



RESEARCH PAPER

A Discourse Analysis of Humour & Incongruity in Chinua Achebe's "A Man of the People"

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how humor is constructed and functions thematically in "A Man of the People" by "Chinua Achebe". Veatch states that two incongruous elements form humor, the first one is the violation of 'subjective moral order' and the other is socially normal. Considering Veatch's principles about incongruity, several examples containing congruent and incongruent elements are foregrounded in this paper. Humor as well as its attachment and detachment with somebody or something, characters' attitude, and the conditions in which humorous make-up is established along with others, is to be explained. The study finds that humor based on incongruity increases reader engagement while highlighting broader societal faults. Future research should look at comparative humorous methods in African postcolonial literature to better understand the role of humor in sociopolitical commentary.

KEYWORDS A Man of the People, Chinua Achebe, Incongruity, Laugh, Humor, Satire

Introduction

Humor has been a primary factor of the works produced in Africa by the writers of Africa and others. Analysis of African literature provides the role of humor in such works. Many examples can be found in the works of the writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei, Amrah, and Ola Rotimi. Chinua Achebe is considered a leading literary scholar by critics like Carol and Dwivedi. Chinua Achebe is famous for his novels like *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and *A Man of the People*. Achebe deals with issues like conflicts between individuals and society and colonial problems that have been a major cause of decay in Africa. Humor is a key aspect used by the writers to depict issues of society. There are many ways for the writers to represent humor like humor used in visuals, use of gestures and motions, short stories, etc (says, Richie). Humor is much helpful for the writers in achieving many purposes in a piece of literature. One of the major functions of humor is to create the interest of the readers and to make them relaxed. It is the effect of the humor present in a piece of literature that makes the readers smile, sometimes becomes the cause of loud laughter. That is to say, it pleases the senses of the readers.

Our concern is to analyze the humorous elements present in the novel by 'Chinua Achebe'. As our major concern is to pinpoint the presence of humor, we will discuss the concept of humor as a source of background knowledge. Then we will proceed towards the inspections of the humorous elements in the novel discussed by Achebe.

Literature Review

The Meaning and Concept of Humor, According to Polimeni and Reiss, "Humor is a complex cognitive function which often leads to laughter". Many researchers are of the view that humor and laughter are deeply related to each other. They say that the source behind the achievement of the laughter is some humorous stimulus. Rutter (1997) says that every business prevails with laughter, humor, and jokes. Humor is a part of every culture in the world. Humor is its significant effects on the lives of human beings. This tendency of humor is known and realized by many writers like Chinua Achebe. That's why they make it a significant part of their writings. There are many conflicts in the viewpoints of the experts about the use and functions of humor. However, according to Franklin, these disputes largely centered upon the content of humor. Humorous conditions are largely enjoyed by the people without any consideration of logical effects. Many theories are there to be followed to highlight the functions of humor and its components. These theories reveal the role of humor in communication.

According to Chapman and Foot (1977), the origin of these theories is found in the times of Aristotle, Charles Darwin, and Quintilian. Superiority theories derive that reason behind laughing at others is that people consider them to be inferior. The practical application of this theory can be seen in schools, hospitals, and some religious places where it is common. At such places, there is a common trend of the senior members to laugh and ridicule their juniors considering them inferiors. Gruner's theory has great significance in this regard. Gruner believes that every piece of humor acts as a tool measuring the winner and the loser. Sometimes it becomes difficult to recognize the winner and loser clearly as there is no winner and loser. This theory doesn't help a lot in the analysis of the written text like 'A Man of The People'. It mostly concerns the analysis of the political relationship between a politician and his subjects.

There are certain other theories like release or relief theories, which emphasize that humor is a great source of releasing tensions or issues related to the psyche. One of the most important proponents of release theory is Sigmund Freud. Sigmund Freud is of the view that humor is a great cause to get rid of many tensions like sexual and aggressive ones. According to Freud, certain impulses are the reasons behind different tensions. These impulses or psychic tensions are released by humor or touches of laughter. So we can say that laughter and humor are quite necessary to lead a healthy life.

Franklyn (2006) notes and gives his views about Incongruity theories as "the most largely acknowledged discipline about humor". It is also worth mentioning that there are variations among the theories that fall under the umbrella term. Immanuel Kant, Norman Maier, and Arthur Koestler are notable authors.

If we define "incongruity" we can take Schopenhauer's definition as a reference: "laughter is a result of the sudden perception of strangeness which lies between the concept and the real objects which has some cognitive relation with it, and laughter is the representation of this strangeness".

