Politics across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men and Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People

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Abstract

This paper attempts a deconstruction of the practice of politics across cultures, using Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men and Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People. The study analyses the connection between political culture in a democratic climate and political actors' operation of the democratic system. It examines the presence of several narrative parallels that connect the novels and particularly the character of the two narrators and the politicians whose stories seem representative of the general trends in the selected novels. However, the study also discovers that the few peculiarities that distinguish the two political cultures and the politicians in the novels are part of larger socio-political constructs. Hence, while the contexts in the novels share certain variables of political corruption, voter susceptibility, and democratic excesses, also highlighted are peculiarities of contexts like consistent strivings to ameliorate the democratic process 'in America' and a general inclination towards sycophancy which, among other things, impairs and undermines democratic objectives 'in Nigeria'.

Keywords: Political Culture; Democracy; Fiction; American Politics; Nigerian Politics.

Introduction

Authors, texts and contexts

Even though America has often been described as 'God's own country', where achievements and fulfillments are not merely the lineaments of promises and idealization, but the materialization of the American dream, not all Americans extol these cultural vectors built on success at any cost, or achievement at other's expense. American authors, in particular, have a tradition of eulogizing, on one side, the American democratic spirit, love of adventure, romance, individualism, self-reliance, and living the dream, and, on the other, chastising the proclivities toward escapism, materialism, over-ambition, racism, and excessiveness. American literary history is littered with authors' responses to their contemporary times, though mostly not to the attitude of the government or its performance. Because America is a land of the 'individual', the literature is also that which continues to explore the experiences of the individual in his or her attempts to personalize the context. From the literature of the first generation of Americans that could be described as 'a transported European culture' (Spiller et al. 1963,
xviii), to the more personalized literary developments of the subsequent ages, American literature is rich because of its deconstruction of the American initiative of self-reliance and the inquiring drive, essentially focusing on how the common person thrives or fails while attempting to negotiate the democratic ideals that form the substratum of a unique tradition. Though the thematic strains that catenate the works of American authors manifest universal relevance, like all national literatures, the peculiar qualities that define them are autochthonous to the American experience.

Hugh Henry Breckenridge is credited with producing the first American novel that examines the corruption and the manipulatory aspects of the country's democracy. In *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), he utilizes the (mid)adventures of the protagonist, Teague, to investigate the nature of contemporary American politics, government excesses, democratic chicanery, corruption in high places, the gullibility of the masses, and how unarduous it is for someone incompetent but cagey, savvy, wily and hugely determined and committed to manipulating the democratic system to get into a position meant for highly qualified individuals. It is not surprising that a novel with such a subject matter would be written so early in the existence of the country as the democratic process was still in its matutinal phase. What the author did was to warn of the consequences of the vices that could crop up with the political developments in the country if care was not taken to protect the principles and ideals behind its establishment.

Subsequent novelists like Henry Brooks Adams (*Democracy: An American Novel*, 1888), Sinclair Lewis (*It Can Happen Here*, 1935), and Philip Roth (*The Plot Against America*, 2004) also problematized certain features of American politics by taking critical looks at its peculiarities. Out of the lot, Sinclair Lewis's novel stands out. *It Can't Happen Here* fictionalizes the coming to power of Berzelius Winrip, a rabble-rouser who deploys all the 'tricks' of democracy and promising to improve the welfare and finance of the masses, and return the country to greatness and introduce social reforms. But the moment he gets into office he becomes a dictator, the kind that is endemic in the African terrain. The policies rolled out by his government look like the typical stratagems of 'democratic' leaders in Africa: he jails political foes, bans dissent, puts together a paramilitary force to harass and intimidate citizens and his opponents and legislators and also enforce his dictatorial policies, restructures the country by doing away with individual states and splitting the country into sectors. Predictably, the government is characterized by greed, corruption, nepotism, and incompetence. While the fictionalization of such a subject matter is supposed to exhort and forewarn Americans about guarding against allowing the country to degenerate into a dysfunctional society, American readers of the novel do not view the plot as realistic since such has never happened in the country and they cannot imagine it happening there. The topic admits as much. Historically, the novel was published during the period that dictators like Adolf Hitler and Mussolini were holding sway in Europe. Most of the policies fictionalized in the novel were implemented by these European dictators and the Second World War happened to be one of the consequences of their dictatorial excesses.

In Nigeria, like in other African countries, the dusk of colonial rule promised political, social, and financial manumission and cultural rebirth for the citizens. Under colonial rule, even though the signs of crucial problems had begun to surface, most people thought that colonial rule was the only problem, that
once it ended, naturally, unprecedented development in all facets of national life would attend the process of independence. The words of the first president of Ghana and Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah, summarise the thrust of expectations that flooded the continent during independence celebrations:

At long last the battle has ended! And... your beloved country, is free forever...We are not waiting; we shall no more go back to sleep...Today, from now on, there is a new African in the world and that new African is ready to fight his own battle and show that after all the black man is capable of managing his own affairs. We are going to demonstrate to the world, to the other nations, young as we are, that we are prepared to lay our own foundation. (Quoted by Lazarus 1986, 49)

Postcolonial realities have not matched the expectations, however, as already envisaged problems and those unexpected have since then come to characterize the national space in most African countries.

The focus of most African authors before the independence of their countries had been socio-cultural reclamation. This was done to counter several decades of the white man deliberately discrediting and disparaging the culture of colonized societies. The general European attitude towards Africa and its inhabitants was one of superiority, hence while the continent was pillaged of its resources, the inhabitants were perceived as subjects for civilization, through Christianity or the western form of education (See G. D. Killam, 1968).

