

*An International Journal of Language, Literature and
Gender Studies (LALIGENS)*

Ethiopia

Vol. 3 (2), Serial No 8, May, 2014: 30-46

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v3i2.3>

ANECDOTE AS A PERSUASIVE STYLISTIC
TECHNIQUE IN PUSONNAM YIRI'S *BLINDNESS
OF THE MIND: NO ONE IS USELESS*

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Abstract

The paper explores anecdotes as a stylistic technique in the language of persuasion using samples from Yiri's Blindness of the Mind (2011). It attempts a textual analysis of some extracts from the novella using a Functional Stylistics Framework of M. A. K. Halliday. It analyses the writer's ability to manipulate situations with the addition of verbal language to convey, persuade, influence and project convincing messages to persons in order to achieve or elicit specific positive results. This paper focuses on anecdotes and how they advance the plot of the text. The study equally examines the metaphorical manipulation of language through anecdotes to support an opinion

and also to catch the reader(s) attention. It foregrounds the persuasive importance of anecdotes by bringing to the fore the anecdotal evidence deployed. The analyses show that anecdotes have effectively helped to enhance the linguistic and literary/aesthetic appeal of the text. It concludes that anecdotes are creative and active ways often used to gain the reader's interest in the written text. This persuasive technique is used not only to draw the reader (audience) into an argument or reasoning but also to reinforce, re-orientate, incite, subvert, clarify or simplify a particular point in an apt and forceful manner.

Introduction

Although the authorial intention was to use a figurative language in order to make his communication to be powerful, forceful and memorable as anecdotes to convey his points, the same linguistic/literary device may equally be seen as a parable since it lends itself to a variety of meanings and interpretations.

Blindness of the Mind deals with moral, spiritual and socially sensitive subjects/issues of prostitution, immoral acquisition of wealth and lack of positive orientation to moral, social and spiritual value and decay among other issues as a way of life of the characters in the story. It is inconceivable that a writer could broach these sensational matters without appearing to be chastising, sermonizing and condemning the people for their moral recklessness and ineptitude. But Yiri was not explicit and also non-didactic in his attempt to deplore, condemn, sanitize, re-orientate and discourage the people from this mode of moral turpitude. He demonstrates artistic, literary bravery and uncommon ingenuity in crafting and using stylistic and rhetorical devices among which the anecdote stands out.

In this prose/narrative there is an interesting blend of anecdote – a feature of language, imagery, and sincerity which the author employs or uses to tell his story. The author uses anecdote scopiously as a subtle persuasive linguistic technique in the linguistic repertoire of the protagonist (Nachau) to anchor his thoughts and views as firmly as

possible in concrete reality. He also uses it to convince, convict and convert the people he interacted with to a change in positive behaviour without being aggressive and also appearing to dictate, insist or impose considering the religious and cultural attitude towards these types of behaviour in the society. The novel glows with anecdotes which deepen the rather simple plot by lending deeper and wider implications to the story. The effect of the anecdotal evidence is to allow the reader(s)/ audience to grasp the actual message via introspective and reflective thinking.

The general stylistic framework adopted in this study is that of the functionalist stylistics of Michael Halliday. Traditionally recognized functional styles are (1) Rhetoric (persuasive function) Rhetoric is the art of public speaking and any techniques which make such speeches more effective are referred to as rhetorical devices. (2) Publicistic (informative function – to announce things – and scientific (educational function). Also, functional styles can be classified as subjective (colloquial and aesthetic) and objective (administrative and scientific) (Mistrik 31).

Several scholars have tried to define the term ‘Stylistics’ though an agreed definition remains elusive. Wales’s definition is as follows:

Stylistics: The study of style ... just as style can be viewed in several ways, so there are several stylistic approaches. This variety in Stylistics is due to the main influences of linguistics and literary criticism ... by far the most common kind of material studied is literary; and attention is largely text-centred The goal of most Stylistics is not simply to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their functional significance for the interpretation of text; or in order to relate literary effects to linguistic “causes” where these are felt to be relevant... (437-8)

Stylistics is “a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language” (Simpson 2) while it is defined by

Leech and Short as “the linguistic study of style”(11) and also Widdowson defines it as “the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation” (4). Mistrik opines that stylistics is “the study of choice and the types of use of linguistic, extra-linguistic and aesthetic means, as well as particular technique used in communication” (31). He also defines” stylistic or text analysis as a procedure which aims at the linguistic means and devices of a given text.” The goal of most stylistic studies is not simply to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake but to show their functional significance. It is in this guise that this study is undertaken to explore the functional significance of the use of this device Anecdote in this text.

