

The Search Motif in Chukwuemeka Ike's *The Search*

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Abstract

*Chukwuemeka Ike is a prolific Nigerian novelist who uses his works to dramatise some of the socio-political issues in Nigeria, in particular, and Africa, in general. This can be seen in *The Search* (1991) which focuses on Nigeria's chequered political journey from independence through civilian rule to military dictatorship, and the possible elixir to the nation's multi-faceted malaise, ranging from ethnicity, corruption, electoral malpractice/violence, to the marginalisation of ethnic minorities, women's subjugation, neo-colonialism and political instability, among others. This study seeks to examine Ike's adroit deployment of the search motif to espouse the theme of the quest for Nigeria's development in the novel. The study argues that the search motif is predominant in the novel, and in fact, constitutes the master key for unlocking meaning in the novel. The study thus adopts the formalist approach with its emphasis on technique as a vehicle for revealing meaning.*

Key Words: Search, Technique, Motif, Formalist Criticism.

As the present writer has noted in an earlier study on Ike, there is, indeed, a dearth of critical response to Chukwuemeka Ike's works, his prolificacy and the social relevance of his works notwithstanding (1). With, at least, a dozen socio-politically-committed novels, a collection of short stories, a travelogue and a number of non-fictional works to his credit within the past fifty years of his writing career, Ike, doubtless, ranks among the most prolific African writers of all times. Furthermore, as some eminent scholars on African literature, like Chinua Achebe, B.E.C. Oguzie, Kanchana Ugbabe and Ernest Emenyonu, who have extensively studied Ike's works, have affirmed, no other Nigerian, nay African writer has written so consistently on various socio-political issues affecting the various strata of society as Ike has done. This accounts for why Oguzie dubs him a socially relevant writer (1).

A cursory look at some of the topical themes in most of his novels validates Oguzie's position. For instance, *The Potter's Wheel* (1974) deals with the challenges of child upbringing; *The Bottled Leopard* (1985) and *Expo 77* (1980) with teenage life in secondary school; *Toads for Supper* (1965), *The Naked Gods* (1970) and *Toads Forever* (2007) with youth life on university campus; *Our Children are Coming!* (1990) with the problem of generational gap; *The Search* (1991) and *The Conspiracy of Silence* (2012) with the shenanigans of politicians at national level; *Sunset at Dawn* (1976) with the horrors of the Nigerian civil war; and *The Chicken Chasers* (1980) with political intrigues in multi-national organisations in Africa. But, in spite of all these, available facts reveal that critics have not yet devoted adequate attention to the exegesis of Ike's works. A good illustration is Bernth Lindfor's famous study that rated forty African writers based on continental and inter-continental critical responses to their works, according to which study Ike is rated thirty eight out of forty (25).

The paucity of critical attention on Ike's works has even provoked some critics to ponder on the possible reasons for this unfortunate situation.

Oguzie, for instance, traces it to Ike's deviation from the current fashion of his colleagues dwelling on the traditional world and colonial experience (2), while Ike, himself, alleges that the core reason is that "writing about an 'unwritten' author entails breaking virgin ground which many scholars are either incapable (sic) or reluctant to attempt" (qtd. in Nnolim "Interview" 55). It is, however, doubtful whether African critics, generally speaking, are incapable of, or reluctant to write about new authors considering their impressive large harvest of critical works on such relatively newer writers as Mike Okri and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for instance. In fact, the dearth of critical attention on the works of Ike and his co-"unstudied" Nigerian writers has so much enraged Emenyonu that he bitterly describes the situation as "a sad commentary on the relevance of Nigerian literary critics to the contemporary African situation"(118). But Nnolim disagrees with Emenyonu by contending that "critics do not have a union where they decide which authors and which books to focus on", and maintains that, if at the moment Ike's works and those of his fellow "unstudied" writers "have not compelled critical attention, their turn may come" ("Interview" 59).

