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Fiction and National Consciousness in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Teachers on Strike*

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Abstract
This research work focused on fiction and national consciousness in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's*Teachers on Strike. Teachers on Strike* by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh provides the anchor for the evaluation of societal malaise in the novel. Much of the critical study of Post-Independence Nigerian Literature is mainly on disillusionment. It is the emergent literary tradition highlighting the interface of literature and resistance in Nigerian novels that this study focuses on, it attempts to advocate resistance as means of effecting change in society. The study employs the content analysis approach to qualitative research. The theoretical framework is Marxism and sociological approach to literature. These theories advocate literature as weapon against negative forces militating against the people as well as proffering ways in which the society can be redeemed from man-made atrocities. This study ultimately broadens literary scholarship on resistance discourse in Nigerian novels.

Keywords: Post-independence, Nigerian, Literature, Resistance, Novels.

Introduction

Nigerian literature emerged from gory tales of slavery and colonialism. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's*Teachers on Strike* (2005) focuses on man-made atrocities of contemporary Nigerian society. It is important that the African get deeply rooted to social circumstances of the society. Charles E. Nnolim (1992:16) noted that: "African literature cannot be properly understood and appreciated as an isolated expression but must rather be viewed as part of the totality of human experience".

Literature is not in isolation of the society. Rather, it reflects the society and any attempt to remove literature from society will result to futility. This is because the focus of literature is geared towards addressing issues confronting society. Nigerian literature is therefore a reflection of the Nigerian society.

Through literature, society expresses thoughts and ideas. On this basis, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Teachers on Strike* embodies the author's identification with the condition of the working class. As stated earlier, the sociological approach to literature sees literature as an avenue for the emancipation of the oppressed. To this approach to literature, the writers should be in the vanguard of clamoring for change in society. One of such writers who are sociologically oriented in their literary endeavour is Ngozi Chuma-Udeh whose novel *Teachers on Strike* is acclaimed as a great work of literature.

Teachers on Strike is a scathing criticism of poor leadership prevalent in Africa. "Why so they be so cruel? So insensitive, so morbidly wicked to the plight of the citizenry at large? (99).

African novelists and literary critics believe the creative writer must question the society and its antecedents. The writer must propose positive changes in the society. Chinua Achebe (1975: 45) summation is timely, "the African writer cannot be expected to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in right".

Teachers on Strike is a direct attack against dictatorial tendencies of the rulers in the society as seen in the person of "HIS EXCELLENCY" who typifies the rottenness of the rulers in Africa who are selfish, deaf, dumb, blind to the suffering of the citizenry thus exposing negative nature of rulers who assume leadership positions immediately after the exit of the colonialists.

Teachers on Strike links out the insensitivities of the rulers against the ruled, the ostentatious lifestyle of the rulers amidst the prevailing worsening conditions of the people. The novel shows the real issues afflicting the people. Issues of poverty, corruption, environmental degradation, exploitation and exploration thereby resulting to instability of the society. The people in their bid to survive go into societal vices. AminuSegun and AdetoroAbiodun (2016:29) listed the societal vices to include:

> …. robbery as we see the young male students who are dropouts going into robbery so as to survive; young girls taking to prostitution at tender ages owing to the fact that they are idle, their parents who are teachers have nothing to afford even a single meal for them, cloth them or even take them to the hospitals for good medical check-up.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh recreates the terrible Nigerian experience, she offers insightful appraisals into Nigerians' predicament for a long time. The novelist is of the view that the writer, like the ordinary people, has always had to stand between two choices: either to be on the side of the establishment – the elected self-imposed rulers or to be with the people. Emmanuel Obiechina (1990: 67) denote the corrupt nature of the rulers and what writers especially in Africa should do in recreating society:

> The writer satirizes the corrupt method used by many people to amass wealth. It is a doleful tale of

> embezzlement of public funds, appropriation of public facilities to private use, and the use of bribery and corruption for personal enrichment. A corrupt society is full of thieves, big and small, professional and amateur.

With the character of His Excellency, the governor of the Province, the writer stimulate the mindset of the people by exposing corruption, poverty, dishonesty, betrayal perpetuated against the people by the rulers. The teachers are shown as second class citizens who are debased. Similarly, NgoziChuma-Udeh condemns in fierce terms the abject squalor and misery of the people. The teachers terrible situation is as a result of non-payment of their salaries leading to closure of schools for almost a year. The narrator vividly captures the situation:

> There are no more schools to go to. No more students to teach. The schools are closed. The teachers are on strike. This month marked the eight month of inactivity. The teachers had embarked on a work-to-rule 'sit down' strike for three months, 'begging' for the payment of their monthly salaries (2).

