

CHUKWUEMEKA IKE: HUMOUR AND THE BURDEN OF CASUAL CRITICISM

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Abstract

The paper examines Chukwuemeka Ike's use of humour in the light of the accusations by some scholars that he deploys humour in his works for mere entertainment. The paper reveals that Ike incorporates humour in his creative works from prudential motives; humour, as deployed in his works, is often sophisticated and intricately woven into his narration, sometimes requiring a gentile approach and sometimes, requiring the force of a sledgehammer in exposing vices and deficiencies in his society. The study shows that Ike is a consummate humorist who takes delight in using satirical humour to critically examine and evaluate his society rather than for mere entertainment. The study involves the technique of close reading of some of Ike's novels. Henri Bergson's theory of humour was used as the theoretical framework for evaluating Ike's use of humour. Bergson explains laughter (humour) as a sort of social gesture that aims at improvement since laughter forces people to suppress their vices. The paper concludes that scholars need to read Ike's works thoroughly rather than engaging in armchair criticisms which robs Ike off his merits as a creative writer.

Key words: humour, casual criticism, critical neglect, comic characters, comic situations

Introduction

Chukwuemeka Ike is one of Africa's prolific writers and has contributed greatly to the social and political history of Nigeria over the past forty years mainly through the prose genre. He is particularly concerned with institutions such as political institutions, examination bodies, African cultural organizations and most prominently, the university and secondary schools. These concerns are borne out of the wealth of experience from his administrative engagements in many governmental bodies. He was the Assistant Registrar and Student Affairs Officer at the University College, Ibadan for 3 years (1957-1960). He was also the Deputy Registrar of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka for another 3 years (1960-1963) and he eventually became the Registrar of the same University for 8 years (1963-1971). He equally held the international position of Registrar and Chief Executive of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) for another 8 years (1971-1979). He later became a visiting Professor at the University of Jos. He was also the Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of the Governing Council at the University of Benin and much later, the Pro-Chancellor of Anambra State University. All these administrative positions furnished him

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with insights into the moral decay and corruptive practices in the fabrics of Nigeria's social and political system.

No African novelist has suffered neglect by scholars and critics as much as Chukwuemeka Ike especially considering his prolific literary output. Though he started his writing career with short stories, the novel became his medium of creative engagement and he has written extensively ever since: *Toads for Supper* (1965), *The Naked Gods* (1970), *The Potter's Wheel* (1973), *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), *Expo '77* (1980), *The Chicken Chasers* (1980), *The Bottled Leopard* (1985), *Our Children are Coming* (1990), *The Search* (1991), *To My Husband from Iowa* (1996), *A Conspiracy of Silence* (2001), and *Toads Forever* (2007). He has also written other works like *University Development in Africa* (1976) and *How to Become a Published Writer* (1991). He has as well written many articles and essays too numerous to mention here.

With all these great works, Ike is only niggardly mentioned in literary scholarship. Where writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Okotp'Bitek, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and a host of others have been suffocated with scholarly attention, with over twelve novels and many short stories, Ike's works are only grudgingly engaged by a few scholars. Whenever attempts are made, it is always by the same set of scholars: Ernest Emenyonu, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Kanchana Ugbabe, B. E.C. Oguzie and occasionally, Obi Iwuanyanwu. Till date the only meaningful work on Ike's novels is *Chukwuemeka Ike: a Critical Reader* edited by Kanchana Ugbabe which has articles by the same sets of scholars. Whenever he is considered by critics outside this circle, he is held up for all to see as a specimen of the writers belonging to the popular tradition of whom Cyprian Ekwensi is regarded their father. Ike's case is that of criminal neglect of a profound novelist who, through his novels, has contributed greatly to the social and political development of Nigeria. His creative genius focuses mainly on contemporary themes which are specifically concerned with issues around the youth and academia. Ike is very much aware of this painful neglect:

Judging by the attention given to other Nigerian writers, my writing has not received commensurate scholarship... I have not carried out any study myself, to ascertain the reasons for this attitude. When Oxford University Press Nigeria published an *African Encyclopedia* in the 1970's, I inquired (out of curiosity) why my name was omitted in the section on Nigerian creative writers. The reply I received was that the compilers based their information on the list of Nigerian writers published in the Heinemann African writers' series. Since I am not published in that series it is not unlikely that literary critics

who limited their scholarly activities to the series may not know of my existence as a creative writer. (Oguzie 2000)

This observation was made over twenty years ago. C. M. Ukegbu in his M. A. Thesis submitted to the University of Ife in 1986 titled “Coating of Quick-Silver: Society in Chukwuemeka Ike’s Novels” describes this neglect most appropriately: “resounding critical silence, neglect and indifference” (2). Even with greater works, the neglect could at best be described as a criminal disregard of an ingenious writer.