According to Veatch, there are two components of incongruity. On a social level, one component is prevalent, whereas the other is a violation of the "subjective moral order". The moral order refers to the system of opinions that are concerned with emotions and cognitions. Humor in Achebe's Novel is well understood by Veatch's theory and incongruity theory. However, all incongruous are not considered as humor. So Veatch's incongruity theory does not provide all answers about incongruous elements. Incongruity theory is very useful for the detailed analysis of humor in Achebe's novel.

Research Framework

Chinua Achebe's outstanding brilliance was undoubtedly strengthened and aided by what is known as the advantage of a head start. As a result, other African authors felt compelled to pick up his approach. Without a doubt, Achebe is regarded as the father of the African novel. He possesses the distinct privilege and honor of being counted among world-class authors whose names are familiar with their countries of origin. The scholar envisions a relationship similar to that of Russia and Tolstoy, England and Shakespeare, the United States of America and Hawthorne or Melville, and Kenya and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Achebe is as Nigerian as garri and okro soup, similarly to how Hawthorne is as American as apple pie, Tolstoy, like whisky, is a Russian native, and Shakespeare, like the longbow and the monarchy, is an English native. The novel depicts the conflict between morals and incongruity, as well as humor and corruption. According to Veatch, humor consists of two incongruous elements: the first is a violation of "subjective moral order," and the second is socially normal.

Material and Methods

The current study's topic involves a qualitative approach. Therefore, For the study, the qualitative research approach was chosen to examine the perceptions of political, humorous, and incongruity discussed in the novel. According to Lincoln (2000), When researchers want to investigate attitudes, philosophies, values, and opinions about any position or policy, the qualitative approach is best. Because the current study is concerned with attitudes, viewpoints, and goals, qualitative research is the most efficient way of gathering and analyzing data. Moreover, Flexible data interpretation is preferred in qualitative research.

Results and Discussion

The conflict between morality and corruption has been shown in the novel. We can clearly see the contrast between the protagonist Odili Samalu and Chief Nanga, Minister of Culture. The ideological difference between the two is what separates them. Odili Samalu who is a teacher-turned-politician and narrator of the story develops a conflict with the corrupt minister of the culture, Chief Nanga. The entire reason behind the conflict is not merely the deterioration caused by Chief Nanga and his government. There is another thing that has added fuel to the fire. Chief Nanga once seduced the girlfriend of Odili Samalu. That is the major cause of his hatred for Chief Nanga. We see the Odili is tortured by the followers of Nanga. At last Nanga's corrupt government comes to an end he is arrested.

The titles of the characters and name-calling are also the major sources of humor. Certain titles serve as the causes of ridicule and exaggeration. They are used just to raise the humor and entertain the readers. When the novel starts the narrator Odili, calls Nanga "the most approachable politician in the country" (page 1). Chief Nanga is commonly said as "a man of the people" (page 1). That's why he is given different titles and out of which some are humorous. Out of these titles, two are: "Chief the Honourable M.A Nanga" and "M.A minus opportunity" (page 1). Chief Nanga is respected by many people in the society but there is also another fact that most of the people including his know that nothing belongs to him that can be can be a cause of honor. We can say that two incongruous elements are present here. If Nanga is an honorable person then he must be part of the socially acceptable act in society. Unfortunately, he is observed as a part of acts that are not acceptable in society. He is engaged in practices that are considered as the symbol of dishonesty like bribery as well as sexual activities with the wives of others. So it is strange and humorous that still, people consider him honorable or "Chief the Honorable". According to Veatch standards, Chief Nanga's illegal activities create a violation of the

"subjective moral order". Chief Nanga's activities make him unsuitable for the titles like "Honorable" Minister of Culture.

Chief Nanga is disliked by the narrator just because of his dishonorable activities. He is not competent for the post he occupies. He is considered to be an "unnatural growth" because of his sudden rise in society. As Nanga has also been the teacher of the narrator, the narrator knows very well about the corruption of Nanga's government. The people of Nanga are completely blinding their eyes to his activities.

On an occasion Odili remarks as a narrator:

"Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you – as my father did – if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth" (p. 2).

This situation is incongruous that when it is expected that Nanga must be rejected due to his unacceptable activities then is admired by the community that he is not a corrupt person but "A man of the people". The thing which is the major cause of the narrator's dislike for Nanga and his government is the criteria on which they select people in any position. The person doesn't need to have experience in the relevant field but the thing which is just expected is "being loyal with the party" states Chief Nanga. This is one of the major problems in African countries where there is no value for competency. The criteria to hold a reputable position is just to be loyal to the party in government. The greater issue is that this is acceptable to the people. Achebe represents this level of deterioration in society. Therefore, Chief Nanga who is "M.A minus opportunity man" is appointed to the office without any struggle. The narrator points out that Nanga's position is unacceptable and ridiculous.