It is, however, gratifying to note that notable critics, like Emenyonu and Oguzie, have written perceptively on Ike's *The Search*. In his study, Emenyonu describes *The Search* as a "Sequel to *Our Children Are Coming!*", and further explains that even though the novel was published in April, 1991, it was completed in 1988, and took three years to be published" (125). According to the critic, the story in *The Search* borders on the characters' search for the causes of, and the enduring panacea to Nigeria's nagging political crises. To him, the novel is one in which Ike demonstrates convincingly that he can handle complex and serious themes with maturity and vigour. He then adds that, the novel "may remain for a long time to come Ike's masterpiece and his greatest contribution so far to the growth and development of African novel" and that "in the same vein, it may turn out to be the most topical and explosive fictional history so far to be attempted by a Nigerian novelist under a military rule" (125). Emenyonu

further observes that *The Search* is written in the mode of fiction because it has a realistic setting and subject matter, as well as makes copious allusion to real political personages in Nigeria, like Olusegun Obasanjo, Benjamin Adekunle (a.k.a The Scorpion) and Obafemi Awolowo which, according to him, adds realism to the novel, even though it detracts from art as a high realm of creativity (131). He, however, concludes that, "Ike achieves in *The Search* a degree of craftsmanship and thematic realism never before associated with his writing" (131). Emenyonu's eclectic approach in the study enables him to fruitfully comment on various crucial aspects of the novel, such as plot, theme, character, language and technique.

As for Oguzie, he describes *The Search* as a biting criticism on the socio-political problems that besiege contemporary Nigeria, such as ethnicity and corruption, and a fervent search for their solutions. To him, "an area of Ike's excellence is his narrative technique. Ike's interweaving of the scene and summary is skillfully handled" (166). However, he picks holes with the novel's over-factuality and its tendency to offer solutions to Nigeria's problems, as well as its prescriptive overtures (168). The present study focuses on Ike's use of the search motif as a vehicle of narration in *The Search*, and argues that it constitutes the main key for unlocking meaning in the novel. But before proceeding, it is necessary to briefly comment on the tenets of formalist criticism which is adopted in this study.

Formalist criticism is a school of literary criticism and theory that lays emphasis on the structural properties of a text by de-emphasising its extra-textual dimensions, like historical, cultural and biographical contexts. It originated from Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism in the Twentieth Century, and has gained a boost from the works of Wellek and Warren, I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, W. K. Wimsatt and Charles Nnolim, among many others. According to Geoffery Hartman, exponents of formalist criticism fervently believe that,

The main purpose of criticism is understanding the concrete literary work-the text as an object of its own

right . . . The excursion is always directed to the formal properties by which the human content of art is constituted and revealed . . . (qtd in Agwu 3)

Hartman further observes that,

. . . It follows that the descriptive and demonstrative modes – interpretation, explication, exegesis, analysis – that direct the mind toward apprehending the modes of language and form which constitute the text of a poem are given priority (not exclusive privilege) over such other modes as genetic, causative, affective and evaluative. (qtd. in Agwu 3)

Charles Nnolim reinforces the point by asseverating that formalist critics stress,

The beauty of form, the sheer lyricism of the poetic prose, the delight on the architectonic construction of plots, the charm of ordered patterning, the beauty of total effect through the detailed and subtle analysis of the complex inter-relationships within each work under study. (*Approaches* 10)

In the main, formalist criticism, therefore, revolves around technique. According to Mark Schorer:

Technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it (66)

Edward Cranshaw corroborates Schorer's position by insisting that the writer's technique covers "the means and skills with which he makes his matter tell" (qtd. in Agwu 4-5). And Agwu Dike further illuminates the concept of technique by noting that,

Apart from the story, the 'conscious' writer is concerned with such procedural questions as: who tells the story? How much should the narrator know? How does he tell it? At what point should the story begin? And at what point should it end? How far should motives be traced? What aspects of background are to be described and to what end? Should elements like allegory, allusion, images and symbols, etc. be used as vehicles of meaning? How should each character be introduced and built up . . .? (15)

As earlier hinted, this study focuses on Ike's use of the search motif as a vehicle of narration in *The Search*. This, therefore, calls for an explication of the search motif in literature.

It is necessary to define the key term 'search motif' in order to clarify how it is used in this study, for as is well-known, many literary terms are subject to various interpretations and uses. To begin with, a search denotes a quest, longing or seeking for a thing, which can be abstract or concrete, spiritual or material; economic or political, etc. In literature, a search usually goes hand-in-hand with a journey or movement which propels the search. This accounts for why the search motif often goes *pari-passau* with the journey motif. In *Pilgrims Progress*, for instance, both motifs feature simultaneously, for Christian; the protagonist's search sets him on a journey. This is so because literature, like life which it mirrors, is a sort of journey. Any wonder why Sister Eileen Sweeney metaphorically describes literature as "Another country?" (See her illuminating book: *Another Country: The Land of Literature*).

