

## The Dialectics of Setting and Humour in Chukwuemeka Ike's Novels

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### Abstract

Chukwuemeka Ike skillfully integrates his settings into the fabric of his stories just as he employs humour in portraying the context of the stories, as well as in determining lessons, challenges, and thematic evolutions of his characters. This rich interplay between the settings of particular scenes, events, encounters, and humour in some novels of Ike impacts the characters and the choices they make. This study investigates the rich intersection between setting and humour that fertilises Ike's stories. Henri Bergson's theory of humour, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, was used as the theoretical anchor for evaluating Ike's use of humour while the theoretical inspiration was drawn from Sven Birkerts's views on setting. The results revealed that the characters were influenced and shaped by their settings; a character grew, changed, and evolved as he grappled with the natural or social environment, especially when he alternated between the rural and urban settings where social and cultural orientations were different. The study concluded that the impact of humour on the characters was observed in the way that their attitudes and behaviours were altered under different customs and conventions and adopted different habits, fresh insights, and new expectations at the end of the stories, many of which generate humour.

**Keywords:** Chukwuemeka Ike, dialectics, setting, humour, comic, laughter

### Introduction

Setting is a crucial element of storytelling because "without the setting, there would be no story" (Birkerts, 1993:62). Setting could be the historical time, physical location, and social milieu that shapes the behaviours and the worldviews of the characters. It gives the reader a better sense of the story since it is the platform on which all other elements in a story are anchored. Setting, to quote Birkerts further, "situates us in space and time so that we can understand the events of the story as they are shaped by specific factors" (p.54). In other words, the settings of literary works allow readers to visualise what is happening and bond with the characters better thereby pulling readers right into the story. How the world is built around the characters enhances the plausibility of the story and the type of world created determines the reactions and behaviours of the characters. Most times, what Ike tries to do in his narrative is to move away from the conventional style of furnishing the reader with adequate background information most common to African fiction. He calls the reader's imagination into question.

Ike does not deploy humour in his works for humour's sake. In Ike's fictional works, a careful reader would observe that there is a congenial affinity between humour and the physical, social, historical, political, and cultural environment in which his stories are told. However, one cannot but notice also some dialectical patterns in his humour and the atmosphere in which such humour occurs. Thus, some of the humorous incidents or encounters are foregrounded by the setting, especially his Igbo socio-cultural settings noted for their convivial atmosphere.

Bergson has provided an effective model for us in his theoretical essay on which to frame our discussions and evaluations of the social interactions between the humour and setting of particular scenes, events, encounters, and humour. Our focus is particularly going to be on the dialectics of the period (time), cultural, social, and physical environment with the events or encounters. We shall critically probe Ike's resourceful and innovative use of setting as a tool for de-emphasising or re-emphasising the personalities of his characters after which we will proceed to discuss its interplay with humour in situations, character, and language all of which form one of the major cruxes of this research.

### Ike's use of Setting

Ike's deployment of setting is suggestive; he does not resort to overt descriptions but allows his readers to draw their conclusions from a few hints. In almost all his novels, Ike plunges into the narration right away without the preliminary touch of situating the setting. The reader gleans information through careful observations of events and incidents. First, the reader becomes aware of the setting from the names given to the characters; most times, Ike's characters bear Igbo names, and when in a cosmopolitan environment, a handful of other characters with Yoruba and foreign names appear here and there; like Mr. Ola, Mr. Olowu, Aduke and Femi in *Toads for Supper*, Dr Mal Wilson, Brown, Textor, Joe Ann, Miss Ajayi, etc. in *The Naked Gods*.

Ike is fond of situating his stories within particular settings, precisely the Igbo cultural environment, village, university campus, and secondary school settings. Why does Ike consistently situate his stories in these sorts of settings? Emenyonu (2002:112) explains:

Ike is at his best as a creative writer when he navigates the environment of university campuses and he may well dwell there because it is a very crucial phase of life in Nigeria which is often misunderstood by the society and mishandled by writers of lesser talents. Ike succeeds with this commitment perhaps because he approaches the subject as a concerned parent and a seasoned administrator who is acutely sensitive to character training which the youth must receive if they are not to “grow up absurd.

Most times, the setting of a narrative fiction advances the plot. When a writer focuses on environmental changes taking place in a society which in turn have causal effects on the behaviours, reactions, habits, or occupations of the characters, the story progresses just as the plot then advances. An upsurge in a natural disaster, for instance, jumbles together characters whose paths might not have crossed in which case their interactions then result in the advancement of the plot. Obstfeld (2002:65) talks about the elements of fiction observed on a summative note:

Elements of setting may include culture, historical period, geography, and hour. Along with plot, character, theme, and style [...] setting is considered one of the fundamental components of fiction.

