

“I DON'T BELIEVE ANYBODY WILL BE SO UNLIKE OTHER PEOPLE”: IRONY AND ANXIETY ABOUT THE NIGERIAN NATION IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S “MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR”¹

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Abstract

'That's what you always say. But I don't believe anybody will be so unlike other people that they will be unhappy when their sons are engaged to marry' (Achebe, 2009, p. 18). These words are spoken by Nene, a central character in Chinua Achebe's short story "Marriage is a Private Affair," after the man she has just got engaged to, Nnaemeka, turns down her request that he writes to his father to inform him of the couple's decision to marry. Nnaemeka's refusal is based on his appreciation of the challenge that the fact that Nene is of a different ethnicity from him would pose to his father's ethnocentric worldview. He decides that it will be wiser to inform his father in person. Directly, Nene's words capture the anxiety of a soon-to-be bride. She wants to be accepted by and in the family of her husband-to-be. In her view, which the narrative also endorses, that is just as it should be. Therefore, not only does Nene hope that she will be accepted, but she also fears that she will not be accepted. Beyond this anxiety of a soon-to-be bride Nene's words also help convey what I argue to be Achebe's anxiety about the possibility of realizing a Nigerian nation out of the diverse peoples that inhabit the state. In "Marriage is a private affair" Achebe pushes for the building of a Nigerian nation. But he fears that the realization of a Nigerian nation may not come to pass. His fear arises out of an acknowledgement that there are many ethnic groups in the state, and is heightened by an acute awareness of how entrenched exclusivist ethnic sentiment is in the country. Achebe recognizes that the exclusivist ethnic sentiment leads to the consideration of those outside one's ethnic group as being "unlike ... people."

Key Words: Ethnicity, Irony, Anxiety, Nation, Marriage

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Introduction

“Marriage is a Private Affair” is among Chinua Achebe’s earliest writings. The short story was first published in 1952 – as “The Old Order in Conflict with the New” – in a university student magazine, *The University of Herald* (Lynn in Booker, 2003, p. 207). At the time, Achebe was a twenty two year old undergraduate at the University College, Ibadan (today the University of Ibadan). The first university in Nigeria, the University College, Ibadan, was also one of those institutions that were founded partly with the bigger intention of practically and symbolically consolidating the Nigerian “nation-state.” Achebe was in the college’s first intake of students. It is not illogical to expect that, as one who was being trained to take up a position of responsibility in the state, with the attendant prestige that the position would no doubt have, Achebe was optimistic about the realization of a new nation called Nigeria. And, indeed, he was. In fact, the optimism translates into the short story’s general message that it is both possible and desirable to create a Nigerian nation out of the different ethnic groups in the country. But the young man that we would be forgiven for expecting to be idealistic and impressionable – as he, indeed, later confesses that he was (Achebe, 2012, p. 27) – also was conscious of what he took to be the major impediment to the goal of nation building: ethnicity.

Ethnicity

Irony is the major vehicle that Achebe uses to convey his anxiety about the Nigerian nation in “Marriage is a Private Affair.” In this paper I use “irony” in the sense of the term that is captured in Brian Lee’s definition as “a mode of discourse for conveying meanings different from – and usually opposite to – the professed or ostensible ones” (in Fowler, 1987, p. 128) together with the other sense of the term as referring to a situation which has an outcome contrary to the expectation. Most important to my focusing on irony in my present reading of “Marriage is a Private Affair” is the point that irony “is about seeing the different kinds of gaps between what is thought and what really is so” (Gill, 1995, p. 121). I proceed from this recognition that irony generally functions to foreground the complexity of reality – to remind us that things aren’t always what they seem and that things don’t always turn out as expected. This general function of irony apprehended, one easily appreciates that when it is properly deployed – as I judge that Achebe does in “Marriage is a Private Affair” – irony is a useful device for not saying things literally and for complicating the obvious. Irony, then, is a device that Achebe uses in “Marriage is a Private Affair” to construct and convey what he would years later describe as his “complex sense of reality” (Indangasi, 2013). By demonstrating the point, my reading shows that in this short story Achebe proves himself a master of the subtle art, where meanings are suggested rather than stated.

