

## **Corruption in the Contemporary Nigerian Society: An Appraisal of the Stylistic Devices in Uche Nnyagu's *Mediocrities***

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author AN designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author OBN managed the analyses of the study and managed the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

### **Article Information**

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Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/58753>

**Scholarly Book Review**

**Received 03 May 2020**

**Accepted 09 July 2020**

**Published 18 July 2020**

### **ABSTRACT**

Although fiction is a work of imagination, it is a mirror of the author's society. Writers of fiction are inspired based on what they experience. A reader therefore, reads a work not just for the entertainment that it offers but also for the education it offers about the society. In other words, writers have the responsibility to use their creative writings to expose, condemn and criticise aberrations in the society. This is why creative writers are seen as the gadflies whose duty it is to reform the society. Therefore, fiction is a crucial weapon used by the concerned to correct certain impressions in the society. In writing, writers apply varied stylistics to make their works unique. This is why readers delight in reading some authors while certain authors' works do not impress the audience. Style is an indispensable element of writing, indispensable in the sense that if the author's style isn't impressive, no matter the subject matter of his work, it will never impress many. Uche Nnyagu's *Mediocrities* is a contemporary novel that aptly X-rayed abnormalities in our contemporary society especially in the academic environment. Nnyagu has used the novel to condemn such ills with

a view to reforming the contemporary society. In this research work, the researchers have reviewed the stylistic devices applied by the author with the aim to ascertain how the author has effectively applied the stylistics to effectively pass his information. The author has incorporated proverbs, pidgin, use of Igbo words and phrases as well as transliteration in the novel and he has been able to effectively harmonise them to maintain plausibility and credibility of the plot.

*Keywords: Fiction; stylistics; realism; language.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature and language are inseparable. Kennedy et al. [1] are of the opinion that language is an expressive vehicle of subjective experience (88). Language is a systematic means and an indispensable tool used by humans to communicate ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds and gestures, which has meaning. According to Sapir [2] and Robins (2007,p.112), language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by the means of voluntarily produced symbol. In the view of Umera-Okeke, "All natural languages, because of their nature as social phenomena are susceptible to various factors influencing their development. Therefore, apart from *regional variations, social variations, and personal fluctuations* there are numerous differences between the form a language takes now and its past forms" (1). Language, therefore, is the vehicle by which other disciplines are transported to their target audience. Against this backdrop, Orabueze [11] illustrates that language is to literature what shovel, sand and water are to the mason. Therefore, literary writers manipulate language in literary texts in order to express what Adejare [12] calls distorted reality. Hence, language could be said to be the sole medium of literature or literary discourse.

Following Chinua Achebe's suggestion, Nigerian literary writers use the English language creatively to communicate various intentions. In fact, they twist the language to fit the culture and local sensibilities of the people. Yankson [3] writes that "the creative artist expresses his sensations, perceptions, themes etc., primarily by the means of language. Uche Nnyagu has deliberately used language creatively to paint the picture of the social evils going on in most tertiary institutions in Nigeria in his novel *Mediocrities*. Geoffrey (2007,p.4) Finch [13] argues that "every time we use language, we necessarily adopt a style of some sort; we make a selection from a range of syntactic and lexical possibilities according to the purpose of communication".

Hence, every writer has his or her own style, as "style is the man". As language is an indispensable tool used by creative writers to pass their information, African writers since Chinua Achebe have applied various stylistics to pass their information. Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, have used profuse transliteration apt for passing his information about the life of the traditional Igbo man and his society. Similarly, Uche Nnyagu in his contemporary novel, *Mediocrities* has experimented incorporating similar stylistics in the contemporary era and still maintains the unity of the plot.

## 2. STYLISTICS AND STYLE

M. H. Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, says that since the 1950s, the term stylistics has been applied to critical procedures which undertake to replace what is claimed to be the subjectivity and impressionism of standard analyses with an "objective" or "scientific" analysis of the style of literary texts. The term stylistics refers to "a method of textual interpretation which the primacy of place is assigned to language" (Simpson,p.2). Widdowson [7] defines stylistics as the interpretation of literary discourse from a linguistic perspective. As for Halliday (34), it is the linguistic study of literary texts. Crystal and Davy (p.112) view stylistics as a linguistic discipline that studies certain aspects of language variation. From the above scholarly definitions, stylistics in a nutshell, could be understood to mean the linguistic study of style, and the individual differences in the use of words by different authors.