Debunking these racist misrepresentations became the focus of most African authors as they ‘fought’ to show that Africans had vibrant cultural traditions before the coming of colonialism which disrupted their traditional ways of life and imposed European sociocultural norms on the continent. In fiction, authors like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Camara Laye, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o explored the pre-colonial traditions of pristine African societies, and sometimes they demonstrated how these societies were forever transmogrified by the vagaries of colonial impositions. Writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Cyprian Ekwensi produced novels that explored pre-independence expectations of post-independence development and abundance that filled colonial societies. But almost immediately after independence, focus on cultural resuscitation and post-independence prospects became untenable and lost its allure as authors could not but notice how quickly the situation had deteriorated. In novels like The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (by Ayi Kwei Armah), No Bride Price (by David Rubadiri), The Interpreters (by Wole Soyinka), and Petals of Blood (by Ngugi wa Thiong’o), the authors thematized issues of postcolonial betrayal, political corruption, government ineptitude, despotism, nepotism, and other vices which had seemed peripheral under colonialism but which have since become endemic. These themes, once they found their way into the textual fabric of African literature, have never left; not because they are interesting topics for continuous literary explorations, but they have become inexorably integral to the postcolonial experience in Africa and therefore permanent motifs in postcolonial literature.

**Theoretical Framework: Cultural Criticism**

Cultural criticism is a theoretical contemplation that analyses the historical circumstances that are relevant in the evaluation of a literary work. Cultural critics examine a work of literature from the
extrinsic perspective, taking intimations from historical facts and incidents which provide hermeneutic significance in the analytical unraveling of literature. If culture is a people's way of life, cultural critics examine the cultural experience behind a piece of literary work and link this with the textualized culture in the fictive realm. Because culture is a phenomenon that encompasses all aspects of human interactions within its perception, cultural critics, according to Meyer,

Use widely eclectic strategies drawn from new historicism, psychology, gender studies, and deconstructionism (to name only a handful of approaches) to analyze not only literary texts but radio talk shows, comic strips, calendar art, commercials, travel guides, and base-ball cards (2002, 2105).

Indeed, all literary hermeneutics that utilizes extrinsic materials fall within the ken of cultural criticism; postcolonial studies, gender studies, feminism, biographical criticism, Marxist criticism, mythological criticism, historicism, deconstruction, eco-criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, etc. However, cultural criticism as deployed in this instance will involve cultural materialism and postcolonialism, the former for All the King’s Men and both for A Man of the People.

With these two theories, there is a recognition of the presence of warring dialectical forces in every society; the dominant force and the subaltern. The dominant group (which could be in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, economic or political position) is always at the helms of affairs, as it controls the production of social and cultural constructs and determines which cultural values are extolled and which are abhorred. The dominant group utilizes all cultural appurtenances, like religion, language, politics, and ideological cosmology, to maintain the status quo in its drive to perpetuate its power and control over the subordinate group. These cultural constructs, in their separate and general configurations, all appear to be working for the overall good of all members of the society but only appear so. Critically deconstructed, they have all been formulated and orchestrated to work in the interest of the dominant faction. Most cultural myths that are allied to these constructs are schematized to favor the dominant group and provide support systems for itself since it is in charge of the predominant societal narratives. The way and manner in which democracy is operated, it yields more 'democratic dividends' for the members of the dominant group who almost always have better chances of getting into political positions, or possess the wherewithal to control whoever gets into any of the political offices. For example, the cultural myths built around the issue of gender configuration in most societies evince the same hierarchized polarity. Whereas the male/female, superior/inferior, objective/subjective, cold logic/emotional binaries, the femme fatale, and the wicked mother-in-law tropes in most cultures, elevate the virtues of patriarchy and 'positivize' masculinity, alternatively they denigrate femininity. These were all created for a purpose; to further strengthen the tropes of masculine superiority and feminine inferiorization.

However, the subaltern group, while seeming to live within the delimitations of the prevalent culture, provides an alternative subterranean culture that survives below the major one and gives a different interpretation to the general narrative. Parts of this interpretation are contradictory to the general narrative and subversive in their trajectories. According to Sinfield (1991, 9), there is always 'co-occurrence of
subordinate, residual, emergent, alternative and oppositional cultural forces alongside the dominant, in varying relations of incorporation, negotiation and resistance.' Consequently, albeit most societies appear to be culturally homogeneous, there are always secondary, dissenting voices within the larger cultures. This situation, by implication, engenders crises, struggles, tensions, to dominate on the part of the dominant cultures and to survive on the part of cultural subalternity.

Though it is common to hear and read about the uniqueness of 'American culture', America is indeed a multicultural society made up of a major 'white society' within which there are minor 'non-white' societies. Hence, this multiculturalism is manifested in terms like African American, Japanese American, Latino American, Arab American, Chinese American, Mexican American, Italian American, Irish American, and this validates the presence of several societies outside the 'main society', since, despite the much-vaunted presence of the main culture, these minor cultures still develop their own unique characteristics as they all co-exist contemporaneously. As Sinfield affirms in the quotation above, the relationship between the major and the minor cultures apprehend 'incorporation, negotiation and resistance'.

However, while race is important in America, the dominant group is defined here as the elite, white (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) race which has the largest population and invariably produces what is generally referred to as American culture, against which the subcultures above are contrasted. The American culture is unabashedly built on the virtues of (white) patriarchy, individualism, and opportunity.

In Nigeria, the complexities of the hybridized postcolonial context provide a different scenario further complicated by the presence of several ethnicities (Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Ijaw, Fulani, to name just a few) with distinct cultures and socio-political systems. While the imposition of alien cultural norms is enough in itself to engender complications, the presence of these distinct cultures makes it impossible to have a homogeneous cultural experience in Nigeria. Indeed, whereas it is possible to mention the phrase 'American culture' and have specific values come to mind despite the level of multiculturalism, at any level of analysis nothing holistic comes to mind when the phrase 'Nigerian culture' is mentioned but particular ethnic cultural variables which only refer to the cultural constructs of any of the major tribes, e.g., Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani, etc.