One of the reasons for this neglect according to Ukegbu is the generally held view that Ike’s novels are not topical. Ike expatiates:

As far as these scholars are concerned, any novel which does not concern itself with whatever political or economic issues they consider crucial at any point in time is not topical, and therefore not worthy of serious scholarly attention. (Oguzie 2000)

This is most unfortunate given that some of his novels actually deal with topical issues. Take *Expo ’77* for instance, it recorded the massive leakage of WAEC of the 1970s. Similarly, *Sunset at Dawn* dealt with the Nigerian Civil War Saga and its attendant calamities and disillusionment. At that time the war themes dominated the literary output of that period to which many a Nigerian writer turned their creative energy. If the Nigerian Civil War does not constitute high seriousness, then one wonders what does.

Chukwuemeka Ike’s use of humour is also at the centre of this scholarly neglect. To pass across his message, Chukwuemeka Ike dexterously deploys humour in his works for comic criticism of the society and it is for this reason that some critics described his works as ‘mere entertainment’ which should not be considered when serious works of literature are being discussed. And on this account again, Chukwuemeka Ike reveals:

Believe it or not, a Nigerian Professor of English told me privately [...] that he classified my novels as entertainment and therefore not worthy of serious study because I bring so much humour into them. I was not surprised to find that he omitted my *Sunset at Dawn* from the list of novels written on the Nigerian Civil War by Nigerian writers in a paper he presented [...] (Oguzie 2000).

This Professor is none other than the controversial critic, Charles Nnolim. Reacting to a question on John Munonye's *The Oil Man of Obange*, Nnolim argues:

[...] I have commended the style for instance, compactness and the seriousness of the subject matter in that novel. But if you take Ajasco in *A Dancer of Fortune*, it tends towards farce and this is my quarrel with Chukwuemeka Ike which is what I call the lack of high seriousness. (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 2003)

To achieve this “high seriousness”, Nnolim (2009) sets agenda for African writers in the 21st century:

African writers must face the future by developing an international theme, by engaging in futuristic literature, by looking forward to the fulfilment of the “African dream” [...] this is the challenge of the 21st century for African writers. (5)

It is clear from Nnolim's agenda that Ike is being ignored by critics of his ilk because of Chukwuemeka Ike's failure to develop “international themes”. It never occurs to Nnolim that it will be awkward for a writer to concentrate on international themes and avoid the immediate issues plaguing his society or to concentrate on “futuristic literature” when the present poses poignant challenges.

On the contrary, the humorous content of Ike's works is what confers real merit on him as a resourceful and ingenious writer. What the likes of Nnolim chose to forget is that humour is a viable field of research. Humour as a field of research has drawn a lot of scholarly interests, opinions and arguments which has seen many humour scholars propounding several theories across many academic disciplines. There are over a hundred theories of humour. Even though humour seems an ordinary act done without much effort, it requires extraordinary efforts to meaningfully engage in it. So, it takes a very gifted writer to deploy humour in a creative work in a way that could expose and ridicule the follies and vices in the society rather than for mere entertainment as misconceived by Nnolim.

Chukwuemeka Ike's Comic Vision

Ike is fond of situating his stories within similar settings, precisely the Igbo cultural environment or the village, university campus and secondary school settings. Ernest Emenyonu (2001) explains why this is repeatedly done in almost all of his novels:

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Ike is at his best as a creative writer when he navigates the environment of university campuses and he may well dwell there because it is a very crucial phase of life in Nigeria which is often misunderstood by the society and mishandled by writers of lesser talents. Ike succeeds with this commitment perhaps because he approaches the subject as a concerned parent and a seasoned administrator who is acutely sensitive to character training which the youth must receive if they are not to “grow up absurd”. (112)

Whatever his reasons for choosing similar settings, what is evident is that Ike has a fertile imagination for comic narratives in which social vices and foibles are ridiculed in order to make them unattractive. The focus of this paper is to examine humour in Ike’s works under two categories; comic characters and comic situation in order to reveal how he uses humour and whether his use of humour is for ‘mere entertainment’ or for the meaningful engagement of his society. Bergson’s theory is relevant to Ike’s use of humour because Bergson identifies literary elements which when used in certain ways produce humour.