'Style' in a general sense, is the way or manner of doing something. In his *Literature and Literate*, Uche Nnyagu [5], sees the concept, "Style" as any specific way of using language by particular writer. He emphasizes that style refers to all the writing skills that contribute to the effect of any piece of art. Nnyagu discloses that style exists in all aspects of life and that style is something that is peculiar to individuals. As he puts it, "In all

human endeavours, there is style and once one talks about one's style, it is something peculiar to an individual" (p.53). Historically, the term comes from the Latin word 'stylus' meaning a pointed instrument for writing on wax tablets. To the linguist, style is viewed as a distinctive or particular characteristics which enable us recognize the work of a particular writer by making a careful examination of his writing, word choice, word order etc. as markers of his personality. Leech and Short (p.82) view style as linguistic characteristics of a particular text. Nnamani [10] sums it up by illustrating that "a creative artist expresses his feelings, thoughts, ideas and vision through language and his unique way of using language to convey his feelings is what is called style". This problem, therefore, informs the desire to attempt a stylistic analysis of Uche Nnyagu's *Mediocrities* in order:

- ❖ To identify the prevalent stylistic devices and tools at the levels of lexis and structure used by the author as a style index to convey the message of the novel and;
- ❖ To discuss logically how the tools contribute to the theme and plot developments in the novel.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher considers structuralism as the appropriate theoretical framework for the study. Structuralism implies that elements of human culture must be understood by way of their relationship to a broader structure. This theory developed in Europe in the early 1900s, mainly in France and Russian Empire. According to Abrams [6] in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, structuralism was employed by Levi-Strauss and other writers in 1950s and 1960. According to him, structuralism cuts across the traditional disciplinary areas within and between the humanities and social sciences by undertaking to provide an objective account of all social and cultural practices, in a range that includes mythical narratives, literary texts, advertisements, fashions in clothes, and patterns of social decorum (p.309). Wikipedia online Dictionary confirms that Levi-Strauss was the father of structuralism. According to the Wikipedia, structuralism in reference to social science first appeared in the works of French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who gave rise in France to the structuralist movement, influencing the thinking of other writers such as Louis Althussee, the psychoanalyst Jacques

Lacan, as well as the structural Marxism of Nicos Poulantzas, most of whom disavowed themselves as being a part of this movement. Wikipedia goes further to state that the origins of structuralism connect with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure on linguistics, along with the linguistics of the Prague and Moscow schools. Saussure's structural linguistic propounded three related concepts to include:

- Saussure argued for a distinction between *langue* (an idealised abstraction of language) and *parole* (language as actually used in daily life). He argued that the "sign" was composed of both a "signified", an abstract concept or idea, and a "signifier", the perceived sound/visual image.
- Because different languages have different words to refer to the same objects or concepts, there is no intrinsic reason why a specific sign is used to express a given signifier. It is "arbitrary"
- Signs thus gain their meaning from their relationships and contrast with other signs. As he wrote, "in language, there are only differences 'without positive terms.'"

The present research is an attempt to appraise the structure of Uche Nnyagu's *Mediocrities*. Therefore, the researchers consider structuralism as the appropriate theory for the present work as her aim was basically to parse the novel, looking at the different components with the aim to ascertain how well he has organised and arranged the elements into a unified whole.

#### 3.1 Corruption in Our Institutions of Learning

*Mediocrities* centres on the excesses, arrogance and self conceitedness of the protagonist Mrs Azu, who can best be described as a *mediocre* in the field of academics, considering her qualifications and her job as lecturer. Mrs Azu is obviously officious and high-handed in her attitude towards people especially the ones she feels she is superior to. Even when it is obvious that she is a complete dunce, Mrs. Azu, in her profuse ignorance, parades herself as the best lecturer in her school; a College of Education located somewhere around the imaginary setting - Nkwelle. The Nkwelle College of Education is used by the author as a representation of some government higher institutions in Nigeria. The writer makes it so obvious that Mrs Azu is simply a charlatan. A lot of Mrs. Azu examples abound

in our institutions of higher learning. People wonder how such dunces gain entrance into the academic staff of the institutions where they are seen. The author here simply reveals that giving appointments in Nigeria is based on whom you know and not on qualification. Nnyagu believes that this malady negatively affects education sector in the country. When sound academics and researchers are not given the opportunity to teach, rather, dunces are employed because they are in a way or the other, connected to those at the top, ignorance continues to spread rapidly. The beginning of the novel vivifies the fact that Mrs. Azu is a dunce and she is a direct opposite of what she projects herself to be. The novel had begun thus:

It was almost half past noon when Mrs. Azu drove to the front of the class and parked. The students had been sitting in the class for sometime waiting patiently for her to come and teach them. Although they abhorred her style of teaching, they waited still because she was serious with class attendance. The first thing she would always demand as soon as she entered the class was the attendance sheet. When she alighted from the car, an old navy blue Volkswagen Golf, obviously bought as second hand not too long ago, she stood by the car admiring herself (p.1).

