

A Focus on Caricature in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Our Children Are Coming*

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Abstract- *The study commenced with conceptual clarification in order to properly define the focus and state the purpose of this research which is to study caricature in Ike's Our Children Are Coming and point out its communicative function. The researchers carried out a review of some critical works on Ike's novels to establish a lacuna that this study intended to fill. The researchers observed that caricature as an aspect of Ike's style had not been investigated. In the novel, Our Children Are Coming, caricature is a device employed by Ike to ridicule characters, titles, and commissions of inquiry in Nigeria in order to bring about a positive change. A number of passages were extracted from the novel and analysed. Some of the findings of the study are: caricature enhances an understanding and interpretation of the novel; it has both entertainment and communicative functions; it is a way of expressing the author's disgust for some people, their idea, and the institution they represent.*

Keywords-caricature; Chukwuemeka Ike; The Nigerian Novel; satire; literary devices

1. INTRODUCTION

A plethora of ways through which a writer or a novelist can pass across his message to the audience exists. And caricature as employed by Chukwuemeka Ike in *Our Children Are Coming* is one of such devices.

In his explanation of lampoon, Abrams (©2005:28)[1] expounds that 'it typically employs caricature, which in a verbal description (as in graphic art) exaggerates or distorts, for comic effect, a person's distinctive physical features or personality traits'. However, this study treats caricature in Ike's *Our Children Are Coming* as more than a device for comic effect. It considers caricature in the novel as a device that enhances an understanding of characters and reinforces the theme of the work.

Caricature is a device employed in satire, therefore, the exposition that satire differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides, that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual (in "personal satire"), or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even...Mankind (Abrams, ©2005:285)[1] is applicable to the analysis of caricature in this study. In the novel, *Our Children Are Coming*, Ike caricatures characters, titles, and commissions of inquiry in Nigeria.

Chukwuemeka Ike is a contemporary African writer. He is a prolific writer who has not enjoyed enough critical attention like the first generation of African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Cark, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, etc.

Emenyonu (2001:111) [4] has observed that:

For too long, Chukwuemeka Ike has remained untouched by African and indeed Nigerian critics. A few uniformed generalisations have trickled in from abroad with little or nothing profound to say about Ike as a writer... Quite often Nigerian critics have chosen to skirt around the so-called big names in African writing generally referred to as the first generation of African writers namely, Achebe, Soyinka, Ekwensi, Ngugi, Clark,... The dearth of critical opinions on such writers as Chukwuemeka Ike...is a sad commentary on the disregard of Nigerian literary critics for the contemporary African literary situation.

Oguzie (2001:10) [7] also lends his voice to the dearth of critical attention to Ike's works in the following way: 'the situation whereby very few Nigerian authors and their works have been identified as valuable literature is

unsatisfactory. Many a time, other writers or works are rarely considered worthy of serious critical attention'. Therefore, this research work like others on Ike's novels is partly an endeavour to prevent obscurity.

It is also pertinent to observe that those who have critiqued Ike's novels have always admitted that he is a satirist but the present researchers have not come across any critical work that investigated Ike's use of caricature in any of his novels, thus, these researchers consider this aspect of Ike's style worthy of critical attention.

Some of the critical works on Ike's novels are: 'A Stylistic Approach of Chuckwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn* by Aire (2001:26-35)[2] which examines the stylistic and narrative structure of the novel, analysing aspects of lexicon, syntax, figures of speech and literary devices, and Oguzie's (2001:10-17)[7] analysis of Ike's use of irony and humour in *Toads for Supper*. Azuikwe's (2006:50-63) [3] 'Language and Style in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Bottled Leopard* ' identifies diction and stock phrases, sentence types, repetition, humour, idioms and proverbs, rhetorical questions, adjectival density, Americanism, atmosphere and dramatic effect as linguistic and stylistic devices employed in the novel. His textual analysis is based on these features as they are deployed to reveal the background of characters and their experiences. Jibrin's (2012:84-126)[6] 'A Systemic Text Linguistic Study of Selected Nigerian Novels' analyses metaphor, descriptions, proverbs as well as other linguistic devices such as register, coinages, collocations and parallelism in Ike's *Our Children Are Coming*.