Ike's use of setting is suggestive. He uses settings in a manner that re-emphasises or de-emphasises his character depending on where he or she is from time to time. This can be seen in the manner of welcome they receive whenever they return home. Their return always brings joy and happiness to the entire village and they are normally celebrated with songs and dancing. In *The Potter's Wheel*, for instance, the return of Obu to Umuchukwu caused a great pandemonium and hullabaloo, especially among the women:

Mama Obu, Mama Oti, Mama Polycarp, Mama John, Mama Moses, Mama Emma, Unoaku the perpetual spinster [...] the number grew as the strong village wind swept the news of Obuechina's return through Umuchukwu, and as passers-by heard the singing and merriment in Mazi Laza's compound and came to check what was happening. The women sang in praise of Jesus Christ the all-merciful whose saving grace was readily available to all and sundry. Even stone-hearted Mama Samuel joined in the merriment, clapping from where she leaned against the compound mud wall for the women who danced. (p.202)

A similar situation is observed with Amadi's return to Ezinkwo. In *Toads for Supper*, Amadi returns from the university amidst funfair and merriment. His image and reputation before his folks have changed somewhat, first because he is the first son of the soil to obtain a university education and secondly, because of his exposure:

'I hear that place is wonderful,' put in one of the old men, as he blew off some foreign matter and excess foam from the top of his cup of wine. 'The day Chinwuba returned from there he had no mouth to tell the story. One thing I have not been able to believe is that everybody, including labourers, goes to market in cars. My son, is that one true?' (p.37)

At the University, Amadi is a little fish in a sea of bigger fishes. Conversely, in the village; he has a semblance of the king. When he first lands in front of the postal agency near the market, there is hysteria and jubilations similar to that observed at Obu's arrival from Aka:

'Oh yes O! It's Amadi, son of Mazi Onuzulike Chukwuka!' The shout echoed through the market and everybody momentarily suspended their higgling and haggling, stretching their necks to see the new arrival. Then came a rush towards Amadi. The women embraced him, the men shook hands with him, and the girls greeted him. (pp. 35-36)

Ike manipulates his settings by moulding the behaviour and habits of the characters to project his themes. Amadi returns to Ezenkwo his village for the first time from the university with a very much expanded outlook on life:

The smallness of Ezinkwo was more glaring than ever to Amadi after the year he had spent in the enormous University town. Instead of the four-storeyed and impressive buildings of the campus, he saw now, on his arrival home for the long vacation, houses with thatched roofs. Even the double-storeyed house belonging to the Chairman of the Improvement League the only one of its types in the town and generally acclaimed as the most magnificent house within a radius of ten miles lost its importance; he disliked the prominence given to the staircase and the ill-advised choice of colours. (p.35)

When they leave their Igbo cultural settings where Ike always likes to situate his stories to a more cosmopolitan society, we get to see some other aspects of their character, especially in the manner they manage to survive under severe conditions in academic and socio-cultural environments. Amadi's love for Nwakaego changes perception which nearly causes a setback as a result of peer influences:

What would his friends and colleagues at the University say if they heard of his attachment to a girl who had no mind of her own and who could not look her fiancé in the face? (p.78)

The relationship never enjoys the peace and understanding upon which it is built at the beginning. The initial harmony and understanding between them degenerate into a situation which gives way to dissension and social distance.

In *The Potter's Wheel*, consider again the fact that Obu would steal. This is a boy whose food is served to him on his bed and we are told that "he and friends were fully occupied, too busy at times even to eat their meals." (p.58) Ike shows the dynamic influences of the setting or environment on his characters. Thus, Ike's system of using setting as an element of fiction places critical focus on the meaning of what is taking place at any point in time and how people behave differently in different places and at different times. This apposition of care and neglect on the part of Obu illustrates the impact that motivations and external influences have on the choices made by individuals. This reinforces our view that the setting of literary work is an active part of storytelling such that it shapes the choices, decisions and behaviour of characters as we have seen with the character of Obu. It allows the readers to inundate themselves in the complexities of human behaviours and perceptions.

There is also parallelism in the use of setting. There is a silent conflict within some of the characters that alternate between the urban and the rural settings in Ike's works. When a character leaves the village or rural setting to an urban society, he finds it hard to cast off his cultural and tribal values which makes coping or survival in his new environment difficult. And when he gets back again, we see a gradual alienation from his traditional and cultural life. In *Toads for Supper*, Amadi returns home betraying a lack of enthusiasm about his people's way of life. This is discernible at the time of his in-laws' visit when he is asked to break the kola nut:

Amadi was asked to break the kolanut, as was the custom at Ezinkwo, he being the youngest man present. He was handling the kolanut clumsily when Nwakaego's uncle intervened. 'Okeke,' he called on the stalwart young man, 'take the kolanut from him. They don't break kolanuts in the University. (p.54)

But his father refuses to swallow the situation being a cultural activist of some sort with a rigid disposition towards the tradition of the land:

Okeke was rising to obey the instructions when Amadi's father asked him to warm his seat. 'I don't train my children in that way. This is Ezinkwo, and nobody has said that people who go to university should forget the customs of their people. (p.54).