A side-effect of this demonstration is the illustration that “Marriage is a Private Affair” is an excellent modern short story – that genre that, properly speaking, came into existence in the nineteenth century in America (Mboya, 2009 for a definition of this genre). The illustration that “Marriage is a Private Affair” is an excellent modern short story has some implications on our appreciation of Chinua Achebe as a literary artist. Achebe’s justified fame as a

novelist can blur the fact that he worked in different genres. We know that his short story writing predates his novel writing. The poetry writing came later, after Achebe had made a name as a novelist. As did his essay writing. I propose that the fact that as a literary artist Achebe is best known for novel writing be taken not as a comment on his ability as a short story writer or poet but on the dominance of the novel among the genres of written literature in his lifetime and social milieu. I resist the temptation to relate Achebe's reputation to output, to think that he became known as a novelist because he wrote more novels than short stories and poems. The truth is that Achebe was not a prolific writer. This becomes obvious when one brings to view the fact that the man published only five novels in a novel-writing career that spanned more than half a century. Which observation can lead us to think that the reputation may be based on Achebe's being a good novelist and, a not so good short story writer and poet. The present reading of one of Achebe's earliest short stories argues against the thought.

On the face of it "Marriage is a Private Affair" is a simple, straight-forward story. Nnaemeka, a young Ibo man working in Lagos, and Nene, a young Ibibio woman, who also works in Lagos, decide to marry. Nnaemeka travels to the Ibo country to inform his father, Okeke, about the decision. Okeke, who has already arranged a marriage for his son, rejects the proposed union. He does so chiefly because Nene is not Ibo. Nnaemeka goes back to Lagos and weds Nene, anyway. Okeke severs all relationship with his son. Nnaemeka and Nene have a happy marriage and are blessed with two sons. Eight years after their wedding – and after countless attempts by Nnaemeka to persuade his father to change his mind about rejecting his son and his son's family – Nene writes to Okeke stating that the children, his grandsons, wish to see him. The story ends with Okeke repenting his decision to cut off his son and his family.

Before I delve into why irony is integral to the structure of "Marriage is a Private Affair" and that it then plays an important role in the construction of the theme that gives the work its gravitas, I point out that irony is a device that Achebe uses to create humour in the short story. Here is a passage that illustrates the point. At this stage in the story Nnaemeka has informed his father of the decision to marry Nene. Okeke has rejected the decision. The relationship between father and son has consequently suffered serious damage. I quote the passage at length to give us the opportunity to enjoy Achebe's writing even as we train our eyes on only one aspect of it.

Nnaemeka, for his own part, was very deeply affected by his father's grief. But he kept hoping that it would pass away. If it had occurred to him that never in the history of his people had a man married a woman who spoke a different tongue, he might have been less optimistic. 'It has never been heard,' was the verdict of an old man speaking a few weeks later. In that short sentence he spoke for all his people. This man had come with others to commiserate with Okeke when news went round about his son's behavior. By that time the son had gone back to Lagos.

‘It has never been heard,’ said the old man again with a sad shake of his head.

‘What did Our Lord say?’ asked another gentleman. ‘Sons shall rise against their Fathers; it is there in the Holy Book.’

‘It is the beginning of the end,’ said another.

The discussion thus tending to become theological, Madubogwu, a highly practical man, brought it down once more to the ordinary level.

‘Have you thought of consulting a native doctor about your son?’ he asked Nnemeka’s father.

‘He isn’t sick,’ was the reply.

‘What is he, then? The boy’s mind is diseased and only a good herbalist can bring him back to his senses. The medicine he requires is *Amalile*, the same that women apply with success to recapture their husband’s straying affection.’

‘Madubogwu is right,’ said another gentleman. ‘This thing calls for medicine.’

‘I shall not call in a native doctor.’ Nnaemeka’s father was known to be obstinately ahead of his more superstitious neighbours in these matters. ‘I will not be another Mrs. Ochuba. If my son wants to kill himself let him do it with his own hands. It is not for me to help him.’

‘But it was her fault,’ said Madubogwu. ‘She ought to have gone to an honest herbalist. She was a clever woman, nevertheless.’

