



## Literature Can: A Sociological Reading of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake*

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**ABSTRACT:-** Literature mirrors society and literary artists reflect the realities of lives in their various societies through their literary works. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is one of the Nigerian writers who have continued to use the avenue of literature to project the realities of lives in our 21<sup>st</sup> century in the hope that through the powers in literature we could still achieve the changes, ethical values and reformation needed in many spheres of our lives. The novel, *The Presidential Handshake* is her second novel, a sequel to her first novel, *Teachers on Strike*. This paper adopted a sociological approach as the framework for the study of the novel. This approach is rooted in the idea that literature is a product of the society. It sees a literary work as nothing but a product of several real aspects of the society of a writer. Armed with this approach, the paper is interested in determining the real life social – political and economic issues that obviously gave rise to the issues in the novel under discourse. The study discovered that politics and political disillusionment as peculiar to our society formed the bedrock of the novel. But unlike many writers and works critical of politics, the writer adopted a rather different approach by casting aspersions this time, not on our leaders but on the masses whose actions and inactions provide the taproot with which the leaders continued to exploit them. The paper projected how the writer reflected a realistic picture of our society decaying as a result of bad politicking, insensitivity on the part of the masses that have lost faith in politics and view it as an avenue to loot and enrich one's generation rather than a call to serve. How the writer portrayed our society, her optimism on the emergence of new political ideology, selfless leaders and a new generation of masses who would once again glorify politics and politicians and view it as our avenue of redemption rather than exploitation is the crux of our study.

**Keywords:-** Society, Politics, Exploitation, Orientation, Reformation, Embezzlement, Oppression, Masses, Government, Leaders, Patriotic

### I. INTRODUCTION

Literature as a mirror reflects society and writers and literary artists from time immemorial and in different climes around the globe reflect their societies in their literary works. In this regard, literature has continued to fulfill its own unique function in nation development. No society exists without its literature and no literature functions in isolation of its society. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in recognition of this fact expresses thus:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape, direction, and even area of concern by social, political, economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations. (*Homecoming*, 16) [1]

Thus, literature exists in society and is given its shape, direction, concern and thematic expositions by the socio-political, economic as well as religious situations in society. This is what Ngugi wa Thiong'o rightly maintains and literature ought to at all times reflect the actions, activities and situations of men and women in society in their quest to understand their world better and make more meaningful assessment. As Charles Nnolim posits:

Literature as art deploys language embellished with pleasurable accessories, to paraphrase Aristotle ... and it is around the embellished use of language that the creative energy of the story deploys itself. And to invest the story with meaning, there must be some truth about life, something to chew over, some theme, some

moral, some philosophy of life, and some metaphor of life that tugs at the edges of a symbol. As in all art, literature is useful, for as art, it is not a waste of time. (*Morning yet on Criticism Day*, 3) [2]

This places emphasis on literature as capable of carrying to the outside world, the truth about human existence which will in turn engineer a concrete and noticeable change in society. Literature does this by employing language which paints out the writer's mind and points at the problems of society which the writer hopes through his writings to redeem and salvage for a better society.

## II. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Writers across the world have embraced this unique gift of literature to express the socio-political, economic, religious even cultural milieu of their people. These writers, under the umbrella of literature have created works whose goals are channeled towards the ideas of socio-political, economic, cultural and religious reformation. This situation and manifestation are made possible by the "inner-light" believed to be possessed by any gifted and talented writer with which may be beyond the ordinary and innermost life for the better mind of mankind. According to Wole Soyinka:

The writer possesses an inner light not available to masses of his people and that it is his duty to use this inspiration and insight to guide his society towards a beautiful future. (7) [3]

Writers and literary artists have embraced the genres of literature to preach, shout, satirize and mock in order to purge their societies of all the canker worms that have eaten deep into their very fabrics. As David Ker opines:

The writer is a member of a society and his sensibility is conditioned by social and political happenings around him. These issues will therefore perforce be present in his work. (*Literature and Society in Africa*, 7) [4] No devoted and patriotic writer can escape this task of social crusading, re-ordering, re-orientation, re-educating, engineering and re-shaping that must be done in society. In the views of Nwoga Donatus: "if it is necessary to throw bombs in order to change the society, then a writer should recognize his obligation to his society and throw as many bombs as possible ...." (4)

It follows therefore, and behooves every writer to focus the subject matter of his work towards the accomplishment and attainment of the goals of literature. A writer ought not to be like the proverbial man who was busy pursuing rat while his house was on fire. A writer in a society is the moral conscience of his society and his art should gear towards social issues and social rehabilitation. It is in tandem with this known fact about literature and literary writers in society that this paper attempts a sociological reading of Ngozi-Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake* with the aim of exploring the various socio-political and economic realities of our society that formed the matrix of the work and the writers viewpoint in the quest for a better and ideal society of our dream.