The next concept that calls for elucidation is motif. Northrop Frye, Sheridan Baker and George Perkins define motif as "a recurrent thematic element – word, image, symbol, object, phrase or action" (207). For M. H. Abrams, a motif is "an element – a type of incident, device or formula – which recurs frequently in literature" (111). Abrams adds that it can also

denote “the frequent repetition of a significant phrase; or set of description, or complex images, in a single work” (111). According to Abrams, instances of motifs in literature include: “a loathy lady” who turns out to be a beautiful princess (in folklore); the *La femme fatale* and, the Carpe Diem motif”, etc (111). From the foregoing, the search motif can be seen as the recurrent idea of search in literature, which is usually tied to the theme of search in literature. As Kerrywood *et al* have rightly noted, the search theme is “an old and important motif in literature” (363). According to them, the search that the characters embark on can be literal “as when the Mesopotamian hero, Gilgamesh, takes a long journey in order to find the secret of immortality” or symbolic “as in the Medieval romance about the Holy Grail, where the search for a sacred object is meant to convey various religious truths” (363).

In sum, various characters set out for various forms of search for various purposes: virtues, freedom, peace, identity, solutions to personal or communal problems, truth, knowledge, experience and mortality, among others. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, king Oedipus, the protagonist, searches for the following: (1) his true identity (2) freedom from the spell from the gods (3) causes of the plague in the land (4) the killers of his predecessor, etc, while Jocasta, his mother-wife, searches for peace of mind. In Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, on the other hand, Christian, the protagonist (symbol of man in a world inundated with sin and temptation) searches for virtue and salvation, while in Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*, to give one more example, Zilayefa (a.k.a Yellow-Yellow) searches for her identity and freedom.

How then did Ike handle the search motif in *The Search*? To what extent did the technique contribute in revealing meaning in the novel? The next section attempts to provide answers to these challenging questions.

The Search is a very realistic socio-political novel in which Ike deftly dramatises some of the socio-political and economic malaise militating against Nigeria’s development, such as ethnicity, religious intolerance,

inept leadership, corruption, neo-colonialism, subjugation of women, political instability and military dictatorship. Emenyonu aptly captures this point in his observation that Ike's major concern in *The Search* is "the search for a viable system of government for Nigeria after repeated failures in conventional democratic systems" (130). In addition to that, this study seeks to demonstrate how Ike deployed the search motif in the novel. According to Mark Schorer:

Modern criticism has shown that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the achieved content, the form of the work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique. (66)

In the novel, Ike effectively weaves the search theme around the search motif such that right from the inception of the novel, all the characters embark on a frantic search for not only the motive behind the coup which ousted Alhaji Jambo's democratically elected government, but also for the motley reasons behind Nigeria's hydra-headed nagging political problems and their potential solutions. Significantly, the title "The Search" successfully prefigures the theme of the novel which borders on the search for Nigeria's greatness. A careful reader will also notice the author's creative use of graphological features – a torch, its rays and a question mark – to foreground the search motif in the novel. All these are further accentuated with the author's scattered references to the word "search" and its variants on the pages of the novel.

For instance, the novel begins with Ola's search (on various radio stations) for the motive(s) behind the coup (1). Echoes of search also come up on page twenty-nine when we are told of Dipo, the radical politician's "soul-searching" action on whether to remain in the Yoruba – controlled Torch Party or to join the Federal Government – controlled Ruler's Party. And, to give another example, the idea of search also resonates on page seventy where Ola began "searching" his brain in a bid to recall whether it

was Professor Eni or Kaneng, his wife, that made the point that it was better to aim at integrating the various ethnic groups in the city into one national community instead of carving the city into various ethnic communities. In all these, the search motif becomes paramount in the novel, and thus highlights the theme of search that dominates the novel. To achieve this, Ike creates very mobile characters drawn from various ethnic groups in Nigeria, as well as from various professions who move from one place to another in the quest to unravel the mystery behind the coup and the reasons responsible for Nigeria's stunted growth.

In the novel, Ike uses these highly patriotically – conscious characters to advance his quest for national unity. For instance, Ola, the protagonist, hails from the Yoruba ethnic group, had his university education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, married from and resided in the north; Eni, hails from the Igbo ethnic group, married Dappa from Rivers State and resided in Bauchi; Shehu hails from the Fulani ethnic group and represents the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy whose activities, according to Emenyonu, “attracted the most undisguised censure from the author” (129). Other characters who played significant roles in the novel include Alhaji Mason (David Oludotun Adebola), a Yoruba Christian who became a ‘Muslim’ and married many women from the north in order to gain acceptance among northerners; Simon Luka, a banker married to Saratu both of whom hail from Sayawa, a minority ethnic group in Bauchi. According to Emenyonu, “Ike’s handling of the multiple characters in the novel is to create mini assemblies for the characters at which they unleash cross-fires at each other in their argument and discourse over national issues” (128). He further notes that, “the individuals discuss and argue from the perspective of their individual and collective experiences as persons in their own rights, and groups with particular sociological activities” (129).