‘She was a wicked murderess,’ said Jonathan, who rarely argued with his neighbours because, he often said, they were incapable of reasoning. ‘The medicine was prepared for her husband, it was his name they called in its preparation and I am sure it would have been perfectly beneficial to him. It was wicked to put it into the herbalist’s food and say you were only trying it out.’ (2009, pp. 20-22)

Note, as a starting point, the irony of the elders coming to *commiserate* with Okeke on the news that his son has decided to marry. And then there is the irony of the highly practical Madubogwu directing the discussion away from the nebulous and mystical to what the passage shows is – at best – the ambiguous, and the irony of the “magical” reasoning of Jonathan who believes himself more intellectually gifted than his neighbours. One can also pick out the ironically presented earnest debate on whether Nnaemeka is ill or not. There are, also, the multiple ironies in that story of Mrs. Ochuba and the native doctor: the medicine that kills the doctor instead of healing the “patient”; the contested judgment of

Mrs. Ochuba's action – whether she “was a wicked murderess” or “a clever woman.” If the quoted passage is humorous, it is precisely because of the irony at work.

As is only to be expected, my summary of “Marriage is a Private Affair,” being a bare outline of the short story's story line, leaves out virtually all the instances of irony in the narrative. To get into a discussion of irony in this work I start by citing a couple of the prominent instances of irony that are worked into the plot of the short story. As I recalled earlier in the paper, after Nnaemeka and Nene decide to marry, Nene urges Nnaemeka to write his father a letter informing him of the good news. He refuses. His reasoning is that since he has decided to marry outside his ethnic group, a cautious personal delivery of the decision will be more effective. It is the wise thing to do, he says. And, besides managing the shock that the news will be to his father, Nnaemeka hopes to persuade the old man to see things his way. Seeing that she cannot get him to write the letter, Nene tells Nnaemeka, “You know your father” (2009, p. 18). Nnaemeka tacitly agrees with the statement. But when it happens, the personal delivery of the decision fails to persuade Nnaemeka's father to support, or even accept, the couple's decision. Much later, Nene writes to Okeke. Her letter achieves the desired effect on the old man. The letter, then, ironically does what Nnaemeka thought letters incapable of doing. And there is some added irony in this as it turns out that Nene also “knows” Okeke. But, of course, the layered irony is that Nnaemeka was not wrong in his prediction of his father's reaction to the news that he had decided to marry outside the ethnic group.

But irony works at a deeper level in “Marriage is a Private Affair.” Besides the two instances in which irony is worked into the short story's plot that I have just cited, one can see irony in the discrepancy between the “obvious” and the “invited” readings of the short story.

From my summary of the short story, one can rush to conclude that, “Marriage is a Private Affair” is a short story about family relationships. The default reaction among many readers is to think of short stories about family relationships as, at most, stories of social criticism, and to read them apolitically. Such an obvious and “universalist” reading of “Marriage is a Private Affair” as a short story about family relationships will locate the story's central conflict in the father-son disagreement about the son's choice of wife, which is escalated by the father's obstinate refusal to accept the son's choice and the son's equally obstinate insistence on his choice. In this reading the short story's ending would be a statement on the power of love – or of blood – that overcomes the obstinacy of the characters in conflict. If a gender angle is brought to bear on the reading, then, the perception will be that the damaging masculine “like father like son” conflict is broken by a family nurturing feminine power.

Whereas this “universalist” reading of “Marriage is a Private Affair” is interesting, and is valid to an extent, it is not the reading that is invited by the short story. And this discrepancy

between the “obvious” and the “invited” readings is how irony comes into play at the structural level. The short story directs the reader to identify the central conflict as one between the idea of Exclusivist Ethnicity – embodied by Okeke – and the idea of Cosmopolitanism – embodied by Nene. In “Marriage is a Private Affair” Exclusivist Ethnicity is domiciled in the country while Cosmopolitanism is domiciled in the city. That these two characters – Okeke and Nene – are representative of these ideas that conflict is made obvious in the story. Through Nnaemeka, the story tells us that Okeke’s insistence on exclusivist ethnicity is not idiosyncratic, and neither is it a special impulse of the Ibo. Nnaemeka tells Nene: “If your father were alive and lived in the heart of Ibibio-land he would be exactly like my father” (2009, p. 18). Earlier in the same conversation in which this statement is made, Nnaemeka reminds Nene: “You have lived in Lagos all your life, and you know very little about people in remote parts of the country” (2009, pp. 17-18).

