

## Irony and Social Criticism in Chinyelu Ojukwu's *Memories and Visions*

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### Abstract

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This essay studies Chinyelu Ojukwu's *Memories and Visions* as a critique of the marriage institution in Nigeria. It derives its significance from the paucity of scholarship on the play and deploys the qualitative research methodology and the sociological theory of literature in its analysis of primary data. It adopts the Priscilla Clark model and applies, specifically, the strands relating to the place and function of society in literature and the interpretation of that relationship. It underscores the use of irony as a critical device in the sociological assessment of the subject matter and approaches its textual analysis by balancing two sets of characters and marriages on the scale of the contrasting traits of the two Greek stock characters – the *eiron* and the *alazon* – credited with the origin of irony. Consequently, irony is seen to be performing the critical functions of deflation and inflation. It plays a deflationary role by the use of the devices of bathos and antithesis to ridicule the *alazonian* characters and marriages and the marital ills they represent; and an inflationary role through the device of climax to extol the *eironian* virtues in the good sets of characters and marriages. Consequently, the study concludes that *Memories and Visions* is a veritable companion on a positive marital voyage as its critical approach and judgmental denouement depict the author's favouring of the virtuous *eironian* sets of marriages over and above their vice-ridden *alazonian* counterparts.

**Keywords:** *Irony, Social Criticism, Marriage, Marital ills, Memories and Visions*

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### **Background to the Study**

Chinyelu Ojukwu is a native of Alo in Anambra State, east of Nigeria, but she was born and raised in the coastal city of Lagos, west of the same country. She attended the prestigious Universities of Ibadan and Lagos, and now teaches Dramatic Literature and Gender Studies in the Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Apart from her career in teaching, Ojukwu is also a talented actor and playwright. Her inclination to the dramatic art blossomed in the eighties when, as a young girl, she acted on television and wrote many scripts one of which has metamorphosed into a published screen play, *Memories and Visions*, which is the text under study in this essay. Trained in Theatre Arts, English Studies and Music, Ojukwu brings versatility into her writing which clearly depicts a combination of good craftsmanship and positive social vision.

Incidentally, *Memories and Visions* has received very little scholarly attention. Since its publication in 2008, only two critical commentaries exist on the play albeit in the forms of a Foreword and a review. In her forward to the play, Chioma Opara observes that *Memories and Visions* is basically about humans' struggle for survival in a harsh environment. According to her:

Chinyelu Ojukwu's *Memories and Visions* is an expose of men and women struggling to survive in an environment riddled with thistles and thorns. As one of the characters puts it, "Life generally is very tough; it is always the survival of the fittest". Woman's relentless quest for survival is continually thwarted by looming poverty and recession in the wider society... The stifling atmosphere is jarred by sporadic twists and turns resulting in a welter of emotions discernible in resonating slaps and raucous sobs. Ojukwu's characters who represent the major Nigerian tribes (WAZOBIA) as well as some minor ethnic groups are apparently overwhelmed by economic, societal, and cultural encumbrances in a developing Nigerian society. (vii)

On her part, Akachi Ezeigbo describes *Memories and Visions* as an important addition to the intellectual crusade against the marauding vile of greed and dishonesty in our marital system in Nigeria. She berates the "Mrs. Obis" of our society who commoditize their daughters when giving them out in marriage thereby sacrificing love and the bride's conjugal happiness on the altar of financial gains (2-5).

The foregoing remarks cast the play in the light of a social "document" and its author in the mould of a society-conscious writer or a social reformer. Every society-conscious writer is a visionary of an error-free society. Gabriel Okara argues that a visionary writer is, in addition, a believer in an ideal society; one who subscribes to a revolution - if need be - in rescuing society from the wrong hands; a conformist to positive values which will improve society and a rebel against ideas that hinder societal harmony and development:

The [writer], whose tool is the word basically is a visionary, idealist, revolutionary, a conformist, non-conformist, or he is all of these put

together in infinite number of permutations. It is the word he uses as tool to bring about the transformation and regeneration of the present to meet the demands of his dream society. In his bid therefore to bring about the desired change he must have the courage to be the lone voice if necessary, in the hostile wilderness of our society. (80)

Like all literary artists, Ojukwu's tool is the *word*, and her *word* in *Memories and Visions* is imbued with ironic fervor requisite of the all-important task of social criticism and reformation. This concern for society launches her into the league of committed writers whose role is to point the society in the right direction. According to a foremost Nigerian writer:

Social criticism is perhaps the most widely acknowledged role of the writer. Every other member of the society seems to look on you, the writer, as the person to speak out against an unpopular government. It is a role which could get you into a maximum security prison, into forced exile, or even to face the firing squad. It could lead to considerable frustration, as you assess what impact, if any, your writing has made on the developments around you. On the other hand, it could turn you into a hero. Whichever way things work out, you are likely to have a feeling of relief to know that you have "got it off your chest" by getting out a book or an article in which you have made a point. (Ike, 223)

Green delineates three categories of Nigerian writers committed to the task of social reformation, and Ojukwu belongs to the first category by her use of the ironic instrument, which is unsparing in its attack on the perpetrators of the monstrous vices rocking the nation's marriage institution. The first category, according to Green, is "that of the angry writer who strikes out at society and the establishment employing many devices of angry humour, satire, sarcasm and irony ...." (86).

