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# Negotiating Identity and Resisting Political Otherness in Selected Nigerian Novels

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**Abstract**
The time following Nigeria's independence has been marked by the appearance of a new Otherness, one whose oppressive institutions are now internal rather than foreign. Prominent among these oppressive post-independence binary systems is the leaders-led/majority-minority dichotomy manifest in political arenas, which is symptomatic of the us/them reality contrived in colonial times. The ideology of identity discourse in Nigeria, and by extension, Africa, is shifting away from the debunking of the racist myths that Western colonialists imposed on Africans to internal crises and differences that are manifesting in the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres, destroying the post-independence dream of a better life for all. This paper uses subalternism, a branch of postcolonial theory, to highlight the new hegemony and imbalances. Two novels by Nigerian authors from different eras, *A Man of the People* (1966) by Chinua Achebe, and *Tenants of the House* (2009) by Wale Okediran, are chosen for analyses. The socio-political and leadership factors, and mechanism of discrimination and domination that have hampered growth in the postcolony, are dismantled in these works through the instrumentality of the active Other. By constructing the active Other to address the unhealthy conditions of inequality, marginalization, contradictions, and stigmatization within the socio-political domain, the authors uphold the utmost goal of literature in advancing the course of humanity to establish a more inclusive society.

**Key words:** Nigerian writers, Okediran, Achebe, political Otherness, subalternism

## Introduction

The time following Nigeria's independence has been marked by the appearance of a new Otherness, one whose oppressive institutions are now internal rather than foreign. The Other as an ideology stands for different things to people in different situations and settings. Within the humanities and the context of this study, it is used to show how people view others that are dissimilar and separated. According to Jean-Francois Staszak, the Other is a member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group (1). Bill Ashcroft et al. observe that "the existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world" (154). The

Other typically appears in a binary opposition with self and is essential in determining the identity of the subject.

Extending this notion, the Other, therefore, becomes the out-group— "them"—who are different from the in-group— "us." Hence, the Other, within the ambits of this study, is taken as the inferiorised, discriminated, excluded, deprived, dominated, marginalized, devalued and powerless in postcolonial Nigeria. One of these post-independence binary systems is the leaders-led/majority-minority dichotomy inside political arenas, or what is more accurately called political Otherness.

Political Otherness occurs when political authority is used to achieve and satisfy selfish interest, and relegate the masses or vulnerable minority groups to a position of insignificance. This disequilibrium between the leaders and the led has left the nation crawling and in a precarious state symptomatic of the binary pair "us/them" prevalent during colonial times. Mahmood Mamdani summarises this binary pair in post-independent African politics and leadership when he observes on genocide in Rwanda thus: "the political world set in motion by the modern state and modern colonialism generates subaltern identities endlessly, in binary pairs. For every sergeant, there is a subaltern, for every cat a rat, and for every settler a native… To change the world, we need to break out the worldview of not only the cat, but also the rat, not only the settler but also the native. Unless we can break out of the worldview of the rat, postcolonialism will remain a purgatory punctuated by non-revolutionary violence" (8).

Thus, literature which plays a practical and crucial role in ordering men's dreams about an ideal world becomes a veritable platform for the understanding and interpretation of the complexities in national integration, unequal relations of power and representation and growth, especially in analyzing human behaviours in relation to response to the challenges of existence. This paper therefore focuses on the Otherhood of the masses, ethnic groups, and non-aligning members of the political class, exploring how they counteract inequities through individual and collective actions within the political and leadership contexts. The new hegemony can be interrogated under a strand of binary engagement known as subalternism.

