

Language Style and Effect: A Study of Ifeoma Okoye's Men Without Ears

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the language style used by Ifeoma Okoye in her novel Men without Ears. It examines how Okoye has used specific style of linguistic approach to pass her message and achieve particular effect on her readers. In the novel, she criticises the ills in the Nigerian society as opposed to what obtains in other societies like Tanzania. She uses the metaphorical statement in the title of the novel to describe the obstinacy of those Nigerians who are bent on promoting corrupt practices through their continuous illicit transactions. This would be her contribution to correcting the anomalies in the society as she has, through language craft, exposed the rottenest among government officials, the security agencies and others. And she could gain the sympathy or attention of her readers who may directly or indirectly be connected with or involved in such practices. With this study, it is revealed that choice of language style could be used as an effective tool for managing societal malfunction in Nigeria.

Keywords: *language, style, Ifoma Okoye, corruption, Nigeria.*

1. Introduction

Language choice is a very important aspect of literary writing. It forms part of the stylistic effect a writer could use to gain the attention of his readers. Batool et al. say that stylistics “refers to the study of appropriate use of words or language in a [...] writing” (2014). The writer’s use of language determines how successful the piece of writing will be in terms of reaching its target audience and achieving its purpose. The language style used to tell a story can depict a number of ideas: time, age, era, social background, season, educational level, environment etc. For instance a reader can tell when a woman or a man is talking without been told by the narrator that it is a woman or a man talking. Language style can also be chosen for certain effect on readers. It is clear that Ifeoma Okoye has not ignored this relevance of language choice which she has interestingly deployed in telling her story. She has employed a remarkable linguistic art in *Men without Ears* to capture the attention of her readers as she reveals the ills rampant in the Nigerian society. Her prowess in this regard attracts the interest of literary language analysts who would like to unveil the secret behind her successes in the literary world made possible through her intelligent selection of expressions.

2. About Ifeoma Okoye

Ifeoma Okoye is a native of Anambra state, Nigeria; born in 1937. She has done a number of literary works that include *Behind the Clouds* 1982, *Trial and Other Stories* 2005, *Chimere* 1992, and *The Fourth World* 2003. She studied English Language in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. For her post graduate study, she went to Aston University in England. She later taught English in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Her voice has gone quite loud in attempting to play her part in addressing the prevalent political and social ills ravaging the Nigerian society.

3. Synopsis of *Men without Ears*

The story centres on Uloko and his brother Chigo. Chigo leads his childhood in Tanzania where his father had worked for years before returning to Nigeria. When he comes back to Nigerian to take up a job, he is not able to cope with the kinds of Uloko all around him. Uloko does much to introduce him to such exorbitant life style but he would not be bought over. Chigo and his father do all they can to stop Uloko from continuing with the greedy and wasteful pattern of life, but their effort does not yield any desired result.

Uloko on the other hand loves to live above his earnings in order to be envied by other people especially the poor people in the community. His father always warns that this attitude could lead him unto destruction, but he would not listen. Eventually, he gets himself involved in ritually killing which does not succeed. He is not able to bear the shame that causes him to have heart attack that eventually leads to his death.

4. Discussion

4.1. Point of view

Point of view refers to the standpoint of the narrator. A story can be told from first person point of view, third person point of view or omniscient point of view. Ifeoma Okoye chooses to use the first person point of view whereas she could have decided to take the third or omniscient points of view. The narrator, Chigo, uses the first person pronouns: *I*, *me* and *my* in his narration which shows that he is telling his own experience: “**I** felt ill at ease as **I** picked **my** way through the chaos..., **I** had received a letter from **my** father urging **me** to come home immediately” (3). It is certain that this choice of narrator’s standpoint is not by chance but the writer chose it in effect with the intension to create a conversational situation between the narrator and the reader. The reader is made to feel like been part of the discussion were the narrator experiences personal problems and wishes to share with the reader who is invariably his listener.

This point of view also helps the narrator to focus on one aspect of the story at a particular time, and events unfold in a smooth succession. Omniscient point of view for instance allows a break in the flow of events where there could be a leap to another scene and back again because the two events happen concurrently. Such can be a distraction to the reader and sometimes difficult to follow.