Despite the suffocating condition of the teachers, their ability to resist their subjugation is highly commendable, it is the triumph of the people against evil which is a feature of Marxism.
NgoziChuma-Udeh is a Marxist adherent. She imbues her characters with Marxist praxis and concretely demonstrates how Marxism works. She taught her characters to be revolutionary in thought and action. Hence we have seen his characters revolting against existing bad status quo despite challenges confronting them:

> The aroma of delicious food hit the noses of the teachers like a thunderbolt. These men were hungry, they were hungry …. They craved earnestly for the

> food then they abhorred the food too just like a man turning away from a beautiful naked damsel infected with the HIV virus …. In one accord, they refused the food. They rejected His Excellency's very kind gesture with impunity. (112-113).

Yes the teachers are hungry but hunger never becloud their sense of reasoning.

By bringing to the fore, and at the same condemning the social ills in the society, NgoziChuma-Udeh deserves and qualifies to be classed as a satirist. Apart from attacking societal ills, she also proffers solutions out of such quagmire rocking the society.

It will not be wrong to state that as a novelist, NgoziChuma-Udeh is an accomplished writer for choosing relevant themes and treating them with innovative literary skills, NgoziChuma-Udeh's effort deserves to be rated "beta plus", to use the words of Eustace Palmer (1978: 56-58).

There is no doubt that *Teachers on Strike*dramatizes "the stark contrast between the rich and the corrupt, and the poor and the wretched in a modern African State". To quote Hans M. Zell (1983: 155).

Teachers on Strike illustrates with the contrast that characterizes the abjection of the major characters (the teachers) and the affluence in which His Excellency swims. While the teachers agree that bad rulers commit violence against the people, the people must reject their subjugation by revolting against every shades of dehumanization against them.

The meaning here is that society is always two-sided: there are the haves and the have-nots; the socially elevated and the downtrodden; the morally upright and the deviants. It is therefore, the reader's duty to know the side to which he or she belongs. TejumolaOlaniyan (1988:303) believes that "one unifying element of art in a class-striated society is that they manifest alienation".

Nigeria is definitely a "class-striated society". To desalinate the people who are alienated in our society, resistance to oppressive tendencies is seen as an effective means. For TejumolaOlaniyan (1988: 306), desalination in African literary works should imbibe. "First are the lessons which the novels teach us: that our society is alienation – ridden, is pillaged by avarice and runs on unbridled rapine, it warps the ethical code of man and undermines his moral development". While tracing the trends in the African novel, Jude Agho (1995:5) has posited that committed African writers brought in another phase to the African novel:

> The novels of these writers portray the excess of the new black rulers of Africa, those who took up the reins of power at the exit of the colonialist, corruption in high places, social ills such as prostitution, bribery and the exploitation of the masses of the people by a selected few.

Teachers on Strike unfolds the main character, Nebe the chairman of Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) ruminating about the events leading to the strike. The peaceful atmosphere of society is disrupted by the dictatorial bad governance of His Excellency. Nebe like the other teachers love their teaching profession with passion but their passion for teaching is dispelled by atrocities of the governor:

> Let us make a representation to the stakeholders of the society. The church, the traditional rulers and the Parent/Teacher Association should be officially brought in to intervene on this absolute madness of the power in power. We would give them time to act before embarking on a kind of rear guard action as a last resort towards making His Excellency and his obscurant government recant their out-of-touch-with-reality attitude. (31-32).

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Teachers on Strike* is against the African elite that assume leadership positions in Africa after the exit of the colonial rulers. Instead of soothing the pain of the people who suffered centuries of slavery and colonialism, they seek their own empowerment through massive corruption and greed, they destroy the dreams of prosperous Africa for the people. This is what Udoka Odor (2003:8) sees as: "The tragedy of the African people after years of slavery and colonialism.

The journey from colonialism to independence does not seem to provide freedom to the people who face another form of imperialism through oppressive rulers. In fact, the rulers become terrorists who terrorise and oppress the people. NgoziChuma-Udeh denounced the tragedy of the Nigerian state:

> That was another victim of the absolute insensitivity of the people in power,
> Another demonstration of the plight of the unpaid teachers.
> This man had watched his pregnant wife die of improper care….
> I had no money to cater for my pregnant wife when the salary stopped coming. I watched my wife die of hunger. My pregnant wife starved to death.
> How can a Government be so callous and insensitive to the plight of the people they govern?
> The three teachers wept. (66-67).

