
AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia
Vol. 1 (2) April-July, 2012:85-95

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

Omenuko: The First Igbo Realistic Novel

Okodo, Ikechukwu

Department of Igbo, African and Chinese Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria
E-mail: ikeokodosons@yahoo.com

Abstract

Omenuko, the first Igbo novel, was published in 1933. Before it, there was no work in the Igbo language that is of the length of a novel. There were then booklets and pamphlets of different sorts mostly published for religious purposes rather than the expression of the art of the Igbo language with the view of discussing the environment. This novel is realistic because it is woven with stories of what could occur and the cock-and-bull type. In it, Omenxkq who is the protagonist has his biography x-rayed by Pita Nwanna. He started as an apprentice merchant. He was installed by his master. He grew up and made it in life, but the ill-fate of losing his goods in a river forced him to sell his apprentices and load bearers into slavery. This offence against mankind forced him and his relatives into exile. He later returned for the home is the best.

Introduction

Allen et al express realism as “an acceptance of things or a willingness to deal with things as they really are”. They make it clearer in discussing realistic situation which they described as “life like representation in writing and the arts” (Allen et al 1994:1050). This definition is a good portrayal of realism as the reflection of nature or reality as completely as it is, that is without bringing idealism into play. The story or artwork that portrays realism could be developed from real stories, issues or imaginations but what is important is that the work will look like what obtain in life. It will be credible. So realism is the artistic impression of reality which could be in written works like prose, poetry and drama or the artworks of painting, moulding and sculpture. This view is the same as that of Welleck and Warren (1982:213) that state that it is not the truthfulness of a work of art that matters but the expression looking convincingly like a report of a fact.

The reality of a work of fiction – i.e. its illusion in effect on the reader as a convincing reading of life - is not necessarily or primarily a reality of circumstance or detail or common place routine. By all of these standards, writers like Howells or Gortfried Keller put to shame the writers of *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *Moby Dick*.

The idea of making works of literature believable is the definition of Curie (1990:146) in stating the necessity of making literary works believable. He states that a theory of fictional names which are plausible must account for the numerous uses to which fictional names are put. He states that the uses begin with author’s initial act of writing or telling through the engagement of the audience to the separation of the character from the original text to making it an autonomous motif of itself.

Realism started to exist in the olden days. Realism as an aspect of ideology started a long time ago. It had started to exist in France before it was known of in German. The awareness of realism in German started in 1883 with the opening of Deutsches Theatre by Adoff Arronge and Ludwig Barnay. Many theatre organisations arose after and the focus of the dramatists was to reflect realism. England became aware of realism in 1980’s when Jones and Pinero started writing plays that were comparable to Dumars fils and Augier in French Theatre (Brockett 1995:434-36).

Realism in *Omenuko*

What one is stating here is that the issue in *Omenuko* bothers on the realities of life. The writer portrayed the life of Omenuko in the manner a human being leads his life. Such issues are discussed below.

1. Birth: Omenuko is a human being born in an Igbo home. He was born into a family of six. Four of them are boys whereas two are girls. The family is a poor one because his parents not have much money but they have food stuffs of yams and cocoyams.

When a child is born in Igboland, he is given a name on the eighth day. It is the father who is the head of the family it is the father that gives the child a name in Igbo custom. The father, in a ceremony, takes the baby and while looking at him in the face gives a name he would be called and known by.

The case is the same with Omenuko whose father gave the name he answers. The name means ‘O Me N’uko Aku’. He that spends money on projects or ceremonies when there is scarcity of resources. He lives up to this name of his as he started erecting a storey building during the time of financial difficulty (Nwanna 1963:94).

2. Learning a Trade: It is realistic that when the child is born, he is trained to empower him for leading his life very well. There are various trades one would choose from. Today, one might decide to earn his living from studying to the level of obtaining a degree or any other certificate before seeking and obtaining a job by which one would earn income.

It is in line with this that Omenuko was handed over to Omemgboji as an apprentice in trading. He diligently served his master in such a way that he (Omemgboji) trained Omenuko very well and set up a business enterprise for him. Omemgboji prayed for Omenuko so that he would succeed in his life endeavours. He wished he was a king for he had served him as a king would be served. He told Omenuko “Ka ihe dikwara gi mma, ka ndi gi feekwa gi ofufe di ka I fere m. Gaa nke oma”.

Omemgboji swore to see Omenuko succeed. After setting up a business venture for him, he did not quickly leave Omenuko to sweat out. Rather he continued to guide Omenuko who was still enjoying his protection and buying his wares under the coverage of his master. Nwanna (1963:2) explains the shield of Omenuko by Omemgboji: “Omenuko wee zuwa ihe

nke aka ya ma o na-akwunye n'ahụ nna ya ukwu, bụ Omemgboji wee na-azu. O wee ruo mgbe o nwetara ego nke ga-ezuru ya, o hapụ nna ya ukwu”.

