

**AN EXPLOITATION OF SATIRE IN NGOZI CHUMA-UDEH'S *TEACHERS
ON STRIKE***

Aminu Segun and Adetoro Abiodun

Department of Languages, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Literature can be seen as the mirror of life, which shows the action of man in the society. To mirror this society, writers usually rise to the occasion using the medium of arts to express people's mind. It is common knowledge that the problems associated with democratization in Nigeria have left a profound mark in literary circle as there have been gradual shift from military misrule to that of political and social diagnosis. The satirical portrayal of the Nigeria political class, the meddlesomeness of the working class and the all pervading cynicism in the polity are all that is looked on by writers. As a result of the spirit of patriotism and nationalism, the source and inspiration of their work came, as they were victims of harsh economic situation and corrupt environment. To pass across their message, these writers explored a unique style of writing through which they ridicule and make caricature of their society. This style of writing is said to be a social criticism whereby the actions and thoughts of man are criticized in a positive way. This unique style is known as satire. This work takes a look at the exploitation of satire in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Teachers on Strike*.

INTRODUCTION

Writers through the coming of independence sought for ways of expressing thoughts about their contemporary societies. These writers were disappointed with the society since the society offered almost nothing of worth. The activities of Africans after their independence brought about disillusionment and disenchantment in the lives of people including the writers. Their optimism and hopes were dashed as elites began to build class for themselves. The mode of political writing since then has become that of bitter experience, deprivation, neglect of infrastructure, ethnic crises, cries against apartheid and amending wars among Africans themselves. Their literary pieces were meant to educate and awaken the black African spirit in their fellow blacks. In order to bring their thoughts to fore, these writers explored a unique

style of writing through which they ridicule and make caricature of their society. This style of writing, which is very peculiar, is said to be a social criticism whereby the actions and thoughts of man in the society are criticized in a positive way. This unique style is known as SATIRE.

Satire could be defined as a technique of writing that contains strong criticism and is delivered in an ironical derisive, sensuous, and jesting manner. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of English, satire is a way of criticizing a person, an idea or an institution in which you use humour to show their faults or weaknesses. Satire is a very important technique of writing in a society where values are shifting; people take liberty where there is no appropriate response to issues of morality. As a literary concept, satire serves as the vehicle for social criticism and an instrument of attack, it has long been used to expose and criticize individuals or the collective misdemeanor and social ills. Writers have found satire an interesting style of writing which sets out and ridicules the vices in their societies with the hope that in laughing at the society that they will consider their life style and change for the better. Looking back, these writers are victims of harsh social and economic situations in their societies. They ridicule the actions of man and what he has turned the society into.

According to M. H. Abraham in a Glossary of Literary Terms, Satire is defined as,

The literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitude of amusement, contempt, scorn. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter as amend in itself where satire 'derides', that is, it uses laughter as a weapon against a butt existing outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual (in personal satire) or a type of person, a class, an institution, a native of even the whole race of man the distinction between the comic and the satire however is a sharp one only at its extremes (84).

In Arthur Pollard's satire, he expands the weapon of satire to include wit, ridicule, irony sarcasm, cynicism invective and caricature. This means that in some works, the laughter can completely vanish and assume the harsher tone through the use of invectives.

Satire as a style of writing has been in use since the middle of nineteenth century till date. Writers like John Gay, Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift have been regarded as the fathers of satire because in their works, we find the ridiculing of man and his actions in his society. Jonathan Swift who has been regarded as the greatest ironist in English Literature does not give man any allowance for comfort and dignity as he cruelly reduces grand pretensions to systematic follies and mechanized brutality. His characteristic device is to invent some rational basis for the behavior that men go into self indulgency. If we live exploiting others, we are only a short way from cannibalism and Swift shocks us with that possibility in a Modest Proposal which is an ironic tract based upon England's Exploitation. The most objective of Swift's satire was political, usually in the form of an individual who typifies some corrupt interests.