Moreover, there are critics of Ike's novels whose works are theme based. Some of these critics are Eznwa Ohaito, Kanchana Ugbabe, Obi Iwuanyanwu, and Ernest N. Emenyonu. In contrast to what others have done on Ike's novels, this study focuses on caricature in *Our Children Are Coming*. In doing this, the study hopes to reveal a new perspective in the interpretation of Ike's novel, *Our Children Are Coming*. This study is important because it is an exploration into an area of literary criticism that is not yet saturated with critiques.

2. CHARACTERS AS GROTESQUE FIGURES

In the novel, we see bogus description of characters that keeps us not only reeling with laughter but also helps in our interpretation of the message. The characters drawn from the world of adults that we see at the Presidential Commission on Juvenile below Twenty-one appear bizarre; characterised by so much flamboyance and jumbo appearance that one will be forced to conclude that nothing good will come out of the commission. For example, Chief (Mrs) Edo is outlandish in appearance:

1. *Chief (Mrs) Winifred Edo straightened up. Her Hayes head tie stood 30 centimetres above her head, with two of its four ends screeching off the back of her neck. She acquired a reputation for installing such*

head ties without the help of one single office pin; and for guiding her head into and out of a car without knocking the skyscraper over. (Ike, Rpt 2012:63)[5]

2. *Speculation has been rife as to why her right cheek should be dimpled: dimples usually came in pairs. The most widely held view was that she had been born with dimples on both cheeks, but had lost the left dimple through excessive use of make-up, particularly since acquiring the M. Ed degree from Premier University. Pencilled eye brows. Green, blue, pink, white eye shadows, depending on her mood, with her cheeks often the colour of ripe tomatoes. To crown it all, imported hair, often brown European, occasionally an Afro-wig (Ike, Rpt 2012:66)[5]*

Chief (Mrs) Edo is the only female member of the presidential commission. Her description in the above passages does not present her as a model of womanhood. The description suits a fashion mannequin not a civil servant appointed to serve on a presidential commission. Moreover, as a member of commission on juvenile with moral restoration as one of its terms of reference, her mode of dressing and appearance are improper as far as the Nigerian society is concerned .

As we can see in the above passages, Chief (Mrs) Edo in the novel manifests as a caricature. Her description not only induces laughter and scorn but also reveals a rotten personality. Apart from her outlandish make-up, she dances when she walks. She is a prostitute who is worse than a commercial sex worker. She is a married woman who engages in extra-marital affairs. She breaks her marital vows without feeling guilty about it.

Chief (Mrs) Edo's M. Ed degree from Premier University is made possible through her sexual escapade with Dr Joko. The same Dr Joko is instrumental in her appointment as member of the presidential commission.

Ike has adroitly crafted the character of Chief (Mrs) Edo in a way to intensify his denunciation and disapproval of the Presidential Commission on Juvenile below Twenty-one and by implication, his aversion to any government commission. Moral laxity in society is portrayed through Chief (Mrs) Edo and other members of the commission. This is why National Association of Students (NAS) is protesting. The members of the commission do not have any modicum of morality to sit on any commission charged with the task of discipline and moral restoration.

Chief (Mrs) Edo is sexually promiscuous. Apart from Dr Joko, she also has sexual intercourse with Dr Nwoke and other members of the commission. According to Alhaji Adamu, a member of the Presidential Commission on Juvenile below Twenty-one, women are appointed members of commissions of inquiry for the sexual pleasure of their male counterparts. All these stress Ike's condemnation of commissions of inquiry. The type of head tie that Chief (Mrs) Edo uses is described

elsewhere in the novel as: ‘headtie (the type which stood like church towers on women’s heads)’ (Ike, Rpt 2012:32)[5]. In the novel, we are made to visualise outrageous dresses that draw attention to themselves and the characters in such dresses. The way Chief (Mrs) Edo dresses is not suitable on a formal occasion like the sitting of a presidential commission; it is not even acceptable at a traditional wedding ceremony in Africa. Thus the presidential commission is a joker and Chief (Mrs) Edo is portrayed to make us see the commission as a cosmetic exercise, a window dressing, an unserious project. We can see the author’s scorn for the presidential commission.