However, if there is no single culture with peculiar features which can be characterized as Nigerian, the members of the Nigerian elite cut across ethnic divides. Whereas the members of the ruling class are separated by ethnic differences, their interests are connected by an ingrained longing that runs deeper than tribal harmony, which is the desire to employ personal positions to perpetuate their hold on power, since having access to political power translates into having access to the nation's wealth.

A comparative exploration of politics in the selected novels is significant because it offers us the opportunity to juxtapose how politics is presented in the two novels, and to examine the authors' ideological positions on politics within and outside the novels. The two novels were written by two of the most decorated writers of their time, and the novels were published when there were concerns about the place of politics and democracy in the societies. Achebe’s *A Man of the People* was published in 1966,
just a few weeks before a military coup swept away the civilian government (just as the military coup plotters did in the novel). Most of what Achebe thematized in the novel appeared on the list of what the coup plotters alleged were the 'sins' of the civilian government. Warren’s *All the King’s Men* was published soon after the death of Huey Long, a popular Louisiana politician whose political style was perceived as dangerous to American democracy.

**Democratic Dictatorship and the Corrupt Cavalcade of American Politics in Robert Penn Warren’s *All The King’s Men***

*All the King’s Men* is more than a novel of politics. Since politics is concerned with the expression of power (voting gives the voter power, and the elected official utilizes political power), the political narrative textualized in the novel covers the whole gamut of political experience: voting, canvassing for votes, politicking, use and extent of political power, the fickleness of power and its corruptibility. The interactions necessitated by these activities engender particular behavioral complexities which simultaneously define societies and elucidate the basis of human actions.

Willie Stark begins life as an idealist son of a rural farmer in the northern part of an unnamed state (possibly Louisiana because of the topography and other endemic geographical presences). When he collaborates with the political dynasty in Mason County, he becomes the Treasurer of the county and seems destined for great things until he goes against Dolph Pillsbury, the local 'political godfather'. He refuses to support Pillsbury when he gives out a contract to build a new school to a contractor who is Pillsbury's in-law and who is known for producing poor quality blocks. For not supporting the corrupt political system, Willie is soundly defeated when he emerges to recontest for County Treasurer in the next elections. When the fire escape in the school built by the contractor collapses and kills three children, Willie becomes a prescient hero for having protested against giving out the contract to the contractor in the first place. Re-energized by the turn of events, he comes out to campaign against Pillsbury's candidate for senate, and the candidate loses. He soon finds himself in the middle of two factions vying to produce the next governor of the state: the MacMurfee and Harrison factions. He becomes the third candidate and an unintentional stooge for the latter faction. When he finds out he has only been picked to neutralize the rural power of the MacMurfee group, he renounces his candidacy and supports the eventual winner, MacMurfee. This serendipitously works in his favor when he eventually goes for the position himself. By then, he is already well known across the state and his political rivals have no chance of defeating him.

For someone who grew up in such a political climate, Willie himself soon becomes a poster child for political corruption and machinations. Idealistic from his university days, utopian at the incipient stage of his political journey, within a few years of losing his position as county treasurer and contending with the Mason political Titans, he quickly sheds his naivety upon discovering that 'there ain’t anything worth doing a man can do and keep his dignity’ (48). This resonates with the 'you chop, me self I chop, palaver finish' maxim that characterizes the political landscape in *A Man of the People* (149). During his initial attempt to be governor, Willie's posture was that of a man who believed so much in destiny and divine purpose for a man such as himself. He also trusted that the people could be swayed to vote for him if only
he gave them the facts, the truth that he thought they so badly needed. While he once thought he needed a political philosophy, not just temperament, to encapsulate his political vision, he quickly learns that his 'reformist agenda' is elitist, and alienating. His assumptions all go south soon enough, as he re-arranges his political strategies to accommodate most of the venal qualities he had campaigned against. Whereas he had thought that the people needed facts, he now knows that they need emotion. Whereas he had thought he 'could just make 'em listen' (84), to his chagrin he finds out that 'when they come out to hear a speaking then they won't listen to you. Not a word. They don't care... They won't listen' (84). It is Jack, the narrator and Willie's right-hand man who seems to have a better grasp of the people's temper and he tells Willie so:

I heard the speech. But they don't give a damn about that. Hell, make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em think you're their weak erring pal, or make 'em think you're God-Almighty. Or make 'em mad. Even mad at you. Just stir 'em up, it doesn't matter how or why, and they'll love you and come back for more. Pinch 'em in the soft place. They aren't alive, most of 'em, and haven't been alive in twenty years. Hell...likker won't set on their stomachs, and they don't believe in God, so it's up to you to give 'em something to stir 'em up and make 'em feel alive again. Just for half an hour. That's what they come for. Tell 'em anything. But for Sweet Jesus' sake don't try to improve their minds. (72)

In short, what his society needs is a demagogue, and Willie is ready to pander to imbibe any requisites that would get him into political office. In his initial quest for higher office whereas he had tied his political ambition to an omnipotent God, thinking, like some of the local people, that 'since the Lord moves in a mysterious way...the Lord was calling...(him)' (66), by the next time he contests again he has come to acknowledge the impracticality of his idealizations and the necessity for espousing populist methods. He develops different personalities and voices, which he deploys as the situation demands. According to Jack, Willie has so mastered the deployment of the different personalities and diverse voices within a short period, that it becomes difficult to identify which one you were dealing with at any point in time. Jack himself is puzzled to identify which of the voices he is dealing with at any particular time; 'In his old voice, his own voice. Or was that his voice? Which was his true voice, which one of all the voices, you would wonder' (10). From being a demagogue who appeals to people's emotions rather than reason (No, I'm not here to ask you for anything. A vote or anything else. I reckon I'll be back later for that...But I don't expect all of you to vote for me. My God, if all of you went and voted for Willie, what would you find to argue about?' (11)), he becomes what he had feared most; a dictatorial demagogue.