### **Theoretical Foundations: Irony and the Sociology of Literature**

#### **a. Irony**

Irony as a literary concept originated from the Greek word *eironeia*. It emanated from the mode of speech and behaviour of a stock character of early Greek comedy, the *iron*, who was the natural antagonist of another stock figure, the *alazon*. The *iron* was an underdog who by speaking in understatements and deliberately pretending to be less intelligent, simple and humble, regularly triumphed over the stupid, self-deceiving, loud-mouthed and bullying *alazon* who sought to achieve his ends by deception through exaggeration. Irony has, since then, come to designate the difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case (Frye, Baker and Perkins, 250), or any form of dissembling.

Following this origin are several scholarly definitions of the concept all of which highlight the same features. According to *The World Book Dictionary*, irony is "a way of speaking or writing in which the ordinary meaning of the words is the opposite of the

thought in the speaker's mind" (28). It is also "an event or outcome which is the opposite of what would naturally be expected" (28). The above definitions delineate two modes of ironic realization, namely, by word and by action. Both, however, share the quality of deception. In words, irony is achieved when the opposite of what is expressed is actually meant; and in action, it is realised when an unexpected kind of event happens consequent upon an earlier action.

Hugh Holman and William Harmon define irony simply as "a broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance" (264). And Muecke reveals its presence in every field, describing it as a way of:

speaking or writing, acting, behaving, painting, etc., in which the real or intended meaning presented or evoked is intentionally quite other than, and incompatible with the ostensible or pretended meaning. (The 'real meaning' may be the contrary of the pretended meaning or it may be no more than a hinting at a mental reservation ...). From the reader's point of view, the irony depends upon felt incongruity of both meanings. It is too subtle, occulted, or impenetrable (for him) if the real meaning never appears, and it falls short of irony if the pretended meaning has no force. (53)

Emerging from the foregoing definitions is the fact that there are two levels of signification in a typical ironic usage or situation. These have variously been described as "outcome and expected" meanings, "seems and is," "ought and is," "appearance and reality" and "intended and pretended meaning." These pairs are the equivalents of illusion and reality, what Chidi Maduka describes as the "intrinsic formal characteristics of irony" (141). Maduka, however, adds a third quality, innocence. *Illusion*, according to Maduka, concerns how the victim of irony perceives life (where there is an ironist). *Reality* is the way life is perceived by the observer or presented by the ironist (where there is an ironist). And concerning *innocence*, Maduka holds that, "the victim of irony is presented with a touch of innocence: he has a complete trust in the accuracy of his perception of reality" (141).

Despite its many types, irony could be grouped into three broad categories, namely, verbal, situational and dramatic irony. Verbal irony involves saying something contrary to what is meant; and situational irony, known also as circumstantial irony, irony of fate or cosmic irony refers to situations when events turn out in the opposite of what is expected or what should be; while dramatic irony occurs when a character does not know what the audience and perhaps other characters know that is happening around him and concerning him.

Ironic situations open up vistas of meanings in a text, even meanings which the author never intended. Yet, to unravel the whole ironic situations in a text is a no mean task, due to the slippery nature of that literary tool. It must, however, be noted that irony could either be deployed for a utilitarian purpose or for its own sake in the manner of the

formalist notion of art for art's sake. Irony deployed for utilitarian purposes is referred to as educative irony, or according to Muecke, corrective irony. Irony is educative when it is "used for ridicule, contempt, humour or satire" (Emeaba, 102), or when it is employed "to make the reader uncomfortable, to shake him out of his complacency and to make him ally in the battle against the world's stupidity" (Matthew Hodgart, qtd. in Maduka, 144), and to correct the anomalies rocking the human society. Irony, in the text under study, performs a utilitarian (an educative) function because of its use as tool for social criticism.