**Theoretical Background**

Subalternism is a branch of postcolonial theory. According to El Habib Louai, it is the "latest subdivisions of post-colonial theory and was launched in the 1980s by a group of eminent Indian scholars" (4). Thameemul Ansari posits that "the term subaltern, has been adapted to postcolonial studies because despite the great diversity of subaltern groups, the one constant feature is resistance and subversion of elite domination" (216). Gayatri Spivak, on her part, explains the point of convergence between post-colonial and subaltern studies when she observes that "the thrust of post-colonial and subaltern studies is to highlight aspects of agency among the subordinated or colonized in conditions of subalternity or coloniality" (379). Ranajit Guha, co-founder of the Subaltern Studies Group, makes the concept very clear when he observes that the subaltern is "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office or any other way" (Preface 35). It is in this regard that Rosalind O' Hanlon submits that "subaltern study was conceived as an analytical lens to facilitate a recovered historiography of the presence, voice, and experience of subaltern groups that had been hidden by the dominance of elite historical narrative" (164). It therefore implies that within the notion of subalternism is projected binary vision with dual and opposing discursive practices. Hend Hamed Ezzeldin amplifies this argument when he claims that "the term subaltern denotes alterity, difference, inferiority and subordination" (104). Towing Ezzeldin's line of thought, A. N. Akwanya states that postcolonialism is fundamentally interested in minority, that is, subaltern rights, within the world community (74).

The subaltern ideology highlights the notion of difference and alterity in literary discourse. Theresa Mclary Jeffreys shares this line of thought when she observes that "the subaltern designation has a long history including definition applied to peasants, vassals, lower military rank and class struggle" (11). Today, its scope of coverage has been widened to cater for all forms of classism, imbalances, injustices and differentiation. For Winslow and Winslow, "it is a discursive process of separating "We" from "Other" as a means of constructing hierarchies" (1). In effect, the term subaltern has come to be associated with those individuals or groups that are subjugated by hegemony, subordinated by the dominant world-view, and excluded and alienated from having any meaningful position from which to speak. It also denotes the colonised or the lower classes of people who are at the fringes of society (Moreton 8). This is why Sumit Sakar observes that the subaltern encompasses "women, children, colonial subjects, the poor, the illiterate, the proletariat or the religious/ethnic minority [who are systematically silenced]" (55). Knowing full well that the major stance of postcolonialism is to give the minority a voice, it therefore becomes an avenue for the subaltern to speak, and in most cases, the dominant language of rebellion and violence, or toleration and collaboration are appropriated so that marginal voice can be heard. Franz Fanon, having experienced what it means to be voiceless, observes that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (17). This is why Madina Tlostanovia observes that "postcolonial theory in the last two decades has become an established and integral element of thinking on otherness, ethnicity, race, and gender, as well as queer and ecological projects both in the west and in the non-west" (130). This idea is clearly projected in the words of Benedict Binebai when he observes that, "the subaltern post-colonial theory responds to the question of subjugation and silencing of the oppressed and marginalized people in post-colonial societies. [It] is principally designed to examine the voice of the subaltern subject" (206). As Edward Said, a pioneer voice in postcolonialism, emphatically said, "indeed, the subaltern can speak, as the history of liberation movement in the twentieth century eloquently attests" (*Orientalism* 335).

From the aforesaid, it is clear that Sudhansu Kumar Dash is justified in claiming that postcolonialism establishes intellectual space for the subaltern peoples to speak for themselves, in their own voice, and so produce cultural discourses, of philosophy and language, of society and economy, which balance the imbalanced us/them binary power-relationship of the colonist and the colonial subjects (50).

## Negotiating Identity and Resisting Political Domination in *A Man of the People* and *Tenants of the House*

Domination within the political sphere is a case of one group claiming superiority or lording over others, whether overtly or subtly. Foucault Michel succinctly captures this when he asserts:

> When an individual or social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement – by means which can be economic as well as political or military – we are facing what can be called a state of domination. (3)

The above form of relations occurs among two groups of people, which can be divided into two opposite terms: dominator or superior (ruling class) and dominated or inferior (masses/non-aligning members of the political class). Before Nigeria attained independence in 1960, many were thinking that immediately the British left the seat of power, the road to an egalitarian society would open. However, at independence the petty bourgeoisie, now in a position of political authority, were fighting to seize and remain perpetually in power in order to rule and dominate the citizenry. This is recognised in Nuruddin Farah's view of the Nigerian politician

when he observes that "the African politician is a blind man: he moves only in one direction -- towards himself" (11). In this case, the concern about self and the oppression of the masses by a political class engenders a binary relationship.

