

THE POWER AND POLITICS OF SATIRICAL DISCOURSE IN SOME NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

The study examines the satirical style as a source of literary comment generally and in selected Nigerian newspapers in particular. The objective is to find out how language is used to create a satirical piece. The study first looks at stylistics generally, and then focuses on satire as a basic sub-generic manifestation of literature in which writers employ different stylistic devices to convey their messages to their readers. It then examines selected newspaper articles written in the satirical style. The major findings of the study were that: There is a general lack of knowledge of satire as a stylistic device and how it could be used effectively, e this device for more than one reason, which include: as a source of literary fun; to provide variety from long, boring, conventional articles; and writers find it safer to use this indirect method of criticizing because of repression fears which, quite often, are real. The Nigerian reader as well as writer needs more exposure in the area of language usage so that he can acquire the level of sophistication that is necessary for him to read and write, understand, and correctly interpret messages contained in a satiric piece.

INTRODUCTION

Language and Style

The mass media presents social issues such as war, peace, apartheid, politics, human rights, etc to the public through print, electronic or other media. The print media is one of the two major components of the mass media: the other being the electronic media. The idea behind being endowed with language and the ability to use it is to say something meaningful in it. However, due to differences in individual experiences, the way one individual uses language differs significantly from that of another, the medium notwithstanding, even when they are talking about the same thing. Usually, the vehicle used in conveying topical issues in all media language, which Sapir (1921:8) defines as "... a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntary produced symbols..." Language is thus the bridge between the writer and his audience, the channel through which communication takes place in the newspapers. The peculiar way a particular writer presents information to his audience is often referred to as the "style" of that writer. Williams (1986: 22) has argued that "the excellence of literary artists must be evident, ultimately, in their choice of language". Comte Buffon in his popular cliché, has also argued that "style is the man

himself". This is the reason why the study of style has often been viewed as a step towards a fuller and richer literary appreciation.

Stylistics, within which satire belongs as a genre, has been variously defined by Crystal and Davy (1969), Chapman (1973); Leech (1984); Holman and Harmon (1986), where they see it as the linguistic study of different styles; while Widdowson (1975) sees it as the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation. Crystal (1987: 71) observes that, in practice, most stylistic analysis have dealt with the complex and 'valued' language within literature, i.e. 'literary stylistics' and that in such examinations, the scope was sometimes narrowed to concentrate on the more striking features of literary language, for instance, its 'deviant' and abnormal features, rather than the broader structures that are found in whole texts or discourses. For example, the compact language of poetry is more likely to reveal the secrets of its construction to the stylistician than the language of plays and novels.

Fowler (1996: 185) makes the point that, "in non-theoretical usage, the word literary stylistics makes sense and is useful in referring to an enormous range of literary contexts, such as John Milton's 'grand style', the 'prose style' of Henry James, the 'epic' and 'ballad style' of classical Greek literature", etc. In addition, it is a distinctive term that may be used to determine the connections between the stylistic form and effects within a particular variety of language; in other words, it looks at what is 'going on' within the language. From these definitions, it is clear that stylistics could be approached from both the literary and linguistic standpoints. Literary style could be satirical, metaphorical, conversational, parodical, etc. If the style is satirical, the writer delves into his linguistic bank, retrieves certain words that are capable of producing satirical effects, and presents his information to his readers who then interpret his material hopefully, with the expected underlying satiric implication. Here, the creative ability of the writer is to put to task. The fact that the linguistic choices the writer makes are the most important aspects that contribute to the success of any writing cannot be over-emphasized.

Satire

An object is criticized because it falls short of some standard which the critic desires that it should reach. The corrective purpose, which is basic in every satirical text, is expressed through a critical mode which ridicules or otherwise attacks those conditions needing reformation in the opinion of the satirist. Satire as a basic sub-generic manifestation of literature was created by the Romans who were noted for their pragmatism. They called it "satira", a word derived from another word meaning "sated" or "filed with food." Satire has, from earliest times, employed irony, derision or wit to expose human faults such as folly, wickedness or pretense. It is further defined as "a kind of literary composition in verse or prose, in which weakness or folly is censured and held up to reprobation; ... From the time of Lucilius till now, says Dryden, ... the very name of satire is formidable to those persons who would appear to the world what they are not in themselves".