Noteworthy is the fact that one of the ways in which irony performs its critical, educative or corrective function is by means of "deflation" (Nnolim, 2005:131). Irony, according to Nnolim, is a deflationary rhetoric which is realized through such devices as understatement, bathos, litotes, anticlimax, antithesis, paradox, oxymoron, juxtaposition, antiphrasis, and so on (131-133). This implies that in a work in which irony is the chief critical tool, the ironic victims' journey from the stage of illusion to the state of reality often takes a deflationary turn via the said figures in order to spite the idea they represent.

#### **b. The Sociological Theory**

The sociological theory is one of the extrinsic approaches to the study of literature, others being the biographical, mythic and archetypal, reader-response, psychological, moral, and feminist theories. It examines the relationship between literature and society. As Wilbur Scott observes, "scholars, of course, have long been interested in the ties between the art, the writer, and the social milieu, and very often their studies contain implicit judgments based on those associations" (126). Edmund Wilson, writes Scott, traces the beginning of the sociological approach to Vico's study of Homer's epics which revealed the social conditions in which Homer lived. Herder, according to Scott, continued in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Vico's approach until the French historian Hippolyte Taine brought the critical approach to its fullest state with his famous pronouncement that literature is the consequence of the *moment*, the *race*, and the *milieu*. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx and Engels introduced the factor of mode of production which gave rise to that branch of the sociological approach called Marxism (123).

Invariably, the sociological theory has been a dynamic approach capable of developing new perspectives within the larger unit. Examples of its offshoots are the Biographical, Psychological, Historical and Moral approaches, New Historicism, Feminism, Eco-criticism, Post-colonialism and Post-modernism. In spite of the numerous off-shoots, however, the traditional method has remained a veritable tool for the study of literature as new ideas have been infused into it by diverse scholars to further strengthen it. Here lies the significance of Priscilla Clark's "The Comparative Method: Sociology and the Study of Literature" whose suppositions are an advancement of the earlier models of Taine and Wellek and Warren. Clark views the sociology of literature as a comparative approach between sociology and literature and delineates four basic theoretical perspectives from which one can carry out a sociological study of a literary work. The first perspective concerns "the place and the functions of literature in society", while the

second examines the effect of the literary phenomena on society. The third looks at the place and function of society in literature, while the fourth underscores the influence of society on literature. (5)

This study adopts Clark's model for its analysis of primary text, especially the third and fourth perspectives. Clark declares that criticism that is based on the place and function of society in literary works would be interested in describing social themes, character types, trends, currents, manners, genre, period, and writer (7), while that based on the influence of society on literature entails the interpretation of the mutual relationship by moving from the social space within the work to the social space without; moving from the description of social elements in literature to positing influence of society on literature.

In tune with the foregoing theoretical considerations, analysis in this study shall examine how the effective use of irony enables the playwright to interrogate characters' actions and attend to the social issues that constitute the themes of her work. These shall, no doubt, be enabled by some kind of an oscillation between the social space within the work and that outside of it.

### **Irony and Social Criticism in Memories and Vision**

Memories and Visions has an episodic plot in which Nneka is in love with Onome, but both fail to marry because Mrs. Obi, Nneka's mother, persuades her to leave poor Onome and marry Ifeanyi who comes from their Igbo ethnic group and is rich enough to take care of her and her family including Ike's (Nneka's younger brother's) education. Heartbroken, Onome gets involved in a motor accident, and while in the hospital finds solace and love in nurse Bisi whom he marries and also secures a well-paid job. Nneka is traumatized by her husband's maltreatment and adulterous lifestyle, which earns him a twenty-year jail term as punishment for killing Gladys, one of his lovers, in a hotel room. Another couple, Musa and Shade, rise from poverty to riches through prayers and trust in God, while Tony, Ifeanyi's equally adulterous elder brother, takes Bisi, his girlfriend, as a second wife in spite of his gossipmonger and envious first wife, Maggie, who had worked so hard to destroy Nneka's marriage.

Memories and Visions is, thus, a critique of societal ills prominent among which are those associated with the sacred institution of marriage. These ills constitute the themes of the play such as Tribalism in Marriage; Marriage based on the Highest Bidder; Marriage by Arrangement; Exorbitant Marriage Rites; Parental Intrusion in Marriages; Lack of Self Assertion among Young Women in the Face of Marital Challenges; Marital Infidelity; Gender Discrimination; Jealousy and Envy among Women; et cetera. The themes reflect the playwright's "memories" of situations prevalent in our society, particularly Nigeria, and by extension Africa, while her critical approach to the handling of the themes underscores her "vision" of a society devoid of such ills.

The playwright's beginning of her self-imposed task of social criticism from the very cradle of all social institutions and the very root of the wider society is particularly

significant. In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, the success of a marriage is of paramount importance to all. Thus, writers (especially the female) are expected to dwell more on the subject in order to direct the less intellectual in the society on the right path towards a successful marriage. Dramatists seem to have done well in this regard, for as Saviour Nathan Agoro has observed, “some subjects do often occur more than others in plays. Marriage is one of such subjects” (26).