Two of the numerous novelists that have underscored the domination of the masses within the political space are Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People,* and Wale Okediran in *Tenants of the House*.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe presents a picture of the self-conscious and domineering inclination of the political class to perpetually remain in power. He uses Hon. M.P Nanga to typify this ugly reality. Hon. M.P Nanga is the Minister of Culture in a fictional state symptomatic of Nigeria. The politicians indulge in sheer luxury and misuse of public funds to the detriment of the masses who voted them into power. Nanga's style of leadership is such that it undermines the masses. This notion about Nanga is succinctly captured by Mavis Macheka when he posits that Achebe's text ironically presents "a man of the people who detaches himself from the society and seeks to meet individual interests. The leaders had wielded power and had been misusing it by pursuing personal interests" (15).

Another instance in the narrative that shows the domination of the masses is seen when Hon. Nanga pays a visit to another Minister, Chief Koko, in the government enclave. Here, we are exposed to the self-conscious and domineering attitude of the political elites over their subordinates. The attention of the Ministers is on consumables produced outside the country, in spite of the fact that government has initiated a policy to promote homemade products and consumables. Chief Koko, a key member of the political class, still imports Nescafe, a foreign beverage. When his chef presents him with a homemade coffee, after the first sip, he discovers that the taste is not like the taste he is used to. He assumes that the chef has connived with his enemy to poison him. Immediately he summons him for quizzing. The chef, in reply to Chief Koko, avers that they have run short of foreign beverage, hence, he has to improvise with the home grown. The Minister, on hearing that from the chef, almost snuffs life out of him (31-33). Koko's preference for foreign or imported coffee and inability to recognize the taste of homemade coffee creates a tiny but telling line of division between the ruling elites and the masses. While the masses are compelled to obey the laws and policies of government, the political class is exempted from some and never brought to book for violating such laws. It also showcases their penchant for flamboyant living at the detriment of the masses.

The flamboyant lifestyle of the political class further exposes their domineering tendencies in another scene. Odili opens our eyes to this reality through his fraternization and association with Nanga, his former school teacher and a serving minister. He tells us that each minister has a residence of seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms. Nanga even owns, in addition, three blocks of seven storey luxury flats which he has built at three thousand pounds, each in his wife's name at Bori, the capital. Odili considers the flamboyant life of the political class one of the reasons they fight to dominate the masses (37). Abiodun Adeniyi presents a germane argument in this line when he observes that "Chief Nanga represents the failure of the political class from inception till now. Chief Nanga and his cohorts loot the nation with reckless abandonment and would not baulk at intimidation and murder of political opponents to retain their office" (129). Nanga therefore becomes a metaphor of the new crop of leaders who assume the seats of power exited by the colonial masters, and who stop at nothing to use the new status as a potent weapon in dominating and silencing any form of opposition. This is in tandem with Chabal's and Daloz's position on the post-independent political class. According to them, the new political class, instead of focusing on nation-building after the general struggle for independence, chose to concern themselves with selfish interests, seeking political office for the mere purpose of amassing absolute power and wealth. Hon. Nanga's craving to perpetually stay in power and dominate the people is amplified in his advice to Odili Samalu

who is strategizing on getting involved in politics in a bid to dethrone the wicked government onboard. He puts it this way:

> I have done my best and, God so good, your father is my living witness. Take your money and take your scholarship to go and learn more books; the country needs expert like you. And leave the game of politics to us who know how to play it. (119)

Nanga sees himself as the only person qualified to pilot the affairs of the state.

