enriches life by offering valuable insights that uphold moral and ethical standards in society, while also serving as a source of entertainment and solace through storytelling. As William Shakespeare aptly stated in *Macbeth* (158:219), "life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing." Stories are conveyed in various forms, including dance and plays, often serving as tools to critique societal flaws with the aim of fostering improvement and maintaining standards.

For instance, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) showcases a moral depth rarely seen in African fiction. Armah's use of blunt and unrefined language effectively critiques the dysfunctional Ghanaian society of his time, highlighting its moral and social decay. Through his work, he advocates for a societal transformation where values such as cleanliness and godliness become central to daily life. Armah's critique of moral decay and corrupt behavior, particularly through his use of coarse language, significantly contributed to his prominence in the literary landscape. This choice of language not only enhances the artistic and aesthetic quality of his novel but also serves as a stark commentary on the unpleasant attitudes pervasive in Ghanaian society during that period. Armah's unconventional use of vulgarity stands in contrast to the norms of African literature, where such language is often eschewed.

Chinua Achebe, a prominent figure in African literature, criticized Armah's approach in "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" (1968), characterizing it as a radical departure from the established literary conventions upheld by writers like Wole Soyinka. Achebe famously labeled Armah's work as "...a sick book" (Morell, 1975), reflecting his disdain for the overt coarseness of language and the bleakness of the narrative.

In contrast, Achebe himself addresses societal corruption in "A Man of the People" (1966) with a different tone. His critique is both satirical and humorous, avoiding the feeling of disgust that permeates Armah's work. Achebe's intention to highlight the corrupt practices and immorality of those in power is conveyed with clarity and simplicity. This approach allows readers to empathize with the marginalized and oppressed, particularly represented by Odili and the new wave of politicians.

The humor and straightforwardness in Achebe's writing engage readers and keep them invested in the narrative, while the underlying sexual overtones add layers of complexity to the characters and their experiences. By juxtaposing these two authors, we see distinct methods of addressing societal issues: Armah's raw and unfiltered critique versus Achebe's subtle yet impactful satire, each illuminating the deep-seated corruption in their respective societies while offering unique insights into the human condition. Overall, literature—whether expressed through prose, poetry, or drama—offers countless benefits. Most importantly, it has the potential to inspire the creation of a just and harmonious society where equality, peace, and security prevail.

### **Power**

The concept of power and its association with corruption has been explored by various political scientists and scholars. Talcott Parsons (1963:262) describes power as a mechanism that drives changes within social interactions, which may have either positive or negative consequences for society. Max Weber (1978:8), on the other hand, defines power as the ability of an individual to enforce their will within a social context, even in the face of resistance. Similarly,

Thomas Hobbes (1969:215) views power as the exercise of dominance over others. These perspectives align with Weber's analysis, which resonates strongly with the African context, where repression and exploitation often characterize the use of power. In both Weber's and Hobbes' definitions, power is depicted as a tool for subjugation, frequently employed to deprive individuals of their rights and privileges.

This study focuses on power in its absolute form, where control is exercised over subjects, resulting in deprivation and inequality. Two West African novels serve as case studies: Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). Both works, set in Ghana and Nigeria respectively, grapple with themes of corruption, moral decay, materialism, poverty, and abuse of power. These novels reflect the deep disillusionment that followed the anticipated promise of independence—Nigeria in 1960 and Ghana in 1957—when hopes for just governance were dashed by bad leadership and a failure to fulfill the aspirations of the people.

E.N. Obiechina (1990:121) aptly describes this betrayal:

When it came to keeping faith with  
the people and fulfilling promises, it  
became clear that a gulf separated  
fulfillment from hope. Within a few  
year of independence, the hopes had collapsed,  
and disillusionment had set in.

This sentiment is echoed in the works of writers who depict the post-independence era as marked by administrative failures, instability, and violence, including coups and counter-coups.