3. Occupations: Every human being must have an occupation by which he earns his living. Occupations, in Igbo culture, are many. They include making baskets, ropes, carving, moulding, and thatch roof construction etc Basden (1982:177) states that women are also engaged in arts and crafts: “Certain of the arts and crafts are in the hands of the women. The chief of these are pottery making, spinning, weaving, basket work and grass plaiting and specially free hand drawing on the person by means of stains”. More occupations are trading, palm wine tapping, medicine making, farming (cropping), rearing of animals, industrialisation like black soap making, salt making, pomade making etc.

Out of all these, Omenụkọ takes to trading. After his apprenticeship he started buying wares from selling at a distant market from his home country. He is so much good in his commercial entrepreneurship that he grew fast and employed a lot of load bearers in addition to many people serving as apprentices under him. On one trip, he bought a lot of wares in his home country and his apprentices and load bearers carried them to the distant market. A distant market indeed in that they walked a whole day and slept over in Umuduru Nso Ofo. When the day broke, they set out again and had to sleep again in Umu Lolo. On the third they continued their journey. It was on this day that it rained heavily and beat them so badly that they had to sleep over in Ezi Nnachi. On the fourth day, they edged on and fell into the Igwu River because the rope with which the cane bridge was tied up loosed and Omenụkọ and his train fell into the river. Luckily nobody drowned but the wares were lost in the waters of Igwu. Omenụkọ sold the people that learn trade and bear loads for him. This crime made him to run into exile.

While in exile Omenụkọ was earning his living from farming. He makes use of his large family in handling his farm work. In addition to his family, he was using the labour of the people he learnt money for they would continue to serve him until they refund the loan. Nwanna (1963:26) states all:

Omenụkọ na ụmụnne ya na-enwe ji na ede nke ukwu, he enwekwa ụmụ anụmanụ nke ụlọ, dị ka ehi na ewu na aturu na okuku na ụmụ elulu ndi ozọ. Madu ụfodu na-ere onwe ha n'uzo di iche nke na-adighi egbu ha mgbu n'obi. Ma n'obodo

anyị ndị mmadụ adighị akpọ ụdị ihe ahụ orire, kama anyị nasị na onye ahụ jiri onwe ya gba ibe.

One other work by which Omenuko was earning his living from is judgeship. He started to be a court judge in the jurisdiction of Eze Mgborogwu. He employed Omenuko because he felt that Omenuko's wisdom was wonderfully good for delivering judgments (Nwanna, 1863:16).

When Eze Mgborogwu died, the District Commissioner appointed him a regent and a substantive court judge. By the commissioner's appointment Omenuko started attending court sessions once a week. He performed creditably well and so was promoted to a higher position with a court clerk and court messengers (Nwanna 1963:76). His elevation made other court judges to be under him.

Apart from the above function, his position as a Warrant Chief afforded him the rulership of his community. So his income also comes as his payment for the management of his community. He is between his people and the government (Nwanna 1963:23). When the warrant was about to be taken from him, the District Commissioner did not want to lose his service because of his wonderful performance. So he appointed Obiefula a chief and a judge for the land of Mgbrogwu and transferred the chieftaincy and judgeship of Omenuko to Ikpa Oyi, the new layout Omenuko built and moved into. They were taken as an autonomous community (Nwanna 1963:72).

4. Slavery: This is the act of buying man by his fellow man for labour. Some people were kidnapped and sold in slavery by their relatives or non-relatives. Some slaves were bought by some Igbo people who employed their slaves on their farms. Some slaves were taken abroad to work in European plantations. Basden (1982:104) states it well:

Until the advent of the British, slavery was rampant amongst the Ibos. In earlier days great numbers of these people were transported to America, the West Indies, and to other places and traces of their language and customs are said to still survive amongst the negroes in those countries.

Nwanna (1863:7) states that the issue of slave was portrayed in the novel, *Omenuko*. It shows how Omenuko suffered an ill-fate of falling into the River Igwu with his apprentices and load bearers in such a manner that he lost all the wares they were taking to the market to sell. Because of the loss,

Omenuko's capital was so much affected that he would not be able to continue his business. So he decided to sell some of his apprentices and load bearers into slavery. He deceived them by asking them to stay in the house of Mazi Oji until he (Mazi Oji) gives them the wares they would bring home for him. He left them and used the proceeds from the sale of those people in buying wares he would sell at home. Nwanna (1963:7) states it thus: "o wee were ego dum o retara na ndi nile o rere ere, zusia, ihe dum madu ji ala ala, kechie ibu ya, si ndi ibu, "Bulienu".

