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A Comparative Study of the Art of Satire in Innocent Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* and Godson Echebima's *Ugomma*

By

Sabina N. Nwokeji*

and

Florence C. Nwosu*

Abstract

This paper sets out to explore satire as a social art. The playwrights examined in the study, like other playwrights used their creative works to instruct and teach their audience. Instruction in this context is in the form of criticism which aimed at restoring order in the society. Innocent Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* and Godson Echebima's *Ugommaare* the tools for analysis in this work, although there would be cross references to other writers who have used satire to ridicule or pass substantial commentary on societal ills with the main purpose of sanitising the society. The two playwrights have contributed heavily to the development of African literature especially in the area of drama and theatre and a lot of critical attention has been paid to their works. The researchers have chosen the two playwrights mentioned above, in order to enunciate the satiric themes treated by them as well as to highlight the social perspectives presented in the selected plays. Moreso, this work examines the semiotics and definitionof satire, its types, as well as their stylistic analysis. Finally, comparative analysis of the two plays and their stylistic approaches are brought to the fore, followed by the summary and conclusion.

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Introduction

The fact that literature is an integral part of the society cannot be overemphasised. Literary artists write in moments when they have deep sensation or emotions. This implies that the literary artist uses language to reflect the ups and downs that take place in the society. They write however, in a language and theme that portray human actions. Supporting this, Nnolim (1998, p.15) asserts that literature is the reflection of the society. In every literary work, a people's way of life is x-rayed. This presupposes that literature is crucial within the ambit of human society and

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does not exist in a vacuum. It lends greater credence to functionality of both human and society advancement.

Over the years, satire has served as a medium for passing social statements that are targeted towards correcting social discrepancies in persons, institutions and societies. Playwrights have at various times, deployed satiric works and ideas to shape and influence the minds of the members of contemporary society. In traditional African societies and quite predictably amongst socties across time and space, satire has been used to attack people who show negative tendencies in their characters. Societies as a whole ridicule people through songs, proverbs, folktales and other verbal arts. This study, therefore, examines the satiric themes treated by Nwadike and Echebima in their respective works (Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* and Echebima's *Ugomma*) and their effect on the society.

The Semiotics of Satire

The term 'semiotics' is derived from the Greek word 'semeton' denoting 'sign'. Already in the seventeenth century, the philosopher, John Locke referred to 'semtottfea', which he defined as "the Doctrine of Signs, [...]; the business whereof, is to consider the nature of signs that the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others". In modern usage however, the concept of semiotics refers to a theory ofsignification and meaning.

In semiotics, importance is attached not only to the elaboration of theories but also to their application as methodological tools for textual analysis and societal applicabilty. Semiotics according to the Paris School concerns itself with the existence of universal structures that underlie and give rise to meaning. These structures are susceptible to representation in the shape of models which can also be applied to any signifying object to decode and interpret its effects of meaning. Semiotics thus covers all disciplines and signifying systems aswell as social practices and signifying procedures (Martin and Ringham, 2000, p. 2.).

In agreement with the above, the fact that all human behaviours have underlying meanings cannot be overemphasised. Meaning is therefore, a function of language. Only within the discourse category, symbols are understood as consisting of two linked elements - signifier and the signified. In this interpretation, the signifier holds an arbitrary, rather than natural relationship to what is symbolised and anatomised and a symbol has no inherent meaning (De Sussure 1916). In this sense, communication occurs in those situations in which a source transmits a message to a receiver with conscious intent to affect the latter's behaviour (Miller 1966).

In semiotics, meaning is also conceived as a function of consciousness, perception and emotions. Consequently, non-discursive

symbolism is based on an assumption that there is an area outside the thought, including other types of meaning and that art is symbolic by nature and its meaning can and must be analysed (Langer, 1976) against the backdrop of the society. Corroboratively, artists deploy semiotics in incorporating several different art forms to address, mock, attack and ridicule actions of men and societal ills in order to satirise society. Satire,quite conversely, is a genre of literature and sometimes graphics and performing arts, in which vices, follies, abuses, and shortcomings are held up to analysis with the intent of shaming individuals, corporations and government that fallen in the cadre of social acceptability.