Memories and Visions depict a deployment of irony in this critical assessment of our marital systems. It is assigned a deflationary role using chiefly the devices of bathos and antithesis, and also a reverse role, which is inflationary using the instrument of climax. This way, the playwright dramatizes the two sides of the ironic coin in keeping with the origin of the critical tool which showcases two antithetical characters - the *Eiron* and the *Alazon* - whose different mannerisms depict a contrast albeit in favour of the *Eiron* because of his virtuous disposition. Thus, it is the *Alazonian* vices that the critical tool aims at attacking in the play while upholding the *Eironian* virtue.

The said contrast is depicted in the play through the juxtaposition of what may be described as the negative and the ideal sets of characters, families and marriages. Mrs. Obi, Ifeanyi, Nneka, Maggie and Tony belong to the negative set while Onome, Bisi, Musa and Sade belong to the positive. Characters in the first set are described as negative because each of them embodies at least one of the outlined marital vices and (with perhaps the exception of Nneka) the *Alazonian* features of boastfulness and pride, all of which the playwright tries to castigate. Characters in the second set are ideal because they exhibit the *Eironian* virtues of humility, gentility, modesty and wisdom and the marital virtues of love, mutual respect, tolerance and trust in God – attributes which the playwright holds up for societal emulation.

The binary presentation extends beyond the sets to individual characters. The result, therefore, becomes that for every positive character there is a corresponding negative figure that functions as his or her foil. Okpara has, for instance, identified the rich, pompous and arrogant Ifeanyi as an “express foil of the gentle and loving husband, Onome” (viii). It would also be observed that the unassertive Nneka is the adverse of the assertive, loving and calculative nurse Bisi. The dangerous, envious and wicked Maggie is foil to the God-fearing, sensible, long-suffering and patient Shade; while the care-free, impatient adulterer, Tony, is the contrast of the humble and gentle Musa. Mrs. Obi is the only major character that seems to have no adverse figure except of course the parents of Bisi who are only mentioned indirectly in the course of action. However, Mrs. Obi's role is significant and central to the appreciation of part of the author's vision: she is the harbinger of the prejudice and sins of the old order which the playwright seeks to expunge. She, therefore, provides the traditional background needed for the assessment of the modern and younger generation of Nigerians represented by the rest of the major characters.

The negative characters stand as symbols of the outlined societal (marital) ills, thus, they are the victims of the playwright's irony. By attacking them, the playwright invariably derides the ills which they represent. She does so by making their expectations illusive and events in their lives to take on a deflationary course towards degeneration. This entails the effective handling of bathos as an ironic tool. Nnolim describes bathos as “a sudden collapse of high expectancy, an appearance of the commonplace in otherwise elevated matter, a letdown” (133). There is a letdown, in fact a collapse, in the expectations of the characters in the negative set. Mrs. Obi is chief among the characters in this category and so deserves first scrutiny.

Mrs. Obi symbolises the vices of tribalism in marriage; marriage based on highest bidder; exorbitant marriage rites; marriage by arrangement; and unhealthy parental intrusion in wards' marriages. Her role as the precursor of these evils is revealed quite early in the play in the negative sentiments which she betrays in the following declaration to her daughter Nneka:

**Mrs. Obi:** Onome cannot marry you ...

First, he is not from our tribe. So he knows nothing about our culture. He is still struggling to survive and cannot afford your bride price. I'd rather you got married to Ifeanyi who is fond of you and can comfortably pay your bride price. He is ready for marriage now. (4)

A less discerning reader is likely to believe that Mrs. Obi's desire for an Igbo and rich son-in-law is well-meaning. It would seem that her desire for an Igbo son-in-law is to ensure the security of her daughter and to guarantee harmony between the couple; and that her craving for a rich son-in-law is, as she says, to “relieve me of my burden” (of single parenthood) and “to take care of Ike's education” (14-15).

Upon closer consideration, Mrs. Obi's declaration actually smacks of tribal pride and arrogance, some of the *alazonian* vices earlier outlined. This is typical of many citizens of the so-called major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They exhibit proud tendencies over the minor groups whom they regard as inferior. The expression: “he is not from our tribe. So, he knows nothing about our culture,” depicts some degree of arrogance. Thus, Mrs. Obi is conscious of her daughter's origin from a major ethnic group in contrast to Onome who hails from a “minor” one. Part of the feeling, therefore, is that Onome is nothing other than a gold digger, a worthless second-class citizen who wants to mingle with the pure and first-rate citizens.