When the course representative meets her to remind her that they have been waiting for her to come and teach her, she becomes tensed and vents unnecessary anger on the course representative. The audience is aware that the anger is simply a ploy to instil fear in the poor students as to hide her ignorance. She quickly, as usual, accuses the course representative of aligning with her antagonists to plot against her. The poor course representative is amazed. In a bid to explain to her of her innocence, she flares: "Shut up! .... What gave you the nerves to talk when I am talking? Who are you? Are we now age mates or have you become so daft that you no longer know your mates, eh? How dare you talk when I talk? I am the HOD and there is no other HOD in this department (1).

Mrs. Azu's appointment as the HOD of Paediatrics Department in the institution makes it further clear that the level of favouritism and nepotism present in the social circles of our society is unimaginably high. Those qualified for the post of HOD are not considered because they are not connected to those at the top. The author revealed that the reason for appointing

Mrs. Azu, despite her ignorance is the fact that she is a girlfriend to the Registrar of the institution. Mrs. Azu, a married woman offers sex to his shameful benefactor, the Registrar as a way to appreciate him for the security he offers her. She gives him regular sex even in the Registrar's office. Nnyagu vivifies this fact when he writes; "The Registrar picked up the empty bottle and flung it into the waste basket. He picked the two drinking glasses and kept them on the fridge. He didnt bother to wash them. He picked the remote and pressed it so that the video which was paused began to televise. When he held her, she reminded him that the door was still open. Like a robot, he ran to the door and locked it securely" (28). Earlier, the author had disclosed that the duo had been watching blue film while drinking in the registrar's office.

Students of Mrs. Azu dislike her mode of teaching, owing to her gross ineptitude. The students just attend her classes simply because they want to write their names on the attendance list in order to be qualified to take exams during exam period. Mrs. Azu, according to the novel, does not teach. Whenever she enters the class, she continues to ramble until her time is up and she would leave. Her domineering attitude is further made manifest in her relationship with her husband. She disobeys her husband, makes inordinate demands and, ultimately cheats on him. She cheats on him with the Registrar of the school who in turn provides her with assistance, both financially and otherwise. Mrs. Azu is presented by the author as a tart, she also sleeps with Dr Chikelu, Chairman of the panel set up to look into the crises in the department. She bribes him with sex to pervert justice in her favour. She believes that with sex, she can achieve whatever she so desires. Therefore, she becomes arrogant and believing in her bottom power, Mrs Azu insults Dr. Uduoma who helped her get employment in the school. She now sees Dr Uduoma as subordinate and a threat to her progress because Dr. Uduoma wants her to do things in the right way. Mrs Azu always insults anyone because of her connection with those at the top. Highly infuriated by the incessant insults to Dr Uduoma by Mrs. Azu, Uduoma, in anger, reminds her that she is an ignominious tart and has been shamefully rejected by her husband. When she talks about Uduoma's martial status, Uduoma becomes aggrieved and in anger, she says to her, "Look at you making mouth about the man who had rejected you" (105).

Furthermore, Dr Emeka Agu who the author presents as a foil to Mrs Azu is diligent in service and serious minded, and this makes Mrs Azu green with envy. Mrs Azu believes that nobody is up to her standard, she thinks that she is the most beautiful woman in the school, and always rubs it on people's faces how important she is. Her movement suggests her arrogance as she catwalks always. She brags that she is superior to everyone. She says to Dr Agu, "... Dr Agu, I am your senior. We are incomparable. My salary is higher than yours" (110). This statement of hers shows how piggish she is as sane people don't brag about such. People like Dr Agu who actually worth their onion are constantly humiliated and frustrated instead of encouraged to offer their best to the students. On several occasions, he receives unwarranted queries both from Mrs. Azu and her boyfriend. Mrs. Azu had earlier promised that she would make sure that he is frustrated out of the institution.

The novel got its title from the usual and unwarranted practice in tertiary institutions in Nigeria which is the appointment of unqualified personnel for teaching jobs because they are connected or related to the Human Resources Managers. The school Registrar in this novel gives favours and promotions to Mrs Azu because she is his lover; she can offer her body any day any time in exchange for such favours. The narrator puts it thus:

It was then that Mrs Azu became the HOD of Paediatrics Department, Mrs Monica became the HOD of the Department of English while Dr Enuwa became the director of General Studies. It amazed the members of the staff that almost ninety percent of the appointments went to *Mediocrities* and sycophants. (*Mediocrities*, p. 86).