Furthermore, creative writings have continually dealt with issues of graft and corruption, political vagueness, religious fanaticism and social injustice, a process that infers the likely methodic conversations between the signifier and the signified. Soyinka (1967) in Mutiso (1974, p.12) recognises the social responsibility of the writer by echoing that 'an artist has always functioned in the African society as a witness of mores and experiences and as a voice of vision in his own time'.

A Comparative Study of Satire in Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* and Echebima's *Ugomma*

OkweAgbaala is a play that was written in 1991 by Innocent Ụzọma Nwadike. The play reveals certain rampant ills in our higher institutions and their consequences. It revolves around a girl called Chinyere, a student of Obinaọzara University. She finds one of her courses entitled "Omenaala na Ewemewu" (Culture and Institution) quite challenging and therefore, resorts to compromise with the lecturer in charge, Dr. Emezina, telling him to give her the questions set on the course for the semester examination to which he obliged.During one of Dr. Emezina's visits to Chinyere's house, he meets Ozuruigbo, Chinyere's male classmate in her room. Dr. Emezina becomes angry and vows to fail Ozuruigbo in the degree examination, a task which he eventually accomplishes. Ozuruigbo finding out the injustice done to him, writes the school Senate demanding that his paper be revisited. He also puts up some allegations against Dr. Emezina. At the end, the case is taken to court, and the court rules against Dr. Emezina. He is sentenced to two years imprisonment and at the same time, dismissed from the university. The court also advise that Chinyere's results be cancelled and that her studentship be terminated. Ozuruigbo's papers are re-marked and his rightful grades are awarded him.

The play, *Ugomma* was written by Godson Echebima in 1980. It tells the story of a girl named Ugomma, who was initially known to be respectful, obedient, God-fearing and prayerful. Ugomma gets into a relationship that ought to have ended in marriage with Alozie. Nevertheless, the relationship goes sour because Alozie is a CMS while

Ugomma is from a Roman Catholic home. In the process of looking for a Catholic suitor, she gets messed up and is impregnated by unscrupulous elements in the society among whom she is unable to pin down the actual owner of her pregnancy.

Artists mirror their societies in their works, but this varies from one playwright to another. Ekwealor (1998, p. 3) believes that literature re-shapes, re-creates, re-clothes, and transfigures the society for our emotional and imaginative consumption. He further submits that this depends on the writer's imaginative resources and his linguistic and visionary powers. A playwright might show his dis-pleasure with society by becoming a rebel using art as an instrument for affecting social change. A playwright can as well criticise the mannerisms and idiosyncrasies of man using creative art. Above all, artists use satire as a weapon. It is obvious that each age (generation) produces its folly and its collective satire. Satire can be directed to individuals and groups whose conduct shows a marked departure from the norms of the society. In recent times for instance, some targets of satiric attacks were made on monks (the religious), politicians, and the prominent men and women in the realms of power who failed to uphold the ideals, obedience and humanitarian services.

Looking at the satiric themes explored in the two literary works in question, Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* falls under the Horacian tradition of satire because Nwadike is critical of the ills in Nigerian Universities. The play is a comic or mild satire because the events characterised as well as the actions of some of the characters in the play make us to laugh at individuals, institutions and the society being ridiculed. However, major subjects of attack and mockery in the play are Dr Emezina, Chinyere, and Ozuruigbo who are the major characters in the play. In order to expose inhumanity in our universities today, Nwadike uses mild mockery to ridicule the Nigerian lecturers and students in general. The playwright lampoons the major characters' idea about student to student relationship and lecturer to student relationship. In the statement of Dr Emezina to Ozuruigbo, Dr. Emezina has the following to say because he is a lecturer:

> DR. EMEZINA: Onye dị ihe a? Ọ ọ kwa nwa akwụkwọ m? Gịnị butere ya ebea?Aga m egosị ya na m jì jí jide mma. Onye m wanyere o rie, aga m emechaa ya ọ hụ n' anya .....gwa m nọba ya . . . (Who is this? Is that my student? What brought him here? I will show him that I have the yam and the knife. Whoever I give will eat, I will deal with him...Tell me his number...(Nwadike 1991, p.29).