Quintilian, the foremost Roman rhetorician, contributed significantly to the establishment and acceptance of satire as a Roman literary phenomenon (Oloruntoba-Oju, 1990). In other words, satire is a particular use of humour for overtly moral purposes. It seeks to use laughter, not just to remind us of our common often ridiculous humanity, but rather to expose those moral excesses, those corrigible sorts of behaviour which transgress what the writer sees as the limits of acceptable moral behavior. The best satire does not seek to do harm or damage by its ridicule, unless we speak of damage to the structure of vice, but rather it seeks to create a shock of recognition and to make vice repulsive so that the vice will be expunged from the person or society under attack or from the person or society intended to benefit by the attack (regardless of who is the immediate object of attack); whenever possible this shock of recognition is to be conveyed through laughter or wit: the formula for satire is one of the carrot and the stick; honey and medicine. Far from being simply destructive, satire is implicitly constructive. It was thus identified with social, political, personal, religious or literary criticism.

At the initial stage, however, satire was in poetic form. But it gradually became synonymous with any literary work that had elements of satire, even when the form was not poetic. It is defined as “a kind of literary composition in verse or prose in which weakness or folly is censured...” Satirists have tended to follow, largely, either the Juvenalian or Horatian traditions. Juvenal, revolted by immorality, was often “fierce and furious” in his manner of protestation. Horace, on his part, attacked societal ills in a “mild and genial” manner, implying that satirists can either be mild or bitter in their use of linguistic resources.

Research Problem

The problem of some Nigerian writers is that they think first in their language; interpret these thoughts in English before writing them down. In the process of writing, some words, expressions, thoughts, feelings/ideas might become distorted, underplayed, over-emphasized or not even reflected at all. Because proficiency in English is generally low coupled with socio-cultural experiences, some words, expressions, concepts/ideas are invariably misunderstood. Since readership of newspapers cuts across all levels of the society, the problem of reading, interpreting and writing exists, even among native speakers of English, let alone speakers of English as a second language; particularly when one is called upon to interpret sophisticated styles such as satires.

The history and politics of satire

Satire has always been used to point out societal ills. It is, therefore, not surprising that great satirists wrote indicting pieces in which aberrations were ridiculed and societal foibles were highlighted. Such works include Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*; Fielding's *The Adventures of Joseph Andrews*; Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; etc. For any literary work to be meaningful, it has to be established in the cultural and linguistic premise of such people. Most of our proverbs, myths, riddles, songs, etc that are common during communal

activities such as coronations, naming ceremonies, festivals, etc clearly depict that satire is by no means a new weapon in Nigeria, although it is a style newly polished for use in newspaper columns and one to which public attention has been drawn largely because of widespread misinterpretation by popular readership (See Abioye, 1991 for instance). According to Brown and Kimmey (1977: 1):

Satire typically works through subtlety and suggestion rather than through bluntness and plain statements. It avoids the direct approach of propaganda and sermon in favour of the indirect method of art. Choosing a subject such as politics or pedantry, satirists set out to attack with moral fervour ...they express themselves in a complex and often witty way. The object is ridicule, not simple invective. In short, satire begins with denunciation and ends with an appeal to the critical understanding of the reader. (emphasis mine).

If well understood, satire can make important contributions in the area of language use as it is the choice of certain grammatical items determines whether a writer is being sarcastic, witty and subtle; whether the object is ridicule, etc. By the use of language and the appropriate techniques, the satirist demystifies societal problems and sometimes even suggests solutions. It has been argued that satire emerges whenever normality (conscious of its own rightness) mocks at subnormality. The functions of satire as a regulating force, therefore, make us laugh at the foibles of the human race while learning moral lessons.