Satire as a style of writing has continued to flourish till the present day and African writers have found it most suitable. Africa witnesses series of political corruption and mismanagement on the part of the new-colonial African affairs. The trend which has continued up to the present day, provoked most African novelists to a certain sense of disillusionment. The literary realization of this feeling took the form of realistic depictions of the socio-political aberration mainly through the medium of caustic satire and in some cases outright indication.

The twentieth century saw the birth of many indigenous African writers who write on the concept of satire as it affects the African people. These writers tried to show African people their own mistakes of accepting colonialism and everything that came with it. In view of this, these writers therefore used satire as a way of registering their protest against colonialism and the social injustice meted out to the African by the Europeans. In other words, they ridiculed both the continent and its colonizers telling both sides their follies but showing the inhumanity of the whites to the Africans. Among these writers were Ferdinand Oyono, and Mongo Beti who wrote on the Cameroonian experiences. T. M. Aluko and Chinua Achebe, both wrote on the Nigeria colonial influence in this period of African writing, there were attempts at re-asserting that African literature is truly indigenous.

T. M. Aluko in his novel *One Man One Wife* attempts to present the picture of the colonial influence in the Yoruba people and the subsequent clash this influence had on the people. We see him experimenting on the modern Yoruba society in the pre-independence and post-independence Nigeria. In this direction, he takes a look at

the old Yoruba traditional society and the unhealthy influences on the people. Aluko therefore sanitized the Western educated Africans, the kind of ideologies they tried to bring into traditional societies. Still looking at the satirical tradition in literature, Chinua Achebe in his novel *A Man of the People* Satirizes the several ills in post-independence Nigeria; Achebe takes a special look at the political and socio-economic life of Nigeria Society. He also makes attempt to make his readers believe that nemesis must always overtake both the electorates or people and the rulers who abuse the political structure of Nigeria even though they know the rules of politics. According to Achebe, Nigeria can only survive when political quacks stop abusing political procedures and allow the honest elites and political experts who have got authentic political ideology into the system. If this is not allowed, there will never be good government in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. These trends of satiric writing will not be complete without mentioning Chuma-Udeh Ngozi's *Teachers on Strike* as a satire.

EXPLOITATION OF SATIRE IN NGOZI CHUMA-UDEH'S *TEACHERS ON STRIKE*

Teachers On Strike is a satirical work which lashes vehemently at the barbaric acts and wickedness of man to his fellow man without compromises in his society. Man has ceased from having the heart of man which has been made by God to be loving, emotional and accommodating. Instead man has taken upon himself the heart of a beast. Wickedness and man's humanity to man has become the order of the day. We see the poor and degrading standard of living of the masses which is as a result of poor governance by the government authorities.

Chuma-Udeh satirizes the government in the person of "HIS EXCELLENCY" who became selfish and deaf to please the anguish-stricken citizens. The novel exposes the ills which paraded itself amongst the citizens, the hopeless and helpless state of the teachers and their families who were most affected. Man who has the inherent zeal to survive no matter what it takes results to societal vices. These vices include robbery as we see the young male students who are dropouts going into robbery so as to survive; young girls taking to prostitution at such tender ages owing to the fact that they are idle, their parents who are teachers have nothing to afford even a single meal for them, cloth them or even take them to the hospitals for good medical check-up.

The novel unfolds the main character, Nebe, who is the chairman of the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) thinking about the trend of events. The peaceful, serene atmosphere and environment is being suddenly disrupted by the non-challant attitude ineptitude and negligence of the administration of His Excellency, the province Governor on the poverty stricken masses. An atmosphere which has been like a love-nest for both native and man. We see Nebe at the Centre of the whole event, a talented and dedicated teacher who loves his profession with a passion and does what he knows how to do best. No sooner than later, his cherished dreams, vision and mission is cast into oblivion. This is marked by the non-payment of the teachers' salaries which later degenerates into a strike action.