Dr Nwoke is another member of the commission who is also caricatured:

1. *From Chief Olabisi’s seat, the most striking feature of Dr Nwoke was his head. It reminded the Chief of a shinning smooth highway cutting through dense equatorial jungle. Wider than his temples, where the jungle originated, it gradually narrowed down as the highway faded into horizon. Only a tough wooden comb could penetrate the dense growth on either side of the highway and emerge intact* (Ike, Rpt 2012:20)[5].
2. *The gap between the two incisors reminded you of a cricketer’s wicket after an aggressive bowler had uprooted his middle stump* (Ike, Rpt 2012:73)[5].

The above descriptions evoke in one’s mind’s eye a weird appearance. These descriptions are enough to give the impression that the commission that one encounters is a kangaroo type. The author wants us to laugh at the commission, its members and the idea behind it, hence his disapproval as it is an avenue for waste of resources and perpetration of immoral acts. The characters that Chukwuemeka Ike crafts in this novel have the right academic qualification but lack the moral rectitude required for a commission on moral reorientation.

The chairman of the commission has sparkling owl-size eyes. Alhaji Adamu, another member of the commission is described to show another extraordinary appearance. Ike despises him like every other member of the commission:

1. *Alhaji Adamu went on as he brushed back his luxuriant moustache* (Ike, Rpt 2012:23)[5].
2. *...his thick, glossy black, undivided eye brow lifting up and providing a roof over his eyes* (Ike, Rpt 2012:40)[5].
3. *...displaying the three slits which diverged from each corner of his mouth like the rays of a torch light* (Ike, Rpt 2012:78)[5].

Alhaji Adamu like Chief (Mrs) Edo is frivolously ornamented. The author dons them in an uncharismatic appearance that evokes ridicule for them and the commission.

Furthermore, those who appear before the commission to give testimonies are as well described by

the novelist to show his comic appetite. Vice-chancellor’s appearance is funny:

Vice-chancellor Hassan Aliyu felt his cap with both hands. It was still in place, tilted right to left. A red, downy cap which contrasted with his light blue kaftan, it covered only part of his hair. No single, conventional cap could cover his rich, fluffy, jet black hair, including his luxuriant side burns which obscured his ears from the front (Ike, Rpt 2012:60-61)[5].

This passage shows a humorous, grotesque figure. The bushy hair with a cap whose colour riots with the colour of the kaftan gives Vice-chancellor the look of a harlequin, an appearance that is suitable in a carnival, not a formal occasion like the sitting of a commission. Ike wants us to see the commission as well as those who appear before it as jokers.

Dr Yough is another sight to behold. Readers can visualise him from the following passage:

Dr Yough spontaneously felt the thirty-centimetre high aji cap on his head as he acknowledged the compliment. Nature had not been very generous to him vertically. The cap lent nature a helping hand. ‘I have always wondered how people like you manage to keep those skyscrapers in place, particularly when entering and getting out of cars’ (Ike, Rpt 2012:162)[5].

Dr Yough is presented in the above passage as a comic buffoon. Ike dons him an appearance that makes him look outrageous rather than looking distinguished, therefore, readers behold him as well as the commission with its assignment with contempt. We can imagine the author sneering at the commission and those who appear before it.

3. CARICATURE OF TITLES

Other major issues that are caricatured in the novel are obsession with and acquisition of chieftaincy titles in Nigeria. Love of chieftaincy titles bear on corruption and primitive accumulation of wealth in Nigeria hence they are caricatured to show the author’s scorn and disapproval of these forms of behaviour. The following dialogue demonstrates an obsession with chieftaincy title:

‘Chief, Sir. I stopped answering ordinary mister twelve years ago, when I bagged my first chieftaincy title. Since then I have bagged nine additional titles.’
‘So you want to be addressed as chief, chief, chief...ten times’.
‘By all means!’
‘All right, chief...?’ (Ike, Rpt 2012:7)[5].