Achebe's *A Man of the People* critiques corruption and irresponsibility among leaders, who prioritize self-enrichment over societal welfare. Nepotism, tribalism, and hypocrisy dominate the political landscape, as exemplified by Chief Nanga's preferential treatment of Odili. Achebe uses satire to expose the hypocrisy of leaders like Nanga, who, having risen to power, betray their promises of equitable governance. For instance, Nanga's ignorance as Minister of Culture is evident during a book exhibition where he fails to recognize prominent writers from his own country. His ineptitude becomes a source of ridicule, both locally and internationally. Achebe also describes chief Nanga as a hypocrite when he describes him in this way :

A man who just came in from the  
and dried his body and put on dry  
clothes, is more reluctant to go out  
again than another who has been indoors  
all the time... and barricaded themselves in (P. 41-42)

Similarly, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* portrays the greed and moral decay of figures like Koomson, whose ostentatious display of wealth exacerbates the suffering of the

impoverished masses. Armah paints a grim picture of those trapped in poverty, describing them as “living dead” who have resigned themselves to despair. Koomson’s eventual regret highlights the emptiness and futility of power when misused. His lament about the burdens of being a minister underscores the incompetence and superficiality of political elites, whose failure to enact meaningful change only deepens societal inequities.

The excerpt in the following lines shows his regret as he says:

Some people thinks being a minister is  
all good time Hey, hey sometimes I wish  
I had been a business man instead. One  
day they brought a man to give the minister  
and the parliamentarians and the party  
activist a lecture. That was during the  
Winnebago days (P. 155-56)

Both Achebe and Armah critique the excesses of power and the ineptitude of the ruling class. They depict leaders as betraying their nationalist ideals, fostering corruption, and perpetuating social injustices. While these politicians initially manipulate their way into power, their reigns often end in disgrace and regret, reflecting the consequences of abusing authority in societies where literacy and intellectualism are undervalued. These novels thus serve as potent commentaries on the detrimental impact of power and its unchecked excesses.

## **Insecurity**

Insecurity is a multifaceted concept encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. It also extends to areas such as food and job insecurity, both of which pose significant threats to human existence. According to Nasiru Zubairu (2020:3), insecurity refers to a lack of safety, instability, or exposure to danger, as well as an absence of protection or a state of being unsafe. The consequences of insecurity often manifest as social unrest and political upheaval, particularly in societies where oppressive and unresponsive leadership exacerbates the grievances of the masses. Notably, one form of insecurity can lead to another, creating a cycle of instability.

Critics have extensively explored the impact of insecurity on human development and societal progress. Hartley et al. (1991:7) describe insecurity as “an external threat or a discrepancy between the level of security a person experiences and the level he or she might prefer.” Similarly, Sverke et al. (2022:243) define insecurity as “the subjectively experienced anticipation of a fundamental involuntary event,” while Rosenblatt and Ruvio (2002:587) characterize it as “an overall concern about future existence.” In essence, insecurity represents an external threat that destabilizes human conditions and is often intolerable. When security is absent, crises and political turmoil become inevitable outcomes.

People respond to insecurity in various ways—some resort to radical measures, while others adopt more subtle approaches. This divergence in reactions is where protest literature plays a critical role. Protest literature addresses themes of societal decay, as seen in the selected texts: Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). Both novels delve into the pervasive issues of corruption, insecurity, immorality, and broken promises that plague society. They critique the failures of leadership and highlight the disillusionment of the masses, whose expectations of political independence—better governance and improved living conditions—are met with neglect and abuse of power.

Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) vividly portrays the consequences of corruption and the inherent insecurity in Nigeria's socio-political landscape. The text critiques the Nigerian government system, exposing its flaws and resonating with the broader themes of power, corruption, and social inequality.

The themes of power and corruption resonate strongly in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966). The novel serves as a vivid reflection of the Nigerian system of government, where political, social, and economic standards are frequently abused by those in power. Achebe critiques the pervasive corruption and greed of political leaders who loot public funds and enrich themselves at the expense of the masses.

Throughout the novel, this abuse of power is glaringly evident. For instance, Chief Nanga, a central character, embodies corruption and the intoxication of power. He demands servile reverence before offering any assistance, as illustrated by the phrase, "...to lick big man's boot" (p. 17). This expression underscores his need for unquestioning loyalty and respect as a prerequisite for any help he renders.