Dr Emezina's aim of collecting Ozuruigbo's matriculation number is not logical. He wants to prove to him that his future (i.e. Ozuruigbo) is in his hands. He is certainly myopic, ideologically barren and too ridiculous to

be a lecturer in an institution. In exposing Dr. Emezina's motive, Nwadike subtly indicates the decadent fibrethat is beginning to take root in Nigerian Universities. By making jest of Dr. Emezina, Nwadike indirectly attacks the acclaimed superiority, foolishness and self-importance among some lecturers in the higher institutions in Nigeria.

Certainly, Dr. Emezina's statement evokes victimisation. It goes to show how wicked and crude he is. This therefore, arouses the pity and emotion of joy in us. The emotion of joy in the play is engendered by Ozuruigbo's ability to pick up courage to fight Dr. Emezina when he cannot see his name on the board at the release of degree result. If Dr. Emezina is taken as a symbolic representation of lecturers in Nigerian Institutions, one can say that the playwright criticises Nigerian lecturers' use of position to victimise students. From Dr Emezina's action, he exposes the fact that he is incredibly ridiculous. Nwadike portrays him as a man who breached the ethics of his profession as he gives out his examination question to a student and at the same time fails Ozuruigbo deliberately as seen in the text. Immorality is one factor in Nigeria that did not escape Nwadike's ridicule. The playwright partiularly dramatises the activities and relations between female students and lecturers. The playwright also exposes sexual seduction as a tool used by female students on their male lecturers. Chinyere, one of the major characters in the play gives us this picture of immorality and promiscuity. Chinyere's belief is that she can use what she has to get what she wants. This belief makes her to go to Dr. Emezina at the end of the lecture on 'Omenaala na Ewemewu' (Culture and Institution) to seduce him. She seduces Dr. Emezina so as to collect the question papers he prepared for the semester examination. She gets closer to him and begins to caress him, saying:

> **CHINYERE: Bikonụ Dọk. Ama m na i ji nwaanyị, ma onye nwere jì na-erikwa jì onye ọzọ. Onye rikata ofe egusi, o ritụkwanụ ofe ọgbọnọ…biko zinụ m…((Please, Doc. I know you are married, but he that has yam can eat another person's yam. One who eats egusi soup can equally have a taste of ọgbọnọ soup…please show me…)(p.22).**

She sits on Dr. Emezina's lap and says:

> **CHINYERE: Dọk., ihe a anaghị ekwe m aghọta. Biko, gbapenyetụrụ m nwa azụ, aga m akwụghachi gị n' ụzọ nke m. (Doc, I can't understand this thing, please hint me a little, I will pay you in my own way) (p. 23).**

Chinyere in her effort to seduce Dr. Emezina insiststhat,"Bịa ka anyị gaa n'ụlọ m nọrịa" (Come let's go and have a nice time in my house) (p.25).As if this is not enough for her, she suggests that they go to a hotel. Dr. Emezina accepts and gives her the question paper, hence breaching

professional ethics. Chinyere's activity is in reality a fictional representation of what actually happens amongst female students and lecturers in Nigerian Institutions. In directing his satire in such situation, Nwadike is indirectly cautioning lecturers of the consequences of being extra ordinarily free or light brained with the female students.