Hence, as Willie Stark was once a victim of vile political machinations in his state, any misgivings he might harbor against dirty politicking quickly vanish when the same political narrative he detests gets him into office. Sired by political demagoguery and acute prebendalism, he becomes one with the system, and sometimes worse than the system that members of the old generation (Judge Irwin and Patton) believe that, since Willie became the governor the world has
changed so much a fellow can step in and grab the whole state. Give him another few years and nothing can blast him out. He'll have half the state on a payroll and the other half will be afraid to vote. Strong-arm, blackmail, God knows what (124).

Feeling no compunction, Willie digs up dirt about people to blackmail them, (like Judge Irwin and the legislators), uses strong-arm tactics to subdue perceived saboteurs (Brian B. White), gives out contracts to pacify his enemies (the medical-center contract he gives to Gummy Larson), and denigrates his staff (pouring water in the face of Tiny Duffy). Willie becomes the master of political chicanery.

Like Odili, the narrator of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Jack Burden the narrator of *All the King's Men* (AKM) does not maintain a moral distance from the general political venality for long. While from the beginning he has always chafed at Stark's political naivety and moral idealism, Jack himself was a product of an illicit affair between his mother and her husband's best friend. As a student of history and a journalist, while he might be afraid to formulate a pragmatic scheme for his own life, preferring to rather attach himself to Willie Stark whose charismatic verve and optimistic self-confidence provide signification for those around him, he is alert to the general socio-cultural climate of his society and he can better discern the people's temperament. Lacking a moral pivot himself, Jack lashes unto Willie's political ambition, and when Willie's utopianism seems to be bringing an abrupt end to his (Jack's) only source of signification, Jack introduces him to the realities of electioneering and political demagoguery.

Eventually, Willie and Jack regain their lost morality only after one has lost someone dear to him (Willie) and the other has access to the secret that has hung over his family since birth (Jack). Willie's moral substratum returns only after his son is involved in a freaky accident from which he later dies. Before this, never for once does he reflect on the consequences of his political strategies, as every political gimmick prolongs his career and feeds his self-esteem. Even when he goes to visit his parents at Mason County after becoming governor, he spends time taking pictures with a dog on the steps of their house (his boyhood home where he grew up) to put in the newspapers to show his affinity for the grassroots. All his actions are to a great extent dramatic, calculated to impress the masses to present him as compassionate and approachable. But with his son's accident, he discards his posturing, abandons his egocentric theatraics and dictatorial inclinations, and resolves to redeem himself. This is why he tells Jack on his death bed that 'If it hadn't happened, it might-have been different-even yet' (400). For Jack, the discovery that the person he thought was his father's friend is actually his father, provides clarifications about much of the mystery surrounding his youth. While it shows for him the prevalence of a long tradition of pretended moralism manifested, for example, in his mother telling him not to work for Willie Stark because of the man's political venality, yet she could go behind her husband's back to have an affair with his friend. Jack also discovers that Judge Irwin, one of the moral pillars of the town and his 'real' father, once collected bribe to save his property. The revelations, rather than make him become sarcastically critical of the tradition of immoral idealism that forms the experiential underlayer of the old generation, he comes to the realisation that while desires to feed personal instincts form the lineaments of human existence, it is important that people realise that actions lead to actions, and actions have consequences for which responsibility must be taken.
The presentation of Willie Stark does not show that he is an aberration. Rather, he is presented as a product of his society. If Willie is corrupt, it is because he is attuned to better fulfil the requisites of his society with its feigned morality more than others. If his actions are not guided by any high standards of moral behavior, it is because of the general laxity that characterises the human interactions in his society. To successfully navigate the political terrain in his state, he has to become a demagogue and do away with trying to appeal to the people's reasoning. To survive politically, he has to be dictatorial while seeming to be liberal. He also has to be manipulative, use blackmail and strong-arm tactics, while seeming to be ingenuous, above board and compassionate. Even when he is not religious by any ordinary standards (66), he is not reluctant to deploy religious sentiments to make himself out as a 'child of destiny'.

The conclusion of *All the King's Men* indicates the continuation of the existing political template. Before his assassination, Willie has already realized the consequences of his (mis)behavior and has already begun to take steps to remedy some of the actions he took prior to this realization. But the fact that it is the same Tiny Duffy who instigates Adam Stanton to kill Willie that later becomes the governor, this is the author saying that nothing has changed. The same socio-cultural climate of immoral idealism continues and so will the same political venalities. However, the presence of individuals (like Judge Irwin, Willie's wife and Adam Stanton) who always strive to be on the moral side and always eschew political corruptibility, provide a redeeming aspect to American politics in a manner that is different from that of Nigerian politics fictionalized in *A Man of the People*.

**Political Corruption And Collective Larceny In Chinua Achebe's A Man Of The People**

In his famous article 'The Trouble with Nigeria', Achebe laments that 'the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership' (1983, 22). In *A Man of the People*, however, he contradicts this position by offering a scathing dissection of the Nigerian situation and tracing the country's troubles to a collective larceny and general moral frailty.

