

## **The Funny Side of Life: Exploring Humour and Social Commentary in Elechi Amadi's *Pepper Soup*...**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines comedy as a humoristic and iconoclastic dramatic genre. The paper uses qualitative research methodology in examining Elechi Amadi's *Pepper Soup*...and finds out that comic dramatic texts have the potential to draw from societal problematics and although these issues are presented in the most incongruous and or boisterous manner, they make critical commentaries that lead to eventual societal transformation and development. The paper concludes that a society without humour is not just on its knees or eventual death but lacks critics to return her back on her feet or from the dead. The paper encourages playwrights to intensify efforts in repositioning the Nigerian society through their creative works.

**Keywords:** Comedy, Humour, literature, and Social Commentary

### **Introduction**

Having the penchant to ridicule and lampoon, satire in modern African drama and theatre as in other climes has always been met with resentment, opposition and sometimes, outright clamp down by its butts. (Ododo and Asigbo, 455)

The above bias against comedy as an unserious art as compared to Tragedy sets the tone for this paper. To purport that tragedy is a more serious art than comedy stems from the fact that the

issues treated by Tragedy as Aristotle submitted must be serious in nature whereas comedy presents issues through the lens of base action which must evoke laughter. While poking and treating serious issues through humour, comedy is seen as unserious art. Tragedy “imitates upright action while comedy imitates immoral and base action... the effect or impact of one differs from the other. Tragedy affects the the purgation of the mind through pity and fear and comedy through pleasure from the ridiculous (Bamidele, 2). Suffice it to mention that humour is intrinsic in human beings; the innate trait to be moved or elated by hilarious situations, events, or occurrences and to make other people laugh with either conscious or unconscious motivation. Often, we are vulnerable to these occurrences which are in form of words or actions and our reactions differs any measure of our control. However, under some circumstances, while our reactions come from within us naturally, we subject them or modify them or control them.

As little children without factual knowledge of what constitutes tragedy and comedy, we cry or scream at the sight of a horrible face made at us, when we are pinched or beaten, when we see our loved one cry, when we are hungry, and our mood changes when a frowning face stares at us. We then smile and laugh when tickled, pampered and funny signs or gestures made to us. The rationale for our reactions to that which seems serious or playful remains speculative. Hypothetically, however, the seriousness associated with the former activity and the cordiality that characterises the latter may explain the varied reactions.

As adults we respond same way although with some degree of self-control. We go further to amuse ourselves through our responses to daily activities, verbal utterances, and self-reflection.

It is common to see people laughing with themselves while working, reading a book, walking, or reflecting. We also cry when we are hurt, lost a loved one and so forth. These indexes contextualize the tragic and comic within an informal, non-professional everyday life occurrence. In the context of the professional level, appreciating comedy and comic forms as purposive art in comparison with tragedy is engulfed in divergent polemics. This trend stems from the perception and conception of comedy as unserious or playful art earlier mentioned. The understanding of these variables which is instinctual may inform this categorisation. In the same manner, people who are funny be they artist or not are adjudged unserious and those who are more restrained in character and action are adjudged serious-minded. Bamidele aptly corroborates this when he posits that:

... the simplest idea of tragedy defined as a play that has an unhappy ending or lots of corpses at the end, or a reversal of fortune for the worst, and comedy as a play that ends merrily, is a popular idea. The popular idea about comedy brings about weighing the bias against it as an unserious, therefore, very frivolous and a not purposive art when compared to comedy (1).

Comedy thrives on pungent and hilarious situations; through ridicule and boisterous show, comic works poke and provoke laughter at erstwhile serious events or happenings; as such, the art is taken to be unserious. The humorous nature of comedy does not, however, condescends its potential in transforming society; comedy is a two-pronged artistic form; it could be appealing through its evocation of laughter, yet, very iconoclastic with the

sensitivity and way it handles critical societal issues. Bamidele again affirms that:

Comedy is a vibrant art that no theoretical formula can contain. It depends on the demand of a popular theatre from ancient Greeks to the modern times. It allows for creative ingenuity of writers from age to age and clime to clime as against tragedy that has a universal theme of man being mar-handled by fate. Criticism of comedy under its various terms must have been enormous or is it just on the increase lately as against the situation some few years ago when criticism of comedy lags far behind that of tragedy. Is it really true to say that the critical literature of comedy is light when compared with that of tragedy? The fact that comedy tolerates and provides a bewildering variety of views because of its craftsmanship and purpose could be seen in Antonio Raccoon's view. (Literature and Sociology, 7)

From its oratorical base in Africa to its literary (documented) nature in western theatres, comedy assumes another dimension, the stand-up comedy typology. The evolution of dramatic comedy dates as far back as the classical period following the works of Aristophanes in his juxtaposition of the great Greek tragedians in the play, *The Frogs*. This humble beginning saw comedy through all theatre epochs to the present times. It is bifurcated into two forms: stand-up and dramatic comedy. Stand-up comedy is,

A comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, speaking directly to them. The performer, known as a comic, stand-up comic, stand-up comedian or, simply, a stand-up, usually recites a fast-paced succession of humorous

stories, short jokes, called, “bits,” and one-liners, which constitute what is typically called, a monologue, routine or act. Some stand-up comedians use props, music or magic tricks, to enhance their acts. Stand-up comedy is often performed in comedy clubs, bars, neo-burlesques, colleges, and theatres. (<http://www.NICO.gov.ng>)

Ayakoroma explicates further that,

Unlike comedies in dramatic form, stand-up comedies are mostly non-theatrical, without dramatic performances on stage reflecting characters in societies with a blend of elements of surprise, incongruity, conflict, repetitiveness, and the effect of sudden reversals. The intent of the comedian here is not the audiences’ critical perception of the message, but the eliciting of laughter or smiles over the jokes or vulgar jibes. (<http://www.NICO.gov.ng>)

Today, both forms of comedy are found in Nigeria with an overwhelming audience ship and patronage. The focus of this paper is on the dramatic typology.

**The play, *Pepper Soup...***

*Pepper Soup...* is an intriguing play that captures the tale of Ichela as he grapples with life exigencies. He owns a musical band but could not maintain it due to low returns from performances. Following this problem, he relies on his girlfriend, Ineba who is very hard working to pay his house rent. On one of his performance trips to London, he met a lady, Mavis who presumably fell in love with him. His excruciating poverty situation made his friend, Oti to suggest that he marries Mavis so that she will enable him to get out of his current predicament. He,

however, rejected the idea because many people already know about his relationship with Ineba. Oti pressured him to dissolve the relationship to enable him to marry Mavis. He later agreed and his attempt to dissolve the affairs is stalled pro-temple by Ineba's pregnancy. Notwithstanding, he went on and drives her away paving the way for Mavis who come to Nigeria. Before her arrival, Ichela reorders the house with new furniture which he borrows; he hires a chef, a taxi car and its owner which he lied to be his car and his driver. Mavis's arrival is marred by Ineba's consistent invasion of Ichela's home. Ichela does not have any choice but to let her stay with them until she gives birth. As they live together problems of satisfying personal interest began to emerge. These spans from the choice of what Ichela will eat to where he will take either of his wives to spend quality time as well as how his body should be built. As time went on, they were able to put aside pettiness and live together as a polygamous family.

### **Humour and Social Commentary in *Pepper Soup...***

*Pepper Soap...* is a satirical play with its inaptness found deep-rooted in the irony of events and or situation. The play brings to the fore four social contradictions eminent in Nigerian Morden life - poverty, deceit, marriage, and the conflict of interest. This thematic focus further puts the play's trajectory beyond comic and or amusing aesthetics thus presenting itself as a chronicler of social challenges in Nigeria. Therefore, the play is read within the purview of its satirical qualities and its cogent commentaries on social issues.