The late doyen of Nigerian theatre, Dr Hubert Ogunde, staged satirical plays in his life time. Such plays include “Strike and Hunger”, “Bread and Bullet”, etc. In 1964, he staged “Yoruba, Ronu” (Yoruba, think), which clearly depicted brothers literally selling brothers for the love of power. This play was later banned by the government in power who saw it as insulting. Other oral satirists include late Kola Ogunmola, Moses Olaiya (aka Baba Sala), late Adebisi Afolayan (aka Ade Love), etc. Mabel Segun (1985) satirizes contemporary Nigeria in *Sorry, No Vacancy*. One of the stories, “The Wicked has done their Worst”, takes a look at the “In Memoriam” columns in our newspapers, and comes up with “laughable details”. For instance:

It is incredible the number of people “whose sun set while it was yet day” and the number of departed ones who “forgot to say goodbye”-fearful enjoyment of a death-bed scene, to be recounted later, spiced with gory details (p.27).

She examines the language used in writing such columns and finds that it is haphazard. For instance, you Laboured but Liveth not to reap the fruits of your labour”. She goes on to argue:

Why “liveth” when lived would have gone better with “laboured?” But the writer apparently thought that Biblical language was Holy language and more suited to one who is resting (there’s usually no doubt about it) in Abraham’s bosom (p.38).

Olaniyan, (1988:48) has argued that:

The whole society being its constituency, satire focuses its lens on our failings as a community of people, and magnifies one or several of our sores for critical inspection, using as surgical tools such sharp weapons as scorn, derision, ridicule, bitter irony and laughter ...

Other Nigerian satirists include T.M.Aluko (One Man, One Wife); Wole Soyinka (A Dance of the Forests, The Lion and the Jewel, The Trials of Brother Jero, etc); Femi Osofisan (Who's Afraid of Solarin, Kolera Kolej); Nkem Nwankwo (Danda) Odia Ofeimum (The Poet Lied), etc. *The Long Harmattan Season* is a compilation of satirical commentaries by Nworah (2007) who shows that Nigerians incessantly face social, political and economic challenges unlike the harmattan which is seasonal. Lamido, takes up the cause of Safiya Tungan Tudu, a woman 'convicted' of adultery in a sharia court by publishing "The Adulteress' Diary" in Safiya's name. It is a controversial piece, which savages the Sharia lawmakers, accusing them of gross hypocrisy and questioning their interpretation of the Koran. (January-March archive of [nigeriannet](http://nigeriannet.com)).

Satire is equally found on the internet. For instance, "Did you hear the one about the stockbroker who's been sleeping like a baby? Every hour, he wakes up and cries". Such financial jokes that were once mainly the province of economists are flourishing because of the recession and a longing for catharsis to deal with personal financial losses. (Liz Alderman in New York December 29, 2008.The Sydney Morning Herald). It is as hilarious as it is painful.

A recently published play from Niyi Osundare, the prolific Nigerian poet, dramatist and literary critic, which testifies to the author's commitment to socially relevant art and artistic activism for which he is justifiably renowned. The play tells the story of Yankeland, an imaginary African country, where the country's natural and donated wealth is in the hands of a few corrupt rulers in cahoot with the American military. The powerful prey on the exploited masses, whilst upholding a facade of god-fearing morality. The play is written in the style of street theatre and produces a biting and dramatic satire on political authoritarianism and ignorance, which the author holds responsible for the backwardness of many African countries. The play does however show that such oppression is being challenged; and that the natural inclination of human beings is towards resistance and solidarity, for which Osundare characters demonstrate great capacity. The courage, unambiguous criticism and optimism in the future are reflected in the performance history of the play itself, which was first staged at the Arts Theatre at the University of Ibadan in 1997, during the time of one of Nigeria's most repressive military dictatorships. Throughout recent history, satirization of governmental and political practices has been a reoccurring subject for many authors of varying backgrounds and beliefs. Despite differences in time, period and subject matter, these works contain similar underlying stylistic elements. Sarcasm, wit, extended metaphor, verbal irony,

