

Descriptions as a Functional Semantic Tool in Ike's *Our Children Are Coming*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the manner in which Ike, the author of *Our Children are Coming* uses character-descriptions as a tool for message projection in his novel. It adopts the systemic linguistic approach to the study of texts which bothers much about functionality. It relies on the model designed by Adejare (1992) and Jolayemi (2000) in which texts are bifurcated into First Order and Second Order. In Second Order texts, they assert, there exists a message which is projected through three different levels of meaning projection. Descriptions of characters constitute one of the features used in meaning projection at their third meta-level of interpretation of meaning. The paper discusses the different ways in which characters such as Chu Nwoke, Justice Okpetum, Mrs Edo, Chief Olabisi, Apolonia and Archdeacon Obi were described by the author to project the message of human apostasy in the text, the fact that humans are a combination of good and evil as exhibited in the Nigerian elitist materialism.

Key words: Descriptions; Apostasy; Systemic Text-linguistics; Semiotic variation and Message projection

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INTRODUCTION

This paper adopts the systemic linguistic approach to the study of texts. It is one of the many approaches to text

study, such as those of stylistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, semiotics, among others, which is much interested in the sociological aspect of language (Halliday 1961). This great concern for the sociological aspect of language is what informed the choice of this approach in this study. This concern, to Halliday (1994), Eggins (2004), Jibrin (2012a), leads systemicists to be sharply interested in the description of language and its varieties so as to reveal the ways in which language forms can be related to its social functions and which, to Berry (1975), has relevance for text study.

The paper relies heavily on the framework of systemic text-linguistics developed by systemic linguists such as Adejare (1992) and Jolayemi (2000) for text analysis in which it is argued that there are two different kinds of texts: first order and second order. First order texts are non-literary texts while second order texts are literary texts. In every second order text, they assert, there exists a message which the text producer tries to project using different linguistic apparatuses, which are categorized into three different levels of interpretation, namely: primitive level, second order level and prime order level. Each of these levels constitutes in itself a cluster of analytical components.

This paper aims to discuss the ways in which descriptions of characters have been marshaled by the text producer for message projection in *Our Children are Coming*. It takes into account the fact of semiotic variation as a crucial factor in the interpretation of texts by second language users. This is based on Adejare (1992, p.9)'s position that the same form of a language may generate meanings in a second language variety that are strikingly different from the ones that it can generate in the mother tongue variety. This, according to him, is owing to variation in experience.

Descriptions of characters constitute an aspect of prime order level, which is the third level of meaning generation in second order texts (See Adejare 1992 and Jolayemi

2000 op cit). The other elements of interpretation at this level, according to them, are metaphors and imagery. Characters are considered special metaphors. This is owing to the fact that they are considered as semiotic signs that are representatives of the ideas, through which the message of the text in which they occur is projected. This is premised upon the truism that characters have no objective reality. As a result, distortions of reality according to Adejare (1992, p.9) are regarded as part of the author's idiolect, and to qualify as features for discussion, such features have to be repeated in several episodes in the text. In view of this, characters were selected for discussion on the basis of the emphasis given to their descriptions by the author with recognition of their contributions to the projection of the overall message of the text (Jibrin 2012b, p.79).

1. THE MESSAGE OF THE NOVEL

The analysis is in view of the message identified for the text. The novel shows the elitist hypocrisy and insincerity that have become the hallmark of many average Nigerian elite. The permeating moral decadence of the Nigerian youth in the novel is revealed as a product of the failure of their elite-parents who have failed in their roles as models. In spite of the fact that these parents know their failure, they try to conceal the truth by blaming their children for having benefited so much from their generosity but have refused to be responsible. This is with a view to projecting themselves in positive light in order that the misdemeanour of their children would not be traced to them. This analysis is done against the background that both immediate and wider situations of the text contribute to its interpretations. The author, through the immediate situation of the novel, projects the message that both the youth and their parents are a combination of good and evil and that none is peculiar in that regard (Jibrin 2012a). This corresponds to what Adejare (1992) refers to as apostasy. The youth that were painted so black, within the immediate situation of the text, were those that eventually salvaged the country from the shackles of their parents' corrupt practices. This message of apostasy is projected using descriptions of characters in different spheres of the Nigerian national life in the novel, as will be seen in subsequent discussions.

