

THE LANGUAGE OF HUMOUR IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*: A STYLISTIC STUDY

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Abstract

There is extensive use of humour in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. In the heart of very engaging plots and sub-plots bordering on the colonial tremor in Africa, Achebe still finds time and space to infuse humour into his narrative of culture contact and conflict. This paper analyzes the stylistic use of humour in realizing Achebe's overall artistic vision in *Arrow of God*. As it is, humorous usages dot discourses in the narrative, even in the midst of very severe or intense circumstances. The paper examines the role of humour and the language in which humour is couched to enrich the narrative of culture contact and conflict in an African society. The language of humour in the text under study is found to be sometimes metaphoric, sarcastic, ironic, satiric, hyperbolic and euphemistic. It is therefore concluded that Achebe's deployment of linguistic resources to create humour with which serious communal concerns are attended to is a significant contribution to the development of African storytelling technique, elevating humour as an integral part of the tools of an African oral artist-cum-novelist.

Keywords: Humour, language, aesthetics, stylistic, *Arrow of God*

Introduction

Humour is an utterance, an action or event or appearance that causes or may be intended to cause laughter or offer a sense of emotional relief and sometimes, to accentuate a message. A humorist makes a joke in speech or writing or action to have people laugh and to simultaneously give a message. The scenario created by humour is usually that of trifle. Humour may, however, border on seriousness or convey a serious underlying message in spite of the laughter it arouses. Sometimes, it

may be unintended by the speaker but it is read or perceived by the audience depending on a number of variables including various contextual parameters. These make humour a context-bound, culture-specific and people-oriented subject as people from different cultural and social backgrounds create and respond differently to it.

Based on cultures and backgrounds, what constitutes humour to some may be taken seriously by others. This may be determined by experience or even state of mind, worldview, culture and practice. Nevertheless, humour can be found in almost every communication situation with its diverse roles in social interaction. For instance, situations, no matter how grave, give room for or can be tempered down with humour. It can therefore be used as a tension-reduction device and can serve as a technique or strategy for mitigating the effect of a tragic situation.

As with every other communicative act, humour is couched in language and delivered to the audience through it. That is, language provides the raw material for the creation of, and even response to, humour. Ruth Cisneros and others opine that “The intersection between humour and language is rife with complex cognitive, cultural and social variables that all work together to create a very specific sort of understanding between people” (1). The person who deploys humour in a communication event responds to the interplay of those variables just like the person who listens to it does.

Odebunmi and Ogunleye reveal that:

The subjects of humour vary from people to people, and from culture to culture. It is invariable that what engenders fun in one society may differ from what does it in another. Among villagers or country people in Nigeria, for instance it is common for humour to be created out of fauna and flora resources (244).

It may be different with people in other settings or climes. The items of humour, its nature and its language are socially determined or influenced. Thus, since humour is a social material for communication and entertainment, writers also use it to achieve verisimilitude in

literature, to reflect the dynamics and aesthetics of communication. Writers also employ humour in different ways and for various reasons in their literary works. In that regard, Odebunmi and Ogunleye state that:

It is interesting to note that tragic plays and tension-drenched novels are dotted with humour. The reasoning is that if the thematic solemnity and tension in the works are sustained full-length, the piece would give boredom to the reader. Also, if literature must possess verisimilitude it must take perfect samples from the society. No sequence of experiences in life ever runs its entire span monolithically. Life experiences are usually an admixture of the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, the happy and the sad. (243)

One of the devices that give Achebe's craft its aesthetic and technical quality is humour. He uses this device to connect subject matters, characters, plots, situations and settings.

This paper holds that Chinua Achebe adopts humour as a technique in realizing his overall artistic vision of lampooning the perceptions, conceptions and misconceptions of the white-man and his colonizing mission in Africa in *Arrow of God*. The paper investigates why and how Chinua Achebe uses humour in the novel, the language in which it is couched, including its overall contribution to the development of the plot of the novel; how he weaves in humorous remarks and anecdotes into his treatment of serious subjects.