In *A Man of the People* (AMOP), the context of the warring forces has been historically delimited. During the period of colonialism, the imperialists occupied the position of the dominant group and directed the political and socio-cultural existence of the country. (Albeit the country remains unnamed in the novel, all the contextual indices are similar to those of Nigeria.) Despite the fact that the indigenous societies all had their own autochtonous divisions along socio-political and cultural lines, the introduction of colonialism brought new structures which destroyed the old and created new ones. The introduction of democratic government and civil service led to the creation of a new class of individuals who not only replaced the colonialists after independence, but sought to use power much more than the colonialists ever did. And, much more than the colonialists, they have become the country's ruling elite (dominant group) and would utilize all available tools to sustain the status quo.

The assumptions of Chief the Honourable M. A. Nanga and his attitude towards members of the rabble is symptomatic of the elitism common to his class. Once a member of the lower class himself, a teacher in his home village, the trajectory of his political life has elevated him to not just the position of a
honourable in the country's parliament, but also that of a minister in the government. By occupying these two positions, Nanga has evidently shown that he knows how to manipulate the system in his favor. Within the first few pages of the novel we are introduced to Nanga at work: first as a suave manipulator of people's emotions at the grassroots, and then as a sycophantic toady within the dominant group represented by the government.

One of the attitudinal predispositions of the elite is the constant attempt to make the members of the lower class think that the lives of the elite are cluttered with sleepless nights, endless meetings and other encumbrances which the ordinary people have never encountered. As indeed Nanga tries to affirm several times in the novel, 'Sometimes I use to regret ever leaving the teaching field. Although I am a minister today I can swear to God that I am not as happy as when I was a teacher' (9). This becomes like a refrain, as every instance Nanga gets he never forgets to tell members of the lower class that their simple lifestyles are comparatively better than that of a minister. His wife, who looks well-kept and lives in a mansion and has children who attend 'expensive private schools run by European ladies who spoke impeccable English' (32), also imbibes this elitist attitude by saying 'Any woman who marries a minister...has married worse than a night-watch-man' (36).

However, Nanga is able to continue this farce because of his recognition of the fact that positions of power and authority are coveted by almost everybody, more by the poor people. In a society where 'it didn't matter what you knew but who you knew' (17), where the general belief is that misuse of public funds is not immoral since no 'sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth' (2), people in positions of political power are respected and envied mainly because of the pecuniary benefits accruing to occupants of such positions. Independence had given the people hope of a better experience under the leadership of their fellow black men and women, but, as it is the members of the African elite who practically took over from the imperialists and occupied their erstwhile positions of power and authority have also assumed the coloniser's posture of class and superiority. Most of them, like Chief Nanga, had 'risen overnight from poverty and insignificance' (37), to become outrageously wealthy, not because of any special individual ability, but because they opportunistically found themselves in positions of power where they could explore their corrupt and larcenous proclivities. According to Odili Samalu, the narrator, it is impossible to persuade such people 'without much trouble to give up' their new source of wealth 'and return to...(their) original state' (37). Because, in a postcolonial and newly independent country, where most of the members of the elite have recently joined this class following the reason given above (the departure of the colonialists), the situation becomes come complex. Through the use of the image of 'being in the rain and being indoors', an appropriate symbol that captures the surprising and drastic movement from extreme poverty to extreme wealth, Odili explicates the scenario;

A man who has just come in from the rain 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. The trouble with our new nation...was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say 'To hell with it'. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us - the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best - had
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scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loudspeakers...that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house. (37)

If prior to independence majority of the people did not know the 'cash price' (3) of getting elected into political offices, soon, with people like Nanga living in mansions, driving expensive cars and building rows of houses which they can rent out to 'different embassies at three thousand a year each' (54), getting into political office has become a lucrative investment. It is hardly surprising then, that even Odili's father, who is a retired District Interpreter, wants his son to leave "this foolish teaching" and look for a decent job in the government and buy...(himself) a car’ (31).

Though at the beginning of the novel Odili maintains a cynical distance from Chief Nanga and all he represents, attempting to show via his cynicism his disdain for the shenanigans of the political elite, his distrust soon vanishes when he finds himself enjoying the spoils of corruption with the Nanga family and subsequently defending Nanga's moral debasement. From having 'intense bitterness welling up in...(his) mouth' because he saw 'silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gunpowder in honour of one of those who had started the country off down the slopes of inflation’ (2) when Nanga had come to his village, within minutes he finds himself ‘wondering whether - perhaps - I had been applying to politics stringent standards that didn't belong to it’ (9). For someone who had just called the people who thronged the streets to welcome Nanga to the village 'silly' and 'ignorant' because of his belief that they did not know the depth of corruption being practiced by Nanga and others like him, his volte-face, despite the fact that he had put himself in a position of someone who is wise and knowledgeable about the happenings in the country, is dramatic but not surprising. This clearly shows that, if someone of his ilk is not immune to the influence of political corruption and the pervasive greed, the larcenous malaise is endemic in its ramifications and more deeply embedded in the people's psyche. More than just being 'grinning courtiers and sycophants' (Achebe 1983, 57), the people are themselves complicit in the corruption going on in the country and contribute their own quota to the problem by pandering to the influence of the venal ambiance.