The unfortunate state in which the people have found themselves, and the unbridled craving of the ruling class to amass wealth and stick to power, engenders a revolutionary inclination to upend the existing power structure. Despite all the strategies adopted by the new Self – represented in Nanga – to inferiorise the people (Other) and perpetually stay in power, the people revolt. Achebe introduces revolutionary aesthetics through the masses, represented in Odili and his friend, Max. Both of them decide to rebel against the system, and even front a political party in order to reposition and re-humanize their society. The characters in the novel do not just fold their arms and wait for redemptive transformation. Rather they commit themselves to repositioning their society. They opt for chances at different points in time through strategic planning to initiate a change in the scheme of things. However, it is through Odili, that a clear (re)presentation of the people's attempts to stop their political otherhood and enthrone a more equitable employment of political power is presented. Despite the pressure, molestation and intimidation he is faced with upon declaring his intention to contest against Nanga, he remains resolute in his quest to unseat the clique of oppressors. Even though Odili knows that he has little opportunity of winning Chief Nanga's seat, it is imperative according to him, "to fight and expose Nanga as much as possible so that even if he won, the Prime Minister would find it impossible to re-appoint him to his cabinet" (117). Hence, he becomes more committed to the breaking free of himself and his people from self-seeking manipulation. Unlike Max, Odili does not die. Despite their horrible and tragic experiences, their revolutionary actions pay off by preparing the ground for the overthrow of the anti-people and self-conscious government, thereby restoring the people's hope of a better society. The overthrow in the novel, in the words of Sachdeva Ekta, "serves as a symbol of abolition of false regimes constituted by politicians like Chief Nanga and a hope and a path for better future" (397).

Wale Okediran's *Tenants of the House* interrogates the domination of the masses in the period after military rule in post-independent Nigeria. Okediran, the novelist, was in Nigeria's Federal House of Representatives between 2003-2007. In this sense, the novel becomes a fictional insider account of negative socio-political realities and parliamentary abnormalities that reduced the House of Representative to a theatre of scandal and almost rendered it impotent. The experience-centred narrative approach of Okediran shows the importance of the artist's personal experiences and realities in the fabrication of his or her art. His mode of telling and reconstituting the factual event, which shapes the narrative, through evocative use of language, character and organic plot structure, reinforces his creative ingenuity and removes the text from the fold of outright autobiography.

One form of domination that portrays Otherness in the text is the ideology of godfatherism in present day Nigerian politics. The Other, in this unusual binary pair, consists of the junior politicians – the protégés who have no political godfathers. Through the demeaning experiences of characters in the narrative, most especially the well-meaning young politician Samuel Bakura, Okediran reveals the polarity of "us" and "them" between power brokers and the legislators they deem subordinate. The power brokers see themselves as very important and

the protégés as less important in the affairs of state and governance. They decide the tide of things and leave the protégés choiceless, voiceless and subservient to their benefactors, thereby robbing them of their rights and reducing or eradicating their accountability to the masses. In doing this, they craftily choose candidates for elections and manipulate them and the system for their parochial interest. This is why Senator Jim observes that "[power brokers are] self-seeking individuals out there to use the government for [their] own purpose" (8). Okediran uses Samuel Bakura to showcase the domineering attitude of the power brokers which the novelist, in the voice of Bakura, describes as dirt that relegates political apprentices to the position of the Other. He tells it thus: "But I found that most of the dirt in the dirty game was about money, not merit. Also, the godfathers ignored merit; they were in it for the money" (4). It is this ugly reality and the craving of godfathers to dominate the political space that leads to the emergence of the thug-like Hon. Lamadi Kasali in parliament. Hon. Kasali's ticket to the Parliamentary house is orchestrated by his Ibadan godfather, who has suppressed all credible candidates. This inequality makes it easy to differentiate between the position of godfathers and godsons in post-independence politics. The narrator bemoans the action thus:

> Meanwhile, Linus Wenike was in tete-a-tete with Hon. Lamidi Kasali, the tough godson of a tough godfather from Oyo State. Kasali, a tall hefty fellow whose one qualification for his parliament seat was his unalloyed loyalty to his crusty godfather, was a former chairman of the drivers' and conductors' union. A real roughneck, Kasali was a veteran of bare-knuckle fights in the streets of Ibadan. (20)