Anecdote has been largely described and used in different speech and written situations as a stylistic technique and as a way of providing ‘anecdotal evidence’ in communication (Moore and Stilgoe 2009; Larson 2011;) but many studies have not attempted to investigate the phenomenon of anecdote in relation to persuasion or explore the ways the anecdotal evidence is treated as an objectively defined unit of data to be analyzed on account of the language – psychological(through the use of words indicating emotional, cognitive or social processes) and also proverbs, wise sayings, humour employed in them.

Research Questions

These are the questions that underpin the objective of this study. Specifically, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- (a) Does the use of anecdote as a technique/device make the text more comprehensible?
- (b) Is the use of anecdote an effective, efficient and reliable way of writing?
- (c) Do anecdotes in this text help to advance the plot of the narrative?

Synopsis of the Text

Blindness of the Mind deals with the entangled fates of Felicia, Anano, Selemo and other characters in the story compelled to become the

dregs of the society by their way of life and the type of profession they engage in.

Nachau Turomale, a protagonist in the story chooses a hotel environment to stay and write a book despite the nature of the place as a hotel and brothel. He wants to be free from domestic interferences in order to concentrate on the writing. He is taken to be a prospective client by the ladies of red light district and is boldly approached by one of these ladies of easy virtue named Felicia. But Nachau politely rejects her offer by his smart use of illustrative linguistic skills that makes Felicia start thinking deeper.

Nachau's encounter with Felicia, Anano, Goddy and others helps to bring about a total re-orientation and transformation of these personalities through his interrogative discussion and peculiar style of analyzing issues. It makes the people he converses with think deeper and reason better and this makes them to make profound discoveries about themselves and their different situations. These people's encounter with Nachau makes them have a new hope in life.

In these conversations, Nachau is playing a precarious game. Perhaps his co-conversationalists are implicitly invited to make their own judgments about their own social standing and mode of living. This new attitude induced by introspective thinking provides a way out of a morally confused and economically hostile world. Nachau does not encourage them to think of life as impossibility but prods them consciously and subtly to see a new way of life that is both rewarding and liberating. His encounter with these people hitherto thought of as useless in the society results in their social, moral and spiritual transformation.

The Concept of Anecdote

Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus defines anecdote as 'a short usually amusing account of an incident'. The etymology of the word dates back to about C17; from Greek 'anekdotos' which is unpublished. Nordquist has defined Anecdote as 'a short account (or narrative) of an interesting or amusing incident often intended to

emphasize, illustrate or support some point one wished to make' (about.com). Also, O'Donovan and Kirwan see it as a 'short account of an interesting incident in a person's life. In discursive writing anecdotes are often used to gain the reader's interest before introducing more difficult information.' An anecdote is a story – in all general issues of life as well a short narrative, usually reporting an amusing incident (that is, a single event /experience) in the life of a person or an important person. An anecdote often relays a story that can be used as a theme or lesson. It can also be a scene or story added in just few sentences to connect with the reader, explain a point and adds interest. People generally find anecdotes and anecdotal evidence highly compelling, it could be basically that humans are social story telling animals – we instinctively learn by the experience of others – a case of learning from others' mistakes, which could be a lesson in a positive way or a warning to desist from negative ways. It plays a key and powerful role in speeches, writings, and professions and even in early education and development of young children. Anecdotes and anecdotal experience are clearly individual, and thus lend themselves to reconstruction in terms of 'subjective' versus 'objective' modes of thought. Though Touraine has argued that the success of Modernity lay in its alienation of the subject, the separation of the ordinary person from the instruments of rationality(Touraine 215) and also as Ulrich Beck has presented a similar analysis: Experience – understood as the individual's sensory understanding of the world – is the orphan child of the sensitized world'(Beck 15) but an anecdotal evidence is capable of carrying the knowledge of the risk/ situation that is valid, and useful which is useful to humanities, sociology and other disciplines.

An anecdote is not just an ornamentation used in writing but it is an important feature of language event which underscores its importance as pivots for the spontaneous transfer of thoughts and concepts found to be descriptive of the relevant situation. It is often used in discourse which is concerned with exploiting this language potential and connoting a certain atmosphere or mood.