This reveals the level of corruption of both moral and ethical values in the school and educational system as a whole. This social anomaly is engendered by the corruption of the people at the helm of affairs in the country. The narrator reveals that "As some students were walking past the fruit tree, they overhead a lecturer respond to the other that when the chief executive of any organisation is mediocre, he or she would be comfortable with his or her fellow *Mediocrities* as members of his or her cabinet" (*Mediocrities*, p.86).

This situation makes the educational system reek of corruption and favouritism. The author believes

that every work has its wage. He advocates against evil deed for eventually, by some divine force, the system is sanitized. The corrupt chief executive is expelled and replaced by a more sane one. Mrs Azu collapses, and she confesses of using certain diabolical means to punish Dr. Uduoma who she feels pangs of envy against, but Dr. Uduoma survives the attack by the fervent prayers of Chukwuma. Mrs. Azu gets a taste of her own medicine.

### 3.2 Corruption in Nigerian Politics

There are many instances where the author has copiously integrated real episodes in the novel especially as it concerns politics. Contemporary authors integrate such realistic facts in their novels. This is so evident in *Mediocrities* where the author has so meticulously integrated realistic facts in the novel. Nnyagu in the novel, in a bid to condemn ills in politics, uses identifiable places and existing individuals in the novel. He writes that Dr Agu, Mrs. Azu's husband always goes to Eke Awka market to buy novels for his children as he is the one taking care of the house as his corrupt wife has chosen life of prostitution. Eke Awka as used in the novel is a very prominent market in Awka the capital of Anambra State (31). Dr. Azu comes back early enough on daily basis to watch and listen to news about corrupt practices of our political leaders. Nnyagu talks about the election that ushered in President Mohammad Buhari as the President of Nigeria. Unlike some novelists, Nnyagu prefers not to use fictional characters. He talks about Professor Jega, who was the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). As the he puts it, "... It was a day after the general election that ushered in President Mohammad Buhari. Professor Jega who was The Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was addressing Nigerians on the outcome of the election. Majority of the Southerners had believed that the election was massively rigged by the northerners to ensure that Buhari won. They argued that the southerners who would have voted for Jonathan were massively disenfranchised by the use of the highly programmed card reading machine (33). Many writers of course, integrated this realistic fact in their novels. In doing that, they invented characters but Uche Nnyagu rather used the names of people who played the various roles in real life in his novel. To him, election was rigged in favour of Mohammad Buhari against Goodluck Jonnathan. By exposing corruption in the society,

the author aptly advocates reformation of the society.

#### 4. STYLISTIC DEVICES USED IN *Mediocrities*

##### 4.1 Code-mixing and Code-switching

African writers deliberately deploy the mixing and switching of codes in their texts in order to present the object, phenomenon or idea the way they actually are without any form of alteration, so that the semantic import would be retained. In the words of Ngonebu, code mixing is an art of combining two codes or two languages to make a statement..." [9]. She goes further to define code-switching as the situation whereby the speaker changes from one language or code to the other in narration. It is a known fact, therefore, that some native words or expressions do not have the exact or suitable forms that could be used in their steads. The writer will have no choice than to bring in that word/expression that will fill that void. In so doing, different native codes may have to be placed side by side with that of Standard English.

Nnyagu has stylistically deployed codes such as Hausa, Pidgin and Igbo in *Mediocrities* to add local flavours to the language use. For instance, in the novel, instances of code-switching are prevalent in the following expressions:

He burst into deafening laughter. "House *igba*. O *dikwa egwu!*" (*Mediocrities*, p.38).

"Charles now. Abi you jus wan yab me?" (*Mediocrities*, p.10).

"No be say I wan yab you. I just want to be sure you are talking of Charles." (*Mediocrities*, p.10).

The sentences above portray the informal language used typically by students. Nnyagu made use of this stylistic device to reveal the colloquial language expressions used by students amongst themselves. It can be noted that students tend to use Pidgin English more often when talking to one another in an unofficial or informal situation, as it makes them feel relaxed and at ease.

In another instance, the Nnyagu portrayed the language expressions used by women or confidants when they talk in their cliques. A

group of students, who are mostly married gather up to discuss their sexual experiences with their partners and one of the girls says:

*Nne*, I no go lie to you, the guy sabi the thing wella. I don't know who lectured him. (*Mediocrities*, p.12).

Furthermore, Nnyagu also made use of code mixing in the following expression:

She burst to loud laughter. "*Ife n'agu gibu nwoke adiro na afia Onisha...*" (*Mediocrities*, p.13).

The author made use of code mixing to colour the world of the novel and portray an aura of verisimilitude.