5. Abomination: There are various evil practices that Igbo people abhor. They term such practices abomination or sacrileges against Mother Earth. They include exhuming another person's yam in anger (Ogbobe-McBenedict 2005:46), spilling of blood especially that of a relative, carnal knowledge of one's blood relative (incest), defiling of kolanut trees by women climbing them or harvesting their fruits, climbing palm tress by women etc.

Any of these abominations demand the cleansing of the land. In the case of Omenuko selling his blood relatives he had to go through some purification rites before he was acceptable to his people. He went into exile without wasting time. While in exile, he was haunted by his offence against humanity. He later suffered from nostalgia and so started making arrangements to reconcile with his people. He employed Mazi Igwe as his agent. On inquiry, Mazi Igwe got two lists of the items need for reconciling with people on the one hand and reconciling with idols on the other. Omenuko provided a cow, eight eggs, a cock, eight big yams and eight small yams with which Omenuko asked for the forgiveness of his offence. They slaughtered the cow, the cock and cooked them. They also cooked the yams. Before they ate the meat and food they cooked, the head of the community cleansed himself of whatever evil he might have said against Omenuko and his siblings. He did it by touching his mouth with an egg for four times and stating that whatever evil or good he said against Omenuko and his siblings was cleansed off. He then said that Omenuko and his siblings had again become the same. All the people there did the same thing (Nwanna 1963: 67).

After reconciling with people, Omenuko also reconciled with idols of his land. The rites were conducted by Iyiukwa, the high priest. When Omenuko presented the required items-an old ewe, a hen, a cock, eight eggs, the egg of the duck, a basket of yams, a basket of cocoyams, a kolanut a bunch of

alligator pepper, four pieces of white clay, the wine that the container in which it is put has not been kept on the ground a keg of raffia palm wine, a keg of palm wine and an eagle in place of four feathers of the eagle. Iyikwa officiated at the ceremony in which he first of all sought the positive opinion of spirits which the presence of vultures signified. He then cleansed himself by touching an egg on his mouth and denounced all evil he said against Omenuko. He in turn did the same thing with a piece of white clay. The wine that its containers did not touch the ground was what he used in cleaning his mouth. He then asked Omenuko to do the same. Among other things, he prayed with a kolanut and prayed to the idol informing it that he (Omenuko) had come for reconciliation (Nwanna 1963:68-9).

6. Family: The raising of a family by Omenuko is realist. He got married to many wives. He is a polygamist. Polygamy obtains in Igboland even up till today Ogboke-McBenedict (2005:62) takes note of it. "Marriage is the legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife. Previously, Igbos were predominantly a polygamous lot".

Omenuko got married to many wives and so begetted many children. Nwanna (1963:72) has a picture of his family. "O bara nba ndi nyom, nke ahu aburu abuo. O bakwara uba umu ndinyom na umu ndikom".

Not only that Omenuko has many children he trains them very well. Irrespective of the number, they attend school without discrimination against his daughters as obtained in the olden days when people felt that training their daughters in schools were wastage as they would later marry, out of their father's families. Apart from attending schools, some others of his children are looking for their occupations and jobs at various places. It is stated thus:

"O mee ka umu ya ndikom nile gawa ulo akwukwo, ma ufodu n'ime umu ya, diri ndi na-achọ iputa n'ulo akwukwo site ebe ha siri laghachi n'ihu na otutu n'ime umu ya agafeeleri akwukwo isii, mgbe ahu ha laghachiri obodo anyi (nwanna 1963:92).

7. Regence: It is normal to install regents in various autonomous communities where the traditional rulers are no more and there are no qualified persons to succeed them. It is in this regard that Eze Mgborogwu chose Omenuko to hold his warrant of office until his little son, Obiefula, grew up enough to take over:

O ga-adị m mma nke ukwu ma a sị na unu emee ka Omenụkọ were warrant jidere Obiefula nwa m ruo mgbe o ga-enwe ike ichikọta obodo m. Ana m ekwu nke a ma o buru na District Commissioner ekwe (Nwanna 1963:17). N'ubochia kara aka, District Commissioner juru ndi ala Mgborogwu ma ha zuru ezu kwuo ka Omenụkọ jidere Obiefula warrant nna ya. Ha zara na ha kwere ekwe. District Commissioner wee nye Omenụkọ ikike (Nwanna: 1963:23).

8. Traditional Ruleship: Traditional ruleships of some communities started to exist before the advent of the white man. The communities that have traditional rulers before the coming of the white man include Nri, Onitsha, Oreri and Aguleri (Onwuejeogwu 1975:6), (Ogugha and Okpoko 1993:105), (Okodo 2006: 44), (Okodo 2007: 14) etc.

The rest of the communities in Igboland practise segmentary administrations in which the kindred units are autonomous ruling authorities that formulate policies and approve decisions by simple majorities. In these communities, the white installed warrant chiefs who helped him in his administration of the people. The warrant chiefs were the white man's eyes.