Chief Nanga's impunity and intimidation are further emphasized by references to "guns and gunpowder," symbolizing his use of force to maintain dominance over his subjects. Additionally, the "Cadillac box" in the novel becomes a symbol of wealth and extravagance, highlighting his display of affluence. As Minister of Culture, Nanga exploits his position to amass wealth and manipulate situations to his advantage. For instance, he bribes Odili, the protagonist, to prevent him from contesting the same political position. He also bribes journalists to ensure his articles dominate the front page, showcasing his control over the media.

Nanga's endless corruption and immorality ultimately fuel animosity between him and Odili, who seeks to unseat him as a form of retaliation. However, the struggle for power leads to chaos and significant losses. Key characters like Chief Koko and Maxwell Kulamo die, while Odili fails to win the election. These events underscore the novel's depiction of insecurity, stemming from systemic injustice, corruption, immorality, and the neglect of the masses.

Achebe uses *A Man of the People* to critique a society plagued by corruption and greed, showing how the abuse of power erodes the foundations of governance and creates an atmosphere of insecurity.

Similarly, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) underscores the betrayal of societal trust by an elite class more concerned with personal gain than the welfare of the people. Both authors emphasize the cyclical nature of insecurity and its entrenchment in post-independence African societies, where the promises of freedom and prosperity are replaced with widespread disillusionment.

### Government

An exploration of the practice and challenges of the Nigerian democratic system of government, alongside those of other African countries, is crucial. This analysis enables an understanding of the role of literature in reflecting the socio-political realities of Nigeria and Africa at large, as literature serves as a mirror of the people's political and social experiences.

While Nigeria operates under a democratic government with elected leaders at various levels, the foundational principles of democracy remain inadequately established. Peter Ekeh (2014:3) refers to this phenomenon as "democratism," which he defines as "a brand of rule that employs false principles of democratic institutions." Similarly, Bernard Crick (2014:4) describes democracy as "the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs." These perspectives stem from the numerous setbacks democracy in Africa has faced since the 1990s.

In Nigeria, democracy is marred by issues such as ethnic bias, electoral fraud, wasteful leadership, and poverty, all of which revolve around a central theme—corruption. Corruption is a pervasive issue in governance, with politicians prioritizing personal comfort over societal welfare. Rather than investing in human and material resources, political leaders focus on self-interest, leaving the common man neglected.

This is the foundation of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, which critiques the manipulative tactics of the political elite as they ascend to powerful positions with empty promises. Achebe portrays the disregard for the masses, who are left to endure severe hardship. Through his narrative, he critiques bribery, corruption, and other societal vices, using various literary devices to underscore these issues.

One prominent device is **irony**, evident in the title itself. Chief Nanga, the novel's central figure, is ironically labeled "a man of the people" despite embodying selfishness and corruption. A more fitting title would be "an enemy of the people," reflecting his actions.

Achebe also employs **foreshadowing** early in the novel when the narrator remarks:

"Tell them that this man has used his position to enrich himself and they would ask—you as my father did—if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth" (p.2).

This passage highlights how Chief Nanga manipulates his position to enrich himself while deceiving the masses. He uses his influence to seduce Edna and attempts to bribe Odili to prevent him from running against him in a political contest, demonstrating how power and corruption intertwine.

Achebe's critique extends beyond political leaders to business figures, exemplified by Josiah's exploitation of Azoge. The old woman's remark, "Some people's belly is like the earth" (p.85), symbolizes insatiable greed, a recurring theme in the novel. Similarly, the theft of Azoge's walking stick reflects the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy.

Women in the novel are depicted as victims of societal and moral decay. Characters like Elsie and Agnes are portrayed as succumbing to poverty-driven promiscuity, highlighting another layer of societal dysfunction.

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* offers a similarly unflinching critique of corruption and power. The physical and moral decay of Koomson, a corrupt politician, during a military coup illustrates the ultimate downfall of unethical leaders. Armah vividly depicts this collapse:

"His mouth had the stench of rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the pollution of the air, already thick with flatulent fear..." (pp.191-192).

This imagery reinforces the inevitability of retributive justice for corrupt individuals. Armah uses symbolism extensively to portray societal corruption, with elements like the stinking bus fares representing the decayed economy and the bird "chichidodo" symbolizing hypocrisy.