The Concept of Humour

We have established that in general terms, "humour is the quality of being amusing" (*Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*). M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey G. Harpham declare that humour "may be ascribed either to a comic utterance or to a comic appearance or mode of behaviour" (421). It is what makes us laugh. It may take up a grave situation and create laughter out of it to douse its severity. However, the concept of humour goes much beyond amusement. It contains profound educative material and insights. In addition, it has been a topic in the world of

literature. According to C. Hugh Holman, humour has been a part of literary creativity since the early eighteenth century when it denoted a type of writing whose purpose is to evoke laughter (259).

Agyekum states that:

Humour is used as a disposition of fun often realized in the enjoyment of anecdotes, jokes, puns, repartee, riddles, wisecracks and witticisms. Humour in language is culture-dependent. The joke usually presupposes a social bond. The joker and audience draw freely on the stock of common knowledge involving a shared history, a familiar pattern of daily life, topical events and popular assumptions and attitudes. When humour is considered in its social setting, it seems clear that many jokes derive their force from the joker's readiness to challenge authority and institutional constraints as in courtroom humour. Comedians employ humour and jokes as their major tools. (116)

Ruth Cisneros and others categorize humour into formal and informal types. According to them, jokes fall under formal humour because they are premeditated to amuse, while situational humour is an informal type of humour that depends on context. Formal humour can be replicated, adapted and borrowed to make people laugh, whereas informal humour cannot be replicated or borrowed because contexts and speakers are not fixed, but usually change. They further state that:

Jokes can and do exist within informal humour, but the funniness of an informal situation is based on a greater understanding and shared common knowledge. The punch line to a joke, then, can be part of a funny informal situation, but is not the only or necessarily funniest part of the whole. Situational humour is of a spontaneous nature; it can be created inadvertently or on purpose with a well-placed witty remark. Situational humour is

marked by its reliance on quick thinking, and creative and inventive use of language. Sarcasm, puns, double entendres and irony are often the devices used in situational humour. (6)

To them, humour involves word play (pun), irony, sarcasm, and incongruity, the latter being a violation of expectation, leading to surprise because what is said does not agree with facts on ground. Odeunmi and Ogunleye have a three-way classification of humour: jokes, satire and scatology (243). Raskin (1985) describes humour as intentional and unintentional. Whatever the type, language is its tool. Thus, along with its purpose, the linguistic turns it takes is our concern in this work.

Theoretical Construct

This paper relies on the formalistic theory of literature to study the utterances of the characters. Formalism is interested in the inherent linguistic devices that belie a work of art. It holds that literature employs special language like figures of speech and other linguistic devices. Thus, formalism studies the language of literature, seeing it as being distinctive and different from ordinary language, with a view to achieve special meaning (Bertens, 2008: 31; Agyekum, 2007: 125). Since humour is a linguistic factor, involving the use of figurative language to generate laughter, this study adopts formalism to reveal how humour is transmitted through linguistic structure. The relevance of formalism to this study is further underscored by Cisneros and others' remark that: "From language emanates the very essence of the world view encoded in a joke or story, and in its realm the abstract is given form and transmitted to others" (1). From it, we recognize what constitutes sarcasm, irony, euphemism, pun, figurative usage in humour.

A summary of the novel

Arrow of God is a novel steeped in religion and politics. It is the story of Ezeulu's conflict with his fellow Umuaro kinsmen, on the one hand, and with the white colonialists, on the other hand. Ezeulu is the Chief Priest of Ulu, a position which confers on him the status of the highest spiritual authority in the land. The choice of Ezeulu draws envy from Nwaka of

Umunneora, who believes that Ulu is a smaller god than Idemili, hence the former's priest ought not to have been chosen as the spiritual head of the entire Umuaro. What ensues is a bitter rivalry between Ezeulu and Nwaka, with the latter using every opportunity to undermine the former's position and insult him.

Into the unhealthy scenario comes the white-man with his political and religious campaigns. It also coincides with a land dispute between Umuaro and its neighbour, Okperi. The war between Umuaro and Okperi is settled by the white-man who relied on Ezeulu's truthful confession to cede the land in dispute to Okperi. Nwaka uses this seemingly unpatriotic stance of Ezeulu to mobilize other members of the clan against him.