Similarly, the expression, “He is still struggling to survive and cannot afford your bride price. I'd rather you got married to Ifeanyi who is fond of you and can comfortably pay your bride price,” betrays the greed that has become the lot of most mothers in the present Nigerian society. Most parents in our society today see the marriages of their daughters as avenues for wealth acquisition. The exorbitant bride price and the elaborate fanfare that now characterize marriages in our land are hinted at by this statement. These unwholesome practices which were introduced by a few moneybags are now so

ingrained in the polity that they have even assumed the status of culture and tradition. In the following excerpt, Onome and Musa speak for the author who is disgusted with the status quo and is thus advocating for a change:

**Onome:** But Musa, why is this world such a difficult place? ... Is it my fault that I cannot afford thousands of naira as bride price and the ceremonies that go with it?

**Musa:** Well, some will say it is their tradition.

**Onome:** Tradition is made by man and the moment a tradition fails to protect the interest of the community, such tradition should be discarded and replaced with another.

**Musa:** I quite agree with you. Tradition or culture should be functional and practicable. No culture is ever static. It grows with time.

**Onome:** The point is that high bride price and the elaborate fanfare have nothing to do with tradition. It is sheer ostentation.

**Musa:** One friend of mine from Nneka's tribe explains that this huge sum of money paid on the bride normally comes back to the bridegroom by way of wedding presents from the bride's parents. They call it "Idu Uno."

**Onome:** So what have they all achieved in the end? Inconveniences for everybody – which could have been avoided at the outset.

**Musa:** I suppose that accounts for the inability of their men to get settled in life early. Most of them marry late.

**Onome:** With the exception of their businessmen who handle raw cash early enough and can afford to marry early. So money talks, my dear. (22-23)

The irony embedded in the foregoing is that the society is the cause of its own problems. Instead of expunging such evils which have crept into the sacred institution, the society seems to support them even as they have proven to be detrimental to societal welfare, causing more harm than good. One of its "gains," for instance, is the increase in the number of bachelors and spinsters roaming the streets hoping against hope of marrying and being married someday. Many young men have become perpetual bachelors because they cannot marry the girls of their choice due to their inability to afford the exorbitant bride price and the elaborate fanfare that goes with it; and many girls have spent much of their productive years as spinsters waiting for the "tribally and financially eligible" suitors. Sorrow and frustration are the consequences of the status quo as its character victims speak both for their likes in the society and for the playwright:

**Onome** – It's not your fault but that of our society. People make things difficult for themselves, otherwise your bride price and the traditional marriage wouldn't have been any problem. (47)

**Nneka** - ...Custom demands this, tradition demands that and society dictates this... Norms and values are made by man, yet man is enslaved by them. (50)

Given the foregoing, it becomes difficult not to agree with Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo that greed and materialism, rather than long suffering, are the motivations of Mrs. Obi's action:

Mrs. Obi is a woman ruled by greed and driven by the desire to maintain a high standard of living than is available to her." She ... sacrifices her daughter and her happiness on the altar of greed and crass materialism. [She is an example of the] impoverished women who want to enter the class of the wealthy, the affluent in society by marrying off their daughters to the highest bidders, the men of substance and influence. Of course, almost all the time, their unfortunate and misguided daughters pay a high price for their mothers' inordinate ambition and greed. (6)

Whatever her motive in choosing Ifeanyi against Onome, Mrs. Obi is guilty of disservice to her daughter. She fails, like most women today, in her responsibility as mother to Nneka. The playwright believes that the happiness of a girl child in marriage should be paramount to her mother instead of a better life for herself or the family. There is, therefore, no reason, as far as the playwright is concerned, to justify a mother's mortgaging of the happiness of her daughter in marriage. As a life-long adventure, marriage is not just a serious affair but that which has to be enjoyed instead of endured. Nneka is, thus, a victim of the lack of vision (or is it lack of feeling?) of a mother who is unable to set her priorities right either because of her obsession with the pain of long suffering or with her insatiable lust for wealth and influence. Nneka's lamentation "I wish my father were alive, I would have married the man I love instead of marrying for convenience" (15) becomes, therefore, an eloquent testimony to her unfortunate circumstance as a sacrificial victim. Such is the plight of many Nnekas in our society.

Nevertheless, the author's ironic attack on Mrs. Obi is procedurally significant: the harmony and understanding which she expects from the couple, given their tribal affinity, becomes a mirage for Ifeanyi turns out to be a brute of a husband while she (Mrs. Obi) becomes a consoler of her maltreated daughter, slipping sometimes into delusion that extends even into nightmares ("For the past one week, I have been having nightmares" 38). Rather than become relieved and comfortable following Nneka's marriage to the rich Ifeanyi, Mrs. Obi becomes a receptor of Nneka's perpetual blame for her situation and the mother-in-law of an ex-convict. Moreover, we hear nothing more about the all-important "Ike's education".