The resultant effect and aftermath poses a long and endless list of menace and vices which is evident on the teachers and society at large; but is most prominent on the students (youths) who are the future leaders and backbones of the society in general. Notwithstanding the clarion call by the teachers, the 'Kakiocratic' Province Governor, His Excellency with no milk of human kindness flowing in his veins hoards the teacher's salaries and arrears. Several efforts were made at making him heed to the voices of the masses and thus, alleviating their suffering not even eradicating it entirely. He never listened, instead he uses the money and other funds to flag off his second tenure campaign. In the cause of these events, many families suffered and died of malnutrition and poisoned food. In one of Nebe's nighty works, he met some young students who were being tricked into prostitution as the author puts it thus:

..... Two female figures detached themselves from the shadows. Whores....
Nebe recoiled in disgust as their figures became discernable. They are chortling gleefully, may be at the success of their amorous games, quite oblivious of this presence. Then the women noticed him and began to Swagger (4).

The young boys went into robbery as they had nothing reasonable to do. As often said, ‘an idle mind is the devil’s workshop’. Robbery became the only job that could provide them with their necessary needs. Since their parents who are the breadwinners could not cater for their families, we get:

....Hey! There, hold it or I shout. Hands up! Any movement, you report to hell. Nebe froze! The terrors advanced. Four hefty messengers of darkness. Smell of hemp and strong wafted his nose as they advanced towards him. A rough hand pulled his collars up. He felt the cold nuzzle of a pistol on his neck, then the rough hand loosened its grips as if it was commanded to do so. What are you doing outside by this time of the night “Sir?” The English Syntax was all well pronounced The teacher noted: ‘Boys let’s go. He is bad meat... (8)

After his night walking, Nebe went home to his wife and children. Really, it was bad as he suffered financially. The strike which started not as a ‘sit down’ strike has turned to a ‘lie down’ strike. The bread winner of a family was now handicapped as he could not do anything to improve the deteriorating conditions of his family. It is satirical that Mr Nebe who banned his wife from using her sewing machine in his home now resorted to the little tips it brought as Rita sewed for people to make money. When the salary stopped coming Nebe started to wonder because the family’s source of income should have come to a half. But rather, his wife was meeting up with the demand of the family. Thus we get:

“Rita has taken to sewing with the machine
her parents gave her as a wedding present.
the little money she realized from sewing
became the saving grace of the family” (18)

As the strike lingered further and the pains of starvation in his family left indelible marks in his heart, he had no choice than to allow Rita continued with her sewing. The author puts it thus:

....years later, the buzzing
of the sewing machine had become a relief
to him. Each time the machine buzzed,
there would be food in the house and
children's demands would
be easily met. The buzzing became
synonymous with...(19)

Chuma-Udeh satirized the government in the person of 'His Excellency' who ignored the plea of the teachers to pay their salaries. Instead, he tampered with nature by causing the strike which breeds inhumanity. The teachers in one of their meetings as a result of the death of Irukwe's pregnant wife, were addressed by Ukweze thus:

.... comrades, fellow teachers, fellow workers in the lord's
vine-yard, we are on strike to demand for the payment of
our monthly salaries...
the government is insensitive to the yearnings of the people
who voted them into office. We have watched our families
suffer terrible deprivations, our children starve to death,
right under our very eyes. Our wives suffer reproach from
market women (28 – 29).

We see satire at work again as the Nebe after hearing the sad news of the death of Irukwe's pregnant wife, took to his nightly walk again. This time he wished he could bask in the arms of nature... and forget his sorrows like the tree. He knew it was impossible because humans and trees are different. He says this:

“the life of man is however different from
that of trees. Man is laden with conflicts” (75)

man has ceased from being comforting to his fellow man as Nebe could only see solace in trees, thus he admired,

....The pine trees lining the school terrain swayed
away in the evening breeze. The wind rustled the
leaves and they danced in the ecstasy of nature. The
branches necked towards other, touching, caressing
and conferring in their hidden languages... (75)

wickedness on the part of the governor which brought an endless strike has started eating deep into the leg of the school security man's wife. It was in one such night movements that Nebe subconsciously walked to the school the teachers. When he got there, he saw light shadows and so concluded they were ghosts in the school. He went home and told his wife, Philo and his neighbor who refuse to believe him rather decided to follow him to see for themselves.

