
**Echoes of Empire: Neocolonial Bureaucracy and Identity Politics in
*The Prime Minister***

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Abstract This article explores the lingering grip of neocolonial governance in Austin Clarke's *The Prime Minister*, particularly through the protagonist's confrontation with institutional racism, cultural tokenism, and disillusionment with post-independence ideals. Set against the backdrop of a postcolonial Caribbean democracy, the novel exposes the contradictions and betrayals embedded in Black leadership structures that replicate colonial power dynamics. Drawing on the works of Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and contemporary critiques of neocolonialism, this paper situates Clarke's narrative within a broader discourse of imperial residue and systemic exclusion.

Rather than depicting political independence as a moment of liberation, Clarke presents it as a continuation of imperial domination under a new guise. Bureaucracy, symbolic appointments, and international economic dependencies all function to maintain structures of inequality. The protagonist's personal journey—from an idealistic intellectual to a disillusioned insider—mirrors a wider narrative of betrayed revolution and compromised nationhood. His marginalization within a supposedly liberated state raises pressing questions about the limits of representation and the complicity of Black elites in sustaining colonial hierarchies.

Ultimately, *The Prime Minister* is not simply a political novel but a searing indictment of failed emancipation, where symbolic representation masks enduring inequality. Clarke uses fiction as a tool to unveil the performative nature of postcolonial power and to critique the superficiality of institutional change that does not dismantle colonial foundations. His narrative contributes meaningfully to ongoing debates about neocolonialism, identity politics, and the role of literature in political resistance.

Keywords: neocolonialism, post-independence betrayal, symbolic representation, Black Caribbean leadership, institutional racism, political tokenism, bureaucratic oppression, identity politics, intersectionality, postcolonial disillusionment, literature as political resistance

Introduction: Clarke's Critique of Postcolonial Authority in *The Prime Minister*, Austin Clarke delivers a sharp and unflinching critique of postcolonial authority and the illusion of national sovereignty. Through the unnamed protagonist—a former journalist turned political advisor—Clarke dissects the rot at the core of Caribbean political systems that ostensibly replaced colonial rule with Black governance. However, what appears as independence is exposed as a mirage, concealing the continuity of colonial logic in new forms. Clarke draws a bleak picture of betrayal, not by foreign rulers, but by native elites who perpetuate exclusion through bureaucracy and symbolic power.

Clarke's decision to center the novel on a disillusioned insider allows him to expose the inner workings of power with both subtlety and precision. The protagonist's journey into the heart of political authority reveals how postcolonial governments—despite their nationalistic rhetoric—remain structurally entangled with colonial legacies. The façade of democratic rule is maintained, but the apparatus of state control has simply shifted hands. Bureaucratic procedures, political rituals, and state-sponsored propaganda act as instruments of dominance rather than instruments of liberation.

The protagonist's disillusionment is immediate and layered. Appointed to the Prime Minister's office as a gesture of inclusion, he soon realizes that his presence is performative rather than transformative. His appointment is not a recognition of merit but a tactic of control—designed to showcase diversity without redistributing power. This political theatre masks deeper issues: the persistence of class divisions, the marginalization of radical thought, and the subservience of national policies to global capital.

Clarke's narrative echoes Frantz Fanon's prophetic warning in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where the failure to decolonize institutions leads native ruling classes to serve as intermediaries of empire. The protagonist is trapped in this paradox. He is a Black intellectual working for a Black Prime Minister, yet he feels more politically alienated than he did under colonial rule. His experience becomes a metaphor for postcolonial disillusionment—an indictment of a leadership class that has replaced colonial masters but continues to uphold colonial modes of governance.

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of

the Earth that native ruling classes, when failing to decolonize their institutions, become gatekeepers of imperial systems.

22. Neocolonial Theory: Fanon, Nkrumah, and Modern Bureaucracy The novel finds rich theoretical resonance in the works of Frantz Fanon and Kwame Nkrumah, both of whom cautioned against the insidious nature of neocolonialism—the covert continuation of imperialism through economic dependency, cultural dominance, and bureaucratic control. Fanon's searing critique of the post-independence bourgeoisie in *The Wretched of the Earth* finds direct narrative echoes in Clarke's depiction of the Prime Minister and his circle. Rather than dismantling colonial hierarchies, Clarke's post-independence leaders adopt them, cloaking domination in the language of self-rule. In *The Prime Minister*, power is not redistributed but rebranded; colonial titles give way to local ones, yet the machinery of exclusion remains firmly in place.

Kwame Nkrumah's landmark text *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* outlines how external control is maintained through strategic economic entanglements, foreign investment, and policy influence—features that Clarke subtly weaves into the narrative through references to international donors, consultants, and IMF dictates. The protagonist is acutely aware that decisions within the Prime Minister's office are shaped not solely by national priorities but by global capital and economic coercion. Thus, national sovereignty is exposed as a veneer, behind which Western interests continue to dictate the socio-economic agenda.

