

Beyond Stomach Infrastructure: The Impact of Voter Bribery on Good Governance in Nigeria – A Study of Chinua Achebe's *The Voter* in *Girls at War* and *Other Stories*

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Abstract

*This researcher seeks to interrogate the deleterious implications of voter bribery for democratic consolidation and governance in Nigeria, employing Chinua Achebe's short story *The Voter* as a literary paradigm through which these dynamics are examined. The concept of "stomach infrastructure" encapsulates a pervasive political culture predicated on material inducements and clientelistic exchanges, which in turn erode institutional accountability and compromise the pursuit of sustainable national development. Through a critical interrogation of Chinua Achebe's narrative, this study will investigate how electoral manipulation, political patronage, and ethical compromise influence voting behaviour and perpetuate fragile governance systems. The protagonist's psychological turmoil in *The Voter* symbolically reflects the existential dilemmas confronting many Nigerian citizens, who are often compelled to negotiate between material survival and civic responsibility. By situating Chinua Achebe's narrative within Nigeria's contemporary political milieu, this paper advocates the repudiation of immediate material gratification in favour of principled voting, heightened civic consciousness, and systematic institutional reform. Ultimately, the study underscores the enduring significance of Chinua Achebe's literary vision as a moral injunction toward ethical engagement in democratic governance. Anchored in the theoretical frameworks of Political Clientelism and Postcolonialism, this research adopts a qualitative context analysis methodology to interrogate the intersections between literature, politics, and moral agency.*

Keywords: Voter, Bribery, Democracy, Manipulation, Governance

Introduction

Within Nigeria's intricate political landscape, the term "stomach infrastructure" has emerged as a euphemistic descriptor for the entrenched phenomenon of electoral bribery-the exchange of material incentives for political allegiance. Although such transactional interactions between the electorate and political elites may offer short-term economic relief, they undermine the fundamental tenets of accountability, transparency, and civic integrity that are indispensable to effective governance. The repercussions of this practice are profound, particularly in Nigeria's context, where democratic consolidation remains precarious. Literature particularly that of Chinua Achebe, functions as a critical medium through which political malfeasance and moral decay are interrogated and denounced. Chinua Achebe's short story *The Voter* featured in his collection *Girls At War and Other Stories*, stands as a timeless and incisive critique of electoral corruption, exposing the ways in which bribery distorts democratic ideals and impedes the realization of an equitable society.

Chinua Achebe, often hailed as the conscience of Africa, was acutely attuned to the intersections of politics, ethics, and social justice. In *The Voter*, he dramatizes the moral quandary of Rufus Okeke, a political campaign operative ensnared between partisan loyalty and personal integrity. The narrative succinctly encapsulates the paradox of Nigeria's democratic enterprise-elections deemed free yet marred by manipulation and inequality. Rufus Okeke's ethical struggle serves as a microcosm of a society's moral accommodation of corruption, wherein complicity becomes rationalized under the pressures of poverty and exclusion. Chinua Achebe's portrayal thus illuminates how socioeconomic vulnerability sustains a culture of electoral clientelism, where voters exchange long-term empowerment for transient material gratification.

Voter bribery is not merely a political aberration but a systemic obstruction to effective governance. Scholars such as Daniel Jordan Smith (2007: 13) contend that corruption in Nigeria is deeply entrenched within sociocultural norms and patron-client networks that bind political elites and constituents in reciprocal yet exploitative relationships in a "moral economy of votes". This transactional dynamic discourages policy-making grounded in performance and accountability, privileging patronage over public service. As voters prioritize immediate material gratification rather than sustainable governance outcomes, elected representatives encounter minimal pressure to implement effective policies or adhere to ethical standards of leadership.

Moreover, the concept of stomach infrastructure-popularized during the 2014 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti State, Nigeria epitomizes the instrumentalization of hunger and economic deprivation as tools of political control, Remi Adekoya (2015: 54). It uncovers a model of political authority that frames citizens primarily as beneficiaries of state largesses rather than as autonomous rights holders. In his prescient work, Chinua Achebe revealed the consequences of this logic well before it became a recognized concept in political debate, thus highlighting literature's vital function in shaping and prefiguring social criticism. As Ogechi E. Anyanwu (2012: 78) contends, Chinua Achebe, "used fiction as a medium for social diagnosis", criticizing the "moral decay and ethical contradictions" inherent in Nigeria's postcolonial state.