The first person’s point of view is also important because it focuses on the experiences of just one character. There is less tendency of having conflicting character participation. Every other character mentioned is in some way linked to the narrator. The narrators activities can also easily be related to the places he/she visits, thereby making it easy for the reader to remember the various scenes in the story.

4.2. Humorous statements

Ifeoma has employed humour as a technique in her story to make the reading of the story lively. This is comparable to the effect achieved by comic relief in plays. It is necessary because it reduces tension that the seriousness of the situation portrayed in the story can bear

on the reader; the situations which can be sad. The story in *Men without Ears* is a sad one but the writer probably feels that humour can help reduce the worry that the story can bear on the reader; for instance the stubbornness of Uloko and his friends and how it gradually leads him to his death.

“Now I took a mental note of his features: a small face with eyes too large for it: a small mouth to match the compact face; and a nose a little on the flat side.”

Of course the description of the man’s feature creates some humour to say that the eyes are too large for the face but the mouth matches it.

I saw one of them slip off her high heeled shoes and carry them in her hand as she raced to the plane. Those men and women who wore headgear fought tooth and nail with the wind for their possession” (5).

One can imagine how the men and women struggle to hold their headgear as the wind could throw them off.

Chigo says: *I looked around me and saw women, lipstick and all, devouring their chickens like lions.* The projection of the facial adornment of the women makes Chigo to also personify lipsticks by saying that they are devouring chickens.

4.3. Sentences

Ifeoma Okoye has explored different aspects of language to give her novel substance and acceptability. It can be observed that in *Men without Ears*, she uses a combination of short and long sentences and she has almost completely avoided sentence fragments. She does not use very long sentences that sometimes may end up losing its communicability. As a common feature of novel writing, she uses contracted verb forms like ‘that’s, it’s, I’ll. She has also used complete forms like ‘I had’ which could have been written as ‘I’d’, ‘could not’ which also could have been written as ‘couldn’t’ etc.

It appears she uses more abbreviated forms in negative sentences when the verb is present. She usually separates the verb from the negator element when it is to refer to an event in the past.

“Are you sure he’d like to see me...after he had told me to go my own way?”

“He did not budge.”

“I could not keep my anger”

“It’s nothing. He’s frightened that’s all.”

“That’s very kind of you”

4.4. Proverbs

Ifeoma introduces the use of proverbs in the story. This is to present the picture of a typical African society (basically the Igbo society) where messages are passed more effectively through proverbial sayings. Proverbs are also used in the African society to address prohibited practices that the people still engage in. The evil practice of corruption and unreasonable quest for fame encourages the need for the use of proverbs. When an elderly person has struggled to ensure that a person takes a save decision, he would always resort to the use of proverbs, as one line of proverb can express what can be said in more than two lines using just simple expressions. As an elderly African person, she has added her voice to correct the obnoxious attitude embraced by desperate Nigerians.

The phrase used as the title of the book, *Men without Ears*, is a proverbial statement also used in the book where Chigo’s father says that “Uloko has come to the land of people without ears and is bent on cutting off his own too” (49) to mean that Uloko would not listen to advices. To cut off ones ears passes the feeling pains will be experienced by the person, and that the person becomes deaf. This is a clear indication that Uloko obstinately exposes himself to danger. This is definitely a supposedly more effective means of passing a warning

than just to probably say “Uloko is stubborn and would not accept good counsel.” Other proverbs include “The rat that joins the lizard for a frolic in the rain will remember only when it is too late that he will not dry himself as easily as the lizard” (48).
“... hang his bag where he could reach it,”
“A fly who refuses to heed advice follows a corpse to the grave” (48).
“It is only death which is irrevocable” (127).
“Like the proverbial toads which does not run for nothing in the afternoon...”
“... a fly who refuses to heed advice follows a corpse to the grave.”
The proverbs are all ones that strike a target at the high level of corrupt practices in the society, to draw the mind of the people to this reality for the reason of exposing the evil borne in the Nigerian corrupt system and changing the situation.