Even the rival political parties are not free from the general corruption. Whereas the members of the ruling party, the P.O.P (Progressive Organization Party), seem connected by their selfishness, greed, power drunkenness and desire to use all available means to remain in power, the members of the opposition parties, particularly, the C.A.C. (Common People's Congress), do not fare better. For example, Odili joins them because, as he says himself, Chief Nanga has snatched his girlfriend and joining an opposition party is his revenge. When he is given a car to use as campaign vehicle, the first thing he does is drive it to Edna's place to show off after having the car washed, Edna being Chief Nanga's fiancée who Odili has decided to make his own as part of his plan to get back at Nanga. Also, Max, who provides the philosophical foundation for the new party, collects money from Chief Koko, believing that in a society like theirs you cannot 'fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands a little' (126). Even Max's wife, Eunice, who had previously manifested a measure of moral composure, could not be exempted from the
moral malaise. When her husband is hit by one of Chief Koko's jeeps and is killed, she 'opened her handbag...took out a pistol...and fired two bullets into Chief Koko's chest' (143). Though she is later released from jail and Max is pronounced a posthumous 'Hero of the Revolution' (148), both lack the virtuous substratum to denounce the corrupt tendencies of others and one is not particularly sure to what extent they would be prepared to soil their hands, having already come up with a rationale for 'a little hand soiling' in the political landscape. Apparently, even Max and the members of the C.P.C. are not different from the members of the P.O.P. and P.A.P. They are all members of the 'privileged class sitting on the back of the rest of us...' (124)

What obtains in the national context is politics of reciprocity. The members of the privileged political class feed on the sycophancy of the masses, and their words and attitudes, by pandering to the worst instincts of the masses, bring out the worst from the rabbles who are also aware that they and their communities would only enjoy the dividends of democracy as long as they exhibit their support (or, in this case, sycophancy) for whichever party is prepared to spend money. Odili's father, Hezekiah Samalu, again, offers an appropriate summary of this dialectic. As the local chairman of the P.O.P. he is not expected to accommodate members of the opposition parties in his domain, let alone allow them to launch their campaign in his house. But, after seeing so many cars and thinking of the possibility of personal gain, he explains the situation in a way that normalizes such an abnormality: 'I believe that the hawk should perch and the eagle perch, which ever says to the other don't, may its own wing break' (122). However, the whole community is made to pay for one man's political faux pas, as not only is Odili’s father 'ignominiously removed from his office for subversive, anti-party activities' (133), the next weekend, 'seven Public Works lorries arrived in the village and began to cart away the pipes they had deposited several months earlier for... (a) projected Rural Water Scheme' (133). This kind of political vendetta is endemic, and it makes it clear that the provision of social amenities in any community in the country is vitally attached to the readiness of its members to support the party in government and be obsequious to its leaders.

What Achebe seems to be affirming with AMOP is that the major problem confronting all socio-cultural constructs (politics, democracy, religion, education, etc) in the country is the prevalent tendency towards sycophancy, larceny, greed, and his caveat is that it cuts across all sections of the society; the rich, the poor, male and female. In the urban and rural places, the most common attitude is that of selfish aggrandizement, immodesty and nonchalance towards the well-being of others. Words like morality and ethics are only popular catch phrases which have no significance in the collective disposition. The conflicts which naturally exist in other societies between the elites and the rabbles have become skewed here. In this context the warring forces have no peculiar differentiae, since members of the rabbles are complicit in the corruption going on in the country and this aids the ruling class in the domination and oppression of the masses. According to Odili, albeit this says much about him as about the members of the political class he complains about, the collective attitude of 'you chop, me self I chop, palaver finish' (149) is a national posture which continues to manifest, even till the end of the novel after the democratically elected corrupt government has been ousted through a military coup.
Politics across Cultures: A Comparative Study of Robert Penn Warren’s All the King’s Men and Chinua Achebe’s A Man of the People

Overnight everyone began to shake their heads at the excesses of the last regime, at its graft, oppression and corrupt government: newspapers, the radio, the hitherto silent intellectuals and civil servants... And these were the same people that only the other day had owned a thousand names of adulation, whom praise-singers followed with song and talking-drum wherever they went. (148)

This is a particularly damning revelation which takes the societal problem beyond the egoistical prejudices of an individual, above the peculiar vulnerabilities of the elites or the masses, beyond the ethnic bias of a few, to the collective and elastic venality of the majority. What Achebe has done in this novel is trace the country's essential problems to corporate self-regard, corruption, general disregard for the country's laws and an inscrutable innate rapaciousness which define the common predisposition to cupidity. With this disclosure, obviously, eradicating these vices would be problematic, since they are not considered immoral by most citizens and are also perceived as justifiable opportunities to amass personal wealth and power. If the country fictionalised in AMOP is Nigeria (though Achebe himself asserts that the setting of the novel 'resembled Nigeria' (2009, 43), history has since then proved the author right, as all the problems thematised and the vices foregrounded in the novel have since become permanent fixtures in the national space. Indeed, Achebe went back to again discuss this theme in his controversial last book, a memoir titled There was a Country, where he expressed his frustrations that after more than fifty years of independence, Nigerian had become a failed as issues like corruption, ethnicity, infrastructural decay, and religious crises, have all become more prevalent.

Warren and Achebe on Politics and Democracy

There are two major questions one needs to ask in this paper: how do Achebe and Warren internalise the meaning and ideology of politics and democracy? What makes the two selected texts so comparative and akin to this paper's stated thematic frame? In the case of Warren, despite the fact that America had been practising democracy for more than a century when All the King's Men was published in 1946, it was obvious he believed American democracy could be improved, and because of the activities of politicians like Huey Long, America should not take its democracy for granted. Huey Long was an American politician who served as the governor of Louisiana (1928-1932) and a senator. He was known for his brand of political populism which championed the cause of the poor and downtrodden. Though his several policies as governor helped to raise the economic level of the state and its citizens, his tactics were branded fascist as he was comfortable making patronage appointments to fill vacancies in government, and he was ready to bully and intimidate the opposition. According to Sanson (2006), Huey once asserted that 'I'm the Constitution around here' (265) when informed he was ignorant of the workings of the state Constitution. Long also once said that 'I used to try to get things done by saying "please." Now...I dynamite 'em out of my path' (Parrish 1994, 164). Though his methods were objectionable to people, surprisingly, Long was also very popular across America and was considered a potential presidential candidate. His supporters were blind to his dictatorial inclinations and actions, as they continued to applaud him for the speed with which he was able to get bills passed by the state legislature and for his
control over the state's political machinery. Huey was a practical politician who practiced patronage politics; vacancies in government positions, business and construction contracts, tax cuts, all the direct benefits accruing from the state government, only went to his ardent supporters. What quickly developed in the state could be termed patrimonial prebendalization, where personal fealty was rewarded and opposition or disloyalty scorned. Huey Long sat at the top of the state structure, dishing out political favors in a sort of patron-client style.

