

Art and Social Responsibility: A Study of Chukwuemeka Ike's *Our Children are Coming*

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ABSTRACT

One major function of an art is its edutainment end, which it renders the society. With such function, members of the society are aesthetically satisfied and are abreast of the happenings of the same society. The entertainment value of arthings on the way and manner writers engineer on words in tellingtales while the educative part comes into play, as writers with his knowledge of the happenings of the society intimate the society on some vital issues. However, it is on these that this paper hopes to ascertain how Chukwuemeka Ike in *Our Children Are Coming* entertains as well as presents to us 'the trouble with Nigeria' from the viewpoint of the younger generation.

Keywords: Art, Social, Responsibility, Edutainment and Children.

INTRODUCTION

That which embodies all human creative and imaginative activities, expressing the author's conceptual ideas and capabilities intended for beauty and emotional power is basically what may be called 'art'. This is precisely the foundation of art as laid by Aristotle in *on the art of poetry* as it has to do with *mimesis* [1]. It is the expression of our thoughts, emotions, intuition, desires and sharing of one's experiential view. Having said that, it is important to note that the thoughts, emotions or ideas, are not the 'art' in themselves but the 'how' they are expressed. Various other scholars have looked at it as an alternative world, one created to stand in contrast to the world we live in, which is messy, unplanned, unedited, unfocused and largely immoral [2]. It is also regarded as 'imagination in motion' while others see it as a constant struggle, an escape route or an outreach. Bearing all that have been said above in mind, we can easily find how Chukwuemeka Ike blends the whole above ideas to present another invaluable work of art that realistically captures the

Unattained Social Responsibility

Chinua Achebe in an interview on one of his novels *Anthills of the Savannah* declared, "all art is propaganda" often employed as an effective tool to steer and influence a society's views or thoughts. It is in a bid to achieve this redirection course that Ike engages the

realities of our present society. What is unique in this work is how he presents 'the trouble with Nigeria' from the viewpoint of the juveniles. The other issue this paper is concerned with is on the idea of 'social responsibility' which being an ethical theory precisely has to do with individuals' duties, obligations to act in the best interest of their society and the environment at large. One of the major features of this social responsibility is that it is usually trans/inter-generational - where the actions of one generation have consequences on those following. The underlying idea is that the actions of an individual must benefit the whole society [3]. Where this tenet fails to apply, we would say social responsibility has not been upheld. Where individuals or the society at large fail to live up to its moral responsibilities especially for the next generation, the result is usually outright chaos, catastrophe and general social irresponsibility as graphically dramatised in Ike's *Our Children Are Coming*.

instrument of the fiction. But in a deeper assessment of Ike's propelling force, Patricia Anyanwu in an article *Postcolonial reading of Ike's Our Children Are Coming*, infers that Ike's [4].

ultimate aim at all times is to engage his artistic impetus in raising readers' consciousness to the prevailing deviations from the promises on independence as well as create awareness on the need to engender the desired change in the nation.

She further maintains that it is the quest for positive change in the nation that influences Ike's choice of the subject matter in the novel, which is precisely anchored.

on the need for the adult society to rise up to the occasion of social, moral and economic responsibility required to prepare the Nigerian child and youth for their future leadership roles in the nation. (International Journal of Arts and Humanities).

The artistic apparatus Ike employs here is in his use of simple linguistic constructions that help to convey his message without burdening the work with complex metaphors. The narrative that chronologically flows to its zest of action clearly draws attention to all its imports. The greatest of Ike's achievement in this text is the presentation of the moral decadence and societal negligence from 'the mouth of the suckling babes,' to borrow biblical parlance. The narratives in the novel are in two major parts. These divisions have a central connecting force, which is the revolutionary agency of the National Association of Students (NAS) headed by comrade YekiniFalase and members of his executive. The first part of the divide is made up of the commission set up by the president called Presidential Commission on Juveniles below twenty-one charged with the responsibility of gathering reports on the rising incidence of indiscipline, lack of motivation, laziness, sexual promiscuity and general unrest among young people under twenty-one. Honourable Mr. Justice Solomon Okpetun heads this commission with Chief Mrs. Edo, Dr.Nwoke and Alhaji Adamuas members [2]. These are individual who have varying degrees of questionable characters. However, the composition of this commission is already where Chukwuemeka Ike begins his stroking of his society where unworthy and irresponsible members of the society are appointed into a commission that has to do with integrity and good conscience more especially as it has to do with the

younger people at the total exclusion of worthy men like Dr.Chinwuba. From the first member of the commission to the least person among them, none is free from corruption, unmeritorious, dubiousness and a lifestyle worthy of being a member of such a sensitive commission [4]. By this design, Ike drags our attention to the new civilian government that has come into power through various irregular means as being responsible for such unwholesome composition of a commission. On the contrary is the opposing commission of the National Association of Students termed National Commission for Parents over Twenty-one headed by Chief (Barrister) DipoTaiwo - a very competent and reputable sole commissioner of the students' commission. This was a parallel commission to the presidential commission that refused to incorporate the students' representatives whose welfare was being addressed because of their selfish reasons and shortsightedness. It was in the self-centeredness of the Presidential Commission that they refused student representatives from joining them on the alleged reason that the students are inexperienced and will not make any useful contribution in the commission. This disagreement sets the stage for the completely revolutionary reactions from the students who began to make demand for the over-hauling of the entire system through their own localised machinery that attracted external forces.