The meaning or interpretation of an anecdote in Nigerian context, for instance might not be obtained without a deep understanding of the several aspects of the socio-cultural milieu of an anecdote. Over the time, each community develops a repertoire of vocabulary that fulfils its communication needs. This repertoire generally reflects the social concern, occupations, worldview, physical, regional and geographical environment of the people and it is this collective inventory that constitutes the anecdote which the community communicates with.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The message of this text is projected within the anecdotal evidence of the situation in the novel. Many authors have made use of anecdotes in their writing for different reasons. Yiri has used anecdotes in his novel profusely to project his message and also as an integral element in the development of his ideas or points and the story line. Anecdotes are encountered on almost every page. For this reason, we shall only discuss a representational sample, randomly selected from the different parts of the text. The analysis will concentrate on how the anecdotes have been used to project the text's message.

Extract 1: 'A story was told a goat that found itself dealing with a big problem because its owner was ill. If the owner died, there would be a funeral, and if he recovered, there would be a thanksgiving service. Both occasions would require meat.'(10)

The first anecdote involves the use of an animal imagery to influence the hearer (interlocutor). It is based on a dilemma that can be viewed and solved from different perspectives. For the owner of the goat, recovery from ailment is his/her greatest desire. For the goat, however, the only viable option that guarantees its survival is the continued ill-health of its master with no prospect of recovery or death. The practical solution that can work for the goat however is fraught with humour. In this anecdote, three main linguistic/literary elements are dilemma, humour and resolution from which ever perspective. Yiri

uses a sympathetic tone that may make the reader(s) sympathize with the actors caught in this unfortunate situation or predicament.

Extract 2: ‘Christmas, New Year and other festive periods come and go, but the owner of the cock would rather buy meat from the market than kill his cock. A wise cock should knock at the door of its owner every morning, and thank him for the chance to live’ (11).

Though this anecdote also uses animal imagery, it throws up an issue of existentialism and man’s helplessness in the hands of its creator. Yet it is an illustration of the benevolence of God our creator in allowing us to be alive despite many occasions He would have allowed us to die being mere mortals in His hands that could be easily dispensed with anytime and ‘just as flies are to the wanton boys so are humans to the gods (God).’

For the reader(s), the anecdote produces and provokes a sincere and innate desire to be appreciative of the mercy of God in our lives and also the need to be thankful to God. The writer uses a penetrative and indicting tone that would set one’s mind in turmoil and also stimulate an action on the part of the hearer in the text and the reader(s).

Extract 3: ‘A young lion was pampered by its parents. It had never known hunting experiences. One day, as it was playing with a young antelope, it ran to its mother and cried that it was hungry. They looked at it, laughed, and said, ‘My son, that little antelope you played with is food’ (15).

This anecdote promotes entrepreneurship – one’s ability to be entrepreneurial because great things start from small beginnings. The writer is very frank and also maintains detached, rational tones in stating this anecdote. It proposes a practical solution to Selemon’s or one’s inability to identify and realize the usefulness and importance of what one has at his disposal which could be in terms of coping skills, talent, intelligence or even professional competence because of total dependence on others for all kinds of provision, particularly financial. This story discourages and does not condone idleness,

laziness and also stresses the loss of important experiences of growth, freedom of being independent and also being at the whims and caprices of the provider. It is a case of he who pays the piper dictates the tune.

It is a euphemistic way of de-emphasizing total dependence on others which degrades human dignity, lack of productivity, discernment by insight and responsibility and enthronement of the culture of industry. It focuses on issues of personal responsibility and encourages those with technical capacity but not the financial capacity to undertake any venture and be creative and make a living from it without waiting for handouts from people. The writer has tailored the anecdote this way to influence the reader(s) towards value reorientation.

Extract 4a: ‘When a doctor prescribes a drug to a patient, no matter how good it is, if it causes terrible side effects that can lead to worse problems than the disease in focus, a good doctor changes it’(22).

This anecdote on educational issue uses a frustrating tone to depict the emotional, psychological, traumatic feeling of inferiority that people go through or experience because of their inability to pass English language as one of the important basic requirements for admission into any of the Nigerian universities for further studies. The hopeless situation of this traumatic educational policy makes Nachau advocate a change in this approach because to many it is like asking them to do the impossible or embark on a ‘mission impossible’ which could be devastating to the victims. Nachau proposes for a policy overhaul and a creation of a new standard to solve this monstrous problem in the educational sector.

Extract 4b: ‘A man and some women in a canoe that was loaded with firewood were crossing a river. The man paddling the canoe suddenly saw a snake among the woods. If he informed the women, they would panic, and possibly drown in the river. As the best option, he kept quiet until they reached the shore’ (22).