....in between these thick bushes, the Shadows ironed, lots of them. Some were Sitting, others squatting. There were tiny stubs of light in almost all the corners of the compound. These lights twinkled like little stars. Dife froze!!! Philo uttered a low scream and passed out right into Chike's arm. Chike too shivered uncontrollably (84).

Later they realized that the ghost were actually humans who gave the security man money in exchange for place to lay their heads. These the security man did in order to take care of his wife who was bitten by a snake. Nebe and others were moved with pity. Instead of Nebe and his followers to do something meaningful, they decided to harass the school security man by presenting themselves as detectives. In the real sense, these people would have taken such measure towards the government and those in authority but rather, they saw the security man as a man who could be intimidated. When they met him, instead of seeing a man well fed and healthy, their eyes beheld a man who had not just aged due to age, but a man who sagged like a deflated football. Thus the question:

When they followed the security man to his living quarters, they found the most cruel effect of the strike on them.

“what does he do with the money he had
Been collecting from his nightly clients?”
He doesn’t look like someone who had
Seen a meal of recent not to

talk of

A good one (92)

...when they started their interrogations

Nebe was afraid the man would collapse and kick the bucket right there in their presence. He never attempted to deny his crime. He just stood there petrified then when Chike introduced himself as the detective, he became a sorry sight....(92)

... As they approached the man’s living quarters

The author wants us to see how and what extent poverty had crept into the lives of the poor masses that they could not longer buy kerosene and so resorted to going out even late in the night to gather wood for cooking. This he narrates thus:

...the woman groaned pitifully. My wife”, the security man made an awkward introduction.

“We ran short of kerosene and there was no Money. We had to cook whatever miserable food we had left. So she went into the bush to collect five woods and got bitten by a snake. I had to allow those people in at a fee of twenty naira each so as to feed her and buy her drugs too. I am sorry but...” he broke down and wept like a baby (93).

Another important thing Chuma-Udeh satirized is the notorious state of man in his lustful nature to exploit his fellow man as we see in the character of Philo’s landlord. Now that the teachers were not paid and they were the poorest in the society, Philo’s landlord saw this as the long awaited golden opportunity he had been praying and waiting for to harass her. The teachers as a result of non-payment of their salaries became. The butt for societal talk even students who had benefited solely from the teachers as they invested their time, soul and energy impacting knowledge added to the injury and insults the teachers received. These students had turned into rogues in the society thereby terrorizing the poor lives out of the teachers.

Satire comes into play clearly as we see teachers being very wicked to their fellow teachers all in a bid to survive. This is what happens in a society that has its body rooted into moral decadence and conscience been thrown to the wind. In the novel, we find so many careless and untimely deaths, crime, change of destinies,

students become drop outs and take to street life. But the governor did not and was not ready to make amends and listen to the cries and wailings of the people (teachers).

These teachers even went through the village head and the priest who is a man diligent in his ways to help them talk to His Excellency. But what happened? They lost their lives. Just as nothing evil lasts for ever, His Excellency died leaving all the wealth he extorted and stole. His death was linked to the satisfaction one gets after successfully removing a fish bone in one's throat for so many years.

...Everyone in that crowd wanted to be the first to tell the president of the Teachers Union the 'good news'. "Its His Excellency! 'What happened to him?" "sacked!" "sacked?" "removed!" "thrown away!!!" 'what???'... (129).

The author's satire on His Excellency was a deep and unending one which she hoped would serve as a lesson to other governors. His Excellency who thought that he was "Almighty and untouchable by man met his tragic end. This was what the people secretly and silently prayed for.

In conclusion, Chuma-Udeh used her piece of work *Teachers on Strike* to bring back the conscience of man to himself. She is of the view that the teachers would not be able to survive in the society as long as those in authority keep acting like "His Excellency". With her work, she hopes the government would see the follies of their predecessors and turn over a new leaf.

The society would become a conducive place if only things are done properly and at the right time. Indeed, *Teachers on Strike* is a work rich in satire, bringing out man's wickedness, follies, shameless lustful desires to stark limelight so that man will take corrections and be a better man to himself and the society at large.

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