## III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

By conceptual framework we have in mind the concept on which a given research is based. The adopted theoretical and conceptual framework for this study is Sociological Criticism/ The Sociological Approach. This is one of the approaches to literary criticism. This kind of approach is rooted in the idea that literature is a product of the society. This approach looks at literature from the point of view of social issues and its relevance to the society. It sees a literary work as nothing but a product of several real aspects of the society of a writer. The experience a writer writes about is the experience of the society. Sociological Approach is rooted in the idea that literature is a product of the society. It sees a literary work as nothing but a product of several real aspects of the society of a writer. The experience a writer writes about is the experience of the society. The critic who applies sociological approach to criticism is interested in determining the real life social – political and economic issues that obviously gave rise to a work of art. It looks at any work as a realistic portrayal and representation of society in line with the idea that literature mirrors society, and reflect man in his society. In the opinions of Kofi Agyekum:

Sociological Critics argue strongly that literary works and social context are inseparable. The social milieu is embedded in the works of artists. In effect, it is the social context that serves as the raw material for the production of literary works. The social setups and the institutions in the society at any point in time combine to exert some major influence in the works of the artists. Sociological critics focus on the values of society and how those values are reflected in the literary works. Sociological critic study the economic, political and cultural issues expressed in literary works because they reflect the true picture of what exists in the society. (*Introduction to Literature*, 129) [5]

The critic who applies sociological approach to criticism is interested in determining the real life social – political and economic issues that obviously gave rise to a work of art. It looks at any work as a realistic portrayal and representation of society in line with the idea that literature mirrors society, and reflect man in his society. The critic is concerned with the way and manner the writer responded to the social issues around him at

whatever point in the history of society he writes about. This approach shares a lot in common with the Marxist theory of Karl Marx and Engels though there are peculiar core areas of concentration in the two approaches.

#### **IV. REVIEW OF RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIP ON THE SUBJECT**

This section of the paper discusses the writer and her vision as an artist in her society and reviews some of the available relevant scholarship on the writer and her works.

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is one of our 21<sup>st</sup> century writers who believe in the role of literature for social reformation and transformation. Many of her works are targeted towards exposing the ills of society and making the society better for all of us. She uses her vision as a writer to redirect the ship of the nation obviously heading towards a devastating end. She believes that her voice could help adjust some societal ills which have eaten deep into the fabrics of Africans and other societies at large. Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's literary tenacity has further been directed to the purpose of encouraging unity among the people by consenting to the affirmation that if we stand together we can institute a change in the society. This is evident in her first novel, *Teachers on Strike*. In the novel, the writer explores and exposes the nefarious and corrupt activities of our leaders and highlights how the ruling class amasses wealth and embezzles public funds to the detriment of the masses. In the opinion of Charles Nnolim about the novel, the critic maintains thus:

Chuma-Udeh has delved into the innermost places of the teachers' heart to unveil the agony of the teachers on strike. She has bared it all, the trauma, the hunger, the deprivation....A real touching story of servitude in the African contemporary society. (*Teachers on Strike*, blurb) [6]

The above statement elaborately expresses the disillusionment of the teacher towards the government that has denied them their professional rights by not paying them. The teachers in Ngozi Udeh's *Teachers on Strike* are disappointed with the government because they initially did not know that H.E (his Excellency) would turn out to be a cruel, corrupt, and selfish dictator who brings hardship upon his people. This is the height of disenchantment and disillusionment experienced by the teachers. This inspired the authors to write and expose the cruelty, corruption, and disappointment experienced by the teachers in the hands of the government. According to Cornel Ujowundu on the novel:

The novel is a post-independence narrative that unmask the nefarious and selfish nature of political leaders in Uma Providence, a modern day democracy in Nigeria. The pathetic feelings, conditions and sufferings of the masses under a heartless political dictatorship are exposed, thus, unveiling in a satirical dimension the galling nature of our leaders of today. They are neck deep in corruption, mismanagement, selfishness and unpatriotic acts which undermine the stability and well-being of society. The novelist also sardonically explores the moral decadence prevalent in the society. (43) [7]