2. DESCRIPTIONS

The author projects the message of the text within the descriptions of many of the characters in the novel. The descriptions involve negative and positive attributes which can be got from both physical features and actions of the characters. Some of the characters described in the text were selected for analysis from the multiplicity of the characters whose descriptions have contributed immensely to the projection of the text's message as follows:

3. JUSTICE OKPETUN

The way the character of Justice Okpetun is described in the novel projects apostasy, as his negative and positive attributes are scattered in the novel. Instances of these attributes are shown below:

(a) But he was not sufficiently enraged or famished to forget that the 'contempt of court judge' ...had a penchant for humiliating acknowledged heroes. (p.17).

(b) For how could he forget the years he had wasted away in frustration? Five years in the Western civil service, without rising above the grade of state counsel. Six years in the federal public service within which period he became a free-mason and in desperation, a devotee of the celestial church of Christ. All in the bid for a descent rank. (pp.58/59).

(c) The chairman steamed in his seat. He, a judge of the high court of the federal republic, to be insulted in open court, more or less, and to find himself incapable of doing anything about it, ...no matter the five points of law adduced, he would have dumped the bastard into jail.... (p.49).

The first passage projects the character of justice Okpetun as a judge who misuses the provisions of the law. The phrase 'contempt of the court judge' is a descriptive term used to describe him and his high-handedness in his court. He metes out punishment outrageously to people in his court. The second shows how religious he was at a point in his life. The fact that he became a devotee of the celestial church of Christ shows how religious he was and how he suffered frustration in the civil service, both of the state and of the federal republic. While one will tend to sympathize with him based on his background, the other aspect of the passage shows that he does not deserve any sympathy as he was only using Christ to achieve his selfish aim of being a High Court Judge to be able to humiliate people. Soon after promotions became rapid and he got to the rank of a High Court Judge – he became despotic. He started serving his godfathers instead of Christ. He began to misapply the law in order to boost his ego. This is shown in passage (c) above. This is used to project the apostasy of Nigerians. It is a message that most Nigerians become very religious when they are in need of earthly pleasures and as soon as that comes their ways, they get far from the ways of God.

4. CHIEF AYODELE OLABISI

The character of Olabisi is described in a manner that projects the message of the novel as well. A few instances of such descriptions are given in the following excerpts:

(a) My first wife, the one I married in church, kept giving me girl, girl like that". I became friendly with a teacher at Ikorodu who became pregnant. Thank God, when the baby came it was a boy. (p.9).

(b) I went to a traditional doctor who identified the

culprit as my second wife. She did not want any other woman to give me a male heir, so that she and her son could chop all my money when I die. (p.10).

(c) Although my biggest company, the one which fathered all my other companies, is called Ayodele Olabisi, sons and co. limited, I did not have even one son when I set it up.

From the excerpts above, it can be deduced that the character-metaphor is an apostate. The author makes him reveal everything about him and his family; his attitude to, and impression of, members of his family as well as his worldview are all revealed. All this reveals his apostate nature. His quest for male children led him into marrying at church. When he could not realize his dream of getting a male child, he denounced his belief in the church and went ahead to have illicit sex affair with a lady from where he got a male child. When more male children could no longer come from her or the third lady, she became responsible for the inability of the third lady to beget a male child as told to Chief Olabisi by his traditional doctor. This projects the facelessness of Olabisi who worships whatever religion can guarantee him his unquenchable desire of having male children. Above all, his apostasy pushed him to establish a company named "Ayodele Olabisi and Sons Ltd" even when he had not got a child. All this is based on vanity. He is only bothered about who will inherit his estate and immortalize his name after his death. He is so captivated to the level that he lacks confidence in the women that are mothers of his children. His world becomes ruled with suspicion and in spite of his being a successful business man he has no peace in his home.