This study explores consequences of voter bribery for governance in Nigeria, using Chinua Achebe's *The Voter* as a literary lens. By situating the narrative within Nigeria's socio-political realities, the research investigates how electoral inducements weaken democratic norms and reinforce systems underdevelopment. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from political science, sociology, and African literature, the study examines why vote-buying persists despite reforms and civic education, moving the discussion beyond individual culpability to the structural and psychological factors that sustain weak governance.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Clientelist politics in Nigeria is not simply a tactical maneuver but an entrenched system that both reflects and reinforces the nation's socio-economic stratification. It erodes the foundations of meritocracy, nurtures political dependency, and undermines the integrity of state institutions (Leila Demarest, 2022: 645 – 676). This phenomenon manifests vividly in Nigeria's electoral culture, where loyalty networks and material inducements routinely supplant democratic responsiveness and issue-based engagement.

Postcolonial Theory and Literary Critique of Governance

From a postcolonial perspectives, political structures established after colonial rule can be understood as continuations of imperial power relations. This theoretical approach reveals how colonial modes of domination persist through political corruption, fractured identities, and economic dependency.

A Postcolonial and Clientalist Reading of Chinua Achebe's *The Voter*

The narrative exemplifies the persistence of colonial era hierarchies, showing how disengagement and elite dominance have been neutralized and adopted within the postcolonial state's structures of power.

Chinua Achebe's characterization of Rufus Okeke reflects the broader crisis of moral uncertainty in postcolonial contexts. Far from a one-dimensional figure of corruption, Rufus Okeke embodies the contradictions of a political order that punishes integrity and prizes opportunism.

Chinua Achebe's reflection is understated yet insisive. By privileging irony and narrative sophistication over moral exhortation, he dissects the postcolonial condition as one sustained by inherited systems of domination and marginalization. The reader is thus encouraged to recognize governance failure as a structural, rather than individual, manifestation of colonial continuity.

Colonial Legacies and Political Culture

Postcolonial theory helps situate Nigeria's patronage based politics within the enduring legacy of colonial governance, which operated through decentralized control and targeted systems of favouritism. Mamdani Mahmood (1996: 18) asserts that colonial governance in Africa, created a bifurcated state, with authoritarian rule for natives and rights based governance for settlers. In Nigerian case, British colonialism entrenched ethnic divisions, centralized authority in an unaccountable elite and cultivated a culture of loyalty to persons rather than institutions a condition that persisted after independence and manifests today in political patronage and prebendalism.

Chinua Achebe's fiction reflects this inheritance. His narratives often expose how post independence Nigeria reproduce coloniatera inequalities and corruption in a supposedly liberated context. In *The Trouble With Nigeria*, Chinua Achebe (1983:1), states pointedly, "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." This critiques though nonfictional, resonates in his literary works including *The Voter*, where leadership is shown not as a duty to the people, but as a transactional relationship rooted in material exchange and electoral manipulations.

A Postcolonial and Clientelist Reading of Chinua Achebe's *The Voter*

Postcolonial literature, according to Edward Said (1993: 215) functions as a form of resistance that reclaims narrative authority from imperial discourse. Chinua Achebe use subtle irony and condemn how postcolonial governance mimics colonial hierarchies:

The villagers had had five years in which to see how quickly and plentifully politics brought wealth, chieftaincy titles, doctorate degrees and other honours some of which, like the last, had still to be explained satisfactorily to them; for in their naivety they still expected a doctor to be able to heal the sick. Anyhow, these honours and benefits had come so readily to the man to whom they had given their votes free of charge five year ago that they were now ready to try it a different way (12).

The protagonist Rufus Okeke, once a teacher and now a political campaigner, finds himself torn between loyalty to his community and the material temptations of politicians. This story illustrates how colonial era civic disengagement and elite dominance have been internalized and localized in the postcolonial state.