4.5. Character code concordance and the use of Pidgin

Ifeoma Okoye uses pidgin in her story, spoken through uneducated characters to mean that both the educated and uneducated have taken to corruption and perhaps to raise the question which of the two groups is expected to effect a change.

At the earlier part of the story, Chigo was met by an uneducated fellow at the airport, who uses pidgin to communicate, “You de travel, sir? You don get boarding pass, sir?” (2).

However, Character code concordance seems not to be quite effectively used in the book. Sometimes the language used does not convincingly match the character that uses it. For instance Nweke is a boy that is not quite educated, he goes to school only for three or four years, and his aunt cannot afford to send him to school after the death of his father. He stays in the village all along. When he is first introduced in the book, he does not speak English so that Veronica has to speak to him before relating his response to Chigo. But when he comes back after been missing, he speaks fluently in Standard English as he gives account of his experience when he is abducted by Uloko’s boys. His English does not sound poor at all but he says:

I drew their attention by shouting. They ran to me, and cut off the ropes the men had used to bind me. One of the boys could understand English – better than I. I told him in my poor English about the men who had bound me. They took me home and gave me food.” (157)

Tenses and structural arrangement is good, therefore should not be considered poor.

The villagers all speak in good English as though all of them are educated.

“I have to provide food for my children” (116) was Adaego’s statement when she is warned about staying out late at the market. She is only a trader and is assumed not to be educated enough to speak using such an articulate expression.

However, the justification for allowing more of the characters to use well-formed English expressions could be that Ifeoma Okoye is trying to ensure that her readers read easily and the message is passed without having to face problems of interpretation. Really, pidgin can be difficult to interpret by non-Nigerians since it has different varieties in different countries.

4.6. Figurative Expressions

She employs the use of figurative expressions like metaphor, simile, idiom and contrast.

Idioms

Idiom is a good tool in expressing vital and sensitive issues because it intensifies the meaning of the expression. Chigo says “I was beside myself with joy” (3) when he got his boarding ticket; “the company is in the red” (104) when he was asked to loan money from the company’s account.

“I don’t want to steer up a hornet’s nest” (119).

The story is written in English, so the writer sees a need to include stylistic English expressions so that even native English speakers can well be captivated as they read. “Those men and women who wore headgear **fought tooth and nail** with the wind for their possession” (5).

Sarcasm

Sarcasm is important in correcting societal malfunctions. Chigo called Akar Mr. Engineer, taking “engineer” to be the first name. This is criticizing the unnecessary use of titles by the people. It was strange to Chigo how people use titles as though they form part of ones names. And people do this to display their statuses in the social world so that they may be accorded greater recognition than others.

“Three rows of coral beads and long gold chain with a pendant as large as a saucer feminized his neck”. This statement exposes the extent to which people of the society display wealth through what they wear which sometimes looks ridiculous.

Irony

Irony is also a linguistic tool sometimes quite effective in passing corrective messages. It has been used here to contrast peoples’ false personality and their real personalities which they unconsciously displayed at certain times.

“‘Ladies’ and ‘gentlemen’ struggle for a place in the queue in front of the checking in counter,” (2) refers to the same people who in no time were jumping lines. One would ask if “ladies and gentlemen” are expected to be part of ill practices in the society. Here are people who want to earn respect yet, they display attitudes identifiable with thugs.

He calls himself a millionaire, yet he refuses to lend a widow a small amount of money to help her over a difficult time” (88).

“Humble donation,” which is rather a show-off. (123)

Metaphor

This is used to make comparison between things or situations. Its effect is to create vividness. For instance the struggle by the people at the airport to get a seat on the plane is compared to a marathon race: “... the women would not allow themselves to be beaten in this marathon race” (5). Eka calls himself “Jack-of-all-trades” (7). “Club members trickled in one after the other.”

“Those men and women who wore headgear fought tooth and nail with the wind for their possession” (5). It is metaphoric to say that a person fights with the wind.