5. ARCHDEACON OBI

The character of Archdeacon Obi is described in a manner that projects the message of the novel by the author. He is described as a model of a man in holy orders, and at another level he is described as not being able to let go of an ill-gotten air conditioned Peugeot 505 saloon car, given to him by his daughter, even when it became clear that she got the car through the sale of her body. The following excerpts make the points clearer:

The very reverend Jeremiah Chukwukadibia Obi was a copy book model of a man in the holy orders as he advanced to take his seat at the witness desk. Tall, spare, but not hungry looking, with hands clasped reverently in front of him and humility inscribed all over him. (p.28).

The fifth child of the archdeacon who had not worked all her life came home during her long vacation with a car and left it behind for her parents, in spite of her choice of university against her parents', yet no effort was made by the archdeacon to verify the authenticity of his daughter's source of the car:

And when she gleefully announced that she was leaving behind

the brand new air conditioned car with upholstery as soft as the belly of a pussycat, the parents momentarily lost their power of speech. (p.33).

The fact of losing their power of speech is a significant proof of apostasy. It is a fact that human beings generally get carried away by material comfort no matter how religious. The weakness of the archdeacon became deeper, as he appeared before the commission in the same car his daughter got for him through the carnal use of her body, to the level that the chairman of the commission (one of Archdeacon's daughter's men friends) had to satirize him thus:

"But not too confused, I would imagine, to ride in the air conditioned car, eh?" I bet that's the car that brought you here today?"(p.34)

Aside from the gift of a car, Apolonia, the archdeacon's daughter, built a house for him, he still did not feel that something was wrong. This shows that the archdeacon succumbs easily to the pressure of materialism to the detriment of his religious posture:

"when your student daughter who has never worked for one day suddenly brings you a brand new air conditioned car, you organize a special thanksgiving service for her. She builds you a palace, you thank God again". (p.44).

The author more or less reveals the influence of materials on average Nigerians, even those who are religious. A man who brings up his child according to the precepts of Christianity suddenly sees his child who is not even the second or third, but the fifth child and who is in school doing and bringing home materials what those working cannot do or bring home, yet he is quiet and waiting for somebody to prove to him that his daughter's source of income is illicit. This is apostasy of the supreme order. It is a sound case that most people, religious or not religious, have no morality when it comes to the issue of material acquisition.

6. MRS. WINIFRED EDO

The author via description projects Mrs. Edo's character as a combination of positive and negative features. Her aesthetic sense and her peculiar manner of appearance are extolled in the novel coupled with the melodramatic way in which she carries her head-tie without using office pins, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

Chief (Mrs.) Winifred Edo straightened up. Her *Headtie stood 30 centimetres above her head, with Two of its four ends screening off the back of her Neck.* She had acquired a reputation for installing such headties without the help of office pins; and for guiding her head into and out of the car without knocking the skyscraper over. (p.63).

In spite of her gorgeous nature, she has natural features of beauty to boost. Her lovely set of teeth enables her to give a sweet smile each time she engages in one. In spite of all these gifts of natural beauty, she lacks contentment to the level that her artificiality makes her lose features of

her natural beauty, as can be seen in the following:

Mrs. Edo smiled appreciatively. Her usual sweet smile showing off a lovely set of teeth, and her lone dimple. Speculations had been...as to why only her right cheek should be dimpled: dimples usually came in pairs. The most widely held view was that she had been born with dimples on both cheeks, but had lost the left dimple Through make-up...(p.66)

This is a way of projecting human apostasy. The much work that nature did on her, instead of maintaining it, she has become so artificial because she wants to show off, and she in turn loses part of the beauty.