In Nigeria, chieftaincy like other titles is a status symbol and a hallmark of middle or upper class. It signifies class distinction and a symbol of the upper class. When a

chieftaincy title holder is addressed by the title, he attracts attention of those around him and he feels proud but if he is not addressed by it, he feels slighted like the case we see in the above passage. In Nigeria, chieftaincy title is for men and women of substance, so, it has class significance. Considering the huge amount of money spent to take a chieftaincy title and the source of such money when millions of people in Nigeria are impoverished, we can see the author's nausea and anger towards it.

Love of title has made many Nigerian elite to flout language convention and throw decorum to the wind. It is wrong in Standard English usage to prefix two titles to one's name; but this is the practice in Nigeria which has been caricatured by Ike. Below are instances of aberration portrayed in the novel:

1. *Chief (Mrs) Winifred Edo* (Ike, Rpt 2012:63)[5].
2. *Chief (Barrister) Dipo Taiwo* (Ike, Rpt 2012:181)[5].
3. *Mr Justice Okpetun* (Ike, Rpt 2012:336)[5].

The combinations in the above passages are bogus and they are not permissible in Standard English. They portray Ike's contempt for titles.

4. GROTESQUE JUXTAPOSITION OF COMMISSIONS

The National Commission on Parents over Twenty-one Years is to spite the Presidential Commission on Juvenile below Twenty-one Years. The idea of students (children) setting up a commission to investigate adults (parents) is surreal. These two commissions climax into the setting up of the third one which is the National Moral Reorientation Commission. According to Emenyonu (2001:117)[4], 'Our Children Are Coming was completed while the president of Nigeria was still in power....The bureaucratic obsession with commission of inquiry which the novel ...lampoons at length was a dominant feature of the Shagari era in Nigerian politics'. Shagari's successors were also known for setting up commissions of inquiry and national conferences that never worked as their recommendations were never implemented. The three commissions in the novel are caricatures of commissions of inquiry in Nigeria which are never effective. The author does not see commissions of inquiry as an effective instrument of governance in Nigeria because of the failure of such commissions. In a condemnatory tone, he observes that:

We have no interest in window-dressing or in smoke screens, and we have said so to the government, and to all who have ears and care to use them. The suffering people of our country have for too long been inflicted with a surfeit of such smoke-screens. The Ombudsman came, with all fanfare....What came of it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing except the annual expenditure of huge amounts of

fast diminishing public funds...(Ike, Rpt 2012:305-306)[5].

The author sees decay in the present system and all it represents and thus the need for revolution:

...no attempt to purge our country of corruption will succeed until and unless we attack and revolutionize the entire political frame work upon which everything else rests. Corruption is so deeply ingrained into our political system that it is impossible to eradicate it while that frame work remains intact (Ike, Rpt 2012:309)[5].

Therefore, in his opinion, commissions of inquiry are not necessary in the present state of affairs in Nigeria. What is required is fundamental constitutional changes. This is aimed at abolishing political parties and elections that are the bedrock of corruption and immorality in the country to be replaced with a form of government that is based on selection of leaders by the people. The post of the president, deputy and other top posts will be on rotational basis among states in alphabetical order such will be the offices at the state level among the local government areas in the alphabetical order. The selection of the legislator will rotate among the towns in the constituency. This is prescribed by the author as the solution to corruption and public immorality in the Nigerian body politic. Commissions of inquiry are a product of the present corrupt system and so, they are a subject of caricature in the novel.

5. CONCLUSION / FINDINGS

Caricature as a device in satire is an important element in literary communication. Its purpose as analysed in this study goes beyond mere amusement to effective transmission of message. Apart from entertainment function, caricature in *Our Children Are Coming* is galvanised for communicative purpose. It is a device that is employed in epideictic rhetoric. The findings of this study can be summarised as follows:

- Caricature is employed by Ike in *Our Children Are Coming* to express the novelist's disgust for commissions of inquiry.
- It is employed to express the novelist's nausea for corruption and irresponsible public servants and unresponsive government.
- It has both literary and communicative significance.
- It is used in the novel to reveal government's failure in its duties to the citizenry.

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