The characters in the novel are assigned superior titles. At one point Chief Nanga, during a conversation, remarks that soon he is going to receive the title of "Doctor of Laws, L.L.D.". He doesn't feel to be satisfied with the title "Doctor" only. He even shows his interest in another title of one of his colleagues, "Chief the Honourable Alhaji Doctor Sego, M.P." (page 18). The person mentioned is also as corrupt as Chief Nanga. It is incongruous to call him "Honourable". After the addition of more titles, Chief Nanga's title becomes like "Chief the Honourable D.M.A. Nanga, M.P., L.L.D.", which is just ridiculous. Further the addition of the title, "Doctor of Laws", prolongs the main title. This shows the hollowness of Chief Nanga. He feels content with these titles. So this sort of situation just conforms to ridiculous and sarcastic situations and the presence of humor in the novel. People are just in pursuit of empty titles which are having nothing to do with their real competency.

On another occasion when Chief Nanga is asked about his point of view about the title "Chief Dr. Mrs", he promptly counters "That one no sweet for mouth...E no catch" (P. 19). It is clearly stated that the attitude of society is quite discriminative towards women. Women are not supposed to have the title like Chief. They are just reserved for men.

The title used for Chief Nanga's own Prime Minister is "The Tiger, the Lion the, the sky, the one and only, the ocean and many other names of praise" (page 05). He is called by such titles in the parliament. He sacks his financial minister just because he doesn't agree with him when he asks for some illegal printing of pounds.

Another incongruous situation is described by the conflict between the desired reactions and real reactions of people. The Minister of Finance and other sacked ministers

are looked down upon by the people. Nobody cares that the reason behind their dismissal is just their loyalty to the country. Minister of Finance is given the title of "Traitor", "coward" and "Doctor of fork your mother" (page 6). It also shows the corrupt society of the time. Along with other things they are corrupt even with words which are shown by the replacement of the word "fork" with "fuck".

Some other phrases and words are also a great source of humor in "A man of people by "Achebe". The work "anikilija" is used by the people for the bicycle Mr. Nwege that have faulty brakes. This name-calling is the cause of laughter for readers. There is "a popular Anata joke" in which the narrator conveys an incident of "anikilija" in the following words:

"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 – an unusual phenomenon in those days – 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 the 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!' From that day 'Push me down and take my three pence' became a popular Anata joke" (page. 13).

Another incongruous situation is well understood from the above extract. When Mr. Nwege sees a lorry, in fear of being collapsed he calls out: "in the name of God push me down". This statement shows a strong force of humor. His mentioning of the name of God confirms his nervousness and seriousness at that moment. When nobody comes to help him, he again says loudly: "Push me down and my threepence is yours!". This is how this work of Achebe is pregnant with humor. Mr. Nwege is offering three pence to save his life. As he is on a bicycle with brakes out of order, so this situation is filled up with fun. This situation is serious for Mr. Nwege as his life is in danger but people don't take it seriously and they keep on laughing at him.

There is another example of humor presented in the text. Someone knocks at Odili's door and Odili's reply is quite strange. He says: "come in if you are good-looking" (page20). This condition for the one to come in if and only one is good-looking stirs some humorous emotions.

When Odili and Andrew converse with each other on the topic of girls. Andrew accuses Odili to be too much interested in girls. Odili replies: "OK. Mr. Gentleman.. 'Any person we first mention about the girl again for this room make his tongue cut. How is the weather?' He laughed" (p. 21). The major cause of the humor is the seriousness with which Odili tries to defend himself. As the audience knows very well that they both are much interested in girls. How beautifully Odili switches the topic to the weather. They both burst into laughter indicating that they do converse on the topic of girls. That is the major reason behind the laughter of the readers. They enjoy this situation to a great extent.

There is another quite humorous situation is when Odili goes to city to visit Chief Nanga. One thing is common both in Odili and Chief Nanga. They both are much fond of women and having their relations with them. They converse on the topic for a long time and narrate their experiences. A quite peculiar incident is narrated by Chief Nanga which contains humorous elements. Chief Nanga narrates his experience with "a young lady who never undressed her brassier". This act does not seem to be a funny one but it stirs curiosity. The reason behind the act is revealed after so many encounters that her husband had put some juju in her breasts to frightened her to be faithful. His notion was that if she revealed

her breasts to someone else then it would be easily exposed to him. This incident appears to be a humorous incident for the readers how fruitless effort is done on the part of her husband.