Clarke deepens this critique through his portrayal of modern bureaucracy as a mechanism of oppression. Bureaucratic language, protocol, and rituals serve not transparency or efficiency but obfuscation and control. The state becomes a fortress guarded by formality, where access to power is mediated through performative allegiance and rhetorical compliance. The Prime Minister, though lauded as a Black nationalist hero, functions as an autocrat cloaked in the trappings of democracy. His use of bureaucracy to marginalize dissenters and stifle opposition mirrors the colonial strategies of silencing political adversaries through legalism rather than open violence.

Moreover, the protagonist's navigation of this bureaucratic landscape reveals how neocolonialism permeates not just policies but the very psyche of governance. Clarke critiques a system in which liberation is reduced to the management of appearances—where performative nationalism conceals the erosion of agency, and proceduralism becomes a substitute for justice. The neocolonial condition, in this light, is not a return to old colonialism

but its mutation into subtler, more psychologically pervasive forms.

Kwame Nkrumah's foundational text *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* outlines how economic dependency and bureaucratic manipulation allow former colonial powers to control newly independent states. Clarke's narrative mirrors this warning. The protagonist observes how international donors, foreign consultants, and IMF conditions shape national policies from behind the scenes. Local governance, though Black in appearance, serves interests that remain fundamentally Western.

Moreover, Clarke highlights the way bureaucracy becomes a tool of repression. Civil service rules, diplomatic etiquette, and governmental rituals create a wall of inaccessibility around power. The Prime Minister, though hailed as a Black liberator, is depicted as an autocrat who uses bureaucracy to silence dissent. This replication of colonial structures within a supposedly decolonized state reflects the neocolonial condition in its most insidious form.

3. Tokenism and Betrayal: The Protagonist's Political Entrapment The protagonist's appointment to the Prime Minister's office is emblematic of tokenism—a calculated and performative inclusion designed not to empower but to pacify and neutralize dissent. Initially idealistic and hopeful, the protagonist accepts the role believing that his intellectual credentials and journalistic background will enable him to influence policy and inspire reform. However, his growing awareness of the symbolic nature of his position reveals a harsh truth: he has not been invited to participate in power, but to endorse it with his presence. Clarke masterfully unpacks this disillusionment by portraying how the protagonist's voice is silenced within bureaucratic procedures and public decorum. His suggestions are dismissed, his contributions are sidelined, and his proximity to power is rendered meaningless. Rather than being a change-maker, he becomes a political ornament, strategically positioned to showcase diversity while masking systemic inertia. His identity as a Black intellectual is commodified, transformed into a symbol of progress that the regime parades without ever allowing genuine influence.

The betrayal Clarke portrays is not limited to the protagonist's personal experience; it is emblematic of a broader generational disillusionment. The protagonist represents a class of post-independence thinkers and activists who once believed in national transformation. Their energies, however, are systematically absorbed, diluted, and neutralized by the very state structures they sought to dismantle. This betrayal marks a shift from revolutionary optimism to existential despair—a crisis of belief not only in leadership but in the viability of political redemption.

The protagonist's internal conflict deepens when he realizes that dissent in this system is not merely discouraged—it is criminalized. The state apparatus, eager to maintain its image of stability and unity, deploys a range of tools to suppress criticism: surveillance, targeted media narratives, covert intimidation, and professional sabotage. In this climate, truth-telling becomes a radical act, and allegiance to power is prized over integrity or justice.

Ultimately, Clarke uses the protagonist's political entrapment to expose the dark heart of neocolonial governance. Tokenistic appointments serve to reinforce the illusion of democratic inclusion while keeping actual control concentrated in a narrow elite. The protagonist's experience reflects the broader tragedy of postcolonial statehood: a society where representation substitutes for transformation, and where loyalty is demanded not to principles, but to political survival.

Clarke portrays this betrayal not just as personal, but as generational. The protagonist represents a cohort of post-independence intellectuals who believed in reform but found themselves co-opted by the very systems they sought to challenge. Their radical energies are absorbed, diluted, and silenced. This political entrapment becomes a form of existential crisis—a loss of faith not only in leadership but in the very possibility of liberation.

The betrayal is further compounded by the protagonist's realization that dissent is not merely discouraged but criminalized. Surveillance, censorship, and character assassination are all tools used to maintain the regime's image. In this environment, truth becomes dangerous, and loyalty is demanded not to ideals but to power.

4. Intersectionality: Race, Gender, and Leadership While the novel is centered on male political spaces, Clarke does not ignore the intersection of race and gender in the architecture of power. The few female characters who appear in *The Prime Minister* are situated on the margins—both as women navigating a patriarchal political order and as citizens within a neocolonial state. Their silence, absence from positions of power, and vulnerability to manipulation underscore how gender compounds the exclusions that race alone cannot fully explain. These characters, while peripheral to the central plot, embody the doubly marginalized status of Black women under both colonial and postcolonial regimes.