Living in such turbulent period deeply affects the teachers lives as they witness, experience what is happening in their country. The teachers try to manage this difficult condition as best as they can in order to survive. However, the desperate situation causes much anger, frustration, despair and hopelessness. Ukweze reflects:

> Hunger is the dividends of democracy for us. We are on strike today, not because of demands for a higher pay or

> for an increase in our remunerations. We are on strike today, not because of our four-year leave allowance arrears, long overdue promotions, or even for other benefits which are all a mirage.
> Comrades, fellow teachers, fellow workers in the Lord's vine yard, we are on strike to beg for the payment of our monthly salaries. (28).

This novel is a pessimistic reflection of what Nigeria has become after years of yearning for independence from British rule. The novel presents a recurring image of irresponsible rulers destabilizing the country. According to Modupe Osoba (2021:17): "This chaotic and desperate situation causes a social deprivation that affects the lives of many innocent people". This is seen in the novel:

> The politicians have converted the girls to mistresses and the boys to political thugs. Our children, the future of our nation are turning into diehard robbers. Posterity is being murdered in our time. Ethics has been thrown away through the windows. We are witnessing the worst *Kakistocracy* ever recorded in the injustice. It is man's inhumanity to man-no..man's inhumanity to nature, to posterity. (29).

Teachers on Strike is a biting satire which lashes vehemently at the callous barbaric acts and evil of man to his fellow man. This novel is a tragic evaluation of the Nigerian state depicting the degrading and subjugation of the people as a result of institutionalised poor governance. The province governor is shown as tormenting the teachers, he converts public money to his personal use without recourse to payment of the teachers owed many months of salary arrears. This is typically dictatorship and wickedness in high places. Note Nebe's musing: "Nine months of zero income, nine good months of non payment of teacher's salaries had surely taken its toll on him and his colleagues…. All around him people were

starving, suffering, dying. His contemporaries had all turned into walking deads" (sic). (95 – 96).

As a feminist, the novelist portray instance of sexual humiliation suffered by Philo. Philo harassed by her landlord because of her inability to pay her house rent. The landlord ejection of Philo from his house reflect societal decadence:

> Philo's landlord picked an amorous interest in her and began to pester her with nauseating, lustful overtures …. The landlord had been so desperate as to offer her the accommodation for free if she could yield to his advances….
> The landlord had felt slighted at Philo's blunt refusal to have an illicit affair with him ….
> It was a heart rending sight, Philo was standing on the road, her hair all over the place like a newly demented woman. All around her were her belongings thrown out on the street. (48, 49 and 50).

The portrayal of the open-mindedness of the characters is worthy of note, the author reveal the degree of tolerance and their friendship works to unite them amidst the terrifying condition. Nebe's invitation to Philo for her to reside in his house after her disastrous experience with her landlord is testimony to the fact that people must unite to defeat their enemies. This decision saves Philo from more harm. This silent decision gives a solid foundation to their friendship and even reinforces their relationship. Philo feels completely at home. Rita (Nebe's wife) and Philo experience demonstrates their commitment to female bonding and solidarity. The novel reveals how the women join their efforts to and extends to his female solidarity:

> By far, the most important thing she did for Rita was helping with her shopping. She could dash to the

> market on the spur of a moment to purchase sewing materials for some urgent work…. Philo became a most dependable companion. She too was fast becoming an expert seamstress.
> She blended so perfectly into the family and shared also the joy of mothering Nebe's children. (61).

The difference between Philo and Rita lies in their social status; however, NgoziChuma-Udeh proves that this difference do not always generate conflict or constitute handicap to developing relationship. Through the friendship of the oppressed people in this novel, NgoziChuma-Udeh's novel highlights that the essence of a relationship does not reside in the social status of people involved, but on their degree of commitment and how they care for one another. This novel calls for more understanding and unity between the oppressed people in order to defeat their enemies and stop their subjugation. By showing the friendship between the oppressed people in the novel as an example of solidarity and encouragement for others to follow this example in order to save their humanity from man-made catastrophe.