In the meantime, the District Officer, Captain Winterbottom, sees in Ezeulu a capable ally who can be made a Warrant Chief to advance his colonial enterprise. Ezeulu rejects the offer and is detained for days in the colonial government's holding facility. While there, he bemoans his fate as a lonely sufferer whose kinsmen refused to identify with during a moment of physical and emotional travail. On their own part, the people of Umuaro refuse to rise for Ezeulu because to them, the white-man is his friend, which friendship must not be interfered with. Again, Ezeulu's incarceration coincides with his observance of the sacred act of counting the moon before the harvest season sets in. While in detention, two moons pass without his eating the sacred yams for the period. Ezeulu comes back with the vow to punish Umuaro for not standing by him during his stay in detention. He decides to not eat the remaining yams that will usher in the harvest. Umuaro people wait anxiously in hunger and anger for their Chief Priest, but he is obstinate. The Church, that is the new religion in the community, empowers the people to go ahead to harvest their yams and bring to church for blessing and subsequent consumption. Thus, Ezeulu and his god, Ulu, are undermined and rejected. Ezeulu finds it difficult to believe that Ulu cannot fight for himself nor prevent his desecration; hence, he loses his sanity.

Analysis of language and humour in *Arrow of God*

In the novel, the different areas and sites of conflict involving Ezeulu, Nwaka, Captain Winterbottom (including all the other white-men seen in the novel), and the people's perception of and interaction with the white-man are covered with a blanket of humour. The writer mitigates the tension arising from the conflict with sprinkles of humorous interjections. This analysis shall examine how the jokes are used to advance the course of the narration in the selected novel. It will show how humour is stylistically used to, among other reasons, build the plot, sustain characterization, and develop the themes of the novel. The patterns of humour found in the novel include: proverbial humour, narrative/authorial humour, exaggerative humour, ironic humour and humour expressive of ignorance, and they appear in the novel as jokes, satires, anecdotes and scatology. All of them constitute verbal humour.

The analysis takes into consideration the jokes made, the language in which they are couched, the context of the usage, the cultural implication of each humour to the narration as well as the meaning it generates, which is the actual humorous effect. Out of the numerous instances of humour in the novel, thirteen (13) samples are randomly selected for analysis.

Extract 1:

‘Is it true that one of their women in Umuru went outside without the white hat and melted like sleeping palm oil in the sun?’ asked the other companion.

‘I have also heard it,’ said Akukalia. ‘But many lies are told about the white man. It was once said that he had no toes.’ (*Arrow of God*, henceforth, *AOG*, 19)

In the extract above, Akukalia and the other Umuro delegates sent to Okperi to make them choose between peace and war make mockery of the white-men who are in Umuru. From their conversation, it is obvious that the white-man is a major subject of discourse in the special setting of the novel. The language here is hyperbolic and derogatory towards the white people so as to create laughter at them and therefore to despise

them among the Umuaro people. The hyperbolism is characteristic of humour which overstates an idea or situation with the intent of eliciting laughter or deriding the target. The audience may understand the overstatement but also the speaker's objective is met. Audience understanding above is signalled by 'But many lies are told about the white man...'

Extract 2:

'If you hear anyone talking about Otiji-Egbe, you know they are talking about me. Otiji-Egbe means Breaker of Guns. I am even told that all children born in that year belong to a new age-grade of the Breaking of the Guns.' (37)

Humour can be cast in matter-of-fact language like in extract 2. Yet, it arouses laughter and sometimes, resentment. The statement above was made by Captain Winterbottom, the District Officer, who was reporting to Mr. Tony Clarke, his Assistant District Officer, about the history of the Umuaro/Okperi war over a disputed land, which the former helped to end. The people of Umuaro were so affected by Mr Winterbottom's action of breaking their guns that they gave him the appellation of "breaker of guns" and still went ahead to name a particular age-grade after that appellation. Though the tone deployed by Winterbottom is frank, it evokes laughter especially with the naming of the age-grade. Hence, Winterbottom's statement is humorous because it is achieved through a sarcastic reference to his action of breaking their guns. The message that the age grade of the time has its name as 'Breaking of the Guns' tells how language is influenced by the prevailing events of a period.