Later after the kolanut has been broken, he is offered one of the lobes, he declines "saying he did not eat kola" (p.54). Amadi's eventual refusal to marry Nwakaego is not a sudden decision but a result of a gradual reawakening. He tends to query the rationale behind the culture of childhood betrothal. Having been in a new socio-cultural setting, he begins to interrogate the ideas that have been drummed into his consciousness right from his childhood in Ezinkwo. In a meditative mood, he reconsiders his stand:

As he paced slowly around the convocation Hall he realized he had never given the matter serious thought, or any thought at all [...] Nwakaego, his bride-to-be, had been won for him by his parents, and not through his proficiency in the technique of courtship. He nursed the hope that he could win a girl's love all by himself. (54)

Ike seems to call our attention to the evil influences of Western culture while at the same time calling for the overhauling of some of our cultural practices which seem to be out of tune with life in the twentieth century. To lend force to the voice of Oguzie, "the author points out that the age-old practice of childhood-betrothal should be re-examined and he does so smiling" (p.54). This brings us to the issue of the interplay between setting and humour in Ike's works.

### The Comic in Situations and Events

Certain incidents, events, or encounters become humorous if the people involved hold or lack certain states of knowledge. It is believed that “not all humorous items work equally well in all settings, as the humour is affected by specific knowledge or beliefs about the world or particular cultural assumptions or jokes that are hilarious in one country may be incomprehensible in another.” (Graeme: 33) Bergson (1980:38) expresses part of this point when he argues that:

Imagine ideas expressed in a suitable style and thus placed in the setting of their natural environment. If you think of some arrangement whereby, they are transferred to fresh surroundings, while maintaining their mutual relations, or, in other words, if you can induce them to express themselves in an altogether different style and to transpose themselves into another key, you will have language itself playing a comedy—language itself made comic.

Though Bergson’s concentration in the above excerpt is on language, the same thing is obtainable with action. Setting is a very powerful tool in narration. Setting can be treated as a historical time, a physical location, and a social milieu. We are going to be considering these three aspects of the setting. The dialectical interaction between setting and humour occurs more whenever Ike plays on time and action or place and culture.

The fact that Ike’s characters are associated with their traditional locales, even though they interact in other locales, lends credence to this. Our probe will be to locate them at specific places and examine how such places lend themselves to the humorous acts of the characters. What this boils down to is that the state of knowledge is usually influenced by the culture, beliefs, and social conventions of the people and it is at the centre of the stage in determining what to some people is humorous and why it is not so for others.

Take an anecdote that Ike uses in *Toads for Supper* for example, a principal who had just come back from the United Kingdom wanted to show off his newly imbibed civilisation and sophistication by calling his wife loudly: “Darling” but the wife answered from the kitchen, “Sir!” (p.12). The woman was used to answering in this form before the husband travelled abroad but because he wanted to create an impression before his members of staff, he attempted to be a European on African soil. In the Bergsonian concept of humour, this is a clear case of comic obsessions which Bergson argues, “longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which he is a member” (p.60b). The exchange between humour and setting here is on the prevailing social milieu of the time. This was a common experience when Ike was writing this novel around the 1960s when many Nigerians known as “Been-to” returned to the country with heavy European accents and the funny mannerisms of the white man. Many writers like Chinua Achebe, Okot p’ Bitek, John Nagenda, etc., have satirised this type of habit in their fictional works.

A careful reading of Ike’s novels reveals a dialectical interplay between the settings of some particular scenes, events, encounters, and humour. The phenomenal bicycle activities of Mazi Laza in *The Potter’s Wheel* for instance could not have held any humour for city dwellers amid heavy traffic where a little slip on the part of a cyclist would earn him an early grave. That is if the Road Safety officials do not pick him up. The narrator tells us that whenever Mazi Laza

wanted to travel from Umuatulu Clan headquarters to Umuchukwu, he would despatch four stalwart men on foot to Umuchukwu to await his arrival. Two other stalwart men would help him onto the iron horse at the point of departure, pushing and helping to keep the bicycle in balance until he could pedal away. At his destination, it was the responsibility of his four subjects to snatch him safely from the blind horse and to save the horse from crashing. This required tremendous dexterity, but he soon built up a team of experts who could do it safely at any speed. (p.13)

It would take a person with a lion's heart to try being funny in the face of grave danger. Any attempt at riding recklessly on a highway like Lagos or Onitsha would draw cautionary insults even from the people one tries to humour. But on a deserted road in a small village like Umuchukwu, such funny antics are bound to provoke laughter since few events entertain the village folks.