Warren was lecturing at the Louisiana State University when Huey Long was assassinated in 1935. Like Stark, Long was killed in the state capital building by a physician. Huey Long's moniker was Kingfish, and it is more than coincidence that Warren’s novel is titled All the King’s Men. Though Warren tried to deny any connection between Willie Stark and Huey Long, the similarities are quite convincing enough for Warren to deny any influences from the life of Huey Long. But Warren was apparently concerned that American democracy was in danger in the hands of people like Long. Having discovered how easy it was for Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in Europe to turn their countries’ democracies into dictatorships, Warren was quick to theorise that America was poised to take a similar path if care was not taken. The life of Huey Long allowed Warren to examine American democracy and dissect its vectors.

Evident from the titles and subject matters of his works. Robert Penn Warren was always interested in politics and its ramifications. With the political situations textualized in John Brown: The Making of a Martyr (1929), Night Rider (1939), At Heaven’s Gate (1943), Band of Angels (1955), World Enough and Time (1950), Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South (1956), Democracy and Poetry (1975), ‘Who Speaks for the Negro?’ (1965), it is obvious that politics plays an important role in his writings. Though most critics of his works tend to focus more on his biography and ‘narrative style, poetics, and style’ (Eller and Smith 1994-1995), the importance of politics in his writings should not be under-emphasised. Not content with just making reference to politics en passant, in the world of his political fiction Warren brings diverse discourses that show his characters battling with ‘difficult moral and philosophical issues: the meaning of justice, the legitimacy of regimes, how government must accommodate the demands of human nature, and the difficulty of realising ideals in unfavourable circumstances’ (Berryhill 2000, 5-6).

What this means is that there is always tension between idealism and pragmatism. While Warren appears to believe in the need for judiciousness in individual and public lifes, an abiding motif in his works is the failure of individuals to bring to materiality in public life their private ideals or visions. According to Hellman (1999, 226) Warren is always thematising the ‘failure of a private, subjective ideal realm to come to terms with, to be integrated with, to be married to a realm of public life and activity, the realm of politics and society and group action, of law and justice.’ This consciousness is further corroborated by Berryhill (2000, 7) who postulated that it is Warren’s belief that ‘the relative health or disease of a society in term of the relative health and disease of the individuals who compose that political society.’ Apparently, ‘to know what a political society should be and can be, one must know the aspirations and limitations of man’ (Berryhill 2000, 8). Warren's view is corroborated by Thiele (1997, 31-32) who believes that 'what we do and should in politics rests on the question of human nature.'
In *All the King’s Men*, it is the attitudes of the citizens that are reflected in the politics of the state. Initially, Willie Stark finds it impossible to actualize his ideals. He believed that the citizens are wise enough to see through any form of political deception. Soon, however, he discovers that he has overrated the wisdom of the masses and realizes he has to change his approach if he desires to get elected. Willie Stark is not only a product of his society, the society is also a product of the people. It is telling that Willie, the son of a dirt farmer could become the governor. This shows that the society provides opportunities for individual growth and it is a manifestation of the American dream. On the other hand, the same society that makes available the opportunities also forces compromise on people. Willie has to compromise his ideals of integrity to get into office. Even when she does not feel comfortable with her husband's hypocrisy, Willie's wife (Lucy Stark) has to occasionally pose for pictures with him to present the picture of the governor and his happy family.

A writer that is a product of a postcolonial state cannot but be political. Chinua Achebe’s attitude to politics and democracy runs through the gamut of his fictional and non-fictional writings. Though AMOP contains some of his most cogent intimations on politics in Africa, similar thematic constructs run through his other novels; an individual who finds it difficult to negotiate the emerging colonial politics (*Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*). While these two novels foreground the problems that attend colonialism, particularly the cultural disruption that accompanied the colonial enterprise, the political textualization in *A Man of the People* shows the author's growing concern for the direction of the postcolonial experience in Nigeria. According to him, there was no proper foundation for politics and the practice of democracy in Nigeria:

> The British have always claimed that they taught us Westminster model of parliamentary democracy and we blew it. Nothing could be more absurd. You might as well say you taught someone to swim by letting him roll in the sands of the Sahara. British colonial administration was not any form of democracy, but a fairly naked dictatorship. (2009, 32)

For Achebe, Nigeria's problem started with the inability of the British to practice true democracy in the country. Affirming that Nigerian politicians only learn about politics and democracy while in positions of authority, he affirms that their having just the faintest idea of how democracy works is responsible for their poor performance in office. Hence, he traces the 'trouble with Nigeria' to failure of leadership. Although he accepts that Nigeria's problems are numerous, 'without good leadership none of the other problems stands a chance of being tackled, let alone solved' (2009,139).

The theme of failure of leadership takes the central stage in *A Man of the People*, where Achebe shows that the poor leadership displayed by the country's politicians is replicated in the uncritical self-absorption and sycophantic tendencies in the ranks of the people. Clearly, Achebe’s position corresponds with that of Warren. No matter the level of idealizations, the kind of politics and democracy practiced in every society is invariably impacted by the nature of the people who make up the citizens of such a society. The attitudes of the citizens are reflected in the practice of politics and democracy. Ultimately,
the political and democratic development of any society is conditioned by the individual and collective
tightness of the people.