7. APOLONIA

Apolonia is another character whose description in the novel is used to project its message. A daughter of an archdeacon, Apo, is described in terms of positive and negative attributes:

The same rich eyebrows, the same deep-set of eyes which seemed half shot most of the time, the same natural sheen on the lower lip. Apo had a fair complexion, ... (p.106).

From the passage above, Apo is a gifted lady among her pairs. Her physical features make her resemble unmistakably her handsome archdeacon father. However, her beauty cannot be used for positive effects. Instead, her illicit sexual relationships with the influential persons in society for money earns her the title "vitamin Q", a name used as a metaphor to describe the kind of sensation that Justice Okpetun gets from Apo each time he makes love to her:

Apolonia. Apo-Apple, a unique experience. The yet-to-be patented 'vitamin Q', which, when taken last thing at night, shot tingling sensations right down to your toenails and kept you vibrant with vivacity for the ensuing twenty-four hours! (p.106).

A beautifully endowed lady who ordinarily should use her natural features to settle for a family of her own is busy moving from one man to another based on her conviction that the men stole resources belonging to everybody and she is ready to collect as much of her own share as possible from them, using her beauty. She is such that can charm any man with her beauty and the manner in which she projects it, all for negative and ungodly effects:

The refreshing fragrance of channel No.5 which filled the car as soon as she stepped in, or the glimpse of her plump, tender-looking breasts which he spied through the neck of her blouse as she stooped to get into the car. (p.107).

The worst of it is that, even when her ill-behaviour becomes known to her parents, she does not show any sign of remorse, let alone thinking of repenting. Her character and behaviour were revealed in contradistinction to each other in the novel, which shows a projection of human apostasy.

8. DR. NWOKE

The character of Dr. Chu Nwoke is all along described in a positive light in the novel. He is a guidance counselor who retired from the public service after several years of hard-work and who has always been concerned about making his unsolicited contributions to government on national issues, especially when it affects students' union. He is bitter about the haphazard and perfunctory ways in which government handles such matters. He is someone who has some measure of principles and bothers about integrity. This is shown in his ability to leave his friend Dele's house when it became glaring that Dele's sex-starved wife was trying to lure him into doing what he did not like:

Dr. Nwoke had replied, without taking the seat offered Him. He had been observant enough to notice the danger signals: her reluctance to release his hand long after their hand shake, the...appearance of moisture on her palm, and the involuntary movements of her lip. And he knew that if he had not disappeared promptly he would be stoking up athat could consume his propriety and principles. (p.128).

He also believes that knowing students' psychology is an important measure in handling students, but government will always opt for the uncompromising and pig-headed option which does not work. Even at that, Dr. Nwoke is not a saint. He succumbs to the pressure of a female undergraduate at Akan University at night as captured by the author in the excerpt below:

... and when he asked her destination she had casually replied. "where do you want us to go?... the girl had suggested the Bar Beach when he regretted he could not take her home as his wife was around. And she guided him through his first experience of turning the back seat of his car into a bed. The agility with which she moved herself from the front to the back seat without stepping out of the car showed that that was not her maiden attempt. (p.131).

This shows that there are double tendencies in every man. The only difference is the degree of such tendencies. These are the few instances of descriptions of characters used by the author to project the message of his text.

CONCLUSION

The paper discusses the various ways in which the author of the novel, *Our Children are Coming* uses descriptions of character-metaphors in the novel to project his message which constitutes his ideological stance in the novel. These character- descriptions are done with a view to showing the innateness, as well as the universality, of human apostasy in the novel. As a result, characters were drawn from different spheres of the Nigerian society. These include the judicial, the religious, the private and the public spheres. The author's descriptions of these characters as well as their geographical spread in the novel are used to portray the selfish and materialistic nature of average Nigerian elite in different ramifications, which have no respect for professional ethics, religion or morality. It argues that in the face of materialism every

other thing can be sacrificed, not even children are worthy of being spared, by the elite in Nigeria, irrespective of their ethnic origins and religious backgrounds.

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