Through soft, simplistic but expressive wordings and narrative excellence, Amadi chronicles the excruciating poverty situation in Nigeria. It is commonsensical and unacceptable by law for people

who live in abject penury to become frustrated and take to all sorts of activities be they legal or others to survive. This explains the high level of crime and other forms of activities threatening peace and social stability in the country. In the play, Ichela could not maintain and sustain his musical band due to low returns from performances. He decries in a conversation with his friend Oti thus:

Ichela: ...But you know how it is. We stay here, day in day out without a job. A band hires you for one night and pays you one naira. Then two weeks Snothing. Then a girl comes in and clears the last trace of soup from your pot. I am fed up, Oti, I am. (*Pepper Soup...2*)

This is a cogent example of the life of commoners in Nigeria. Their experience also draws our attention to society's perception of the artist which according to them is low and very demoralising. They lament how impossible it is for an artist to secure loan to boost the potential of his/her band thus:

Oti: If only I could get a loan to buy instruments, I could start my own band. (*Getting excited*) Oti and His Leg Raisers' Band! then I shall play for the high society people. V.V.I. P's and all. None of this one-naira business at naming ceremonies. But where does one get twenty thousand naira? No one gives loans to musicians. Businessmen, contractors may be, but not musicians. And yet every evening they fill the night clubs. (4)

The lack of an enabling environment for artists to trade their craft is a daunting challenge to the development of the profession in Nigeria. In addition, it is common knowledge that the artist is given the most insignificant time in occasions. Although, time may

not necessarily be a constraining factor because the artist can use any amount of time to communicate adequately. However, time becomes a deterring and constraining factor when the master of ceremony hurries the artist out of the stage for more “important” events on the list to take place. This explains why the artist finds it difficult to access grants and other forms of support in Nigeria. In recent times however, government’s provision of loan has made adequate impact on the industry, however, much still needs to be done.

Marriage is closely linked with poverty in *Pepper Soap*.... Ichela remains unmarried because of his poor economic state. He currently does not have a job; this makes him susceptible to Oti’s idea that suggests he married Mavis his white lady friend in order to up his living standards. Oti says “Ichela, grab that woman and ride to success” (*Pepper Soup*... 10). While this idea seems superb, Ichela is scared of society’s impression of his new marriage identity. He complains that society already knows of his relationship with Ineba and that, it would be morally wrong to abandon her for another woman. This is aptly captured in the conversation between Oti and Ichela below.

Ichela: What of Inabe?

Oti: What of her?

Ichela: I am supposed to marry her.

Oti: Who says?

Ichela: I mean –eh...

Oti: Listen man, have you ever made a formal proposal to her?

Ichela: No.

Oti: Then you have no problem



Ichela: Oti, it is not so easy. We have been together for so long. Everyone thinks we ought to get married.

Oti: That is the way most men get foolishly married. Society is always the matchmaker. Just because you are seen once or twice with a girl, society throws her on you. Well, I refuse to accept that.

Ichela: It is not just a question of once or twice.

Oti: How many...? (laughing)

Ichela: Don't be silly. I don't mean that. (10-11)

Evidently, the marriage culture is very paramount in Africa. Among the potpourri of traditional ritual initiations found in Africa, marriage comes handy and very pertinent in the transition of boys and girls into the realm of eternal union. This explains why adults who are not married are accorded little or no respect within the traditional circle. They are sometimes considered not fit to be members of some associations, or privileged to talk were elders or their age grade do. This form of discrimination has forced many youths into early marriages which they regretted over time. In addition, this also explains why society is a fundamental match maker. While Oti makes haste to condemn this act by society, some level of advantage is evident. Such action curtails indiscipline or any form of moral misconduct or promiscuity by youth in the African society. The fear of what society will say of your person when she sees you with multiple sexual partners guarded the conduct of many youths. However, this act would become wrong when youth are forced into marriages. When freedom is lost, then tyranny takes over and this is not good for any society that desires peace and tranquillity. Ineba's pregnancy further compounds and threatens Ichela's moves to marry Mavis. However, his determination pulled him through as he sends Ineba

away and marries Mavis. This did not happen without Ineba putting up a fight. However, as time went on Ichela takes both of them as his wife. Trapped in a polygamous home, Ichela struggles between two women with different perceptions of life.