The terrible consequences of the Province Governor's atrocities against the teachers do not need to be repeated. NgoziChuma-Udeh's novel contrasts the solidarity of the teachers who unite against the oppressors to the oppressors who lack any form of humanity. This novel prod Nigerians to unite and focus more on resisting against oppressive tendencies of the rulers. To the writer, the abiding friendship of the oppressed characters is a factor of unity that tend to dismantle their oppressors. For instance, the teachers became conscious of their sorry predicament thereby ganging up to stop the oppression. AyodeleOjuola (2020: 16) is right to allude that "*Teachers on Strike* is a novel of worldwide solidarity to end unjust rulers in the polity".

Melvinia Odinaka Onyegbu (2020:7) alludes that NgoziChuma-Udeh's *Teachers on Strike* expose a former governor of Anambra State's irresponsible rulership. According to her, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh deserves accolades for writing a novel of social realism:

> She used her prowess as a writer to explore and expose the corrupt and malignant activities of the Nigerian political leader Chinwoke Mbadinuju when he was the governor of Anambra State (1999-2003) and his refusal to pay workers for nine months, which led to the long strike that lasted from December 2001 till October 2002.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in an interview with Henry Akubuiro of Saturday Sun Newspaper dated October 5, 2019, states as follows:

> I was in secondary school then, and teachers were on strike. I witnessed, firsthand, the hardship that followed (during the time of Jim Nwobodo as the Anambra State Governor). But I am not saying *Teachers on Strike*, my first book, was about Nwobodo. It is a work of fiction. My mother was at the forefront of events – she was among the primary and secondary teachers at loggerheads with the government. Things were hard. I had to come back from school, for the hardship couldn't sustain me. Again, there was a debilitating teachers' strike when I was a secondary school teacher. The two strikes teamed up to form my plot in *Teachers on Strike.* I believe it x-rays the ills in the society.

Whether the novel is about Chinwoke Mbadinuju or Jim Nwobodo, the writer has developed survival strategies that helped the oppressed characters in the novel to cope with their difficult situation and refuses to compromise amidst oppressive tendencies of the governor. The teachers express themselves and show some authority to counter the evil machination of the governor. They

succeeded in ending his callous regime. Deprived of their salaries, the teachers provide themselves with armour of resistance. Their confidence collapsed the evil regime and created solidarity of the oppressed, the teachers' realisation of the frailty of the government is an acclamation to the power of the people who stand up for their human rights:

> Yes …. The wind of change …. A change for good. He became more reassured of the oncoming change when he noticed that street urchins, …. No…. school children turned urchins had began to draw grotesque figures on the posters of His Excellency posted on every corner of the street. That's the society reacting! (124).

Ozoh, Okpala and Ihueze (2020:183-184) maintain that the key problem in this novel as well as in the Nigerian society is the government: "The heartless act of the governor made the teachers to be united the more and they unanimously stand their ground …. Teachers are owned for eight months, yet the governor remains adamant and unperturbed".

The major problem is that high percentage of those who assume rulership positions in Nigeria, and Africa are psychologically, mentally and socially sick. This is so because it is only a demented person who loots the commonwealth of the people and puts the looted commonwealth in foreign bank account. Corruption has been institutionalised in Nigeria. Nigeria provides the back drop for the social decadence and psychosocial disorder in *Teachers on Strike.*

Although the literature of post-independence Nigeria and Africa is dotted by disillusionment of the people, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is firm that society and the people can be redeemed from societal malaise if the people are ready to resist and reject their sorry predicament. To this end, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's*Teachers on Strike*

is a novel of resistance showing us the corrupt leadership in Africa and the triumph of the people against their subjugation. Note the assertion of Philo: "I pity your condition, Your excellency. You are not fit to govern a herd of swine and to think that you are seeking to be reelected for another tenure. God forbid". (119). According to the newscaster, the end of the regime of the governor is the triumph of the will of the people:

> His Excellency, the Provincial Governor of Umma Province and His Deputy have been impeached by the House of Assembly for gross mismanagement of public funds, corrupt practices and unethical behaviours.
> The process of impeachment which started months back was concealed from the public for obvious reasons.
> Yesterday, the Assembly men voted unanimously for the removal of these men who failed in carrying out the mandate of the people.
> The Province Governor has also been disqualified from contesting in the forth coming elections ….
> The money stacked up for His Excellency's campaigns was impounded and used to clear off all the arrears of the teachers' salaries (128, 129 and 130).

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