and understatement are major components in works of political satire. Sarcasm, a vital element of this genre, serves to present the topic of scrutinization in a farcical and debased light and often incorporates humor. This is particularly useful in the case of government ridicule, since authority presiding over a populace requires respect and credibility if it is to be wholly effective. The agenda – setting theory (Stone, op.cit; Larson, 1994; Wimmer & Dominic, 2000) assumes that "the public agenda or what kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about (and sometimes ultimately press for legislation about, is powerfully shaped and directed by what the news media choose to publicize" (Larson, op.cit: 390). Since research has confirmed that issues reported in the media are the same as the ones on the public agenda, Stone (op.cit), observes that knowing how a message may affect newspaper readers should influence the way it is produced and disseminated by those responsible for the process (p.136).

The Use of Satirical Tools in Newspaper Discourse

Satire, as used in the newspaper, is an extension of satire as found in literature. It has been argued that a journalist is one who writes for the periodical or public press such as newspapers, magazines, etc. The writer/journalist is usually never tired of diagnosing the various ills plaguing the nation and sometimes, even going to the extent of prescribing remedies for these ills. Satire is born when there are ills crying out to be cured in a society. It is thus the literary man's contribution to, and device for, drawing attention to and or curing such ills. It has been observed that the use of this stylistic device is increasingly being found in Nigeria's print media. Recognized newspaper satirists include:

Niyi Osundare in NewsWatch; Candido in New Nigerian; Durosimi Irojah in Today; Olatunji Dare and Emevwo Biakolo in The Guardian, and Mike Awoyinka in Weekend Concord. (Today and Weekend Concord are now rested)

Why do Nigerian writers choose satire as a source of literary comment? It is clear that satire lends itself, easily to topicalities such as: September 11 tragedy at the World Trade centre, Transition to democratic rule in Nigeria, The Tsunami, Bird flu, Swine flu etc. It implies that this device is a source of literary fun derived from disillusionment within the society. Thus, the writer, like Gulliver's "glass of satire", inquires and meddles into these topicalities so that he can educate his society. Williams (1987: 22), who has been accused of using syntax which is often difficult as well as an invariably inaccessible vocabulary, defends himself by arguing that:

... there is a sense in which a writer's style itself might serve as an index of the social unease of his generation. For the truly creative mind, style is a question of infinite possibilities and endless permutations. A particular stylistic tendency, then, may be nothing but a particular response to grave social pressures ... This column, then, must be seen as a child of its time, an attempt to enhance our political and literary culture and

a desperate intervention against the Philistine culture that has been foisted on us by our elites ...

This, then, lends credence to what is known as the politics of satire, i.e. the reason why writers choose this particular stylistic device. Ideally, the writer is a visionary to his people. If he has to keep the person informed but is constantly being harassed and subjected to inhuman treatments by dictator governments in seemingly democratic dispensations, then the committed writer does not give up. He looks for other literary devices that employ irony, wit, humour, scorn, ridicule, exaggeration, etc which, when used, gives the impression of fun and sometimes, a nonchalant attitude at the surface level, but which has serious satiric implication. In short, his approach is indirect since the fear of these governments is the beginning of wisdom. This is the power of satire over readers or listeners. Hence, the increasing use of satire in Nigeria newspapers.

Satire criticizes real men and women, often in lurid colours but with unforgettable clarity. The satirist starts by describing a painful or absurd situation (or both) in a tone full of scornful amusement. He uses carefully selected words that are calculated to jolt the reader into awareness about the unpleasant facts or people the satirist has in mind. In this process, he uses such satirical tools as irony, humour, disgust, exaggeration, scorn, abusive jibes, dislocation of meaning, scare quotes, taboo expressions, etc.