The novel also critiques societal attitudes toward wealth and corruption. Koomson, despite his corrupt practices, is celebrated as "His Excellency" and "Brother Joe," while the protagonist, referred to as "the Man," is marginalized for his integrity. The Man's wife and mother-in-law, like the broader society, measure success by material wealth, further exposing the societal moral crisis. The description of the 'man' living like a stranger in his own home and the wife describing him as a very polite woman makes him feel like a criminal:

... For failing to do what everyone else  
does in order to get enough more for their  
Upkeep. ( P. 54)

Armah uses "eating and sharing" as recurring motifs to depict the exploitation of national resources and the complicity of citizens in corruption. The protagonist's refusal to partake in a corrupt deal draws criticism from his wife, who laments his refusal to "eat" with others when the opportunity arises (p.50).

In both Achebe's and Armah's works, the post-independence disillusionment of African societies is palpable. Through vivid imagery, symbolism, and irony, they critique the socio-political and economic failures of governance in Africa, underscoring the urgent need for reform and accountability. These narratives serve as powerful commentaries on the pervasive corruption that undermines the potential of African nations and their citizens.

## Corruption

Corruption refers to dishonest or fraudulent behavior by individuals in positions of power, often involving bribery. Transparency International (2023:1) defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for personal gain. It undermines trust, weakens democratic institutions, stifles economic progress, and worsens inequality, poverty, and societal crises. These issues form the thematic core of works by Ayi Kwei Armah and Chinua Achebe, who critique the socio-political decay plaguing African societies. Armah succinctly captures this malaise with the crude, semi-literate graffiti on a latrine wall in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*: "SOCIALISM-CHOP MAKE I CHOP CONTRY BROKE" (p. 124).

Both Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Soyinka's *The Interpreters* examine the physical and moral corruption tied to greed and overindulgence. In Armah's novel, the protagonist, the "Man," is disillusioned by the societal rot he observes. This is vividly portrayed in his encounter with Koomson, whose physical appearance symbolizes his moral decay:

"Koomson... looked obviously larger than the chair he was occupying. The man, when he shook hands, was amazed at the flabby softness of the hand. Ideological hand, the hands soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who have sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade" (p. 153-154).

Corruption permeates every aspect of life, and the pressure to conform to these societal norms nearly breaks the Man. He is mocked for his refusal to take bribes and ostracized even by his colleagues. The ultimate humiliation comes when a bus conductor spits at him. However, the tide turns when the military overthrows the corrupt government, and Koomson, once a celebrated politician, seeks refuge in the Man's impoverished home. His descent into disgrace is highlighted by Oyo's comment:

"He stinks... I am glad that you never become like him" (p. 165).

This stark reversal underscores the inevitable downfall of the corrupt. The protagonist's disdain for the misuse of public resources is evident when he describes corruption as a "national game" and dismisses the February 1966 military coup in Ghana as merely "a change of embezzlers" (p. 191).

Similarly, Chinua Achebe critiques corruption in *A Man of the People*, using satire and the character of Odili as a mouthpiece. Achebe explores the power struggles among the elites, where politics is reduced to "eating and sharing." This concept is exemplified by Chief Nanga, who justifies nepotism and greed under the guise of serving his people:



“Our people must press for their share of the national cake” (p. 13).

Both political parties in the novel—the People’s Organisation Party (POP) and the Progressive Allegiance Party (PAP)—mirror the “eating” culture, with names evoking indulgence in food. Achebe’s satirical tone peaks in Odili’s condemnation of the regime:

“For I do honestly believe that in the fat-dripping, gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime just ended—a regime which inspired the common saying that a man could only be sure of what he had put away safely in his gut... a regime in which you saw... asking to be paid” (p. 167).

The theme of “eating” extends beyond politicians to ordinary citizens, as seen in Nanga’s avaricious father-in-law, who exploits his prospective son-in-law, declaring:

“Leave me and my in-law. He will bring and bring, and I will eat until I am tired” (p. 103).

Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Achebe’s *A Man of the People* depict corruption as a moral and societal epidemic in African nations. Through their craft, these authors serve as social crusaders, condemning internal oppression and the betrayal of public trust, urging for a reawakening and accountability in leadership.

## Therapeutic

The term “therapeutic” is an adjective that pertains to the healing of diseases and the actions of remedial agents. According to the *Collins English Dictionary* (2023), it also refers to something that helps individuals relax or feel better, especially in situations that previously caused unhappiness.