The most interesting aspect of the author's deflationary attack on the character is achieved through antithesis. There is an overt contrast in the conduct of Mrs. Obi at the two extremes of the play – a contrast which depicts a remarkable slope towards degeneration. At the beginning, Mrs. Obi is almost like a dictator backing out orders to Nneka in many words:

So you are still keeping that relationship? I've told you it is not in your interest ... First, he is not from our tribe. So he knows nothing about our culture. (4)...

*[Grows angry.]* It is time you forgot this relationship of yours with Onome and faced reality." (9)

But towards the end, after she has been grounded in the mill of the playwright's ironic machine, she becomes a dazed, hopeless and helpless figure capable neither of many words nor action. Her dialogue with Tony (including the stage directions) at the final collapse of her expectations is quite revealing of her present state:

**Mrs. Obi-***[She remains silent for a while and finally sits down].* How many years imprisonment?

**Tony -** Twenty years, ma.

**Mrs. Obi -** What! *[Mrs. Obi is dazed...]* (200-201)

Given her condemnation of the foregoing ills, Ojukwu advances the view that "marriage is a private affair." This theme has earlier been projected by Chinua Achebe in a short story of the same title. Ojukwu seems to agree with Achebe that marriage is a love accord between a man and a woman who have agreed to spend the rest of their lives together, and that whatever tries to disrupt that mutual agreement is an intruder. Here lies the significance of Onome's demand from Nneka, "why did you bring a third party into our relationship" (18). Mrs. Obi (and her attendants of tribal sentiment and desire for wealth) is an intruder to the aborted blissful marriage of the ideal couple. Onome's ordeal and Nneka's torment are a warning to young and intending couples against unnecessary intruders who may end up destroying their happiness.

Regrettably, unhealthy parental intrusion is deeply ingrained in our marriage system in Nigeria. It is a source of nightmare both to married and intending couples who are not from the same ethnic group in this nation that is ironically founded on the dicta of progress, peace and unity. When Onome queries Bisi, his second fiancé, "I hope there will be no hindrance from your family, knowing too well I'm not from your tribe?" (66), he is exhibiting at once his "Nigerianness" and the fact that he is the proverbial victim of a snake bite who is scared of every long and crawling thing.

Clearly, therefore, the author advocates inter-tribal marriages and marriage based on love (and not on sentiments or a suitor's financial worth). These, she believes, are the sure means of improving the social wellbeing of the citizenry because of the ability of these to create harmony and peaceful coexistence in such a multi-ethnic set-up like Nigeria. Thus, when Nneka says, "what matters in marriage is love. If there is love, every other thing is secondary" (9), we understand that she speaks for the author. Explicitly, therefore, the authorial voice makes mockery of the idea of the older generation that money "sustains love and happiness in a marriage" while "hardship threatens love and kills happiness" in the same manner as "poverty and hardship can keep one miserable in [a marriage] (9). It is ironically refreshing how the playwright presses home her condemnation of the evils here presented: she makes the Ifeanyi-Nneka marriage a failure despite the couple's tribal affinity and the man's wealth, and the Onome-Bisi marriage successful irrespective of the couple's tribal differences and the man's earlier poor financial status.

Next in the row of ironic assaults is Nneka. She symbolises lack of self-assertion among young women in the face of marital challenges. This anomaly is, again, condemned through a deflation of its character symbol. Nneka's marital journey starts on a seeming positive note with a promise of love, affection and care from Ifeanyi: "You are a darling. I love you. And I will take good care of you" (17). But this gradually proves to be a delusion as subsequent events depict the contrary in their deteriorating order of significance: from the statement of love and care to wife battering, wife battering to taunt of childlessness ("... You can go now if you wish. It is easy. After all, you've left nothing behind [*He means a child*]" 89); taunt of childlessness to disregard for and maltreatment in pregnancy ("What is all this weakness every time; are you going to give birth to Jesus? Or are you the first pregnant woman that has ever lived" 129); disregard and maltreatment to discrimination against the resultant girl child; and from discrimination against the girl child to total abandonment ("Even when I had my baby, you abandoned us, because you had wanted a male child..." 205). The deteriorating slope of events in Nneka's marriage finally reaches an abysmal point with her shameful and embarrassing "widowhood" (of a sort) following her husband's twenty-years' incarceration. Her summation of her ordeal as Ifeanyi's wife depicts that downward slant which is the hallmark of irony as rhetoric of deflation:

Since I got married to you we have had quarrels, problems, one after another. Even when I had my baby, you abandoned us, because you wanted a male child and now you've crowned it all by ... by... Oh my God [She continues sobbing]. (205)

The love which Ifeanyi professed to Nneka upon her acceptance to marry him thus proves to be ironical while her mother's observation that Ifeanyi was fond of her (Nneka) appears to be truer because fondness is not love; it is less than love. It is canal and worldly; but love is deeper and divine. By his actions, Ifeanyi seems to have been merely attracted by Nneka's beauty and perhaps her chastity, some of the qualities for which Ezeigbo believes Ifeanyi should have been grateful to Nneka.