The point of the conflict between these two ideas is that there is a tension in the modern African “nation-state” between the claims of ethnic citizenship (in “Marriage is a Private Affair” these claims are subsumed in the idea of Exclusivist Ethnicity) and the claims of state citizenship (in “Marriage is a Private Affair” these claims are subsumed in the idea of Cosmopolitanism). This tension is accounted for by the fact that the modern African “nation-state” is usually a plural society made up of many ethnic groups that compete “for the material resources of modernity through control of the state apparatus” (Berman, Eyoh & Kymlicka, 2004, p. 5).

By directing the reader towards these details of a particular historical context, “Marriage is a Private Affair” identifies itself as one of the many works that constitute the first layers in the foundation of the formidable edifice that would later come to be referred to as postcolonial English African literature. Carter and Long (1991) identify the general objectives of the works regarded as making up the first phase of postcolonial English African literature:

One objective is to seek ways of rewriting history from local perspectives. Another is to fashion themes which are specific to the realities of developing countries and to create characters who represent particular perspectives on life in these countries. Yet another is to explore national identities in the context of newly emerging nation-hoods. (p. 192).

The present reading of “Marriage is a Private Affair” draws attention to the short story’s meeting of the second and third objectives identified by Carter and Long. The engagement of “Marriage is a Private Affair” with “the realities of developing countries” takes in the (to use the title of one of Achebe’s better known collections of essays) “hopes and impediments” in relation to the realization of a nation called Nigeria. We can clearly see today that Achebe’s fingering of ethnicity as an impediment to the realization of a functional Nigerian nation-state was an early recognition of a key aspect of (to use the title of another

of Achebe's better known collections of essays) "the trouble with Nigeria" – ethnicity being a major reason for that country's dreadful thirty month civil war of 1967-1970.

Achebe's locating of resistance to the idea of Cosmopolitanism, and therefore of the Nigerian nation, at the domestic level, the intimate space where marriage is entered into, and not at the public-political level, indicates his consciousness of the depth of the loyalty to the ethnic group in his compatriots. So that, one can argue, Achebe does not see ethnicity as simply an instrument in the hands of manipulative politicians fighting over power and resources in Nigeria. The "people" also participate in the reproduction of ethnicity, and thereby in the fight over power and resources in the "nation-state."

But in keeping with his "complex sense of reality," Achebe does not dismiss the idea of Exclusivist Ethnicity out of hand. This is in spite of his obvious rooting for the idea of Cosmopolitanism. Instead, his representation of the pull of ethnic loyalty is informed by an awareness of what we have come to name "moral ethnicity":

It is important to emphasize that the attachment many Africans have to their ethnic group and ethnic identity is not simply an atavistic or irrational attachment to kith and kin, or to blood and soil. It is rather tied up with a web of social obligations that define people's rights and responsibilities, and that protect people when they are most vulnerable and alone (for example when traveling, ill or dying). This indeed is the point of calling it 'moral ethnicity' – membership in an ethnic group entails subordinating one's behavior to certain moral imperatives when dealing with other group members. (Berman, Eyoh & Kymlicka, 2004, p. 4)

Thus when Okeke tells his son, Nnaemeka, who will not change his decision to marry outside the ethnic group, "I owe it to you, my son, as a duty to show you what is right and what is wrong ..." (2009, p. 20), it is simplistic to judge what he is doing as the manipulation of a parent who merely wants to have his way. Okeke is executing what he accepts as his responsibilities; and these responsibilities are part of a value system that is consolidated by the fact of being a member of an ethnic group that is part of a modern African "nation-state."

Achebe introduces some ironic complications in the elaboration of the central conflict in "Marriage is a Private Affair." There is, for instance, some Christianity in Exclusivist Ethnicity, and there is respect for a traditional definition of the gender division of labor in the home in Cosmopolitanism. These ironic complications – together with the idea of "moral ethnicity" – point us towards what is today accepted to be a truism about modern African ethnicity, which is that:

The development of ethnic communities and identities and patterns of ethnic competition and conflict are the result of the contingent and often idiosyncratic

interaction of indigenous cultures and institutions with the intrusive external political, economic and cultural forces of Western modernity. (Berman, Eyoh & Kymlicka, 2004, p. xiii)