The above incident recalls a similar humorous incident in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* which Odili narrates through an anecdote. He tells us that many years ago Mr Nwege who was then a very poor elementary school teacher “had an old rickety bicycle of the kind the villagers gave the onomatopoeic name of *anikilija*” (p.12) that had faulty brakes just like that of Mazi Laza in the village of Anata in *The Potter’s Wheel*:

One day as he was cascading down a steep slope that led to a narrow bridge at the bottom of the hill, he saw a lorry [...] coming down the opposite slope. It looked like a head-on meeting on the bridge. In his extremity, Mr. Nwege had raised his voice and cried to passing pedestrians: "In the name of God push me down!" Apparently, nobody did, and so he added an inducement: "Push me down and my three pence is yours!" (p.13)

The elemental forces – the narrow bridge and the approaching lorry – in the setting enhance the comic nature of Mr. Nwege's perilous danger. His token offer of "three pence" after the plea to push him down fails to garner the desired result is particularly comic. Perhaps, there is something about the Igbo cultural setting which delights in risky but humorous endeavours. Egudu (1981:51) submits that "in Igbo narrative tradition, it is not irresponsible, but rather a harmless delight in sad events that charms us." The strong cultural bond coupled with similar social practices in most Igbo communities is responsible for the need for socialisation now and then especially when traditional and cultural activities are concerned.

Again, the scattered nature of settlements in most rural settings in Igbo-land is another possible factor. The distance created by the pattern of settlement is remedied by the social harmony that keeps the community aglow. Thus, their commonality endears them to situations that are congenial with humour which oils social interaction and communication. Most times, the youths and children poke fun at the expense of a fellow villager or a stranger. For instance, Obu tells his father that 'there was a town we passed through called Isiekenesi in which the children kept shouting: "is the passenger for sale?" (*The Potter's Wheel*, p.201). Such an encounter also occurs when Obu leaves home for the first time to live with Teacher and his wife. Though a moving scene, the humour is amplified by the primitive and childish assumption and the errors in the perception of reality which is fostered by the small world in which some of the characters live:

Obu shrieked as he was helped into the lorry from the rear end, not out of grief for leaving home but because he had been told that every child generally cries the first time he enters a lorry. Unfortunately, his sisters misunderstood him, and soon all of them joined him as an expression of solidarity. (p.88)

The prevailing social milieu among children in Umuchukwu rules here rather than reason. The humorous reactions of a fellow passenger in the lorry and the conductor who are not indigenes of Umuchukwu lend credence to our position:

'Do you mean people here still cry when someone is about to travel?' asked a mischievous passenger.  
'A town that throws a public party when a woman buys an enamel wash basin is capable of anything,' chipped in the lorry conductor as he forced an opening through sleeping passengers to create space for Obu and his mother. (p.89)

Whenever one comes across humorous comments or situations such as the above in Ike's works, one cannot help wondering what Ike was thinking about or the sort of mood he was in while writing. However, Ike's humorous sense is aided by his Igbo cultural background where humorous interaction is a customary practice. The Igbo society is a very convivial society in which oratory and humour are a *sine qua non* for social interaction. This is evident in the many works of Igbo novelists like Chinua Achebe, Nkem Nwankwo, John Munonye, etc. whose works dominate the landscape of Nigerian prose fiction.

### Conclusion

It is obvious enough that the setting in Ike's novels provides a fertile background for the sort of humour enjoyed in his novels in many ways. Geographically, the insular nature of the villages in which many of the stories are set amplifies the humour seen in many of the incidences and situations explored. Socially, the setting impacts the choices and decisions that many of the characters make which often induces humour. Ike highlights all the absurdities in his environment with a humorous touch. Whenever events unfold in rural settings in his novels, the stage is always set for a humorous social clash. Conversely, in urban settings or academic settings consistently used by Ike, humour is always deployed to underscore the eccentricities and absurdities where logic and sapience are required.

Chukwuemeka Ike is arguably one of the greatest humorous novelists in African literature and the most humorous among Nigerian novelists. Through his works, Ike has been able to demonstrate that the Igbo ethnic group to which he belongs comprises habitual humourists who enjoy spontaneous social interactions. Judging from our explorations, one can incontrovertibly assert that in Igbo society, daily conversations are carried out in ubiquitous

webs of humour in environments that nurture congenial interpersonal relationships. The observation by Eagleton (2019) that “We are, in short, comic creatures even before we have cracked a joke, and a good deal of humour exploits this fissure or self-division in our make-up” (p.21) resonates with communities in Igbo society. Thus, humour functions as a social lubricant facilitating a shared sense of community and commonality within the society of the characters.

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