Extract 3:

'All right. Ezidemili wants to know how you intend to purify your house of the abomination that your son committed.'

'Go back and tell Ezidemili to eat shit. Do you hear me? Tell Ezidemili that Ezeulu says he should go and fill his mouth with shit.' (54)

Oduche, Ezeulu's son whom he had sent to the white man's school, sacrilegiously locks the sacred python in a box so it could suffocate to death. Ezidemili, the priest of Idemili, who is a supporter of Ezeulu's bitterest enemy and rival, sends a message to ask how Ezeulu would cleanse the land. The latter's response is humorous. It would create a mirthless laughter among an Igbo audience that an old man would tell another to go and eat shit, which is an insult. Also, Ezeulu emphasizes the insult by saying that Ezidemili should fill his mouth with shit. This is to indicate that the first statement was not a slip of the tongue; he meant it. This indicates that as trifling as humour can be, it is also as serious as it is sarcastic due to its language and the context in which it is uttered.

Extract 4:

'Then you can go into that bush there and eat shit,' said Obika.

'Do you see where my finger is pointing? That bush.' (140)

Again, here, there is the use of funny statement, an insult that is humorous, this time, by Obika, Ezeulu's son. When the Court Messenger sent to invite Ezeulu to see the white man at Okperi is told that one of Ezeulu's sons would go to Okperi on his behalf, the Court Messenger disagrees with that arrangement. As a result of his refusal, Obika tells him to "go into that bush there and eat shit" (140). It is amusing that Obika would tell the messenger so. He makes it even more dramatic by saying that, "Do you see where my finger is pointing? That bush" (140). Indeed, Achebe's use of humour can be said to be rather serious because as this example shows, the humour sometimes verges on invective due to its language. It can be discerned that among the hearers of the utterance above, some may laugh and some may not and the person targeted will be reproached or maligned.

Extract 5:

'What a man does not know is greater than he. Those of us who want Unachukwu to go away forget that none of us can say come in the white man's language.' (85)

In a meeting where an age-grade is discussing why the white man had not paid the labourers working on the road project, the presence of Moses Unachukwu, an interpreter to the white man, stirs a controversy as to whether he should be there or not, considering his association with the white man. Nweke Ukpaka's position above is a sarcastic response to the issue. It is therefore humorous and sarcastic that people who cannot speak the white man's language want to engage him in a dialogue without the help of someone who can. The truism, "What a man does not know is greater than he" intensifies the humour and the message at once. In fact, it becomes clearer and clearer that even though humour generates laughter and an appearance of unseriousness, the language in which it is dressed is often matter-of-factly. The truth in a given situation turns out to be humorous when one has the courage to say it.

Extract 6:

'Give me a little of that thing to clear my head', said Akuebue who had just drunk water.

'Come and get it,' replied Ezeulu. 'You do not expect me to provide the snuff and also the walking around, to give you a wife and find you a mat to sleep on.'

'I did not know that you had palm wine,' said Ezeulu.

'It has just been sent by the owner of the door I am carving.'

'And why do you bring it in the presence of this my friend who took over the stomach of all his dead relatives?' (96)