Rems Umeasiegbu equally commented on the novel in these words:

Too scathing, too biting but all real.... A story that touches the core of posterity... An indelible mark on the society. The prototypes are all true to life- Amazingly, they are all true to life. (*TOS*, blurb)

The critic lays emphasis on the fact that Chuma-Udeh treats issues that are prevalent in our society and the world at large. According to him, she treated common issues in our society and exposed the fact that, neglect of the teachers can be disastrous to the society. The psychological and emotional traumas of the helpless masses were thoroughly explored by the author. In other words she touches every facet of the human life and she voices out her dislikes against the corrupt and ungodly practices of those in power. This tune also echoes in her novel, *The Presidential Handshake*. According to Asika Ikechukwu on the writer, the critic posits that:

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh is one of the leading voices in our 21<sup>st</sup> century literature. When it comes to politics, she is one writer who believes like Achebe that a writer cannot be separated from the socio-political issues around him which must unconsciously form the basis of his work. Her novels exist as political testaments on several of the areas our leaders have gone wrong and what they need to do if they must restore and ignite the confidence lavished on them during their time of campaign and politicking. Her latest novel, *The Presidential Handshake* is filled with hard-biting political statements, this time not just targeted on our leaders but on the masses that blow the trumpet and beat the drum that made the atmosphere favourable and conducive for our leaders to steal and exploit our limited resources. (54)

The novels of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh will ever bear witness as political satire that will one day help to orchestrate the change we are in dire need of in our country. The novel *The Presidential Handshake* is an ambitious and serious effort to help the masses see politics from an entirely different dimension that will help our leaders to serve us better. The novel addressed the problem of leadership from an entirely different perspective which hinges on the role of the masses in the leadership disorder and anarchy looming all around us. According to Indian Light on the novel:

Teacher Nebe had a morbid aversion for politics. He would have nothing to do with the people at the corridors of power until Supo Obiom invited him for a presidential handshake that changed his notion about the

nation, the art of nation building and the body polity of the nation. A deep insight into the contemporary foibles that drastically affect a nation's body polity; this book touches the core of the society's mindset. It is an apt x-ray of the relationship between the society and the polity. (*The Presidential Handshake*, Blurbs) [9]

In *The Presidential Handshake* the writer created real life situation and the level of degeneration already manifesting in the nation's polity. The writer did much to expose several real life aspects of our society especially as it affects our politics. In the novel, the writer exposed our style of politics but unlike many political novels, the writer told the truth about the state of affairs of the nation. The writer sets out to expose the role the masses play in ensuring that this cycle of exploitation, bad leadership and political exploitation continues around us. The masses, as the writer exposes, play a greater role in supporting the evils and cycle of doom evident in our nation's polity today. The masses envy these leaders and always wish that one of their fellows will be privileged to reach the pinnacle so that the money will be looted in their favour. This was the fate of Nebe the moment he was invited by the president, Supo, for a presidential handshake and all the people brought several requests on all the things expected from the president. Unknown to them that the president, just like Nebe, was worried about the notion of politics in the mindset of the people and would wish Nebe to join him in the crucial task to change the people's mindset about politics and their leaders in order to sanitize our political system and make the nation better for us again.

In *The Presidential Handshake*, the writer created real life situations and the level of degeneration already manifesting in the nation's polity. The writer did much to expose several real life aspects of our society especially as they affect our politics. In the novel, the writer exposed our style of politics but unlike many political novels, the writer told the truth about the state of affairs of the nation. It is no longer news when we criticize our leaders as being corrupt, selfish and greedy but what is yet unknown is the role the masses play in ensuring that this cycle of exploitation, bad leadership and political exploitation continues around us. The masses, as the writer exposes, play a greater role in supporting the evils and cycle of doom evident in our nation's polity today. We support the leaders and encourage them to amass the nation's wealth even to our detriment. Everybody sees politics as a call to serve, loot and acquire all the wealth a person would need even in the generation yet to come. Politics and leadership which should be a call to serve the nation now become a lifetime opportunity for the privileged few to pounce on the nation's economy and loot all the wealth they have longed desired. We shall now turn to all this in the next section of the paper.