Nneka's ordeal is, therefore, an attack on the inability of our young girls to assert themselves in terms of choice of marriage partners. It is ridiculous how they let external influences ruin their joy of a blissful marriage. Nneka was expected to "say No to Ifeanyi and damn the consequences" (22) but she fails to do so. The irony surrounding most Nnekas of our society today is that they know the constituents of a successful marriage, yet they fall victim of parental persuasions against that which they know. Nneka's hell of a marriage is thus her reward for following her head (the voice of reason, which makes her concede to her mother's persuasion), instead of her heart like her forebears Efuru in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Ada in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* to mention but two. Faced with similar circumstances, both heroines mocked brutish and unreasonable traditions to their faces. Damning the consequences of marriage without immediate bride price they got united with the men after their hearts knowing that their joy depended more on their love for their spouses than on bride price; that their happiness mattered more than any amount of bride prize; and that bride prize could be paid any time.

Self-assertion is, thus, demanded from young women especially when it concerns the choice of life partners irrespective of parental persuasions, family problems, unhealthy traditional demands or any circumstance whatsoever. The era when parents chose or arranged marriage partners for their daughters is, by the playwright's reckoning, over as the idea has become obsolete.

From Nneka we come to Ifeanyi who is marital infidelity personified in addition to being the symbol of gender discrimination. Like the foregoing characters, Ifeanyi descends from his exalted status as a free, rich businessman to a hopeless prisoner. The once colossal, arrogant, boastful and unfaithful fellow who used to beat his wife and accuse her of the sin which he actually was guilty of; the one who never could be sorry for his wrongdoings; who neither respected his wife's opinion nor saw anything good in a girl child; the one who did not want his wife to be economically independent, is the same man that becomes meek at the end of the play, pleading for his wife's forgiveness and confessing his wrongdoings:

Please, Nneka forgive me... I have been unfaithful to you ... [*Clinging tightly to Nneka's hands*] Please my dear wife, I'm sorry for all I have done to hurt you. Forgive me. Please take good care of my daughter. Twenty years is a long time. I can't imagine it. (205)

Ifeanyi's incarceration and Gladys' death serve both as punishment for their negative life style and warning to their likes in our society. Ifeanyi is handed a jail sentence instead of death perhaps because of his wife and the new born baby both of whom deserve some degree of sympathy: Nneka, for her goodness of character and the baby for her innocence. But Gladys is handed an outright death sentence perhaps because the playwright considers her sin an unpardonable one. That, however, seems to be too harsh a punishment and a source of contradiction from the same author who spares Rose and Tony and successfully marries them even when they committed much the same sin as Gladys and Ifeanyi.

Next on the list is Maggie. An instance of a "busy-body," Maggie is ironically bent on destroying Nneka's marriage without knowing that her own marriage is undergoing some kind of gradual degradation consequent upon neglect. Maggie is typically vociferous and quarrelsome and embodies such other negative traits as garrulousness, gossiping, greed, lousiness, rumour-mongering and covetousness all of which combine to give her the image of a devilish woman. However, she gradually diminishes from that pompous height and her position as the only wife of Tony, to a lachrymal, complaining, confused and helpless co-wife of another woman. Instances of the anticlimactic turn of events in her life are worth citing. Earlier when she seems to be in control of her environment and marriage, Maggie exudes considerable power and even challenges her husband incessantly:

**Maggie:** [*Flares up*]. I've heard that times without number. It's alright! She's bright, she is well behaved, she is excellent! She's everything. I've heard all that and I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE! (63)

And later, when the news of her husband's taking of another wife hits her, there is a sudden crash of that superfluous energy and a replacement of it with misery. The once arrogant and wicked figure that used to dash about the city giving wicked counsel to Ifeanyi against his wife now makes a longer and strenuous journey to the village seeking solution to her problems from an old woman:

*[Maggie is seen walking down the narrow path leading to a thatched house in an interior village. Camera spans through the environment to establish the setting. Maggie is seen entering a house].*

And then her words,

I'm very confused. That's why I have come to you for advice. Whatever assistance you can give me will be highly appreciated. I just want to leave that house immediately. (134)

Maggie's journey from the comfort of the city to a hut in the village is symbolic of that retrogression which is part of the condemnation of her character and the ills she represents. Ironically too, Maggie, contrary to expectation, does not challenge the new wife of her husband who is actually an intruder, but opts to leave her marital home. Moreover, the Nneka, whom she works hard to destroy, never contemplates quitting her own marriage.