In structural terms, the ironic complications – some would call them internal contradictions – that are worked into the central conflict in “Marriage is a Private Affair” are the fault lines that make possible the short story’s resolution. The complications make it possible for the Ibibio Nene to make inroads in her quest for acceptance by Nnaemeka’s Ibo people. Thus Nene comes to be recognized as a good wife and mother but also a good human being:

The prejudice against Nnaemeka’s marriage was not confined to its little village. In Lagos, especially among his people who worked there, it showed itself in a different way. Their women, when they met at their village meeting, were not hostile to Nene. Rather, they paid her such excessive deference as to make her feel she was not one of them. But as time went on, Nene gradually broke through some of this prejudice and even began to make friends among them. Slowly and grudgingly they began to admit that she kept her home much better than most of them. (2009, pp. 22-23)

Further, the complications also have some thematic significance in so far as they are crucial planks in the justification of the short story’s title. From my summary of “Marriage is a Private Affair” one can already perceive the irony in the short story’s title. It is an instance of irony that is emphasized in the conversation with which the story opens. Plainly, marriage cannot be a private affair if it can lead to the happiness or unhappiness of persons who are not directly part of the union – in this case, a parent. Emphasizing the irony is the point that the couple whose marriage is at the heart of the short story is happy in and with their union. This ironic relationship between the title of the short story and the story itself urges the reader to look for a lot more in this text than is readily available on the surface. For, no character in the story takes the view that marriage is a private affair. Consequently, there is no explicit debate about whether marriage is a private affair or not. The “gap” encourages a generalized questioning, on the part of the reader, of the meaning of the title and of its appropriateness for the story. The complications are in themselves a powerful justification for the changing of the short story’s title from its original “The Old Order in Conflict with the New” because they question the oldness of the old order and the newness of the new order. Between its being entitled “The Old Order in Conflict with the New” and its being known as “Marriage is a Private Affair” the short story was also named “The Beginning of the End.” That is the title under which the short story appears in Achebe’s 1962 collection *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Short Stories* (Lynn, 2003, p. 207). The same contradictions argue against the appropriateness of that title. It is obvious from the evolution of the title that Achebe sought a title that would best capture his meaning. And now we can see that the “marriage” of the story’s title suggests the very public inter-ethnic group acceptance of

difference that is crucial in the plural society that is Nigeria – and that is foundational to the nation-building project.

In light of this point it is very significant that Nene's success starts in a forum where modern "moral" Ibo ethnicity is reproduced "in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city" (2009, p. 18). This is the short story's master trick. By getting Nene to gain admission into the ethnic group using the door of "moral ethnicity" the narrative affirms that the idea of Cosmopolitanism she embodies is not antithetical to that sympathetically presented aspect of ethnicity. It is supportive of all the good things about ethnicity. One can even dare say that with Nene's admission into Nnaemeka's ethnic group Achebe is floating the idea that it is possible to construct a new pan-Nigerian ethnicity. The idea of Cosmopolitanism that Nene embodies is thus positively valorized.

Before he firmly articulates it in the ending of "Marriage is a Private Affair" Achebe indicates his rooting for the idea of Cosmopolitanism in the creation of the character that embodies it, Nene. In Nene we have an early respectful representation of the African woman. Nene is the confident, sensitive modern Nigerian woman who uses her quiet strength not to antagonize other characters but to get things done. A stark contrast to Ugoye the daughter of Nweke, who Okeke has chosen for Nnaemeka, Nene knows her mind. It helps that she is a teacher, and has lived in Lagos all her life. But one cannot downplay the fact that Nene has agency. She chooses who to marry. And she instigates the family reconciliation that the story hails at the end. The choice of Nene to embody the idea of Cosmopolitanism is a reiteration of the point that Cosmopolitanism is about respect for the human person irrespective of their gender, age or ethnicity. One can today add other social categories to this list: race, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

The triumph of the idea of Cosmopolitanism that is Nene's gradual winning of the acceptance of Nnaemeka's people, and ultimately, as is foreshadowed, of Okeke, is the clear expression of Achebe's hope that a nation can be created out of the plural society that is Nigeria. The quoted phrase that I use in the title of my present reading of "Marriage is a Private Affair" is partially answered. Nnaemeka's father is, after all, not unlike other people. He is one of them. And, of course, "people" here refers to Nigerians.

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