Comic Characters

Ike is incapable of creating fictional characters without the masterly and terrific touch of humour. The landscape of his creative works is littered with characters that remain green in the hearts of the readers because of the comic mode in which most of them are cast.

In *The Naked Gods* for instance, what he did with the character of The Ezeonuku III of Onuku is to present a picture of most African leaders who grow fat on the resources needed for building the nation without being challenged from any quarter. They have nothing in the area of common sense to recommend them to positions of power neither do they have what it takes to lead well rather than to enlarge their pockets while the rest of the nation languish in penury. They satisfy every stupid idiosyncrasy that comes into their heads as seen from the flamboyant display of the royal orchestra which accompanies His Royal Highness wherever he goes. We are told that The Ezeonuku III of Onuku:

Ate heavily at lunch, arguing that he needed large quantities of food to keep the network of supply lines to the extremities of his massive body functioning at full blast. (195)

He is said to be “over two hundred pounds in weight” (195). His gluttonous appetite for food is caricatured; “sometimes it was a whole chicken, sometimes a good portion of the leg of a goat,

never less than half a chicken” (195). Sleep comes immediately after each meal, a process that requires summoning one of his many wives to hand-fan him to sleep. For him, hand-fanning is an art which requires training:

To fan H.R.H to sleep was one of the first lessons you were taught when you became one of the wives. You were not only required to swing the fan up and down; you had to vary its direction to cover the different folds of his huge body [...] you kept on until you heard the regal snore; then you tiptoed away with a smile of satisfaction at a job well done. (196)

Ike’s humour comes with sharp edges especially when he treats “his principal characters who are mediocre and who are fortunate enough to find their way into a system which nourishes their mediocrity” (Ememyonu 2000) as seen from the character of His Royal Highness above.

The character of Matthew, the chief Messenger to His Royal Highness the Ezeonuku III of Onukuis dexterously laced with humour just like that of the character of H.R.H. Matthew in the prison of his pride, is a somnambulist who sees everything in terms of social relevance and arrogance. The uppish mentality which he attaches to the English language is what is responsible for the attraction he has for the bad version that he speaks. The writer observes that “Matthew was delighted to see that his fame had extended to the University campus, and he walked into the house as if he was His Royal Highness himself” (163). Matthew serves as a sample of those people who are mere doormats on the corridors of power but want to be accorded the same regard and respect given the people whom they serve.

In the same novel, Mrs Ikin is another comic character whose nature fluctuates between the outrageous and the bizarre. Even the normal aspects of her personality are muddled with a gentle touch of humorous histrionics. According to the narrator, “she was under 5 foot, with a waist that her houseboys likened to the trunk of a baobab, and which earned her the nickname of *gwongwolo*” (32). She is one character whom almost all the other characters in the novels love to hate due to her snooping habit, a situation which Bergson (1980: 53) argues:

Is an inconvenience to society, just as certain slight poisons, continually secreted by the human organism, would destroy it in the long run, if they were not neutralised by other secretions. Laughter is unceasingly doing work of this kind. In this respect, it might be said that the specific remedy for vanity is laughter, and that the one failing that is essentially laughable is vanity.

She is given to bizarre obsessions and absurdities through which Ike skillfully deploys humour for the purpose of ridicule. Most of Mrs Ikin's absurdities and obsessions are as a result of her reactionary nature. When she is not copying some weird ways from some quarters, she is reacting to something said or done by someone. We are told that her taste for jeans wearing is as a result of Miss Jumoke's fashion influence:

The first time she wore jeans she created a sensation throughout the campus [...] within a fortnight she had won a few followers among the female undergraduates. Mrs Ikin, notwithstanding her obesity, soon joined the group (83).

Given the social environment of a university campus with a high concentration of the youth, the show of glitz and glamour is the norm. Ike's concern with her character is to condemn indecent dressing common in our society today especially among women who are far beyond their prime that is fast becoming a norm in Nigeria.