The anecdote gives prominence to the raw display of bravery and uncommon determination even in the face of tragic danger which placed the occupants of the canoe in a dilemma both with deadly or tragic consequences. Sprinkled within the anecdote are compassion-evoking sentiments, designed to elicit the sympathy of the reader. Common sense will make the man attempt killing the snake in the canoe, but wisdom urged him to deal with the situation otherwise. The lesson learnt in this could be that the goal of every decision should be to save, not to inflict havoc.

Extract 5: ‘The eyes see together, cry together and sleep together, but they have never seen each other. That doesn’t mean they are not together’ (36).

This anecdote clearly reveals the writer’s stance on co-operation using one of the sensitive parts of the body that gives light or vision to highlight the essence of teamwork in the society, even when we are not together in the same geographical space.

Extract 6: ‘A cat fish found itself in the midst of thorns, and cried to other cat fish for help. When they came, they realized that if they tried to rescue it, they would also be injured. The trapped fish thought of calling a man to help it, but knew that after being pulled out by man, it would end up in a pot. It had no option, but to struggle out of the thorns despite pain and injuries’ (40).

The power in this anecdote stems from the dilemma that can be solved only with perseverance, doggedness and tenacity in the face of a problem by the victim. It portrays the essence of this experience in the ability to hold on in the face of danger, to be able to struggle and free ourselves from the quagmire that seems inevitable and inescapable; from every opposition, difficulty by ourselves despite the pain and injuries we might encounter or experience because every vision has its challenges and that the door of success opens to those who push hardest.

Extract 7: ‘A story was told of a lion and a rat. Out of hunger, the lion caught a rat to eat. The rat begged the lion not to eat it because it would one day be useful to it. The lion laughed at it, and attempted to eat it because there was no way a rat could help a lion After many persuasions by the rat, the lion finally set it free. One day, the lion was caught in a net trap. All its efforts to escape proved abortive. Suddenly, it saw passing by the rat it had earlier let go. The lion begged the rat to help it out ‘I told you that I would be useful to you one day,’ the rat reminded the lion. Eventually, it used its teeth to cut off the net. The lion escaped to freedom as a result’ (46).

This anecdote is basically that of one good turn deserves another. It has a patronizing tone that propels one to action and to be of assistance to one another.

Extract 8: ‘There was a time we saw a hen at a zoo, in a python’s cage searching and eating food freely, while the python was having its rest. The hen probably had no idea of the danger around it. After some time, we went to the zoo again, but the hen was not in the cage’ (48).

This anecdote has a solemn tone that forces people or one to think in retrospect of the essence and ephemeral nature of life. A lesson to be deduced from this is that no one knows when his/her earthly sojourn or journey would end and it encourages us to make hay while the sun shines before it becomes late.

Extract 9: ‘My past lifestyle was one of bitterness. While in secondary school, my friends introduced me to hard drugs. As a result, I became a nuisance to my parents and community. ... Nobody thought that anything good would ever come out of me. One thing led to the other. I eventually found myself stealing my parent’s money in order to maintain my addiction to drugs. My father, out of anger, sent me to a young people’s home for rehabilitation. Since I could not get drugs at the

centre, I chose aggression as a way of escape from my problems.... After three months in the centre, I was finally released with an undertaking that I would be a good boy. Things became worse two months after my release. I left home, and joined my friends in another state, where we were involved in reckless lifestyles with women who were into prostitution and other things that are now horrible to mention' (67).

In this anecdote, Nachau forges a common ground between him and the reader, in a goal that they share. It stems from the fact people who have confronted and surmounted certain experiences seem to form an ally and understand one another better. The dominant trend in this story is the rise of man from secularism, degrading personality and rudimentary life to an improved living as the quality of moral change of attitude, behavioural change from all the trends of activities that dethrone God and enthrone man/materialism as 'god'.

A mood of sympathy prevails in this story and it generates feelings of empathy.

Extract 10: 'An old woman came to a man and begged him to allow her to farm on his piece of land. After due consideration, he approved her request, but with the understanding that he was expecting some money to start building a house on the land. Any time he had the money, he would start the project. The old woman agreed to his condition and started her farm project The maize the woman sowed grew well. She applied fertilizer and waited for it to mature. Everybody loved her farm. Eventually, the landowner got the money he had been expecting. Early in the morning, he hired a bulldozer and cleared the land together with the old woman's farm The old woman was angry with him for that. Others criticized him bitterly for his wickedness in not considering the hardship of the old woman and the tenderness of the farm (90- 91).