Very important and worthy of note as reflected in the text is Nigeria as a failed nation at birth would always in its corrupt manner resort to setting up of copious, unproductive commissions even at the most critical times when its national integrity and socio-political stability are threatened. Major-General Sam Ifeanyichukwu Momah, former Minister of Science and Technology in his 14th Pre-Convocation Lecture at the Akanulbiam Federal Polytechnic, [3] made reference to such commissions set up at the independence of Nigeria with their recommendations not always fully implemented. The three commissions he referenced to are, "Sir Walter Eliot's Commission, Sir Eric Ashby Commission and Professor Harbison's Commission" (11). Such setting up of commissions characterised by incompetence in the text, is extended down to the Alhaji Shehu Shagari's administration, even to the President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's administration, peopled with members of questionable character who are not even running stable homes of their own but are appointed to handle national matters. In the novel, the two presenters who appeared before the Justice Okpetun's commission to make their presentations have related parental problems. And what Ike has struggled to articulate in the novel has been that the irresponsibilities of the young ones stem from somewhere - basically from parents who have failed to

share understanding and have refused to be perfect role-models to their children. In the case of Archdeacon Obi and his daughter Apolonia whose sexual escapade has gone international, is blamed on the parents who kept accepting gifts and presents of car and other expensive material things that the young girl usually returns home with, after prostituting around with ministers, governors, senators, etc including travelling overseas with them through which she makes her illicit money. At the end of the Archdeacon's presentation, Mrs. Edo's corrective remark is worthy of note as she says, "you'll surely agree that the refusal by a girl's parents to accept the gift of a car on principle would make an indelible impression on any girl" (Our Children 45 - 46 emphasis ours). The word 'principle' is indeed the underlying idea to inculcate and challenge the younger person to better moral disposition. In the case of Professor Hassan Aliyu, Vice Chancellor, Tudun University, his position over insisting that his son Murtalla attend his university education at home in Nigeria against the wishes of his wife and son is astonishingly unconceivable of a professor of his learning. His inability to come to terms with the vision of his son drove the young lad into thievery and mischief. The only flimsy reason Professor Aliyu had for disagreeing with his son to study abroad is to him,

any young person who studies medicine here is more likely to be better prepared to grapple with the health problems of his society than another person who studied medicine, say, America, England or Germany. (Our Children 62)

Professor Aliyu further fears that if his son goes abroad to study, it will deny him the opportunity of making life-long friends at home, thereby making everybody he meets on his return "a stranger" (Our Children 63). Where a whole professor got his conviction from, we are yet to find out especially in a country that is still as underdeveloped as Nigeria. These and many more such cases are the common everyday experiences we

find among Nigerian parents and their wards and it is such stiff-nakedness that result in most irresponsible misconduct by the young people. When the case became alarming from the witnesses who appeared before the NAS commission, Dr. Chinwuba and wife saw the need to bring home their son and daughter from school for a round-table sit-down talk. By so doing, the parents are able to identify certain misconceptions and misdoings

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committed by their children and they are able to correct them, apologise to them to ensure healthy, balanced and stable development of the children and their relationship with them. As hinted by Dr.Bankole from his research report about the problems of juveniles (youth quake) which has become a global issue,

The NAS Parallel Commission as a Standard

In an attempt to actualise their goals having been ejected from the Presidential Commission and their court case against the Presidential Commission thrown out, the National Association of Students now settles down to set up its own commission - the National Commission on Parents Over Twenty-one with the sole aim of initiating moral revolution. A senior advocate and sole commissioner, Chief DipoTaiwo, lead this commission. The commission runs parallel to the Presidential Commission on Juveniles below twenty-one. The different witnesses taken by the Chief Taiwo's commission revealed similar parent-child discrepancy- a situation where parents use their children to settle their dishonourable old

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Dr.Bankole says, one thing has become needful - "the need to establish a channel of communication between parents and children, the old and the young" (Our Children 74). This is exactly what Dr.Chinwuba, the authorial voice and character in the novel does.

scores. Here, the children suffer as escape-goats [3]. The story present by "witness 001" that is about a girl whose parents refused her from getting married to her fiancé on one hand: and another parents who also refused their son from getting married to his fiancée only on the grounds that the fathers of both young people as professors have had age-long hatred going on between them even long before their children were born typicalises the scenario. The most embarrassing part of this situation is that these fathers have had their quarrel started at their young ages over their interest in the same English nursing sister. The narrator notes their quarrel thus:

Two brilliant minds, allowing trivialities to poison their minds against each other! They had fought over every conceivable matter in the younger years...but the last straw, which subsequently turned them into deadly enemies, was their fight over an English nursing sister. (Our Children 199)

As trivial and dirty as the matter sounds is what could make both fathers destroy the lives and future of their children. The young girl in question incidentally become pregnant for her boyfriend as she is disowned by her father who had fed her with all kinds of lies all her life. What the Chief Taiwo's Commission does is to give young people the opportunity to testify about their experiences in the adult society. What we see is that many things go wrong at the family levels, which are poorly managed by parents and they generally manifest at the society level as indiscipline and disorderliness. The Chief Taiwo commission's sole purpose remains to "examine the role of parents in the

upbringing of their children, particularly their role as pace-setters for their children." Through this process, their aim to cause moral revolution could be achieved. The case of "Witness 005", can help to deepen our understanding of how much this parent-child differences has destroyed the moral structure of our society. The "Witness 005" is forced to travel abroad in order to study medicine but is suddenly brought back to Nigeria to study Biochemistry on the more hidden reason that she may not get married to a whiteman. For her mother, "Witness 005" must get married to Ekiti man. Hear her words.

Her parents thought differently. Which Ekiti man, her mother asked, would propose marriage to

a Doctor of Philosophy in Biochemistry? (Yes, 005's husband must not only be a Nigerian, he must be Ekiti)" (Our Children 231)

This is the kind of sentiment that made parents cause their daughter to lose the scholarship she had got to study medicine

at the University of Cambridge. Now, what is the result, "Witness 005" explains,

Sir, at this point I simply cracked up. I sought solace in cigarettes. Followed by alcohol. Then I graduated to weed. And yet the mental escape I sought continue to elude me. (Our Children 232)

This is how far the lives of younger people are sacrificed on the altar of parental ready-made selfish dreams or plans without due consideration of the child's dreams in life. Very important literary skill Ike employs here, apart from making the young people speak for

themselves directly, is his use of codes - 001, 002, 003 etc as symbols to represent the witnesses. The aim is to have an objective record of witnesses without any bias or connection with their families. In the words of "Witness 005" as regards what parents are out to do, she says;

They should accept that their children may have a point deserving serious consideration (Our Children 233).

This is indeed note-worthy and also a way Ike uses to proffer answer to the

numerous issues he raised in the novel.

Endemic Corruption

All the members of the Presidential Commission on Juveniles are chronically corrupt. None is exempted. They are people with dubious and questionable character. Imagine the so-called chairman of the commission Mr. Justice Okpetun

having a secret amorous affair with Apolonia - the daughter of the archdeacon which he fears the NAS was going to expose in court. In recounting his encounter with Apolonia, Mr.Okpetun comments of her thus:

Apolonia. Apo. Apple. A unique experience. The yet-to-be-patented 'Vitamin Q' which, 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! (Our Children 106)

Mr.Okpetun here, recalls how he relishes his affair with Apo. At the point where he

picks up Apo on the campus, Mr.Okpetun says;

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. An electrifying impulse had flashed through him straight away, fertilizing his imagination. (Our Children 107)

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This is how morally deficient the chairman of such commission is; an individual who chairs a commission that is to find solutions to juvenile problems but rather takes pleasure in destroying and exploiting them. Meanwhile, the main incentive that attracted the members of this commission to accept their appointments is the over-sea tour the government promised them where they believe they will go and squander money and come back home with lots of material things. This was the sole reason

Apart from the special relationship between us, there's also the fact that I was instrumental to your appointment on the commission.
(Our Children 125)

While Mrs Edo is dissipating her own fear also says, "Since I came to know you, you have been the only man in my life, apart from my husband"(Our Children 125). All this instances of immoral affairs by the members of this commission make them to lack the credibility to be part of such commission. In all this, Dr Nwoke is also

The entertainment and educative functions of this novel are unmistakable. The entertainment aspect is obvious from the way Ike presents the story. The characters are skilfully given roles to exhibit for the enjoyment of the readers. Also, the educative aspect is not lacking either. This is because as Ike gives the characters some roles to play, he by so doing brings to our understanding that the future of the society are in the hands

CONCLUSION

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Alhaji Adamu accepted the appointment just in order to use the opportunity to expand his business empire internationally. Mrs Edo is not left out in this act of criminality. She is involved in extra-marital affair with Dr. Joko who practically made it possible for her to get her M.Ed from Premier University. Doc is also said to be very instrumental in Mrs. Edo's appointment in the Presidential Commission. In his fear of being exposed by the students, Doc says;

involved, who is said to have slept with one 'streetlight' at the back seat of his car. A young girl he picked up on the campus street. All of these members are guilty of destroying the lives and future of the younger persons thereby failing to be quite them the moral responsibility expected of them.

of we adult members of the society. Although everyone is busy shifting blames on the next members of the society the truth remains whether we like it or not our children, which we are mesmerizing are surely coming to take the society over from us adults. It is high time we realised that we have actually failed in our responsibilities and should turn to our duties before it is too late.

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