Clarke uses this marginalization to problematize the protagonist's own claims to victimhood. Though structurally disempowered within the Prime Minister's office, the protagonist still occupies a position of male privilege that conditions how he interprets power, failure, and betrayal. His gaze is often blind to the systemic subjugation of women, revealing the

gendered blind spots in his critique of the regime. This nuanced portrayal challenges the idea that exclusion is monolithic; rather, it shows that oppression is stratified and complex.

Moreover, the Prime Minister's leadership style—domineering, paranoid, performative—reflects a deeply masculinist conception of authority inherited from colonial military and patriarchal traditions. His cabinet, composed almost entirely of men, reinforces this dynamic. Clarke draws attention to how these performances of masculinity are central to state power: domination, control, emotional detachment, and suppression of dissent are coded as strengths. In contrast, voices that question or complicate this model—particularly women's voices—are ignored or erased.

The protagonist, despite his intellectual independence and growing disenchantment, is not free of these masculinist frameworks. His ambitions, frustrations, and even modes of resistance are filtered through a lens of male entitlement and individualism. He rarely engages with feminist perspectives or the experiences of the women around him. In this way, Clarke demonstrates that even dissident figures can be implicated in the very structures they oppose.

An intersectional reading thus enriches our understanding of power in *The Prime Minister*. It reveals how race, gender, and class are interwoven to sustain neocolonial hierarchies. Clarke critiques not just the corruption of the regime, but also the limitations of resistance that fails to account for these interlocking systems of domination. The novel becomes a powerful testament to the necessity of broadening our political critiques to include gendered and intersectional dimensions of postcolonial governance.

5. Dismantling the Myth of Representation One of Clarke's most incisive interventions in *The Prime Minister* is his deconstruction of the myth that representation automatically translates to empowerment. The novel exposes the dangerous assumption that simply placing Black individuals in positions of power guarantees justice, equity, or systemic change. Through the protagonist's disillusioning experience, Clarke makes clear that symbolic presence—absent structural transformation—becomes a tool for pacification rather than liberation.

The protagonist, appointed as an advisor within a government led by a Black Prime Minister, represents the ideal of post-independence national inclusion. However, this symbolic role proves hollow. Despite his proximity to power, he is systematically excluded from real decision-making. His visibility serves to legitimize the regime while obscuring its underlying

continuities with colonial structures. Clarke thereby critiques the tokenistic strategies through which power maintains its facade of inclusivity while entrenching inequality.

This critique resonates with broader postcolonial dynamics where nationalism is often conflated with justice, and where the elevation of native elites is mistaken for emancipation. Clarke dismantles this illusion by showing how newly independent governments frequently mirror the oppressive apparatus of their colonial predecessors. Representation becomes a performance, a spectacle orchestrated to manage dissent and project an image of progressive governance. Beneath the surface, the mechanisms of silencing and exclusion remain intact. Crucially, Clarke also indicts the post-independence intellectual class for its complicity in sustaining this myth. Journalists, writers, and public intellectuals who once agitated for revolution become absorbed into the state apparatus. Their critiques soften, their radicalism is diluted, and their silence is secured through strategic appointments, ceremonial honors, and social capital. The novel stages a moral reckoning: Who speaks truth to power when power buys silence? What happens to dissent when the dissenter is invited into the palace? *The Prime Minister* does not simply mourn the protagonist's personal loss of idealism—it uses his story to expose the broader betrayal of a generation. In doing so, Clarke challenges readers to distinguish between superficial forms of empowerment and the deeper, often more difficult, task of dismantling unjust systems. The novel insists that real liberation demands more than visibility; it demands accountability, redistribution, and structural change.

6. Conclusion: Fiction as Political Resistance *The Prime Minister* is more than a political novel—it is a work of resistance that interrogates the enduring legacies of colonialism within ostensibly liberated postcolonial societies. Clarke uses fiction as a vehicle to unravel the myths of sovereignty, representation, and democratic inclusion that surround Caribbean governance in the wake of independence. Through the protagonist's gradual disillusionment, the novel dissects how power operates through performance, bureaucracy, and symbolic gestures rather than genuine structural change.

What distinguishes Clarke's critique is its dual focus: he exposes not only the failures of political leaders but also the complicity of intellectuals, civil society, and citizens who become entangled in the spectacle of power. The protagonist's trajectory—from hopeful reformer to silenced dissident—becomes a cautionary tale about the limitations of representation without accountability. Clarke positions literature as an act of intervention, capable of rendering visible the silences and betrayals that official histories often suppress. By weaving personal alienation with institutional critique, Clarke crafts a narrative that is both contextually specific and universally resonant. The protagonist's struggles echo those

faced by many postcolonial thinkers, activists, and citizens caught between ideals of freedom and the realities of systemic entrenchment. In doing so, *The Prime Minister* affirms the potential of fiction not only to reflect political failure but to galvanize critical thought and demand ethical engagement with history, governance, and the future.

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