Ugomma is a work of satire that ridicules hypocrisy and religious extremism in its diverse forms. The playwright questions the credibility of the religions in the society. The prevailing immorality, hypocrisy and flirtatious tendencies of highly placed persons are aspects of the national psyche which he subjects to criticism. Godson Echebima is of the view that immorality and religious hypocrisy have gotten deep into the society. The point of religious hypocrisy is driven home in that Ugomma is initially portrayed as a reserved and religious girland is being defended byher mother, Enyidiya that:

> ENYIDIYA: Ugomma jisiri uka ya na okwukwe ya ike,ọ na-agbalị nke ukwu, o jighị ihe ndị a egwuri egwu.Ọ na-eje nkwuputa izu ọbụla. Ọ na- eso na bulọkụroziri mgbe dum.Ọ bụ onye otu lijọnarị. Ọ nọ n'otu yutu, bụrụkwa onye kwaya.Ọ naghị ahapụ ụka masị bụladị out ma ọ dị ndụ, ma ọ na- anwụanwụ. (Ugomma is a staunch believer. She does not compromise her faith . She attends block rosary every time. She is a legionary, a member youth and a choir. She doesn't miss mass no matter the circumstance) (Echebima, 1981, p.4).

Obinna, Ugomma's father who has been seeing her conversing with different men however complains that:

> OBINNA: …ọ bụ ka ha na-esi abụ ndị oke ụka….Enyidiya, a zọkwarala ya ahụ.Ụmụaka ugbu a, ha amụọla ihe ọjọọ (…that is how they pretend to be good Christians. Enyidiya, do not defend them. Children of nowadays are full of immoral behaviour…) .(pp. 4-5).

Alọzie, a handsome, good and wealthy man wants to marry Ugomma but is rejected because he is of the Anglican faith while Ugomma is a staunch Catholic. Ugomma's excuses includes that:

> UGOMMA: Anyị anaghị eso nwoke apụ ezi. Anyị anaghị ama nwoke belụsọ ma anyị melụ sakramentị agbamakwụkwọ (We don't go out with men, we don't diverge our virginity till we receive the sacrament of matrimony) (p.20).

She continues with her holy sacrament thus:

> UGOMMA: Agaghị m eji ụka m na okwukwe sakramentị m egwu egwu. Ị nụrụ ya? kọmfeshịọnụ m dị mkpa. Bụlọkụ

> Rozarị m dị mkpa. Ị nụrụ ya?... (I will not play with my belief. Do you hear? My confession and my block rosary membership are important to me. Do you hear?). (p. 20).

Alọzie is surprised at all the excuses and utterances just because of difference in religious denomination. He on his part says, "Biko nne, chetakwa m n'alaeze eluigwe gị ahụ mgbe oge ya ruo" (Please dear, remember me in that your heaven when the time comes). (p.21). In another instance, he becomes annoyed and reiterates that:

> ALOZIE: Ma ka o sina dị,ya atụla onye ọbụla anya ịhụ na ọtụtụ ndị na-efe arụsị ga-ebụ ọtụtụ ndị oke chọọchị ụzọ n'iketa alaeze eluigwe ahụ (Nevertheless, let it not come as a surprise that the idol worshippers will be the first to inherit the kingdom of God instead of the church goers) (p.22).

This satiric statement of Alozie is confirmed when Ugomma with all her self righteous attitude falls easy victim to three young men. The mother (Enyidiya) defends her daughter against Alọzie's request thus:

> ENYIDIYA: Alọzie chọrọ ịlụ Ugomma nwa m. Ma akọwacharala m ya otu ihe ahụ bụ ihe na-egbochi okwu ahụ. Alọzie bụ onye ụka Siemesị. Ma anyị bụ ndị Roman katọliki (Alọzie wants to marry Ugomma my daughter. But I have explained to him the bone of contention. We are Catholics and he is of the Anglican faith) (p.24).

All explanations by Obinna (Ugomma's father) to make Ugomma and Enyidiya to change their minds and see reason that we worship the same God irrespective of denominations fall on deaf ears as he says, "Ma Chineke ndị Siemesị na nke ndị Katọliki bụ otu Chineke ahụ" (Both the God of the Catholics and that of the Anglicans are the same) (p.24).He warns Enyidiya and Ugomma about their irrational decision and its implications. Ugomma is impregnated. She tries to convince Obiọha to marry her but Obiọha coyishly objects:

> OBIỌHA: Ihe dika gịnị Ugomma? O nweghị ihe ọbụala m chọrọ ịgwa gị. Eji m aka naịmana m bụ pọọ shuumeka, bụrụkwa onye ụka Siemesị. Biko kwa, onye mmehie ka m bụ. (Like what Ugomma? I don't want to tell you anything. I amsure you recognise that I am a poor shoe maker, an Anglican, and a sinner) (p.31).