Okediran uses the incident of Hon. Kasali and his Ibadan godfather to show the domineering and superior inclination of "power brokers" in postcolonial Nigeria, which leaves politicians without benefactors in a position of Otherness. Another instance of godfatherism in the text is manifested in the intervention of the Kaduna State Governor, Alhaji Salisu Mohammed, who is equally the Governor of Samuel Bakura and is trying to persuade Bakura to support the bill for tenure elongation for President Oneya. In Nigeria politics, higher persons by rank of office and godfather(s) are seen as superior individuals. This is the case here. While Alhaji Salisu is of the same political party with the President, the reverse is the case with Hon. Samuel Bakura. Alhaji Salisu's being of the same political party with the President brings him under his dictates. Hence, he carries out the President's order to the letter. In the same vein, Alhaji Salisu, being the Governor of Bakura's state, expects Bakura to support the tenure elongation bill whether it is against his belief or popular opinion because he is one of the "power brokers" (Self) in deciding who gets what at the state level. He puts it thus:

> …I also know your position on this tenure prolongation Bill. It is not as if some of us like the Bill…you know, in politics, self-preservation is the first rule, so we need to safeguard our jobs first. It is after that you can help others. Once you lose your position, survival becomes difficult in this country. (245)

The above excerpt shows that the godfathers have the power to influence the polity and decide who gets what within the political domain. In spite of the reality painted before him by the governor of his state, Hon. Bakura remains undaunted in his quest to frustrate the unwholesome bill.

Again, another form of domination projected in the narrative which relegates the masses to the position of the Other is the sit-tight attitude of most of the political class. In the novel, President Oneya seeks for tenure elongation. His reasons for sticking to power are that

without him, the democracy will fail and things will fall apart (138). Thus he sees himself as the only qualified person to pilot the affairs of the fictional state. In connection with his bid for tenure elongation, President Oneya decides to mount pressure on his perceived enemies, those fighting the tenure elongation agenda. First, he plans the impeachment of the speaker of the House of Representatives, Rt. Hon. Yaya Suleiman. He sees him as the stumbling block to realizing his dream, since he is not buying into the tenure elongation agenda. Arinze Eze et al. are correct when they observe that impeachment is being used as a sledge hammer by politicians who are able to sway legislative houses, mobilize law makers to impeach governors, deputies and even leadership of the legislative house who they believe are enemies to achieving their political ambition (53). The Chief Whip implies this at the meeting convened by the Speaker to seek the way forward to the problems plaguing the practice of democracy and forestall his impeachment: "My hunch is that Oneya does not trust Mr. Speaker and he wants to replace him with a stooge" (33).

The foregoing situation leads to the stealing of the mace which they believed will orchestrate their plan to impeach the speaker: "Stealing the mace would cripple the house. With the mace, the symbol of authority, in our hands, our impeachment plan would be eighty percent successful" (21). The masses see the action of the President as anti-democratic and adverse to the growth of the post-independent society; hence, while he is near achieving his self-seeking agenda, the masses are mobilized to protest against the bill. Speaker Yaya would have been impeached if not for the intervention of the subaltern agents like the students and workers who occupy the street and shut down the entrance to the legislative chamber. The attitude of the masses towards the domineering dispositions of the political class aligns with Gilly Adolfo explanation on the pathway to engendering change. In his view, "liberation does not come as a gift from anybody; it is seized by the masses with their own hands. And by seizing it they themselves are transformed: confidence in their own strength soars, and they turn their energy and their experience to the tasks of building, governing, and deciding their own lives for themselves" (2). The protest eventually pays off as the bill is discarded and the third tenure agenda squashed.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the unequal distribution of powers and collective wealth by the political class entrenches domination of and discrimination against the masses and non-aligning members of an in-group. This is seen in the attitudes of President Oneya and Nanga towards Honourables and individuals objecting to self-centred interest. The novelists do not merely highlight the excesses of the political class; they also project a positive vision for the regeneration of the rotten political administration in post-independence Nigeria. The regenerative ideas in the two novels are manifest in protest against anti-people policies and the overthrow of the status quo which have for a long time been strangulating the masses and non-aligning members of the political in-group.

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