Euphemism

Euphemistic statements are used to cushion the instant horrid impact an unpleasant statement could have on the hearer. So an unpleasant statement is said in a mild language that the hearer can easily accept. *Do what others do* and *to come and see* is used to mean “give a bribe” as the young man at the airport adds, “Well ‘bribe’ is too harsh a word for it” (4). Africans are good users of euphemistic expressions for reason of moral and respect for societal norms, so this language technique has been adopted quite sensitively throughout the story so that the reader is not offended by the thoughtless exhibition of corruption in the society. This is where it can be said that Ifeoma has manifested her motherly approach to offensive issues within the society. That is why though there is a lot of instances of bribery, but it is referred to as “doing what others do.”

Simile

Simile is a linguistic device also used to compare two things of different features. This is

done with use of 'as' or 'like'. "...devouring the chickens like lions". "The taps have been as dry as bones for years."

The device is used to make a message more vivid and weighty and that is why it is mostly used in poetry. It also 'spices' the language. It makes communication more interesting.

4.7. LEXICAL DENSITY/SEMANTIC DENSITY

Diction

Ifeama Okoye decides to use specific words for some effect. Such words are Blackmail, atrocious, ostentatious, hypocritical, opulence, embezzlement, god-fatherism, make believe, gross indiscipline, nauseating, ill-fated journey, humble donation, tear-stained face, pretty bad, stood transfix, sank into a chair and many others.

"Sank into a chair" (164) is a statement where the writer has used 'sank' to express the helplessness displayed by the character. Likewise 'transfix' (163) shows how Chigo feels helplessly worried at the news of Uloko's death.

Repetition

The following statements have been used in several places in the novel for purpose of emphasis.

On page four "He smiled" is repeated. The repetition of the phrase could be used to show how trivial the issue of corruption is taken by the speaker who represents the Nigerian people. Bank, wealth, borrow, lend, conscience, greasing principles, pride, fashion, nauseating, make believe, home for good are other words that have been used repeatedly in the text. Some are repeated within the same line, others on the same page, and others on other pages.

Specifying disorderly conduct

The writer has been able to use language to paint the picture of how disorderly things are done in Nigeria:

Lagos Airport was pandemonium, through the chaos... The airport officials seemed to thrive on the disorderliness, silent approval of the confusion. I watch with utter disgust as ladies and gentlemen struggle for a place . . . , Even a police vehicle left his lane to join traffic-rule breakers. . . The lounge was filled with noise like weaver-birds on top of a palm tree (5).

Eka tells Chigo, "This is Nigeria" to mean that things are generally not organized in Nigeria as in other nations. It is probably to say that the name Nigeria is synonymous to wrong doing, a land where nothing is done right even though the people know exactly what the right thing to do is.

Craving for social recognition

Ifeoma Okoye has been able to use language to show how people crave for societal recognition and fame in Nigeria, and how they can do anything to get money which they believe is what brings respect.

"Without money, you're nothing in this country" (7) is Engineer Akah's remark as he tries to justify his reason for quitting his job as a university lecture to engage in business. He adds that "nobody talks of job satisfaction these days." This to say that people don't care about the satisfaction they can derive from the job they do, people are rather concentrating on making a lot of money and getting public attention. Uloko is described to dress in lace agbada, three rows of coral beads and long gold chain with a pendant as large as a saucer that feminized his neck. This statement reveals the urge for flamboyance shown in the dress people choose to put on. The description of the Mercedes car: "the seats were upholstered in a velvet material and the floor was covered with soft red rug. It was truly an exquisite car" is equally to show

the extent to which Uloko strives to impress people around him using his wealth. Uloko insists that journalists must be present where he intends to make a donation to an orphanage home. He goes back with his money when he does not see the journalists he invites to capture the event and make it public where he will be seen as a philanthropist. (70) When the millionaires club meeting is held, “club members trickled in one after the other, obviously by design as each wanted his full share of attention from club members” (86). It is obvious that they spend more attention ensuring that they are admired than the effect of their wealth in the life of the people they claim to help. “I watched with amusement as young Millionaire swaggered up towards the front row seat. Never had I seen a person so full of himself, so puffed up by pride” (85). Uloko finds it wired for one to be so desirous of public attention as displayed by the club members. It can be seen that the rampant state of evil in the society can cause other people who do not wish to indulge in evil to be influenced. Chigo finds himself several times lying and he notices that he is changing. He lies about disappearance of Nweke. He lies to Anny when he cannot tell straight away that Uloko is dead. He says to himself, “I was gradually becoming a lair”.