It is this kind of traditional ruler that Omenụkọ was until he returned from exile. He founded Ikpa Oyi Layout and he and his people formed an autonomous community there. Nwanna (1963:72) states it very well. "... Site n'ihì nke a, ha wee ha ka otu obodo, nweekwa otu eze dī ka ndī ozo nwere, ya bụ Omenụkọ".

9. Exile: To go into exile is a normal thing. One goes into exile when one has committed an offence that so much desecrates the land moreso if it involves the spilling of the blood of a relative. Going into exile was observed by Achebe (1958:113) about Okonkwo who mistakenly shot the son of Ezeudu during the funeral of Ezeudu himself:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.

So Omenuko's exile is realistic. He sold the people under him, his apprentices and load bearers, including his blood relatives into slavery. He used the proceeds to buy the wares he sold to make money. When he returned he wondered what the people he sold their relations would do. He was jittery over the spread of the news of his crime. He asked his brothers how it would sound. They told him that his crime was too bad. Continuing, his brothers described his offence as a crime that would be left for the generation not yet born to suffer. "ihe di otu a ka nna nna anyi ha na-akpo nwa nwa tote o tokwuru. Nke putara na umu anyi ga-ahụ ahụ banyere ya umu anyuga-ahụkwa ahụ banyere ya otu aka ahụ" (Nwana 1963:10).

10. Wealth: It is usual to come across wealthy people in the olden days. There were wealthy men and today there are wealthy men. King Solomon's wealth was well known. He was married to about three hundred wives and many concubines were at his beck and call. He had a large family which the cost of feeding it in a day was huge enough to make somebody rich. Today Mr Billgate, the largest producer of computers in the whole world is the richest man in the world.

So it is not unusual that Omenuko is the richest man among his contemporaries in the world of *Omenuko*, the first Igbo novel. He struggled for riches and got it. He made a lot of money from trading, although his ill-fate at the River Igwu swept it off.

While in exile, he worked as a farmer, a judge and a traditional ruler. He earned a lot of money and becomes rich. His acquisition of food in large quantities as a great farmer is noted by Nwana (1963:25) who indicates: "Omenuko na umunne ya na-enwe ji na ede nke ukwu....".

Another portrayal of the wealth of Omenuko is the large number of livestock he has. Livestock, in Igbo culture area, contributes to making a man wealthy. The livestock of Omenuko and his siblings include cows, goats, sheep, fowls and others (Nwana 1963:25).

Omenuko's wealth is well known to every Dick and Harry. That is why people who are in need of money go to him for loans so that they could solve their financial problems. Such people present themselves as collateral security. They work for Omenuko until they are able to pay up the loans respectively (Nwana, 1963:25-26).

Omenuko's outstanding wealth is noticed in his capability to found a new layout, Ikpa Oyi. He cleared the expanse of land and erected a lot of buildings there. He and his people moved in to establish an autonomous community. When he accomplished the new layout, he was impressed with the magnificent buildings that he proudly conducted an opening ceremony just as people satisfied with their new buildings do. He opened the layout and the traditional rulers that were in attendance were so impressed that they praised him for the great achievement. The traditional rulers gave him some money respectively. Some gave him ten shillings and some five shillings (1963:34-55).

11. Dispute: Another aspect of realistic life is the envy of all other traditional rules cum court judges who quarrelled Omenuko so much that they insisted that he must leave their land because he was in exile. This brought about inter-tribal skirmishes. He waged a war against twenty-six autonomous communities. In this dispute, the Omenuko's party killed one person on the side of the all-twenty-six community group and the group retaliated by killing one person on the side of Omenuko's party (Nwanna 1963: 84). Ogbobe-McBenedict (2005:73) states that it is usual that two clans, villages or communities fight wars when they struggle over issues:

In the past, the people of Uvuru have engaged in one form of war or the other with especially neighbouring towns. They have also inter-village wars. The most recent inter-communal war in Ururu is the one involving the people of Ukpata, who tradition holds migrated possibly from Ukpatu in Udi district. The war which evolved from a land dispute is still fresh in my memory.

Conclusion

One can now see that the novel, *Omenuko*, is a realistic one because it mirrors society. It refers to what obtain in human life. The culture of the people is portrayed in the novel with respect to the lives of Omenuko and other characters. The people's life patterns portrayed include the birth, learning of trade, occupations, slavery, abomination, family relationships regency, traditional rulership, exile, wealth acquisition and disputes.

References

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Basden, G. T. (1982). *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*. Onitsha: University Publishing Co.
- Ogbobe-Mcbenedict, C. I. (2005). *People and Culture of Uvuiru*. Onitsha: Bookpoint.