Good satire in the newspaper is essentially topical. This means that it has to be of current and general interest to the reader. In addition to the subject being of general interest, the writer has a duty to perform- he has to bring in his own world of experiences so that he can meet the reader on a common middle- ground, sharing the same experiences concerning the event being discussed. Zakaluk and Samuel's (1988) argued that the writer always assumes that the reader has the necessary requirement/resources for adequate comprehension. They call this "reader resources". It is relevant to point out here that a satirical piece tends to have the following:

Conceptual Interpretation: This is the plain sense/surface level meaning. It is the interpretation the average, undiscerning reader will give to a satirical piece, devoid of its other underlying implications.

Writer's Intention: There is no doubt that the writer's intention is to satirize. So, he goes about this, using satirical tools such as have been mentioned above. This is the basis for what Abioye (1991) has tagged "topicality, level of shared experiences and satiric tools".

The use of satire in Nigerian newspaper discourse has produced a mixed bag of interpretations and reactions; some, totally unexpected. So far, Olatunji Dare has attracted a large portion of these from his satirical style in *The Guardian*, and more recently in *The Nation*. Dare employs the Socratic approach of engaging his characters in a conversation which probes the roots of their beliefs, or alternatively, we can encourage everyone to see them as ridiculous, to laugh at them, to render them objects of scorn for the group. He

is credited with the authorship of the article, titled “Shape Up, Dons ... or Ship Out”, which is as satirical as it is prophetic. In this article, Dare maintains that lecturers and universities are “downright subversive” and “patently irrelevant”:

“The irrelevance of our universities to our national goals and aspirations is amply demonstrated by the fact that year after year, they churn out of their mills graduates who, like their lecturers, are barely literate. They produce engineers who can hardly recognize a dynamo even if they saw it in broad daylight ... The agronomist who must spearhead our much postponed agrarian revolution are taught by professors who cannot raise even vegetable garden behind their luxuriously furnished rent-quarters ...”
(p.3).

He thereafter “roundly” rebukes the university dons, calling them “irredeemable ingrates” who should either shape up or ship out. As such, he gives a few “modest proposals” for the “abolition of universities”. Niyi Osundare has also left his mark on the use of this stylistic device. In his column in Newswatch, he has touched on subjects the direct writer dare not touch, in a typical satirical mood. One of such articles, “Wailing for Wilmot” is a case in point.

Nigerians are an incurably lachrymose lot. Indeed, their fear duct is located somewhere perilously close to the surface of the eye Or how else does one explain all the sighs, groans, malefactions, vilifications, statements, counter-statements, et cetera, et cetera, which have taken control of our national discourse since our government peacefully showed Patrick Wilmot the way out of this country? And it was a most befitting, most humane event: first, a very gentle kidnap in Zaria, then a 12-hour drive down to Lagos in extremely friendly hand-cuffs, followed by a guided trans-Atlantic flight to London. All this, most graciously, at government expense...

Tell me what is there to wail about in all this? Afterall, this is not the first of Wilmot’s deportation experience ...

Now we have a regime which plans without failing, with a military muscle and patriotism unsurpassed in the history of any country in the world. They have carried out our long- suspended national assignment and have taken honour from all over the globe And we all know that these radicals are the alpha and omega of our national head-ache, the cause of all our woes ... We can now sit back and enjoy the peace for which we have always longed
(p.54).

The ridicule, scorn and sarcasm here is clear. A man identified not only as a radical but as a spy for Pretoria was **peacefully** shown the way out of the country in extremely “friendly handcuffs”, after a “gentle kidnap” and “at government expense”. Yet people are complaining. They should congratulate the government since this act has helped salvage our crumbled economy. He insists that now Wilmot is gone, we will no longer experience student riots. All these are on the surface level. His intention is to criticize the government

who turned a blind eye to our woes (which he lists) and instead chased trivialities. Radicalism did not leave with Wilmot neither did student riots. It is not surprising, therefore, that Osundare was “wailing for Wilmot” in this article.

Mike Awoyinfa would live to remember the vitriolic reactions which his controversial article “May your road be rough”, generated. He was literarily crucified. Emevwo Biakolo and others have also been misunderstood on several occasions.