Ike has keen eyes for the ridiculous and he achieves this in the art of character creation such that the incongruous nature of his characters' names fulfils some aspects of their personality that may not be very active in his stories. In *The Potter's Wheel*, King Kong is quite another comic character. He terrorises the people of Umuchukwu community especially women and children. The narrator says of him:

He could impound any jar of palm wine or any foodstuffs brought to the market for sale, without paying for them and without apology. He could walk into any maize farm and cut as many cobs of maize as he wanted, claiming that he was merely walking in the path of Jesus Christ who reaped where he did not sow. He bragged that he had a single bone in his lower right arm which more than doubled the strength and effectiveness of that arm, and claimed that any man he struck with the full strength of that man would crawl about eating grass without knowing what he was doing (36).

This is sure a humorous portrait of a rogue let loose without restraint. Of course, no one would dare him if he claims what belongs to another person in broad daylight except if such a person wants to test the effectiveness of the epic arm with the extraordinary strength and such a person may not live to tell the tale. King Kong's criminal and anti-social behaviour flourishes because of the vulnerable and insecure nature of the society in which he operates. The likes of him typifies

the many petty criminals in the Nigerian society who, because of the ineptitude and incompetence of the law enforcement agencies, has to be endured.

In the same novel *Silence*, a fourteen-year-old boy, is a character with a lot of comic propensities. He does not answer or move whenever he is called until the third call; as a matter of fact, he keeps counting until the third call before answering. The narrator tells us:

He usually ignored the first and second calls, hoping that Teacher or Madam would assume he was unavailable and call someone else. If they persisted and went on to the third, he would answer as if, like a masquerade, he had just emerged from an ant hole (94).

He is a major troublemaker and a very clever one at that who never suffers the occasional beating experienced by the other kid-characters who congregated in Teacher's house. Obuechina experiences his very first baptism of fire through these diversionary antics of *Silence* and learns to be wiser for it for the rest of the narration. Ike's creative genius finds inventive engagement in the issues and problems around children and how the society at large helps or fails to mould them into responsible adults.

'We shall see' is another character whose comic name is derived from his perpetual habit of abusing certain phrases. He is a teacher who goes about his work with a touch of style and candour but without much substance. It is characteristic of students everywhere in the world to nickname their teachers or fellow students with their commonest vices or idiosyncrasies. When Obuechina gets to Aka C.M.S. Central School, he is enrolled in the class headed by 'we shall see'. His mannerism and attitude are humorous especially whenever he is in direct confrontation with his dullest but cunning student, Cromwell, who always tends to undermine his style and pride. An instance can be seen when a team of Education Officer is to visit the school, Cromwell who is the only pupil that could give 'we shall see' out as a deficient teacher is bribed by 'we shall see' to at least conform to the rules and regulations of classroom work while the inspectors are around. Cromwell cashed in on the situation to exploit 'we shall see' by demanding many items so much that the teacher cuts a figure of a hapless hunter being hunted.

In *Sunset at Dawn*, the likes of Chief Ukadike, the chairman of Obodo Civil Defence Committee (C.D.C) is a most comic character:

Nobody conferred any chieftaincy title on him [...] he killed a cow, called in the people and in the midst of the feasting announced that he had renounced his English name, Christian, because of the atrocities the British were perpetrating on his fellow Biafrans,

and wished to be known thenceforth as Chief Madukegbu Ukadike the Chief you acknowledged at sight (57).

Whoever heard of a chief with that type of a title? With the character of Chief Ukadike, Ike satirises the penchant for titles common among the elites in many African societies. In the Bergsonian perspective of humour, this is called ‘comic absurdity’. His absurd nature becomes more comical when some of his clownish dispositions are considered:

Chief Madukegbu Ukadike straightened himself on his chair and fingered his six medals [...] The presence of the medals usually reassured him, especially when he was scheduled to appear before persons, he wanted to impress favourably but could not take for granted. The medals invariably gave him a good start: only a man who had excelled himself in one sphere or another of human endeavour received medals of honour. On this occasion, the medals hung from a thick high-necked grey sweater which he had saved from World War II. (82-83)

Ike’s forms of humour tend to have adequate explanation within the framework of Bergson’s theory of humour because both of them share the belief that laughter becomes effective when it ridicules in order to bring about a positive change in attitude. Bergson identifies gesture as an element of humour. Bergson (1980) posits that “by gestures we here mean the attitudes, the movements [...] by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching” (45). Bergson explains laughter as a sort of social gesture that aims at improvement because laughter forces people to be better by suppressing their vices.