## **V. SOCIO-POLITICAL DISILLUSIONMENT IN OUR MODERN DAY SOCIETY: LESSONS FROM CHUMA-NGOZI UDEH'S *THE PRESIDENTIAL HANDSHAKE***

The novel, *The Presidential Handshake* is one of the rare novels of our 21<sup>st</sup> century that captured the state of affairs of the nation in its multi-dimensional layers. The novel is centered on politics and its attendant political disillusionment as concerns our modern society. The novel also x-rays the lives of the people in society and hinges on many of our actions and inactions that continue to militate against our desired growth, development, peace and prosperity in almost all spheres of our lives. The novel bears the ember of the evils that lead to a failed society and echoes a message on what has to be done if we must salvage the ship of the nation heading towards a dangerous harbour. The most peculiar part of the novel, *The Presidential Handshake* is the urgent and important message which it carries as regards to our conception of politics and leadership in our society. This is one ignored area of our society which some writers may have neglected or are silent about in so many ways. The novel made it clear and projected the fact that we the masses contribute greatly to the socio-economic and political problems that perturb us as a nation. The novel located our failures as the masses. It exposed our mindsets, our actions and inactions which in so many ways help our leaders to develop political and economic taproots that enable them to exploit and oppress us continually.

Our concern in this paper is to reveal several aspects of social reality as exposed in the novel, *The Presidential Handshake*. The novel is a political satire which ridicules not just our leaders but the masses that support and provide the leaders with the needed avenues and amenities with which they exploit the people. Many aspects of social reality is especially as it concerns the state of politics in the nation. Politics is of serious concern to many writers because at the heart of politics is our economic, religious, academic and social lives and survival tied to. A good leader in society who came from the platform of politics could orchestrate a better standard of economy, reduce religious tension, promote an enviable standard of education and help to achieve the much desired social life and conformity in society. The reverse is the case when a selfish and insensitive leader emerges and our country is no stranger to greedy and avaricious politicians. She has produced many of such leaders ranging from the military dictators to selfish, mean and avaricious civilians who grab wealth only to spell doom and havoc on the masses of people who elected them into power and who have lavished much confidence in them. This is the concern of many of our Nigerian writers who are ever using their literary works to decry politics and political activities in the nation with the faint hope that the powers in their pens will someday help to achieve and provide the balance, sanity and decorum in politics which the society is in dire need of. This will go a long way to achieve socio-economic, religious and academic stability in society. All

these are part of what the writer, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh revealed and exposed in her novel that makes the novel an important literary piece worthy of being read by any patriot who still wishes to contribute his quota and make the society better for all of us.

The story in the novel centers around a teacher named Nebe. Teacher Nebe was described as a teacher with high moral standards and values for life. He is a great archivist and social crusader who always stands on the path of truth and what is right irrespective of what the leaders and society think about it. That was the only reason he was still a poor teacher despite the long years he has spent in the profession. He had rejected several avenues to enrich himself from bribery and ill-gotten wealth offered by some political leaders and he is armed with the belief that teaching is a passion, a calling and not a money-making venture. This is why he has a passionate hatred for politics as the teacher was described thus:

Teacher Nebe had a morbid aversion for politics. He would have nothing to do with the people at the corridors of power until Supo Obiom invited him for a Presidential Handshake that changed his notion about the nation, the art of nation building and the polity of the nation. (*TPH*, Blurp)

Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *The Presidential Handshake* is sequel to her first novel, *Teachers on Strike*. The novel is a continuation of the first novel where we had earlier met teacher Nebe. In *Teachers on Strike*, Teacher Nebe was a strong activist and the leader of the Teacher's Union who wedged a long enduring war with the then sole-administrator who had sacrificed the education standard of the state on the altar of politics, selfish and economic gains. Rather than His Excellency paying the teachers the needed salary to equip them and improve the standard of the schools in the state, he resorted to offering bribe to them and Teacher Nebe was the only saving grace that made the teachers not to lose the strike that lasted so long and saw the teachers lose so many things. Worst of it all, the academic standard of the state collapsed and sank into a rather sorry and pitiable state. That aspect of the story is indeed a realistic part of our society as no person from Anambra State will forget in a hurry, the long strike the teachers had during the Dr Chinweoke-Mbadinuju led administration. It was a terrible time to be a teacher in Anambra State. Chinweoke Mbadinuju, popularly known as "Odera", had a slogan that "It shall be well with Anambra State" but his actions and style of leadership especially towards the education sector proved that he had come to shatter the academic standard of the state rather than to improve on it. Though the strike later ended after the teachers had encountered hell during the long enduring months of the strike action, the aftermath of it lingered for so long in some areas of the academic standard of the state. This is part of the realistic aspect of the society the writer depicted in her first novel *Teachers on Strike*. This may not have been of serious interest and concern to us as our discussions in this section of the paper is not on the aspects of realism in *Teachers on Strike* but on *The Presidential Handshake* though written by the same author. The idea became our concern because it formed part of the issues in *The Presidential Handshake*. In the novel, Teacher Nebe had refused to let go his experiences during the strike actions and that led to his bitter hatred on politics. It was until the President, Supo visited his school that the anger was resuscitated and his hatred from the memory of the strike and its effect on the education sector came alive again. The writer captured this in these words:

... Supo's coming has brought so many bad memories to his soul. It had revived the ghosts of buried memory of the long, devastating teacher's strike action against the non-payment of their salaries by the immediate past District Administrator. It was a battle for life by the teachers. So many things were lost both physically and psychologically. People withered and died as if they were flowers starved of water. It was a terrible carnage on educational sector .... (*TPH*, 24)

This is the plight of Teacher Nebe as a result of the strike action in the first novel in the series of what is obviously shaping to be a trilogy. The strike left an indelible mark on the teacher, the society and the education sector as a result of a leader's insensitiveness. The strike took a greater percentage of the teacher's life, and that made the hatred for politics to take root and live with him. He hated the leaders and would wish to avoid them at all cost. The strike robbed him a part of him. Teacher Nebe became a representative of many teachers who may still battle to get over the psychological and traumatic experiences of the strike as the writer portrayed thus:

Since that strike, teacher Nebe had never been his real self. A very significant part of him went into the strike action but at the end of the protest, not all of him returned and he had been trying for years, to figure out which part of him that was still missing. He weighed his spiritual self, he weighed his physical and psychological self. Yet, he could not lay his hands on any tangible component of his being that was missing but he was sure something was missing. Another thing he was sure of was that the experience gathered from the strike action had taught him that no politician was worth giving an ear. He had made up his mind to create a safe distance from the politicking in the nation as he would give a hungry cheetah dangling gold in his claws. Politics was, indeed for the teacher, a very dirty game, a game of the sheathed claws of monster ready to pounce and tear ... (*TPH*, 24)

It is this definition of politics accruing from Teacher Nebe's experiences from the strike actions that shaped his life. Teacher Nebe hated politics with passion. He sees politicians as evil and oppressive sets of individuals who would continue to feed fat on the gullibility of the poor masses. Politics to him is a dirty game not worthy of venturing into or given any serious attention. Our politicians in his concept are liars, oppressors, exploiters, and bloody-tasty looters who are very insensitive and unconcerned about the plight of the masses that elected them into power. That was his belief and he vowed to stay away from politicians. That was the only reason he saw himself running far into his fellow teachers' farmland, just to escape the noise and applause coming from the hall where the school was honouring and celebrating the president of the country, Supo who came to visit the school. Supo was a former student of the school. Nebe knew him as a student full of wit, cunning and conceit and could use the power of his wit to escape from any trouble and predicament he finds himself. Supo would have loved to see his ex-student prosperous and doing well in the labour market if not for the side Supo had identified in society. Teacher Nebe would have been happy and full of admiration and praise for Supo if he had been a successful business man. But Supo was a politician and that drew the gap between the teacher and his ex-student. His realization that Supo had succeeded in the game of blood to ascend to the pinnacle of politics and become the president of the country was a noble feat but Teacher Nebe's hatred for politics would reign supreme and that was why he took the decision not to honour, appreciate, regard or even identify with his former student who had become the president of the country. He was much convinced that Supo will only be one of the politicians that feed the masses with thousands of lies they have no hope of fulfilling. He would only feed on the gullibility of the masses. He would make them promises that would never come true and amass their resources which are stashed in foreign accounts around the world. This is why the applause for Supo's address which was still reaching him many miles in the bush where he was taking refuge was a noise and irritation to him as the writer depicted thus:

The teacher wondered what this last ear-splitting prolonged applause was all about because it surpassed the 'joy' of the visitor's presence among his 'people'. It almost uprooted the school from its very foundations. Whatever it was, be it a promise to build a castle in the moon for his people, tar the roads with diamonds, water the fields with silver, he vowed never to be moved like the rest of the gullible people around him. He sat put, undaunted on the stomp of wood in Aristo's bare existentialist farm .... (TPH, 17)

