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THE IGBO NOVEL AND DIALOGUE: PROBLEM AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

A work of art that seeks to attract a large audience in place and time must include as one of its main features the use of dialogue. A well written Novel must full use of dialogue, which aims at the interaction of the charaters in the novel as it is in really. By this, the novelist shows his mastery of his characters; that he knows well how each would normally act in life. Since literature is “a mirrow of life” it is only necessary that the Igbo novel have a generous amount of dialogue.

Introduction

This paper looks at the current state of the Igbo novel in relation to its use of dialogue. It starts by showing the nature of some dialogues in the Igbo novel; then through to those ones that hardly include any dialogue is so important for the development of the Igbo novel that it can no longer be ignored by novelists in the languages. Its extensive use in the Igbo novel will undoubtedly make the genre more appealing to readers both locally and internationally.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NOVEL AND DIALOGUE

A good novel, to be deemed a literary piece, must effectively incorporate dialogue. This is because dialogue plays a crucial role in helping the narrator achieve their objective successfully. Through dialogue, readers can get a feel of the characters, their emotions, and their moods. Consider the impact of these words when Onengboja blesses his servant Omenuko:

Ka ije dikwara gi, ka ndi ga fekwara gi, e a lee mu Gas ke ome.

Nothing stops Pita Nwana from employing the technique of direct speech in narrating the scene of Omenuko's blessing by Onengboja. What then is the role of words and techniques in this aspect? What effect does this technique have on the reader? Why is this kind of technique

sparsely distributed in the novel? Could the novel have been better if the narrative technique made more generous use of dialogue?

Finding answers to these questions in the novel *Omenuko* and others in Igbo literature is the focus of this paper. Nwana employs direct speech sparingly, no doubt to capture the reader's imagination and draw them into the imaginary world of *Omenuko* and *Onengboja*. The effect is that the reader visualizes scenes vividly, almost as if they were unfolding before them.

On the question of why Nwana uses dialogue sparingly, two perspectives arise. One argument suggests that Nwana does not know his characters well enough to craft speech that suits each of them appropriately. As a result, he fails to fully utilize dialogue. The other argument is that Nwana's intention is to tell a swift-moving story with minimal interruptions. If this is the case, then the achievement of the novel lies in the fact that its recreation of reality in the reader's mind is not as vivid as it could have been with more dialogue.

C.S. Lewis (1961) supports this viewpoint, arguing that readers who prefer a swift recording of events may find extensive use of dialogue unpalatable. He notes that an insensitivity to the aural effect of words and a dislike for the vitality of description and dialogue can cut readers off from real literary experience.

It is the view of this paper that Igbo novels still lack dialogue as a veritable tool for literary development. Mark Twain famously said, "*Don't say the old lady screamed; bring her on and let her scream.*" This implies that effective dialogue enhances a novel's authenticity and immersive quality.

As indicated in the abstract of this paper, some dialogues in Igbo novels appear unnatural and fail to engage the reader's imagination. For instance, in *Ihe Ojoo Gbaa Afo* by Ofomata, the incessant quarrels between Ejindu and Nkemdirim depict both characters as orators who deliver long speeches without interruption. This contradicts real-life quarrels, where incisive remarks are often met with immediate retaliation. The only exception is when one party chooses to remain silent. Otherwise, no one in a dispute allows the other to continue speaking uninterrupted.

Similarly, in *Okpa Aku Eri Eri*, Odilora employs an unnatural dialogue technique by writing out each speaker's name before their speech, as is common in drama. This approach deprives the reader of additional descriptive information that could have been embedded within the dialogue. A notable example appears on page 97 of the 1996 edition, where the novelist recounts Akubuzo questioning Chinedu over a missing chicken. Instead of merely listing the dialogue, the novelist should have described the expressions on the characters' faces as the conversation unfolded.

Writing on the development of the French novel, Finch Alison (1997) observes:

"We should notice also what these novelists are doing with their characters' speech. More than ever before, they individualize this speech, showing the characters' helpless reliance on crude and empty phrases. This is, at one level, a contribution to a new realism: the inflection of ordinary language of everyday cliché is apparently being reproduced before our very eyes."

From this, it is obvious that at some point in time, the French novel, just like the Igbo novel, faced similar developmental challenges. However, over time, novelists writing in French recognized the need to recreate life more vividly through the use of dialogue, which they employed to the satisfaction of their audience.

Writing on Flaubert, Haig Stirling (1986) outlined some fundamental reasons behind Flaubert's use of dialogue. One of these he termed "ironic detachment," where the omniscient narrator distances himself from his characters ironically. Another is "sentimental indulgence," whereby Flaubert expresses his thoughts on social and political issues through his characters' direct speech—something he might not have been able to voice bluntly in essays or public discourse.

The most significant reason Haig identifies for Flaubert's extensive use of dialogue is his desire to reproduce life imaginatively through the interaction of characters in his novel.

This lack of dialogue or its sparse use in the Igbo novel is not seen as a stylistic choice but rather as an artistic weakness, likely stemming from the assumption that the audience has a short literary range and is insensitive to aesthetic values. A literary-insensitive audience struggles to judge a work of art based on its aesthetic merit.

To support this view, Ike Chukwuemeka translated his English novel *The Potter's Wheel* into Igbo as *Anu Ebu Nwa*. Because he originally had a more literary-sensitive audience in mind, he was compelled to write artistically, fully employing dialogue and description. As a result, when the novel was translated, the artistic elements remained intact, making it appealing to readers.

Prospects for the Igbo Novel

As demonstrated, the Igbo novel still has a long way to go in its development. However, this progress need not take years if Igbo-language writers take the time to study their characters in depth before completing their novels. To achieve this effectively, novelists must thoroughly understand their characters in real life before attempting to replicate them in literature.

Creating a masterpiece requires both time and energy. For instance, Tolstoy spent nearly two years composing his all-time classic *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a relatively short novel. Igbo novelists should not rush to publish their works but should instead take the necessary time to craft masterpieces that will endure the test of time and place.

While distributing dialogue evenly throughout their novels, Igbo-language writers must not neglect descriptive details. A good example of this is Frederick Forsyth's depiction of Victor Kowalski's torture by the French Intelligence Service in *The Day of the Jackal*. Such descriptive details, combined with dialogue, help create a vivid picture in the reader's mind, enhancing the sense of realism and immersion in the narrative.

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