In line with this definition, the literary texts examined in this research are therapeutic in nature. They help alleviate tension, inform readers about societal challenges, and prepare them to endure the pain and agony caused by societal ills. Ayi Kwei Armah, in his novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, employs coarse language deliberately to draw attention to the decadence and corruption in his society. His choice of words serves a therapeutic purpose: to expose, condemn, and confront societal absurdities in Africa. By highlighting issues like corruption, materialism, moral degeneration, and filth, Armah aims to provoke a desire for positive change.

Armah’s use of vulgar expressions reflects the decayed moral state of society. For instance, the narrator describes graffiti in a lavatory where someone has written the crude phrase, “VAGINA SWEET.” This degrading expression underscores the societal disregard for decency. Armah uses such language to confront readers with the harsh realities of moral degradation, urging them to resist oppression, corruption, and immorality.

Another example is the narrator’s description of a neglected railway banister, reflecting the lack of maintenance culture in the country:

“Apart from the wood itself, there were of course people themselves; just so many hands and fingers... left hand fingers in their careless journey from hasty anus... after-piss and stale sweat from part crotches” (p. 8-10).

This stark imagery highlights neglect and filth while serving a therapeutic purpose—to provoke awareness and inspire change. Armah seeks to educate readers on the consequences of societal decay, motivating them to adopt better attitudes toward public hygiene, respect for laws, and maintenance culture.

Similarly, Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966) demonstrates the therapeutic nature of literature. Through the character of Odili, Achebe critiques the luxurious lifestyles of corrupt politicians who remain oblivious to the struggles of ordinary citizens:

“The first thing critics tell you about our ministers’ official residence is that each has seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms, one for every day of the week. All I can say... I would be the most anxious to remain one forever... over and barricaded themselves” (p. 41-42).

This excerpt exposes the disconnection between the ruling class and the masses, offering readers insight into the systemic corruption that widens the gap between the elites and the poor. By confronting these realities, readers are prepared to face societal challenges with courage and a desire for reform.

In both novels, the use of satirical elements and, at times, vulgar language serves a dual purpose: to provoke thought and to provide therapeutic relief. These literary tools act as a means of addressing societal seizures caused by disorder, offering a roadmap for healing and positive transformation.

In conclusion, literature, as exemplified by Armah and Achebe, plays a critical role in addressing societal ills. By confronting harsh realities, these works serve as therapeutic agents, fostering awareness, resilience, and a call for change.

## Conclusion

The interplay of power and corruption has become a significant challenge on the African continent, driven largely by the attitudes of both leaders and citizens toward socio-political and economic development. At the core of this issue lies poverty, which often serves as the foundation for corruption and the relentless pursuit of power. Consequently, individuals who ascend to positions of authority often cling to their status and exploit every available resource to solidify their influence and achieve societal prominence. Poverty is an endemic disease that crippled institutions, limits economic opportunities and foster environment where unethical practices become common place. It is therefore important to address poverty not only for improving living conditions but also for strengthening democratic governance and reducing corruption in post colonial Africa.

Chinua Achebe, in *A Man of the People* (1966), and Ayi Kwei Armah, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), critically explore the conduct of individuals who rise from humble beginnings to positions of power, only to indulge in corrupt practices and wealth accumulation to the detriment of the masses. These narratives reflect the realities of many African societies, particularly in the post-independence era, where the general population faces deprivation, immorality, poverty, abuse of power, and social decay.

However, these societal ills can be addressed and mitigated through literature. By engaging with literary texts that capture these experiences and offer insights into managing societal challenges, readers are equipped with tools to confront and process their emotions. The themes and literary devices employed in these works serve a therapeutic purpose, fostering critical reflection, emotional resilience, and a deeper understanding of societal dynamics.

Literature, as a discipline, not only reflects the ills of society but also serves as a healing force, providing guidance and hope amidst social maladies. It remains a vital tool for informing, educating, and inspiring change in society. Literature through story telling illuminates the effects of the social vices by creating awareness and prompting critical discussion on the need to confront uncomfortable truth about corruption and social injustice. In this way the society will be a better place where love, empathy and understanding individuals and the entire society is sustained.

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