The woes of Maggie are Ojukwu's answer to the evils of jealousy, covetousness, hatred and gossip among wives and women. Rather than bring one peace of mind these nefarious traits and activities afford one sorrow and regret. Maggie is the replica of most wives and women in our society today and the reality of her experiences is a lesson for them. Such women abandon the responsibilities of their homes to chase after gossip and other vein things. Their minds are preoccupied with covetousness over other women's possessions and jealousy for their accomplishments and the result becomes hatred of the degree that prompts the mind for serious harm to their targets.

Since Maggie's predicament is self-inflicted, it demands self-purgation and the help of God instead of the assistance of man, hence the old woman's advice which is contrary to Maggie's expectation:

My dear, life generally is tough. It is always the survival of the fittest. So take care of yourself. Above all, put it in prayers and ask God for forgiveness of your own sins. You may also have contributed to the situation. Good bye. (135)

Coming to the lives of the positive characters, we see a climactic progression from the state of despair to that of glory. Onome, for instance, progresses from rejection to acceptance (rejection, ironically, by the Igbo which is nearer to his Isoko ancestry but acceptance by the Yoruba which is farther away from Isoko); from the state of unconsciousness resulting from heartbreak caused by a woman (Nneka), to a state of consciousness resulting from a woman's care (Bisi); from wound to healing; from

bachelorhood to married life; from relationship with a poor jobless girl to marriage with a trained, working class nurse; from being in love to being loved; from poverty to riches; from mere public service to diversified entrepreneurship. In the same vein, Musa and Shade progress from the loss of job and its consequent suffering to the security of a bigger job. Both families achieve their exalted status through humility and trust in God. They, like the *ieron*, lead the life of self-effacement, thus, fulfilling God's injunction that "... he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Lk. 14.11). Their lives, is, thus, a mirror in which the author wants us to take a peep for a better conduct of our own lives.

While admonishing that it is rewarding to lead a gentle, humble, and prayerful life, the playwright also cautions that marriage is not a bed of roses, but that by mutual understanding and respect, complementarity between husband and wife, and by resilience and trust in God a couple could surpass all challenges. This she exemplifies through the life of Musa and Shade which naturally rubs off on their children. Unlike Maggie, Shade is a good woman of the type that the bible says is scarce and worth more than rubies (Prov. 31:10). A few women there are in the Nigerian society who can respond the way Shade does to the predicament in her home. The "Maggies" of our society will abandon their homes and take to vain things, but the good woman would be a pillar of support, encouragement and consolation to her husband. Shade's role is that of the Nigerian woman of Ojukwu's dream - that woman who will stand in the gap for both husband and children in time of crisis. In the moments of trial, Shade is either advising the children or she is consoling her husband and lifting his spirit for a better tomorrow. When, for instance, Musa rues his inability to meet her fatherly obligations, Sade is handy to console him while the children lend their support in prayer elsewhere:

We shall pray to God to help our daddy. Our teacher said we should always pray to God whenever we are in difficulty. He also said that we should always thank God for keeping us alive and healthy. (175)

### **Conclusion**

It has been demonstrated in the foregoing essay that *Memories and Visions* is a veritable tool for marital education and a reliable compass on the voyage to marital bliss. These are made obvious by the author's critical handling of her subject matter and denouement. The impact of this kind of handling is that it provides for the reader lessons on how to actualize a successful marriage in spite of debilitating challenges. Chief among the possible lessons learnt are, first, the need to marry not by financial or ethnic motivations, but out of the conviction of mutual love and respect between a couple, and, second, to depend on God for sustenance and for solutions to marital problems.

Even more fascinating is perhaps the technical aspect of the play, which depicts the author's manipulation of the critical tool of irony. Particularly interesting is the author's two-pronged approach to the handling of that critical tool, which enables it to perform both deflationary and inflationary functions. Similar to that is the infusion into the critical mode the device of poetic justice, which drives home the intended marital morals. It is, indeed, these meticulous and objective modes of dramatization that have enabled the

playwright to reveal her vision for the Nigerian (indeed, African) society based on the memories of events in its past and the worries of its present. This vision, therefore, is that of a society devoid of failed, but replete with successful, marriages.

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