This is the personality of teacher Nebe, a man who sees nothing in the ever delightful and promise filled chants of our politicians. Today in society we are familiar with politicians making empty promises to the masses during every electoral campaign period. Some of the politicians go as far as promising what civilization is yet to offer and this is an untold aspect of the realities of the lives of the people in society. The society is used to having politicians who promised heaven on earth and once elected the politicians begin to amass wealth and have no more business with the people who voted them into power. Their interest would be on the number of houses and property they would acquire abroad and the millions of dollar they would transfer in foreign account before their dispensation would be over. Once their tenure is over, they step aside for another anointed and favoured politicians who obviously have brainwashed the people with promises of gold and diamond only for them to begin to amass and loot more wealth and fortune from the nation's treasury even more than their predecessor and the cycle continues all to the detriment and ill-fate of the masses who continue to pray and look up to the political leaders to better their lots and save them from much hardship, poverty and backwardness that are fast defining the lives of many people in society. This is of serious concern to the teacher as the novelist depicted thus:

Teacher Emeka Nebe was not very happy about this mid-day roaming in the school garden but his heart was heavy, very heavy. His physical heart seems to have pains in it, as if small, sharp crystals were cutting into it. Everything seemed wrong to him, nothing was ever right these days. It was not just the ordinary quandary or misunderstanding or the tiny injustices prevalent in the daily National lives which majority of people feel pressing down on them. He felt rather serious brooding or premonition that the country was weighing down on him. (TPH, 26)

Teacher Nebe becomes symbolic of those patriotic characters in society who still have the moral conscience in them, a conscience that still allows them to feel and be part of the sufferings, failures, broken promises, victimization, oppression, exploitation and corruption that have become part of the realistic aspects of society. Through the eyes of the teacher we feel and be part of the real life sufferings of many people in society made possible by mismanagement, corruption and political instability and dichotomy. The rich are getting richer, while the poor continue to languish in poverty. It is not that the nation lacks the economic and financial muscle to pull the masses from the cesspool of poverty, but corruption and bad leaders have continue to frustrate and ensure that the wealth of the nation is not evenly distributed among the owners of the wealth, the citizens in the country. Through the eyes and character of Nebe which the writer provides as lens, we see our society struggling to survive on the altar of bad politicking, exploitation and mismanagement. This is what Teacher Nebe has come to symbolize in the novel thus:

The teacher had passed through hard times in the country. He has towed the path of war with humiliating governmental policies. He had been a major stakeholder in the struggles of the masses to rise above debilitating governmental actions and decrees but the nation's quandaries seem to be growing in intensity instead of diminishing. In his society, the poor are downtrodden, though they do not seem to mind it anyway. If they do, they would not be shouting their heads off because a seeming oppressor came on a campaign tour ... (TPH, 27)

This is the state of affairs of our society as captured by the writer in the novel. While Teacher Nebe was busy running away from Supo and his presidential entourage, little did he know that the president has come solely for him and to pull him into the politics he had avoided all his life. Just like the Biblical Jonah, Teacher Nebe was to go to Nineveh against his wishes. Unknown to the teacher, the applause that rang greatest in his ears far away in the farm where he was hiding, came when the president announced his invitation to the presidential villa for a presidential handshake and other ceremonies and that was when the agonizing fate of Nebe in the hands of politicians and society began. The moment Teacher Nebe came out from his hiding aware that the president had gone; he was greeted with applause, dance and ululation by the entire teachers who no longer see an ordinary teacher Nebe, but one who has just been invited to the presidential villa. The reason for the cheerful celebration is because this is what politics and political appointment means to the masses – an avenue to enrich one's pocket and say goodbye to poverty. Teacher Nebe was received and addressed in the depiction of the writer thus:

... Everybody wanted to touch him as if he was some sort of relics. "You are a presidential guest", Dike cracked in his deep voice. As if to explain more, a barrage of voices interpreted the information to him in various ways. "Iburu go kwa madu government", "obia ndi oyibo", "Teacher, okwa gi bu zi kwa na elu orji" "onye isi ala si gi bia rie, bia nua", "Teacher tinye kwa m na budget gi oo" .... (TPH, 34)