Mr Ola is also another comic character that Ike created to ridicule some of the intellectuals of his time trained abroad who, after returning from overseas, retain the mannerisms and habits of the whites even when such are uncalled for in an African environment. Ike notes that “although Mr Ola was a Nigerian and his hair was always cut short, he had a habit of stroking his hair backwards as if to keep the flowing locks in order” (*The Naked Gods*, 45). For a Nigerian with short hair stroking the hair as white people do is as unnecessary as it is a waste of time. Mr Ola is ridiculous because the art of stroking backwards imaginary flowing locks becomes a mere mechanical gesture which Bergson argues, is a major malady of an absent-minded person. Besides, the imaginary flowing locks are not part of the physical make-up of an African person, he then becomes a Bergsonian machine imitating a mere gesture, for Bergson argues that “a person is

never ridiculous except through some mental attribute that lives upon him without forming part of his organism” (52). Since this type of overzealous attitude is neither part of Ola’s behaviour nor has a place in an African society, laughter becomes unavoidable. Ike makes this type of behaviour of the “been to” ugly so as to make people to desist from perpetuating them.

Ike employs symbolic names for fictive purposes on an ironical note. In most of his novels, names are sometimes “used as pointers for the purposes of irony” (Plato 1967: 80) and at other times, humorously deployed with an intention of drawing attention to some attributes of characters. The name “Cinderella Fynface” for the young lady recommended to the Vice-Chancellor of Songhai University by the Minister of Home Service is so designed to draw special attention to her beauty. When she enters the office of the Vice-Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor is mesmerized by her beauty and her feminine charm. The narrator says of her beauty and the meeting with the Vice-Chancellor:

A tall, beautiful, fair-skinned and large-eyed girl walked into the office, smiling shyly and exposing a set of perfect white teeth which appeared separated into two halves by a partition in the middle. Her nipples pressed against her fabric. The Vice-Chancellor unconsciously offered her his own chair. (*The Naked Gods*, 19)

Then there is “Toogood” the Registrar of Songhai University whose wife sleeps around with other men because he could not satisfy her sexually. He creates opportunities for Mr. Brown, his fellow European Lecturer in the university under the guise of travelling. However, Brown fails in the attempt and Julie is once again unhappy and miserable. The appearance of Okoro on the scene saves the situation for her and she is determined to keep him at all costs, even if it means divorcing the Registrar to marry Okoro. Thus, the name “Toogood” seems to suggest the Registrar’s generous nature in this regard. Other symbolic names one comes across in Ike’s works like “Babyface” in *The Chicken Chasers*, “Godbless” in *The Naked Gods*, etc., also affect the way that we read and view their relationships with other characters and the general response that we have towards the works of Ike.

Comic Situations

Ike employs satire loaded with irony, caricature, songs, sarcasm, proverbs, incongruity, slapstick and a host of other literary devices to communicate his messages. The charm incident in *The Naked Gods* is one huge satire and Ike uses the narrative to show the calibre of people that run organisations especially higher institutions in the Nigerian society. The satirical treatment of the

epic struggle for the post of the Vice Chancellor of Songhai University comes to a head with the charm incident that polarises the university community into two camps: those in support of Prof. Ikin and those in support of Dr Okoro. Ezenwa-Ohaeto observes, “the satiric thrust of Ike in this novel is directed at the moral depravity of those who would want to be administrators when they lack the essential qualities” (Emenyonu 2001:52). Most of the intrigues are brought about by Okro whose lustfulness shows that he is incapable of building a reputable and credible citadel of learning his expatriate backers intend to build and this is seen with every woman he comes across. He consults a medicine man to fortify him with charms, a situation that leaves many people in the academic environment gasping for breath and safety. With the satire, Chukwuemeka Ike portrays the banality and barbarity attached to positions of power and privilege in the Nigerian society. What prompts Ike’s satirical jabbing emanate from the fact that he finds inexplicable absurdities and foolish vices in places where such are most unexpected.