Titles

Chigo feels it is weird to make ones profession part of one’s name, but people use professions like pharmacist, accountant, architect and so on to attract respect from members of the society. They attach traditional titles and professional titles to their names. So Uloko warns Chigo, “Please don’t fail to address them by this titles or aliases.” (87) Chigo sees their action as “wearing a suit that does not fit but had to be worn because it was in vogue.”

They call themselves names like “Young Millionaire,” “the sea that never dries” which is written in Igbo as ‘Orimili’ etc. all in other to make themselves unhealthily ‘relevant’ in the society.

Chigo is worried when he sees the display of name-plate like *Chief Dr Engineer Ozo Kelie*. This is what the people do to place themselves higher than others in social ranking. With such, they are able to carry out their dishonest intentions and marginalise moral practices.

Corruption

Ifeoma Okoye also uses careful selection of language to depict the level of corruption in Nigeria, to expose how greatly corruption has overwhelmed the society such that the good people are treated as fools and enemies of progress. She shows how corruption has turned into an acceptable practice that those who kick against it are seen to be wired and not fitting well into the societal practices. At several instances, there is the use of “do what others do” (4) euphemistically used to mean “engage in bribery, everybody does it”. Good money or bad money, money is money” Amaeze says, which shows that corruption strives both in the rural environment and the city; among the poor and the rich: the literate and illiterate. It seems that it is madness for one not to engage in dishonest means to get more money added to his salary. Amaeze tells Chigo, “You are crazy” when he says he relies solely on his salaries. Chigo states in disappointment that “It was not the man of character who was the greatest of men, but man of means” (75). This is a complete deviation from the original African practice. When Uloko’s health condition grows worse, Anny’s father suggests that they should take some money to the doctor so that he would pay more attention to Uloko, Chigo tries to tell him see that it was wrong to do such, and that the doctor will reject it. Anny’s father laughed as he reassures Chigo that the doctor “will do no such thing”, that the doctor is already expecting “us to come and see him at home” (162). To come and see here means to give money. This is a society “where money-bags were held above men of character and where means was the measure of virtue” (153).

When Uloko gets a job for Chigo and is asked how he does it so fast. His response is “I did

what every other person does.”

4.8. Loan words, coinages and transliteration

There is no better way to describe a thing than to use the word that best fits it in terms of the society where the item is found. This also allows the reader to see more vividly the true nature of how things happen in the society being discoursed. In the novel, non-Standard English expressions are used. Examples of such words are *oga*, *obi*, *agbada*, *eating-house*, *naira mania* and *moi moi*. These are expressions that are typically Nigerian though *agbada* has eventually been included in the English dictionary. The reader is made to have the real picture of the society. For instance, “... men dressed in expensive agbadas...” paints a good image of Nigerians at a party where they flaunt their ego claiming to be better and deserving more respect than others.

In the book, there are other expressions like *get-rich-quick*. Most of the proverbs used in the story are picked from the Igbo tradition, but they are said in English. This is so, so that there will be avoidance of interruption as the reader who does not understand or read Igbo may consider it distracting.

5. Conclusion

The language employed by Ifeoma Okoye in her novel, *Men without Ears*, is subtle, attractive and interesting. Contrastingly, it is not the coercive approach adopted by Ayi kwei Armah in his *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (1988); though the situations at stake are similar. The reality of the situation is vividly captured in the use of language to expose societal ills and illustrate the pursuit of vain things by desperate people; how the society has lost its moral value to unhealthy pursuit of wealth. She allows the principal character in the corrupt world, Uloko, to face a sad end that proves the waste that accompanies the seeming satisfaction that devilish wealth provides, and leaves a message that can be captured in this short sentence “A good name is better than wealth.” She has not used uncommon words that could disrupt the reader’s concentration and break the flow of reading satisfaction. The language is commendable. With the introduction of Kenwe, Ifeoma Okoye has been able to show that no matter how bad things become, there will always be at least one that will stand firm to uphold whatever is right.

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