Through their discussions, the characters reveal that Nigeria's socio-political malaise include ethnicity, the North-South/Christian-Muslim dichotomies, corruption, neo-colonialism, electoral malpractice-cum-violence, military dictatorship, bad governance and blind followership. All

these call attention to similar views expressed by eminent scholars like Chinua Achebe (*The Trouble with Nigeria*); Peter Enahoro (*How to Be a Nigerian*); Chidi Maduka (*Taming the Beast in the Body-politic . . .*) who have variously traced Nigeria's problems to some of the afore-mentioned issues. These writers and Ike's characters unanimously agree that national unity, justice and fairness are desiderata for Nigeria's development.

But, the most interesting technique through which the author reveals the causes of, and proffers solutions to Nigeria's motley problems in the novel is his adept use of the cinematic technique. The author thus creates an imaginary entity who takes Ola on an excursion in which Ola encounters three voices identified as First Voice, Second Voice and Third Voice, respectively. In a trance-like manner, the agent shows Ola a sunk "Ship of State" symbolising Nigeria, as well as marshals out the causes of its grounding. The First Voice attributes the ship's inefficiency to faulty manufacture, which implies that Britain, Nigeria's former colonial master, is to blame for Nigeria's stunted growth. According to the First Voice, Britain handed over to Nigerians a moribund entity at independence, "a counterfeit model manufactured in "Tai-two" (*The Search*, 213). The careful reader will not fail to notice that the coinage "Tai-two" is a pun on Taiwan, which many Nigerians commonly associate with substandard products (just-like China). As for the solution, the voice suggests that Britain should re-colonise Nigeria and make it workable. But Ola considers this recommendation as utterly retrogressive, hence unacceptable.

The Second Voice opines that Nigeria is too large and ungovernable, hence it recommends that the country should be split into smaller nations. Again, Ola rejects the proposal, reminding the voice that there are larger and more populous countries in the world that make significant progress in all spheres of life in spite of their large size. Then comes the Third Voice which beams the spot light on the conduit pipes through which Nigerian leaders and their foreign collaborators siphon the nation's wealth. Curiously, these leaders become extra-ordinarily wealthy and prodigal, while the majority of their country men and women literally scavenge for

food from garbage bins, school children bereft of decent uniforms study under trees, and an army of job seekers roam the streets. In the end of the excursion, the Third Voice convinces Ola that graft fuelled by greed, neo-colonialism and lack of self-reliance among Nigerians, wrong social values and political instability constitute the proverbial vulture's legs that spoil Nigeria's stew (*The Search* 228).

How then can these beasts (to borrow Maduka's term) be tamed? Ola enquired. First, the Third Voice advises Ola that the country's judicial institutions should be strengthened to fight corruption, especially by punishing corrupt persons and recovering their stolen wealth. Second, the Third Voice recommends that Nigeria should abandon both Western models of democracy and militocracy and go back to African traditional system of governance which is strongly rooted in African culture. In effect, the voice recommends true federalism that will allow each federating unit practise its unique form of government without constituting a nuisance to others. In addition, it recommends rotational system of leadership at all levels in order to curb the unhealthy scrambling for power among the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria (*The Search* 230-234). The recommendations were yet to be concluded when Kaneng, disturbed by her husband's voice, rushed into his room and woke him from the deep sleep in which he had the vision involving the three voices and the wrecked ship of the state. The novel ends open-ended as the problems remain unsolved, hence Kaneng tells her husband, Ola: "The Search continues!" (*The Search* 260).

In conclusion, Ike's *The Search* is a thrilling story of the chequered history of Nigeria's ill-fated journey from independence through military and quasi-democratic regimes. Ike sets out not only to highlight the causes of Nigeria's under-development, but also to find its elixir. In doing this, he creates pan-Nigerian characters cutting across different professional and social cadres who freely move, passionately seek, and frankly discuss the causes of, as well as the solutions to Nigeria's nagging multi-faceted socio-

economic malaise. In the end, Ike successfully deploys the search technique to project the search theme which dominates the novel. Of great significance is his adroit use of the cinematic and voice over techniques to reveal some of the major problems militating against Nigeria's growth, and the possible solutions to the problems. *The Search* truly confirms that Ike is a highly skilled political novelist.

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