In *Toads for Supper*, Mazi Onuzulike tells Amadi his son, “Thanks to God, you do not like women” (44) when we know that Amadi who is popularly known as “Gay Adder” is the very opposite in that regard. This is a comic irony. What this shows is the unpredictable nature of human beings. Mazi Onuzulike thinks that he knows his son thoroughly like a book without realising that environment is a strong factor in determining the choices made by people. Eventually, Amadi is involved with a street girl who accuses him of getting her pregnant which leads to the rustication of Amadi from the university. The case which ensued from the affair is highly farcical; especially at the time the Academic Registrar tries to settle their differences amicably in his office. The Registrar asks:

‘Now, Mr Chukwuka, you say you are not responsible for the baby this lady is expecting?’

‘Yes, sir’

‘You lie! Retorted Sweetie.

‘You go see today! Threatened her mother, ‘if you think say you fit spoil other girls and run away, you not fit lef my own daughter [...] why you dey move? Insect sting you for bottom my friend. When de ting de sweet you, you no move! [...]

‘Yes, sir, I know he will deny. Mama, give me that bag, let me show him the pantie I wore that day, how he soiled and tore it in our struggle [...]

‘If she’s honest with herself, she’ll tell you that she got very angry with me because I let myself go while she was trying to show me the way in. What happened could not give any girl baby.

‘That’s not true’, protested Sweetie, ‘you entered fully’ (111).

The Sordid dimension of the case throbs with farcical humour. The preoccupation with proving themselves innocent blinds those involved in the case from the humour which the incident creates. While the reader pities Amadi, he or she cannot help laughing at some of their utterances. The metaphorical way which Amadi refers to the sexual intercourse that takes place between him and Sweetie and Sweetie's matter-of-fact manner of defending her case; especially in the manner she asks her mother to bring out the panties Amadi soiled while trying to force his way in are humorous.

In *Toads for Supper*, the meeting between Amadi and Aduke's uncle, Mr. Olowu at Ilesha where Amadi goes for introduction as Aduke's prospective husband is quiet humorous. The encounter is as farcical as it is sardonically humorous. The farce is enhanced by the language barrier which renders communication between the two inadequate. It is sardonically humorous as well because Amadi by-passes some processes of marriage traditions:

A tall elderly man in woven *danshiki* walked in. Amadi got up and stood to attention.

'Kabo.' Aduke's uncle, Mr. Olowu greets him first.

'Adupe, Sir', Amadi replied, bowing low.

Mr. Olowu said nothing. Amadi wondered whether he had said the wrong thing. Then he remembered which greeting came first.

'I am sorry Sir', he apologized, again with a low bow, hands behind him. 'Ekusinmi, sir.'

'Se Alafia ni?'

'Adupe, Sir.' Amadi was pleased he had now got the order right. (167-8)

Ike continues the dialogue between Amadi and his prospective in-law with a gentle touch of humour. Mr. Olowu asks Amadi:

'You say you want marry our daughter and you come ask my permission?'

'Yes, Sir,' answered Amadi, getting up from his chair [...]

'That na how people marry for your place?' he asked [...]

'Yes, Sir.'

'We no marry so,' observed Mr. Olowu.

'May I know where I have gone wrong?' Amadi knew it was all over, and he no longer cared what he said.

'Me teach you how to marry our daughter?' Mr. Olowu laughed at the big joke. 'Olorungba mi o!'

‘I am sorry, Sir, if I have offended you. I do not know your custom.’

‘If me be you, I for ask the custom first’ (169)

In any African society, it is the parents who go to negotiate for their children’s marriage accompanied by other kinsmen and not the other way Amadi goes about it. To make matters worse, he goes alone and to a society with an entirely different culture from his. With this encounter, Ike shows the excesses of the youth. Amadi’s anti-cultural move has no place in African society and definitely no explanations in Igbo culture which happens to be Amadi’s cultural heritage.