This is one of the instances in which Achebe tones down on the seriousness of the unfolding and ascending conflict of the novel to show the emotional and psychological playfulness between Ezeulu and his closest friend, Akuebue. The two are in Ezeulu's house. Typical of old men of the same age-grade, both engage in humorous exchanges to entertain each other. Ezeulu uses his snuff and the palm wine his eldest son had just brought in as means of teasing his friend. This episode shows the capacity of Ezeulu to take time off to joke with his friend and also free himself of the burden of petty rivalry that Nwaka has

instigated. The scenario of giving someone a wife and finding a mat for them to sleep on is both hilarious and accusatory. The picture of a man with “the stomach of all his dead relatives” is equally humorous. Like with humour makers or comedians in general, language use here is acerbic but the target takes it in good faith because the speaker meant to be humorous. According to Nilsen and Nilsen (2019), “...many comedians, especially stand-up comedians, convey their criticism through humour because people are willing to listen to humour without feeling patronized...”. This is why the creator of humour, inter alia the novelist, uses otherwise provocative language without fear of incurring the wrath of the target. On the part of the target also, context plays a role in mitigating the ‘wrath’ they would have meted out to the joker. That is, context is a key factor in how humour is absorbed. In the above, the speaker and the target are age mates and friends, the place is the home of one of them with no third parties and the circumstance is relaxed. These extra-linguistic factors allow for their enjoyment of the humour.

Extract 7:

The gun sounded yet again. It seemed to make Ezeulu irritable. ‘I shall go over and tell the man that if he has no medicine to give to the sick man he should at least spare the gunpowder they will use for his funeral.’ (113).

The sick man who had been silent except for his breathing began suddenly to groan.... The medicine-man picked [the flint-gun] up and began to load.... When he had loaded the gun he went to the back of the house and let it off. All the cocks and hens in the neighbourhood immediately set up an alarm as if they had seen a wild animal. (114)

The above is a humorous episode that satirizes a herbalist’s lack of solution to an ailment. It is humorous that Ezeulu has to go over to where the sick man is to see the situation for himself, since the medicine-man keeps loading and firing gunshots. In spite of the fear of death, Ezeulu preempts it for the sick man and he does so in unmitigated terms – ‘... at least spare the gunpowder they will use for his funeral’. This says that the language of humour can be overly sarcastic or unreserved. Yet, it evokes mirth. It is also funny that when the herbalist fires another shot, even cocks and hens registered their displeasure by

raising “an alarm as if they had seen a wild animal.” In the serious situation of life and death, Achebe weaves in humour to extenuate the fears of the people.

Extract 8:

[Okuata] felt greatly relieved for although she had always known she was a virgin she had had a secret fear which sometimes whispered in her and made her start. It was the thought of the moonlight play when Obiora had put his penis between her thighs. True, he had only succeeded in playing at the entrance but she could not be too sure. (122)

Achebe uses humour to present a new bride’s apprehension about being found chaste by her husband on their first night after marriage. The reader would suppress laughter on reading the humorous account of Okuata’s stream of consciousness that, “...Obiora had put his penis between her thighs. True, he had only succeeded in playing at the entrance but she could not be too sure.” In the context above, there is use of taboos/vulgarisms. Again, the matter-of-fact way in which this is said confirms the point that language of humour is blatant, does not cut corners. Indeed, it is the blatancy that makes humour what it is.

Extract 9:

According to Nwaka, ‘Did not our elders tell us that as soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace? It seems to me that Ezeulu has shaken hands with a man of white body.’ This brought low murmurs of applause and even some laughter. (143)

When Ezeulu summons Umuaro elders to inform them about the white man’s invitation to see him, Nwaka uses the proverb above to mock him for making friends with a loathsome stranger. It is also a sarcastic humour to say that Ezeulu had shaken hands with a man of white body, since white body is a euphemism for leprosy. The humour is effective on Nwaka’s audience so much so that there was “applause and laughter... mingled with the salutation: *Owner of words* to Nwaka” (144).

Extract 10:

...he beckoned at Ezeulu, and showed him into the white man's presence. He too was writing, but with his left hand. The first thought that came to Ezeulu on seeing him was to wonder whether any black man could ever achieve the same mastery over book as to write it with the left hand. (173)

'[The white man] could shout in my face; he could do what he liked. Why? Because he could write with his left hand. That is why I have called you. I want you to learn and master this man's knowledge so much that if you are suddenly woken up from sleep and asked what it is you will reply. You must learn it until you can write it with your left hand.' (189 – 190)

When Ezeulu is called in to see Mr Clarke, the former sees the latter writing with his left hand. He thinks it is a mark of ingenuity, a sign of intellectual perfection. This would make a reader to laugh at Ezeulu's lack of knowledge of human physiology and psychology. Later, when he arrives home, he tells Oduche to gain mastery in the art of writing to the extent that he could write with his left hand. Achebe inserts this to lampoon the ignorance of the African chief priest. Thus, it is through the derogatory portrayal of Ezeulu's ignorance that humour is achieved.