In his last published novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe laments the consequences of bad
leadership in Africa through a dissection of the military dictatorship represented by President Sam.
Because *A Man of the People* ends with a military coup and *Anthills of the Savannah* is about a military
ruler who got into office through a coup, it is always taken to be its continuation. Like he did in AMOP,
Achebe also examines the sycophancy of the elites and the vulnerability of the masses.

The aestheticisation of politics and democracy in *All the King's Men* and *A Man of the People* follow a
similar trend. Warren's narration allies with that of Achebe as both authors utilise a corruptible assistant
to examine the nature of politics and democracy in the two contexts, through a larger-than-life political
actor who encompasses the whole attitudinal spectra of their societies. The most important question that
the two authors try to answer is: What is the meaning of politics and democracy to people? Though it
might seem to mean several things to most people, without a moral fibre, personal political idealizations
die at the feet of political survival. Both Willie Stark and Chief Nanga before their entry into the political
terrain seemed to be just like every other 'non-political' citizens: politically naive and believing that
politicians were corrupt and ineffectual. However, it soon becomes obvious that they are not different
from their predecessors in office. Willie's venal political machinery has grown bigger than the corrupt
political machinery he defeated when he became the governor. Also, by the time Chief Nanga becomes a
practising politician, he has lost his naivety and has become corrupt, manipulative, and exploitative.

What Warren and Achebe have shown is that Willie Stark and Chief Nanga are products of their
societies as much as their societies are the products of the citizens, most of whom are like these two
personalities. Thus, these two individuals are not aberrations but symbolic representations of all that is
politically perverted in their societies.

**Conclusion**

The four protagonists (Chief Nanga, Odili Samalu, Willie Stark and Mark Burden) in *A Man of the
People* and *All the King's Men* testify to the prevalence of political corruptibility in the two contexts.
Albeit the settings of the two novels are not identified, geographical and national indices establish these
as Nigeria and the U.S.A. The events are narrated by two individuals very much caught up in the general
venality of their societies. Though younger than the personalities that are the centerpieces of their
narrations, the two narrators profess no different temperament. In fact, they are active participants in the
political machinations perpetuated in the narrations. One of the major differences in the two novels is the
general attitudes toward corruption, dictatorship and political machinations. Albeit the trajectory of
politics in *All the King's Men* is always mired in egocentric self-centredness, there are always attempts by
non-political actors to protest against the unscrupulousness of politicians like Willie Stark. What is more,
some of the characters, like Judge Irwin (despite having strayed in the past) or Adam Stanton, would
rather die than be coerced or blackmailed into partaking in the corruption going on in their societies. It is
significant that after the assassination of Willie Stark at the end of the novel, Jack reposes his trust in
Hugh Miller (the former Attorney General who chose to resign from the government of Willie Stark rather than join in the venality of the governor). Some other characters like Willie's wife who abandons him when he succumbs to the corrupting influence of power but returns when he sets himself aright, provide a viable challenge to the elitist corruption of the political class. But in *A Man of the People* there is a total absence of upright personalities who will fight to improve the democratic process. According to the narrator, it is the same set of citizens who just moments prior were extolling the ‘achievements’ of the politicians that, when the same politicians are removed from office via a military coup, the same citizens now condemn the politicians' excesses while they were in office. Whereas Warren seems to be asserting that American democratic and political hopes lie solely with people like Judge Irwin, Adam Stanton, Hugh Miller and Lucy Stark, and not the political actors who are inescapably tainted by greed, power drunkenness and other vices, Achebe sees no redeeming feature in Nigeria's political landscape. The whole aspects of national life in Nigeria - politics, religion, education, economy, etc - are affected by the prevalent culture of rapacious acquisitiveness and bigotish ethnicism. Whereas Warren recognises that there is constant struggle between the forces of political corruption and the forces of uprightness in public and private lives, there is no evidence of such conflict in Achebe's novel. Both the political party in power and its opposition and indeed the general masses seem to be cut from the same cloth of greed and dishonesty.

The political realities fictionalized in the two novels testify to the differences in the political historical experiences in the contexts. Over the years the political history of Nigeria and the U.S. A. might not follow the exact trajectories configured in the novels, but, without doubt, contemporary political experiences show how uncannily discerning literature can be, with the character of Donald Trump's American political leadership and also the atmosphere of endemic political corruption in contemporary Nigeria, replicating some of 'the realities' textualised in the two novels.
السياسة عبر الثقافات: دراسة مقارنة بين (كل رجل الملك) لروبرت بن وارن و (رجل الشعب) لتشينوا أتشيبي
أولوميد أوجونروتيمي، اموليد باميجوي، سمونيل أديباو أومونود، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية والدراسات الأدبية، جامعة ولاية إكيمي، نيجيريا

الملخص

هذا البحث تحليل لسياسة الثقافات المختلفة من خلال (كل رجل الملك) لروبرت بن وارن و (رجل الشعب) لتشينوا أتشيبي، ويحلل البحث العلاقة بين الثقافة السياسية في الديمقراطية ووظائف الضباط السياسيين في النظام الديمقراطي، وتفحص الباحثة الارتباط المماثل في الروائيين ولاسيما شخصية الراوين، فكلماهما سياسي في الروايتين، ويكشف الباحث أن ملامح الثقافة السياسية في الروايات حاضرة في سياسة اليوم، والروايتان تتحدثان عن الفساد، ومشاكل الفساد، ومشاكل الديمقراطية، والعمل الجاد لتحسين السياسة في أمريكا، ووقف الفاسدين للسياسات الجيدة في نيجيريا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة السياسية، الديمقراطية، خيال، السياسة الأمريكية، السياسة النيجيرية.
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