Chinua Achebe portrayal of Rufus Okeke is emblematic of enlarged moral ambivalence in postcolonial societies. Rufus Okeke is not simply corrupt; he is caught with a system that makes moral action, costly and civic betrayal profitable. As Kenneth Knowles Ruthven (1979:96) observes, postcolonial fiction often depicts characters, “trapped in ambivalent loyalties”, revealing the tension between communal duty and individual survival. This mirrors the structural position of voters in Nigeria who, faced with poverty and systemic neglect, see election periods as opportunities for short-term relief rather than long-term accountability:

Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe was not unprepared. He had drawn five months' salary in advance, changed a few hundred pounds into shining shillings and armed his campaign boys with eloquent little jute bags. In the day he made his speeches; at night his stalwarts conducted their whispering campaigns. Rufus was the most trusted of these campaigners (13).

Chinua Achebe (1990: 62) literary strategy also involves adapting and reshaping the English language to reflect African cultural realities, an approach that aligns with one of the central

objectives of postcolonial theory: linguistic decolonization. He argues that, “the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience”, but only when it is transferred into, “a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings”. In *The Voter*, Chinua Achebe blends formal English with indigenous idioms and social references to create a localized narrative space:

“I will cast my paper for Maduka; if not this Iyi take note.

‘Das all’,, said the man as he rose

with his companion who had covered up the

object again and was taking it back to their car.

‘You know he has no chance against Marcus’,

Said Roof at the door.

‘It is enough that he gets a few votes now;

next time he will get more. People will hear

that he gives out pounds, not shillings, and

they will listen’ (17).

By the application of postcolonial theory and the concept of political clientelism, Chinua Achebe’s *The Voter* may be interpreted not simply as a portrayal of electoral corruption, but as a layered examination of how colonial inheritances have shaped ethically complex political identities. Electoral inducement in the story underscores more profound systemic issues – such as economic deprivation and social marginalization that are rooted in colonial history and sustained by self-serving political elite:

The enemy Roof had referred to was the Progressive Organization Party (POP) which had been formed by the tribes down the coast to save themselves, as the founders of the party proclaimed, from ‘total political, cultural, social and religious annihilation. Although it was clear that party had no chance here it had plunged with typical foolishness, into a straight fight with PAP providing cars and loud-speakers to a few local rascals and thugs to go around and make a lot of noise. No

one knew for certain how much money POP had let loose in Umuofia but it was said to be very considerable (15).

The author's commentary is restrained yet deeply insightful. Rather than adopting a moralizing tone, he employs irony and narrative complexity to expose the realities of the postcolonial experience. Readers are encouraged to reflect on how governance failures in Nigeria stem not merely from individual misjudgements, but from ingrained structures of domination, resource allocation and marginalization inherited from the colonial era. Daniel Jordan Smith (2007: 25) affirms:

Nigerians' sense that their state and society have become increasingly amoral with elites pursuing wealth and power without regard for the consequences, and ordinary people seeking money by all means available simply to survive – contributes to a popular perception that law and order have given way to rampant corruption at every level.

Umuofia: the fictional village, symbolic rural community, or archetypal Nigerian in Chinua Achebe's *The Voter* functions as a microcosm of the Nigerian state, where prehendalism dominates corrupt-public officials systematically plunder, appropriate, and deplete the people's common wealth, treating public resources as prebends to be allocated to familial or political clients in exchange for loyalty and support. One must underscore the fact that post-independence Nigerian leadership has for the most part, been riddled by systemic corruption, misappropriation of public wealth, lack of essential services, political volatility and sectarian conflicts.

Formerly colonized nations, in particular, and the global community at large, were disillusioned to discover that political independence had failed to alleviate the suffering of the masses. Instead, a new elite black rulers emerged as internal colonizers, capturing the reins of power to serve their own parochial interests,. This grim reality is powerfully illustrated in Chinua Achebe's *The Voter*:

Their point was that only the other day Marcus Ibe was not too successful mission school teacher. Then politics has come to their village and he had wisely joined up, some said just in time to avoid imminent dismissal arising from a female teacher's pregnancy. Today he was Chief the Honourable; he and two long cars and had just built himself the biggest house anyone had seen in these parts (12).