All the italicized words are praises showered on teacher Nebe and people's perception of his life transformation following his invitation for a presidential handshake. This is a deep exposition of the people's mentality and mindsets towards politics. The above is a typical portrayal of how our actions and inactions help to fuel the political exploitation and disorder all around us. The news was not good to Teacher Nebe but that was not what the society cares for. Everybody wished to identify with him so that he could help advance their political, economic and other selfish interests to the president. Rather than trying to bring in a change or sanity in the society people are eagerly waiting for their own turn to amass the wealth of the nation. The news soon spread like wide harmattan fire that teacher Nebe has been invited by the president for a handshake. In tandem with that, cows, goats, gifts and money became a regular sight in Teacher Nebe's house from people who needed their interest to be sold to the president. Millions of naira was promised to the teacher by different businessmen who wished to advance their business goal and economic interests. People urged him to accept the offer and alleviate himself and his family from poverty. It was indeed a lifetime opportunity in their eyes. The writer captured Teacher Nebe's situation in this scene:

"The teacher is back". A voice rang out from the roadside like the panic of a mad herd of cattle, the crowd surged forward. Nebe just had enough time to wind up the window of Dife's Jalopy before they mobbed the car ... As the gate opened, the two men thought they were dreaming. Nebe wiped his eyes thoroughly to make sure he was not having a nightmare in broad day afternoon ... As he alighted the car, he noticed that the compound was full of different types of commodities ranging from bags of rice, heaps of yams to varieties of domestic animals, there were about fifteen cows tethered in the compound, countless rams, each with gigantic horns, jars of palm oil .... (TPH, 116)

People from all works of life flooded Nebe's house seeking for one help or the other. Teachers, traditional rulers, bank workers, the students and youths, Alhajis and market union leaders all came to Nebe begging for one selfish desire or the other. The fact that Teacher Nebe continued to reject the gifts did not stop more visitors with more enticing offers to the teacher. One of the most peculiar but provoking episodes worthy of note is the visit of the Traders of the under Bridge market. The market was described as a death zone that has recorded and continues to record greater number of dead people because of the location of the market under a bridge. It was in the view of the increasing number of the people dying almost on daily basis that the government decided to build an ultra modern complex for the traders in a rather remote area far away from underneath the bridge. The idea is to protect the lives and property of the people since the market is always flooded with buyers and sellers and can thrive anywhere it is located. But the leaders of the trader union of the market did not want such change. The reason is in the selfish deal that they profit heavily from the location of the market under the bridge. They had come to bribe Teacher Nebe with millions of naira to help them convince the president that the market should not be moved. Despite being reminded about the death tolls of people and the hazards in the location, the traders argued thus in advancement of their selfish economic interest:

"Yes, oga, Teacher, but death will come when it will, even when you are asleep in your bed. We are only doing our honest business. If one person dies, the market will continue. Human life and the market is the same thing. As people die, others are born. As one trader goes, another comes. Will a soldier refuse to go to war because he may be shot? Do we because termites will eventually eat the body refuse to have our baths? The

pang of childbirth is great, but women get pregnant everyday. The leader-trader philosophized to Dife's greatest annoyance. (TPH, 145)

This is the view of the traders who would wish to remain under the bridge to maximize profit rather than moving to a safe ultra modern complex the government built for them. The head bridge market is real as well as the story surrounding it. It is located somewhere at Onitsha, the River Niger Bridge that almost marked off the territorial boundary between Anambra State and Delta State. The above scenario and many others in the novel is a bitter exposure of the mindsets of the people in the society. As this continued to increase and the perversion in the society continued to be exposed in the demands and actions of those who visit teacher Nebe, the teacher lamented bitterly:

Why had the society reduced every variable to money and nothing more? Money... money, that is what he got to hear every microsecond of the day, money was valued far above human life, money was valued far above the human soul, and money was valued far above the sanctity of the human spirit. Money! (TPH, 147)

This is the pervert mind of many people in our society. This is what brings tears to the eyes of Nebe. It was not just the traders who would wish to advance their selfish goals; even the youths came to Nebe to help them negotiate the sales of their voter's cards to the president. Dife had advised in these words:

"Do you know that these cards are your franchise and by selling them, you are selling your right to vote in the leaders of your choice? You will have no rights to participate in the nation's polity. Is that what you really want? These cards are the only power you hold over these politicians and if you dispose of them, you have disposed of the only franchise you have to make a meaningful contribution to your society. You will be selling away your rights to a better egalitarian life for just twenty thousand naira .... (TPH, 154)

But suffice it to say that this was a mere sermon to the youth who left Nebe's house still burning with desires to sell their voter's cards to a better buyer. There were many other real life aspects of our society revealed in the novel which was only a pointer that our social life and perception of politics is in a real mess. Our mindsets need to be adjusted if we nurse any hope of building a harmonized and prosperous society. The problem is not just with the leaders but also with society as Nebe was to find out later on in the novel. It was when Teacher Nebe visited the president that he realized that the man was suffering. His ideas of politics was different from what the people thought and he needed people like Nebe to help him make some positive changes and change the people's view of politics. The president, Supo had lamented bitterly thus:

... Because I felt time has come for necessary redirection of our people's mode of thoughts towards positivism. You see, teacher, it is not easy being a public figure. Everybody has a wrong notion of you, including your closest of associates. Your people expect you to bring back home all the money in the coffers of the government... they expect to go to bed and get rich the next morning because the president is their kinsman. I found myself in a most bizarre situation and I had to apply certain stringent measures one of which was to stay clear until I figure out ways of tackling the problems of making our people come to full realization that nobody is the government. The government is everybody. (TPH, 348)

The president was full of lamentation on the state of affairs of the nation and what the people expect of him. From his perspective, it was the masses that in many ways push the leaders and give them room to exploit them. That was the only reason he had invited Teacher Nebe to join him in the task of re-orienting the mindsets of people in the society for effective and good governance. The president had confessed thus:

Teacher, as I told you before, the reorientation of our people is a task uphill which only the most dedicated souls could achieve and that is where you came in. Our people were bearing so much erroneous grudges for me because I disappointed their expectations of siphoning all the money in the economy back to the purses of my friends and relatives. I needed someone to illustrate to them the falsehood of their impressions about the nation's politics. I needed someone very intelligent and incorruptible to hammer real sense into their heads and you have started doing that. (TPH, 348)

It was then that Teacher Nebe realized the plot. The president had chosen him to help him fight people's concept of politics and change their erroneous opinion about politics and nation cake. The president, aware of all Teacher Nebe passed through from people from all works of life since he was invited for the handshake pleaded with him to feel what he had felt in the three years of being a president. It was while the president continued to explain that it all downed on Teacher Nebe the reality of it all. The writer faithfully captured the scene of the realization in these words:

Realization dawned on the teacher that the problem in the country emanated from the erroneous perception of the entire society and not wholly from the nation's polity. All had misconstrued the core essence of governance. This misplacement of values had eaten so deep into the people and required very critical persistent modification. The teacher knew it would be a long journey... this march for the redemption of the country but there was hope for emancipation through a great deal of capacity building inductions for reorientation of consciousness. (TPH, 351)



The novel ended with the president and teacher Nebe, the politician and activist uniting in a common cause, a cause to salvage politics and re-orient the mindsets of the people towards the all important idea that politics is not really a call to loot but a call to serve and better the lots of the entire people in the society. It is a call to ameliorate the sufferings of many people in society and advance the nation's growth towards a more civilized, harmonious and idealized society. The people should realize that government does not belong to the leaders and politicians. Everybody is part of government irrespective of the place and level a person finds himself in the society. He owes society so much if the government will be functional and effective. This is the message, the idea the president needed to impart on the people and he needed the likes of teacher Nebe, an incorruptible social activist and crusader to help him reach out and achieve this feat And it is this idea that made the novel a patriotic piece for all, both politicians, activists and members of the society who still believe that the society will be better.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has done much to expose some of the social issues highlighted in the novel, *The Presidential Handshake*. The novel through a sociological approach examines the various social issues and aspects of social reality portrayed by the writer which bother on politics and polity of the nation. The idea and information gleaned from the novel may sound absurd from our knowledge of our political leaders today but the truth is that the writer succeeded in reflecting many real life experiences and affairs of the society. The novel was able to locate the problems of politics. With familiar characters, in familiar places of society, the writer made a point that politics will be better and society too if only we can change our mindsets towards politics and political leaders. If only we know our rights and our powers and if the leaders realize that politics could still be a call to serve and not to loot and plunder, the society would be salvaged. The president, Supo, in the novel, becomes symbolic of the rare kind of leader which we clamour for and continue to wait for in our society. The president is symbolic of the new generations of leaders yet to come, the leaders that would help once again to restore order and sanity in our political sector and restore politics to the enviable height of a call to serve and not to loot and plunder the economy. Teacher Nebe on the other hand, is symbolic of those patriots who still nurse in them the frail hope that the society could still be better and took it upon themselves to shine as light, a light others ought to imitate in order to foster peace, prosperity and good ethical values in the society. If the politicians and activists could unite in one common cause like they did in the novel, we too could reconcile our differences and only then can we be ready to build the desired socio-political, economic and academic polity we are all in dire need of.

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