The article used as a basic corpus in this write-up, titled “The 100-days game”, is written by Olatunji Dare and it is still as relevant today as it was when it was written. Here, Dare trivializes the 100-days game so much so that it has become ridiculous. By the same token, and by a semantic extension, he likens his five years in *The Guardian* (as a commentator: See “My Own Anniversary”) to the first 100-days of any public office anywhere”

A new game is coming to town. Actually, it is not so new. It goes back to the time of Napoleon Bonaparte, specifically the 100 days from March 20 to June 28, 1815, during which he recapture power as French emperor after escaping from his exile ...The 100th day itself has become a quintessential pseudo-event for government as well as the news media. For the government it is an occasion for flaunting real as well as contrived achievements, for putting the best face on failures, and for remarking the good fortune of the people in having such a solicitous, God-fearing...It is, most significantly, an occasion for demanding sacrifices and giving fair warning that whereas constructive critics are ever so welcome, fault finders no matter how highly placed should be prepared for the consequences of their temerity.

For the newspapers it is an opportunity to coax professional congratulators and would-be contractors to buy advertising space to express their pride and satisfaction in being associated with an administration that has done such wonderful things in only 100 days in office. It is not a new game, as I was saying. But it is set to take some refreshing turns in the hands of an enterprising young man of my acquaintance. Unable to get a job even as a graduate bus driver, he has, in keeping with the oft-repeated advice of the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), decided to be his own boss, instead of waiting for government to give him a job ...

He reckons that contractors ought to be willing to celebrate the 100th day of winning a major contract and that swinging men and women should jubilate over the first 100 days of their latest dalliance. Couples need not wait for year to celebrate their wedding anniversary when they can, while the romance is still torrid, have a 100th-day bash. And why wait for your baby's first birthday when you can celebrate his first 100 days on earth? Why can't undergraduates celebrate their first 100 days in the university? On graduating, why can't they celebrate their first 100 days of liberation from those tyrannical lecturers and professors?...

First, he tells his readers the origin of the 100 days game. Only at that time, it was not a game. He satirizes the public officials who organize lectures, symposia, prayers in churches and mosques, newspaper supplements, advertised and unadvertised messages, congratulatory messages, solidarity rallies, merit awards, etc, in commemoration of these 100 days. The conceptual interpretation is that people celebrate their first 100 days in office in different styles. The writer's intention, however, is completely different. What he is saying here is that it is no longer a period of assessing achievements but it has become a game in which every Tom, Dick and Harry has to show that he has achieved something.

Whether they have actually done so is another matter entirely. In effect, those who have achieved something do not come out beating their chests. It is only those who want people to feel they have done so that make noise about it.. Also, journalists are not spared. He takes a swipe at those who go begging for advertisements in their papers, even when they know that such people have not achieved anything. This line of thought is further echoed in *The Guardian*, April 17, 1992 titled "what are they celebrating?" It deplores

"the sheer vulgarity of the self-congratulation that many a public officer is wont to indulge in, and the brazen sycophancy of hangers-on that fuels it ... when much of it is paid for with public funds, it is all the more disquieting when we add that what is being celebrated is hollow achievement, then it is positively reprehensible (p.10).

In "My Own Anniversary", he repeats the same ideas put forward in the 100-days game. Only here, he uses himself as an example. After 5 years in *The Guardian* he gets no messages, etc to celebrate. Then, his friend, to whom he complained, asked him what he thought of himself.

Conclusion

There is no better illustration than these satirical texts that so clearly depict the conceptual interpretation, writer's intention, and the way people react to it. Teachers of language, linguistics, communication arts and mass communication should encourage their students not only to demystify satires, but to actually write them so that they can also see these texts from the writer's perspective. The increasing number of comedians in Nigeria is an attestation to the fact that satire is healthy, necessary and spiritually uplifting. Exposure to the power and politics of satire therefore, as it were, can only help hone their skills in this area.

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