##### 4.2 The Use of Figurative Devices and Transliteration

In the novel, there is also the effective use of figurative devices and expressions, transliteration and proverbs which helps to give the novel cultural spice, and makes it more appealing to the audience. This stylistic device makes use of words outside their literal meaning in order to portray a connotative meaning. Nnyagu used transliteration i.e. the literal translation of Igbo words into English just to portray the worldview of Igbo using a foreign language like English. This style can be said to have originated from Achebe who argues that English, the former colonial language should not be rejected entirely but accepted as part of a package which included many items of doubtful value. He, therefore, advocates for the nativization or domestication of English to carry the weight of native experience. This is why Achebe writes in the English that reflects the Igbo culture even though the linguistic structures are grammatically aligned with that of Standard English. The following are examples of transliteration used in *Mediocrities*:

"She knows that her anus is wide open and that is why she is afraid." (*Mediocrities*, p.44).

"She looked at her. "Eat shit there!" she blared. (*Mediocrities*, p.115).

"The man pulled his hair and chewed it that he would make sure I wasn't successful in my MA defence." (*Mediocrities*, p.129).

The use of proverbial expressions is also replete in the novel. Nnyagu made use of proverbs to retain the natural, cultural and authentic meaning inherent in Igbo society. The following are some of the proverbs:

“O di egwu. My father said that when you come out in the morning and a fowl comes chasing you, do run because it might have grown teeth over the night.” (*Mediocrities*, p.62).

“...it was like a fart passed by a palm wine taper on a palm wine tree that really astounded the poor flies.” (*Mediocrities*, p.62).

The use of proverbs helps to portray the worldview and general outlook on life of a particular people, as the culture of a people is embedded in their language. According to Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*: “Proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten[4]. Therefore, the artistry with words has been part of Igbo society from time immemorial.

#### **4.3 The Marriage of Fact and Fiction in *Mediocrities***

In *Mediocrities*, Uche Nnyagu exposes different societal ills by uniting the characters who represent real people and the settings. The spatial setting of the novel is around 2015, and the geographical setting Nigeria when Buhari running for presidency. The novel satirises the excesses certain academics who are not giving credit for merit. Mrs Azu's employment in College of Education Orula is not genuine. She virtually flirts with any man that comes her way in as much as the man is willing to offer her money and favours.

Dr Agu, who can be said to be the author himself Uche Nnyagu, is everything Mrs Azu is not. Mrs Azu is arrogant and pompous. She has her head in the sky and then looks down on every one. On an occasion when a student innocently leans against Mrs Azu's car, she rains abuses on her reminding her of how expensive it is to maintain a car:

“You are very stupid!” she ranted. “Do you know who you are talking to? You students are very foolish and disrespectful to your lecturers. Imagine that your lecturer would park her car and you would not be afraid to lean on it and this one even has the guts to

talk to me. Don't you know that I can come and slap you well? You keep your handbag on my car to scratch my car. Do you know how much it costs to repaint a car? Umu idiots. You wallow in poverty and you don't know what it means to maintain a car. That was why you stupidly leaned on my car.” (*Mediocrities*, p.45).

Nnyagu's presentation of characters is so vivid that the actions of the characters can be perceived in one's mind's eye. Mrs Azu can be perceived as a universal character because her features are a recurrent one in many different cultural spaces in the world. The topicality of the subject matter and themes makes its significance felt in the everyday lives of different people. Though this work is a fiction, it is based on real life experiences of the author, the school in which he taught before getting employed in Nnamdi Azikiwe University.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Style is a peculiar way of using language by different authors in portraying their themes, presenting their characters and creating plausible world around their work of art. The researchers have studied Uche Nnyagu in *Mediocrities* and have discovered that the novel is a mirror of the contemporary happenings in most of our institutions of higher learning. The author has made use of different literary and stylistic devices to vividly expose certain ills in Nigerian Universities. In doing this, he has employed apt devices and techniques which involve transliteration, proverbial expressions, code mixing and code switching and others. He also married fact and imagination so as to tackle the social ills which plague our contemporary world. He has so wonderfully crafted the work in such a way that the reader finds it difficult to drop the novel when one has not read the last sentence. Nnyagu's style is worth encouraging. One reading the novel would see clearly, the contemporary society represented by the imaginary setting of the author. The characters' conversations are apt and natural and the characters cohere with the setting. There is virtually no episode in the novel that is not possible to happen in real life. One major interesting thing about the novel is the fact that the author believes he is writing for his people and not for the alien audience. This is why he has used the African proverbs copiously in the novel and the proverbs, like in the real life, are understood via the natural context.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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