Rithhie (2010) has also described another method of achieving humor and that is the use of puns, so Achebe has used this way in his novel. They are the types of verbal jokes which are discussed on a large scale. The puns have the functions that make sense as well as urges expression, the expression which contains shared knowledge in the culture. It is the most widely used technique to excite humor by the writers. The example of the use of pun is observed by the use of the word "bar" by "the senior tutor". In this novel, the senior tutor who is a jolly rascal goes out of the lodge containing a beer bottle in his armpit. The man is drunken but still, he is having a beer in his armpit. This scent serves to be humorous by the use of the word "Senior Tutor" and the person referred to is involved in drinking. The senior tutor remarks here: "why so many young people traveled to Britain to be called to the Bar when he could call them all to Josiah's bar" (page. 20). Here, the senior tutor is playing with words. There is the term "bar" used in legal terminology but here he consciously using the word "bar" for pub ignoring the contextual knowledge of the sentence as people go to Britain for legal affairs. Achebe is finely making the use of words to express humor in "A Man of the people".

Apart from these, there are some more examples in "A Man of the people" which serve as light examples of humor as well as satire. Chief Nanga insults his Minister of public constructions for delaying the construction of the road from Giligili to Anata, which is the hometown of Chief Nanga. Here lighter humor is sandwiched in the situation which involves recruitment of the incompetent ministers of the government. According to Chief Nanga, the reason behind this negligence is that a boy from the hometown of the minister of public constructions asked him for delay till the next dry season as he wanted to test the soil. The cause of the distress of Chief Nanga is the upcoming elections. He wants the road to be constructed before the upcoming elections. He comments: "The small boy has become an earthworm" (Page 42). This statement shows the nervousness of Chief Nanga. The particular situation is quite humorous for the readers. The readers enjoy the situation when they see Nanga in a confused condition for his survival in politics.

On one occasion Chief Nanga states that being a minister is not a relaxed situation and it is full of tensions. He intends to show his people that he is a responsible politician. He again utters this statement for the second time when he is invited to the proprietor's accommodation (Mr. Nwege's house). This time Josiah who is a one-eyed person, also an owner of a shop, surprised him with his reply. Josiah says, "I no Kuku mind the katakata wey de for inside. Make you put Minister money for my hand and all the while on top. I no mind at all" (page. 15). These words from Josiah amazed the audience a lot. Everybody indulges in waves of laughter. Josiah says that he is ready to have all those problems along with the heaps of wealth that are enjoyed by the ministers.

In the novel, Achebe portrays Chief Nanga as a man of opportunistic nature. He is always in pursuit of opportunities. The narrator does not consider Nanga to be a worth significant person as most of the followers of Nanga do. As Chief Nanga is an opportunist, he is frequently commented on by the narrator. On one occasion the narrator comments about Nangan that on "seeing the ministerial seats empty", Nanga "hastened towards and snarled shamelessly to get the meaty prize" (page 6,7). Chief Nanga is being represented as the man with a dog-like image. This situation creates a humorous picture in front of the readers. Chief Nanga yells at the cabinet members who have been dismissed and considers himself the only person who is loyal to the party. The narrator does not surprise by the

change of Nanga's position as a Minister of Culture. The narrator sarcastically remarks about his ministerial appointment as:

As soon as the Minister's Cadillac arrived at the head of a long motorcade the hunters dashed this way and that and left off their last shots...The Minister stepped out wearing damask and gold chains and acknowledging cheers with his ever-present fan of animal skin which they said fanned away all evil designs and shafts of malevolence thrown at him by the wicked (p. 7).

The certain things in the above extract like "Cadillac", "damask" and "gold chains" are the wealth of Chief Nanga which are newly attained. His fan of animal skin serves him greatly for protection. The narrator is surprised about the fan of chief Nanga that whether it plays its role effectively for the protection of Chief Nanga. At last, the government of Chief Nanga is overthrown at the end and he is arrested. The fan of Chief Nanga fails to escape him and his government from the catastrophe.

The study reveals that Achebe effectively uses humor—through satire, pidgin English, irony, and name-calling—as a means to critique political corruption in post-colonial Africa. These humorous elements align with incongruity theory, blending the absurd with the socially familiar. The narrative elicits a variety of emotional responses, establishing humor as a deliberate literary technique rather than just comedic relief.

Conclusion

The analysis of *A Man of the People* through the lens of incongruity theory reveals that Achebe skillfully employs humor to expose political corruption and societal decay and various humorous sources and these sources have significant roles in determining humorous situations. The factor of corruption is much significant in this regard. Achebe has used different techniques to depict humorous elements. The elements used as the sources of humor are titles, puns, name-calling, use of pidgin English, use of irony, comparisons, and satire. Achebe becomes successful in achieving desired results i.e laugh, chuckle, or a smile on the faces of readers. These elements construct congruent and incongruent scenarios that elicit a spectrum of reader responses—from momentary amusement to critical introspection. Achebe's deployment of humor extends beyond mere comic relief, serving as a vehicle for incisive social commentary. The novel ultimately exemplifies how humor can subvert immoral authority while enriching narrative and thematic resonance.

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