Extract 11:

'I cannot stay another day,' said Ezeulu. 'I am the tortoise who was trapped in a pit of excrement for two whole markets; but when helpers came to haul him out on the eighth day he cried! Quick, quick: I cannot stand the stench.' (181)

After spending days in detention, Ezeulu is finally released. John Nwodika tells him to wait until the next day when Obika would arrive Okperi so that he (Ezeulu) would not embark on the long journey home alone. Ezeulu's response is funny as he satirizes his own impatience by alluding to the folktale about tortoise's ironic impatience. Ezeulu, who had patiently borne the shame of his detention, says, "I cannot stay another day"; he is now like the tortoise saying, Quick, quick: I cannot stand the stench.' It is laughable because it is coming from him. The

metaphor of the impatient tortoise elicits laughter at a man who has endured mistreatment for so long and complains at the point of relief. It is equally ironic that his endurance has suddenly become intolerance which he did not exhibit during the long period of incarceration.

Extract 12:

‘Eke nekwo onye uka! Eke nekwo onye uka! Eke nekwo onye uka!’

‘We were saying: Python, run! There is a Christian here.’(204)

After the infamous episode in which Oduche locked the sacred python in a box, two of his siblings – Nwafo and Obiageli – engage in a play, using that incident. Their father hears them reciting, “Python, run! There is a Christian here.” When interrogated by Ezeulu, they affirm that the python heeded their warning and “It ran away *fiam* like an ordinary snake” (205). Thus, Achebe creates humour from Oduche’s action. Therefore, the plot of the novel captures the progressive erosion and degeneration of the people’s culture by making jest of one of their most treasured religious items, as children entertain themselves by warning pythons that Christians are approaching. Here, humour has been used to deepen the plot of the novel.

Extract 13:

There was a story told of a young man in another clan who was so pestered by trouble that he decided to consult an oracle. The reason, he was told, was that his dead father wanted him to sacrifice a goat to him. The young man said to the oracle: ‘Ask my father if he left as much as a fowl for me.’ (217)

This funny story is inserted by the narrator in the course of describing how Ogbuefi Amalu’s funeral is negatively affected by the delay in the New Yam feast. In those days in Umuaro, it was customary for wealthy individuals to arrange the way they would want to be buried when they die. The narrator deviates to tell the story presented above. It is humorous that the man in the story questions why his dead father would make such a request when he left nothing behind before his death. This is yet the expression of the blatancy of the language of humour.

Sometimes, it is what one has the boldness to say, which others would not say that comes out humorously. In such a case, the target may not find the humour in the scenario but the audience would and the target becomes the laughing stock. Like in the extract here, were the late father to be reached, he would lash back at his son.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the use of humour in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Thirteen (13) samples of dialogue containing humour from the novel were randomly selected and examined. The study examined the humour created, language (diction, tone) of such humorous expressions, the context of the usage, the cultural implication of each instance of this to the narration as well as the meaning it generates in the novel. It also looks at the overall contribution of humour to the development of the plot of the novel. It is seen from Achebe's craft that one of his greatest show of artistry is the ability to weave in humorous remarks and anecdotes into the plot of his novel. The language of humour in the text under review has been seen to be full of sarcasm, irony, metaphor, invective that render criticism or derision at targets. In some contexts, such targets take in the criticism couched in humorous language without being patronized or condescended where in other contexts they would be reproached.

Besides, the language can be matter-of-factly, hitting the nail on the head and yet causing laughter. It is not only when jocular or ludicrous expressions are used that laughter is generated but when things are said the way are. In such a situation, humour and even surprise are caused by the bold language.

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