Consequently, most individuals became disillusioned with the post-colonial African leaders who had once been seen as the solution to the problems of colonialism. Instead, the political elite transformed themselves into a new ruling class, effectively becoming domestic oppressors and taking on the authority and benefits that had previously belonged to the colonial powers.

Chinua Achebe's primary objective in *The Voter* is to highlight that the true tragedy lies in the seizure of avenues for economic progress. As a result, the masses are compelled to internalize the repressive systems imposed by their leaders, leading to deep disillusionment:

‘All right’, he said in English and then reverted to Ibo. “Let us not quarrel about small things’. He stood up, adjust his robes and plunged his hand once more into the bag. Then he bent down like a priest distributing the host and gave one shilling more to every man; only he did not put it into their palms but on the floor in front of them. The men, who had so far not deigned to touch the things, looked at the floor and shook their heads. Roof got up again and gave each men another shilling (15).

However, this frustration is not directed at the corrupt ruling elite, but is instead born by the oppressed populace.

The Voter as a short story, evokes themes of physical violence, deprivation and systemic corruption, which Chinua Achebe reengages as a pseudo-democratic framework- one that strips individuals of hope, dignity, self-worth and the capacity for independent living, leaving them dependent on the bribes of their oppressors:

‘I am through’, he said with a defiance that was no less effective for being transparently faked. The elders too knew how fare to go without losing decorum. So when Roof added: ‘Go cast your paper for the enemy if you like!’ they quickly calmed down with a suitable speech from each of them. By the time the last man had spoken it was possible, without great loss of dignity, to pick up the things form the floor (15).

This immediately set the pattern. Hundreds of admirers shook Marcus's hand and said ‘Corngrass!’.

Roof and the other organizers were prancing up and down, giving last minute advice to the voters and pouring with sweat.

‘Do not forget’, he said again to a group of illiterate women who seemed ready to burst with enthusiasm and good humour, ‘our sign is the motor car ‘ (18).

Chinua Achebe’s *The Voter* penetrates the lives of the marginalized, exposing how they are rendered powerless in the face of entrenched social, political and economic injustice, all driven by the corrupt machinery of post-independence African leadership turned criminal enterprise.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe’s portrayal in *The Voter* transforms fiction into a vehicle of political thoughts and moral reflection. The story serves as a lens through which the postcolonial condition—marred by disillusionment, corruption, and unfulfilled nationalist ideals—is brought into sharp focus. Through emblematic figures and ethically complex scenarios, Chinua Achebe lays bare the tragic irony of independence: the replacement of colonial rule by local elites that perpetuated, rather than resolved, systematic injustice.

The Voter addresses the profound decay of civic trust and the institutionalization of electoral corruption, exposing a society where democratic institutions have been appropriated for elite gain. The narrative offers a subtle critique of a ruling class that, rather than dismantling colonial systems of domination, reconfigures them to sustain self-enrichment and political control. At the same time, *The Voter* illuminates the moral conflict of the ordinary citizen, torn between ethical convictions and the pragmatic demands of survival in a corrupt environment.

Chinua Achebe’s *The Voter* extends beyond a criticism of corrupt leadership to expose the systematic crises embedded within postcolonial statehood. Through subtle irony and moral insight, Chinua Achebe challenges readers to recognise the ethical compromise demanded by participation in a politics devoid of responsibility and transparency. The narrative becomes a powerful admonition that independence without structural and moral transformation remains a hollow achievement, and that genuine freedom requires continuous collective resistance to internal oppression.

Fundamentally, *The Voter* is a meditation on the necessity of moral renewal and systematic reforms in postcolonial Africa. Chinua Achebe urges readers to confront the paradox of democracy

in settings where the will of the people is constrained by fear and need. The story endures not simply as a literary triumph but as a prophetic reminder that independence is hollow without justice, integrity, and collective moral courage.

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