At Teacher’s house in Aka, we are served more humorous events. In a conspiratorial pack, Teacher and Silence fool Mary’s Fiancé when he calls at Teacher’s house to see how his wife-to-be is doing. Teacher, who obviously does not want to spend a dime in entertaining the guest, orders Silence to buy soft drinks at Dinah’s shop. Of course, he has a secret sign that he makes to Silence symbolising that he should not buy anything. Silence comes back with a plausible lie which beats even the imagination of Teacher himself:

They say the man who sells beer for Dinah has been conscripted into the army, and she has not found another person to take his place. The shop is locked, and there is nobody to open it for me. (*Potter’s Wheel*, 155)

The narrative takes place during the World War II and so Ike uses the historical materials as an alibi. Since the guest is ignorant of the terrain, it is very easy to fool him. However, with this pact between Teacher and Silence, the reader comes to understand why Silence has the mind to play pranks on Teacher and his wife time he is called.

The phenomenal bicycle activities of Mazi Laza in *The Potter’s Wheel* are a delightful recipe. The narrator tells us that whenever Mazi Laza:

[...] wanted to travel from Umuatulu Clan headquarters to Umuchukwu, he would dispatch four stalwart men on foot to Umuchukwu to await his arrival. Two other stalwart men would help him on to the iron horse at the point of departure, pushing and helping to keep the bicycle in balance until he could pedal away. At his destination, it was the responsibility of his four subjects to snatch him safely from the blind horse, and to save the horse from crashing. This required tremendous dexterity, but he soon built up a team of experts who could do it safely at any speed. (*Potter’s Wheel*, 13)

This incident recalls a similar humorous incident in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* which Odili narrates through an anecdote. He tells us that many years ago Mr Nwege who was then a

very poor elementary school teacher who “had an old rickety bicycle of the kind the villagers gave the onomatopoeic name of *anikilija*” (12) had faulty brakes just like that of Mazi Laza in the village of Anata:

One day as he was cascading down a steep slope that led to a narrow bridge at the bottom of the hill, he saw a lorry [...] coming down the opposite slope. It looked like a head-on meeting on the bridge. In his extremity Mr. Nwege had raised his voice and cried to passing pedestrians: “In the name of God push me down!” Apparently, nobody did, and so he added an inducement: “Push me down and my three pence is yours!” (*A Man of the People*, 12)

Perhaps, there is something about the Igbo cultural setting which delights in risky but humorous endeavours. Romanus Egudu (1981) observes, “in Igbo narrative tradition, it is not irresponsible, but rather harmless delight in sad events that charms us” (51). Ike’s humorous sense is aided by his Igbo cultural background. The strong cultural bond coupled with similar social practices in most Igbo communities is responsible for the need for socialisation every now and then especially when traditional and cultural activities are concerned.

Ike is one of the few writers in Nigeria who has continually dwelled on the problems of Nigeria. Like Aristophanes, Ike also impersonates real people in some of his fictional prose works without leaving his readers in doubt as to the persons he is referring to. In *The Search* that is highly political and has some politico-historical background of Nigeria for instance, there are references to real names and dates. The name “Olisiego Obusonjo” clearly points to Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Head of State and President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999-2007). There are also clear references to Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ahmadu Bello and Obafemi Awolowo and the rivalry between Zik and Awo including the crises of 1959, 1962, 1966 and 1979. The election of 1983 in Ondo state in which human beings were set ablaze was pointedly hinted at.

Conclusion

It is evidential that very few scholars and critics of African literature pick interest in reading Ike’s works thoroughly. Darthorne (1976: 111) notes, “Ike is an excellent satirist when not extolling Christianity.” But one needs to study his works to understand that even when extolling Christianity, he is capable of deploying satire for comic effects. What Ike does is to pour out his disgust and disappointment in the hope that the ugly picture he paints through the use of humour would effect a change. His hope is that the picture he portrays in his works would prick the moral consciousness of those who can bring about reformations in the system. Therefore, it is a grievous

misconception to term all of Ike's works as popular fiction or 'mere entertainment' on the account of his use of humour. This unnecessary literary uppity amongst some African scholars and critics of African literature is responsible for the creation of the canonical classification of African writers into old and young writers, a situation which has not encouraged new and up-coming writers since many great scholars and critics prefer to engage only the works of the first generation or the old writers. Ike is a venerable writer who deserves the same level of attention given to other writers with the same quantity and quality of literary output. He is one of the strong voices in African literature drawing attention to some aspects of Nigerian life that need overhauling.

Ike has written on all sorts of things ranging from popular to serious literature and from secular to deeply political works that one feels new methods of evaluation and classification is needed in determining who has or has not written serious literature in Africa.

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