Ironically, Ugomma begs him to marry her not minding his social status and his being a member of the same congregation with Alọzie whom she refuses to marry. She confesses that, " O nweghị ihe nke ahụ mere. Biko nụ- o"(That doesn't matter. Please) (p.31).Obiọharefuses to marry Ugomma byalso giving excuses that his age mates have not married, that he still has his siblings to train, he is not wealthy, he is an Anglican and does

not know whether his parents would allow him to marry from a Catholic family. He says:

> OBIỌHA: Gịnị? Ị maghị ihe ị na-ekwu! ị chọrọ ka nne gị bọọ anụ gị na ndụ? Biko jewe jee chọrọ ndị otu gị, ndị ga eketa alaeze eligwe. Biko abụ m onye mmehie. O nweghị ihe ọbụla m mere gị(What? You don't know what you are saying! You want your mother to eat you raw? ...Please look for people of your type that will inherit the kingdom of God. I am a sinner. I did not do anything to you) (p.32).

When Ugomma goes back to look for Obiọha, he has packed out from the house, putting her in pain, confusion and agony. Her wild life can not stop her from being sober when her parents accost her about the pregnancy and the paternityof the child. However, Ugomma in frustration soliloquises, " Ma ka m jụọ, o nwere ihe bụ ihe mmadu nụrụ taa sị na ọbụ ihe ọhụrụ na ntị ya? Let me ask; is anything new under the sun?) (p.36).

As a way of mocking and castigating her for her immoral life, her church group satirise her by singing a war song and destroying things in their house with tree branches, short sticks and palm fronds. Her immoral life becomes the talk of the town that even the culprits do not want to accept her pregnancy. Okoroafọ also satirises women's flirtatious attitude when he says, "...Ihe dị nwaanyị mkpa bụ ka ego na-abata ka o si chọọ, ọ jụghị gị ma iji ụkwụ, aka, ọgụ, mọọbụ mma akpata ya" (What is important to women is for them to get money, how the money comes is not their concern) (p.43).

In a way to punish the culprits and ascertain the paternity of the unborn baby, judgment is to take its course in the village square and that is enough satire and humiliation to behold. Both Christians and idol worshippers gather to punish the culprits and Ugomma. The three boys: Obioha, Okoroafọ and Okorie admit to have carnal knowledge of Ugomma but deny being responsible for the pregnancy as they claim that they are many. This show of shame brings grumbling, murmuring, grudges and ridicule among the villagers. The picture painted reveals that some mothers are myopic and morally bankrupt, and to Echebima, some mothers mortgage the youth's welfare to their belief tendencies.

Apart from his attack on the youth's immorality, Echebima also criticises motherly trust on the children of today. Children are perceived to be stubborn and disobedient to their parent's advice and to the word of God. Ugomma betrays her mother's trust. Christianity is falsely demonstrated in the play *Ugomma*. This is seen when Ugomma the heroine deceives her mother by hiding under the garb of Christianity while she is indeed a prostitute. She cannot say who among the boysis responsible for

her pregnancy. Echebima criticises and condemns such attitude. To him a Christian should be a model unto others.

Echebima attacks immorality and sexual perversion as it affects our national pride and dignity. Although, he is critical of prostitution and promiscuity among the women in the society, Echebima attributes the persistent prostitution to people's desire to get money at all cost. The playwright is unrelenting in his attack of believers whom he regards as hypocrites. In *Ugomma*, Echebima takes a swipe at these believers' activities, their immoral acts and their deceitful pronouncements which counter to their divine calling. The character that embodies this negative aspect is Ugomma who shamelessly allows herself to be used by Obioha, Okorie, Okoroafo and other boys. Ugomma is also a liar having initially claimed not to be pregnant. Echebima therefore, criticises religious people for their failureand charlatanism and castigates them for misleading their followers.

Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* and Echebima's *Ugomma* share a lot of attributes in terms of the satiric mode explored in them as well as the style and characterisation. First, the two plays under study fall under the Horacian tradition vis-à-vis their satiric vision because the two playwrights use mild mockery to deride and mock the ills in the society. The reader is not meant to hate the character who displays human failings.

Secondly, the stylistic features of the two plays are similar from the point of view of the lexical items. Both playwrights have used simple words as opposed to complex and difficult ones. They equally use English, pidgin, and slang expressions in their respective works. Paralinguistic devices such as songs and proverbs also feature prominently in the two plays under review. The overall purpose of such style is to domesticate the medium of communication in order to give it a Nigerian style. There are elements of verisimilitude in the two plays as far as characterisation is concerned. The characters in the plays represent either a class or a social group in the country. For instance, there are characters whose names suggest that they are from the eastern part of the country. This method of characterisation gives the play a national outlook in terms of their thematic preoccupations. The two plays indirectly pose two fundamental questions to the society: What is happening in our higher institutions? What is happening in Christendom? Despite these similarities identified in the plays, there are still differences since no two writers can write the same way using the same style, the same method and characterisation. Although both Nwadike and Echebima used simple words, it has been observed that Nwadike's diction as opposed to Echebima's is more official.

In *Okwe Agbaala*, the song is rendered by a single individual unlike in the case of *Ugomma* by Echebima. The same goes for the proverbs.

Before the play starts, we meet one of the major characters singing and telling us what she wants to do. Several characters are also seen using proverbs in the play. Chinyere, Vii sii, Prof. Diọgụ, are all characters who use proverbs to express their views in the play. But the situation is different in Echebima's play where the church group use song as a way of castigating and mocking Ugomma's immoral life. Another noticeable difference in style is in the use of language, especially the slangs. It appears that Nwadike has a better understanding of slangs than Echebima. This is evident in many of the instances in Nwadike's play in which he attempts to use slangs as a medium of communication. This is confirmed in Chinyere's statement, "… Akada Kwanu", "Enwere m akada biskiti …" "Maazị ụra atụ mbe…" (These phrases are slangs used by the author to paradoxically describe Kolanut.) (Nwadike 1991, pp. 4-7). Nwadike's control of slangs in the play as we have seen in the above examples and also in other situations in the play is higher than Echebima's.

Echebima's *Ugomma* and Nwadike's *Okwe Agbaala* also vary in terms of structure. *Okwe Agbaala* is divided into four acts without further division while Ugomma is divided into two sets. Act one is further divided into five scenes. Scene I takes place on the road, Scene II, IV, V take place at Maazi Obinna's residence, while scene III takes place at the Maazị Alozie's residence. Act two is also subdivided into five scenes. Scene I and IV takes place in Maazi Obioha's residence, while scene II takes place in Maazi Obinna's residence and scene III takes place in Maazi Okorie's residence, while scene V takes place in the general meeting in their village square. All the incidents in the play take several days. In *Okwe Agbaala*, all the incidents take place in one location - the school environment.

Conclusion

Okwe Agbaala and*Ugomma* as works of satire are of great relevance for the playwrights carefully recorded Nigeria's societal problems in one form or the other. The two plays can be seen as 'problem plays' because both writers graphically explore the problems confronting the nation. Both Nwadike and Echebima are certainly uneasy about the endemic problems of corruption, immorality, hypocrisy, etc. which have become an integral part of our existence. As writers of imaginative literature, art becomes a tool with which they seek to restore normalcy in a society. *Okwe Agbaala* and *Ugomma* are successful works of satire in the Horacian tradition, through the deliberate portrayal of farcical, naïve, idiotic and sometimes erratic personalities, in making us laugh not only at those ridiculous personalities, but also at their actions, deeds, ideas as well as the society which they personify. Nwadike and Echebima can be said to have succeeded in exposing the idiocy, ignorance, and naivety of people, in order to ridicule them.

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