Ichela: (Stares from one woman to the other and from one plate to the other in embarrassment.) sit down ladies. Thank you. (He reaches for the bread and withdraws his hand when Ineba stares angrily at him. He makes for the yam but stops when Mavis appears to be collapsing. He tries all over again with the same results. Meanwhile the ladies are eating. He pauses to think. Finally, he reaches out with both hands taking a piece of yam in one and one piece of bread in the other. He tries to eat the bread first and Ineba stares furiously. He stops. He tries the yam and Mavis appears to faint. He nibbles at the yam and bread simultaneously.) One thing is certain, I shall be overfed in this house. (53-4)

A thorough periscope of the above description of the action between Ichela and his wives invokes a lot of laughter. The expression of fear, the sincerity in trying to balance the scale and not to hurt any of his wives, the quick withdrawer from any action that does not appeal to either of his wives all culminate into funny but educative actions that gives insight into life in polygamous homes. Other hilarious actions include these of his wives; one relying on furious facial expression and the other on suffocation. The play again sways away from this intense non-verbal mode of communication into intense verbalization characterized by the contest to satisfy an individual's momentary and immediate need.

In the excerpt presented below, the choice of physical outlook desired by both wives drags Ichela into another moment of frenzy.

Mavis: You should watch your fingers. You must play golf.

Ichela: The equipment is expensive. I can't afford it.

Mavis: That's ok. I shall ask my brother to send you an old set of his.

Ineba: I don't want a skinny husband with the flat bottom of a beggar. You must show evidence of my good cooking.

Mavis: I hate fat men! (54)

Two ideological and philosophical predispositions can be read from the contention presented above. The African traditional women love a well-fed husband against a skinny one for the simplistic reason of showing or proving to society that she takes good care of him. The thinking is that to be skinny implies a lack of good living; being fat within this context, therefore, implies living above the poverty line. The white woman on the other hand loves a skinny man. The intriguing part of this argument lies with Ichela who finds himself at the threshold and constantly trying to please or give answers that would favour both women. This is captured below:

Ineba: I detest bony men! Ichela, why don't you talk? Will you be fat or thin?

Ichela: Well, I am inclined to be f-f... (Mavis stares) ... I

mean it is good to be rather s-l-e... (Ineba stares).

What I mean to say is that er...er...a man should be well built; that's it, well built. (They eat in silence.)

(54)

Often times he sounds ambivalent because he is thrown off balance and therefore, lacks confidence. He tries to say that there

is a possibility for him to be fat but Mavis's unfavourable looks would not allow him to complete his sentence. He tries to please Mavis by saying it is good to be slender, but Ineba's furious looks would not allow him to complete his sentence. He, therefore, strikes a balance when he says it is good to be well-built. Another episode of the attempt to satisfy conflicting interests is presented below:

Mavis: Darling.

Ichela: Yes, darling.

Mavis: Can you take me to the movies tonight?

Ichela: well... er... (Ineba stares at him).

Ineba: You remember the Egbukele masquerade from Abua. We shall go to Arts and Culture to see it.

Ichela: Well... er... well... er...

Mavis: Actually, I should love to see that one.

Ineba: No more Movies?

Mavis: Mind your business.

Ichela: (Pauses to think.) Ineba I shall take you to see the masquerade in the afternoon. In the evening, Mavis and I go to the...

Ineba: Who told you I don't like the cinema?

Ichela: Good. In that case we shall attend both.

(Mumbling to himself.) I hope I shall survive. (55)

The exhibition of conflicting ideologies and perception of life by Ineba and Mavis and Ichela's fervent attempt to balance the scale points to how our differences does not matter in our quest for peaceful co-existence and development. As family unites, nations and the world our understanding of one another is paramount to how we define our development and the future of the world as a whole. With Mavis and Ineba resolve to live together inspite of

their differences, progress and fruitfulness in their family is guaranteed.

As the world closes into a global village and interaction and cohabitation on the increase, it is pertinent to drop all forms of muddy feet and embrace the essence of collectivism. We must be willing to accept other people's ways of thinking and or ways of life, for outright condemnation and segregation would lead to social unrest and subsequently affect development. Our differences should be our binding and strengthening factors in a world where we need each other to attain maximum goals.

### **Conclusion**

Comedy plays a vital role in repositioning any nation of the world. This is made possible through its critiquing of prevailing social problems in society. Elechi Amadi in this play through the lens of comedy presents polygamy as seen in Africa and the west with its attendant challenges. Comedy defines the concept, of edutainment where theatre is deliberately made to entertain through boisterous and incongruous action and language of expression. Though intended to invoke laughter, it treats very critical societal issues that reposition lingering societal problems.

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