The influence of this anecdote lies in the theme of forgiveness that lies beneath this message but that seems on the surface to be an act of wickedness and injustice done to the old woman by his benefactor who had earlier given a condition on which to give her the piece of land to cultivate but who also destroyed the well-tended farm without allowing her to enjoy the fruit of her hard work and labour. The tones of helplessness, anger, bitterness and contempt were apparent. However, the message is that God has clearly explained to us in His word that we would not live on earth forever and death is real for everyone – young or old.

Findings/Discussion of Research Questions

From the data used as samples, it shows that an anecdote is used as evidence in an argument or persuasion to convince or persuade a reader. An anecdote supports an argument, but it is not supported by any scientific analysis or statistical evidence. Anecdotal evidence are based on anecdotes or examples from experience which offer some proof in favour of an argument, possibly not true or accurate or may be just soft evidence of expert opinion. Anecdotes affect the reader's opinions, orient him morally towards more beneficial and positive socio-moral goals and warn about impending socio-moral, religious pitfalls.

Sometimes anecdotes are humorous, but they are not jokes because their primary purpose is not simply to evoke laughter but to reveal a truth more general than the brief tale itself, or to delineate an institutional or a character trait in such a light that it strikes in a flash of insight to the very essence of the anecdote. Also anecdotes used in certain situations are true and discerning the intentions of the heart of the audience/reader(s).

(a) Does the use of anecdote as a technique/device make the text more comprehensible?

The use of anecdotes in this text actually makes the text more understandable. Anecdotes are usually concrete and they make writing more vivid, they may help the writer to make his point more clearly

because they make elusive, definite and unfamiliar, familiar. The language style of the text is informal, that is conversational throughout the novella. The use of many anecdotes suggests that the writer is seeking one's emotional response or sympathetic involvement in the work.

The writer appears to have made the characters and the reader(s) to be anxious to change their own perspective and way of life; probably through the effect or influence of the lucid and succinct use of the anecdotes as soft evidence that illustrate and clarify some points in the work.

(b) Is the use of anecdote an effective, efficient and reliable way of writing?

Using anecdotes and anecdotal evidence is very persuasive as it makes the reader see the author as knowledgeable and the argument as more logical or reliable. Their persuasiveness lies in their specificity unlike parables. Specific examples tend to be more persuasive than abstract ones. The danger of course, lies in offering as evidence something not closely related to the argument.

It also suggests that the writer has some special insight and therefore adds weight to their argument. Moreover/However, the reader must make decision as to the accuracy of the evidence. An anecdote feels more personal. Anecdotes persuade by usually making a reader sympathetic and receptive to the point; it can set up a character, then position a reader to accept or reject that individual character. It also serves social function such as ideational, informative, persuasive and interpretative functions. Yiri's communication of the messages in his text through anecdotes was efficient, effective and a reliable way of writing as it leads to character transformation and value re-orientation both for the characters and most probably the reader(s) as well.

(c) Do anecdotes in this text help to advance the plot of the narrative?

The anecdotes in this text have been used to illustrate some points and certain truths. Anecdotes form a more human connection (pathos) between audience and speaker. It will add a human and personal dimension that can be irresistible and fascinating. Certainly, we enjoy relating to and learning from stories – and we often can identify with the characters. It was given as a way of eliciting a change of mindset towards a value and moral re-orientation, entertainment and also as an encouragement particularly as they have been used in self-defining and contextual situations to highlight, reflect and illustrate certain personal and societal concerns plaguing man.

Conclusion

Yiri facetiously depicts the vanity of human wishes by his use of anecdotes and upholds moral rectitude as an acceptable socio-cultural attitude. He sensitizes the characters on doing the right thing and living godly lives without him employing confrontation and verbal attacks.

The committed and alert reader is already drawn into a secondary world far distant from the primary one. The text has the sense of wholeness and well thought form. Its story is told quietly and intensely; Felicia's experience has a generality that lifts it far beyond the merely anecdotal; yet it is the 'indwelling value' of this encounter in her life that remains with the reader after the story ended. The ingredients that makes this incidents memorable and significant, apart from the anecdotes with which the story is told, all reflect the adult's view of the world. It is a story that looks at life from knee-height yet avoids being either patronizing or sentimental. The elements of social life that Felicia and the other girls' experiences dramatize and illuminate are the need for appropriate behaviour, spirit of entrepreneurship particularly in polite society and the need to exorcize the destructive feelings towards nearest and dearest ones and the need to come to terms with personal failures and successes.

It attempts to show the relationship between illustrations, arguments and the use of anecdotes and parables in various kinds of writing –

discursive, personal, literature – poetry, drama and prose. It analyzes how the writer has been able to manipulate situations with the addition of verbal language to convey, convict and project specific convincing messages to persons to achieve positive results.

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