

An Analysis of the Language of Humour in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

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Abstract

This paper shows how humour is deployed in Achebe's *A Man of the People* by analysing the make-up of the various instances of humour as well as their significance in attaining the desired effects. To Veatch (1998), humour contains two incongruous elements; one element is socially normal while the other is a violation of the 'subjective moral order'. Veatch's principle of incongruity allows this paper to foreground the various instances of humour which have both congruent and incongruent elements. These instances of humour show the strong attachment or detachment of a character towards somebody or something, and further describe the mood of characters and the atmosphere under which comic utterances are made, among other roles. In the end, Achebe's *A Man of the People* stands out as a classic example of a humorous narrative that effectively attains its thematic concerns also through the use of incongruity.

Keywords: Achebe, *A Man of the People*, Humour, Incongruity, Laughter

1. Introduction

A closer look at the literature produced in Africa by Africans and others will reveal the lively role that humour enjoys in such pieces. A number of African writers such as Ola Rotimi, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo and Ayi Kwei Armah have dealt with various concerns in their work which are also anchored by vast examples of humour. The Nigerian novelist, poet and critic, Chinua Achebe, was considered the leading literary scholar, if not one of Africa's leading literary scholars, by critics and scholars like Carol (1975) and Dwivedi (2008). Achebe has written a number of novels which include the much-celebrated *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. In his works Achebe, like Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, often considers the levels of rot and decay in the individual and society at large, as well as the various colonial issues that plagued and still plague the continent of Africa. These thematic concerns of the African writer are often at times amply depicted also because of the use of humour, a powerful device that can serve a writer well in making his or her work interesting to read.

Humour actually occurs in a myriad of forms such as "physical slapstick, visual humour, jokes relying on gestures or sounds, aphorisms, short stories" (Ritchie, 2010, p. 33), et cetera. With forms like the aforementioned, humour helps the writer to achieve a number of functions in a literary work. It helps the writer like Achebe to downplay the importance of serious issues like misfortune, death, politics, et cetera, as they are narrated with some level of casualness. Even when the issues discussed in a text may not interest a reader, the creative use of humour in the narration of such issues has the tendency to make the reader enjoy reading the text since his or her senses are appealed to. This is to say that in many instances of humour, the reader experiences emotional feelings like a smile, a giggle, a chuckle or even a loud laugh because his or her senses are "tickled" by the power of words, even as these same words do more in literary works by revealing the thematic concerns of their creators; that is, writers. Evidently, humour could play a number of roles in any literary work.

With the above as the introduction, the concern of this work is to consider an analysis of the language of humour in Achebe's *A Man of the People*. This is achieved by looking at the various forms of humour and their incongruities to establish their make-up and enjoyment or otherwise thereof by the reader of the text. However, since the paper addresses the issue of humour, it will begin with an exposition on the concept of humour in order to create a context for the discussion. The study will then proceed to look at the analysis of humour in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, and finally provide a conclusion that will sum up the discussion.

1.1 The Concept of Humour

Polimeni & Reiss (2006) observe that "humor is a complex cognitive function which often leads to laughter" (p. 347). It has also been noted by researchers that humour and laughter are not the same even though they are closely related. Humour is perceived as the cognitive process which often, but not always, leads to the realization of the seizure-like activity called laughter. In actual fact, laughter is achieved or experienced by one when one undergoes a humorous cognitive stimulus, and by other physical stimuli like tickling or caressing. "So although laughter is not a necessary or sufficient condition of humour, from a common sense point of view it's a useful starting point for a definition" (Ross,

1998, p. 2).

As a concept, “humour relies on ambiguities, uncertainties and shifts in perspectives, as well as playing with the limits of language, logic and representation” (Franklyn, 2006, p. 13). It is seen as one of the marginalized aspects of human civilization that until quite recently has been overlooked as an important area for investigation. But as noted by researchers and scholars alike, “laughter, humour and joking surround and permeate our every business” (Rutter, 1997, p. 1). In other words, all cultures are regarded as being familiar with humour (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006; Franklyn, 2006). Humour has a way of defining human interactions as it may promote or endanger the kind of social relations people establish. This ability of humour is known by literary writers like Achebe and it is one of the strong reasons for their use of this device in their works. A notable traditional issue that has concerned a number of scholars and critics alike is whether humour is subversive in the sense that it is a catalyst to undermine authority, or even repressive in the sense of encouraging a safe outpouring of emotions which could have otherwise been expressed unfavourably (Franklyn, 2006). However, these disputes or concerns, as Franklyn notes, “have been largely focused on the content of humour” (p. 68).

People obviously enjoy humorous situations without considering or appreciating all the causal effects. This is where theories or methodologies become useful in revealing not just the content of humour, but its make-up and appreciation or otherwise. There are therefore a number of methodologies or theories that can be followed to underscore the very make-up of humour, its content and the very role it plays in communication. Notwithstanding the number of classifications of humour and studies done by scholars like Attardo (1994; 2001), Norrick (2004), Zabalbeascoa (2005) and Chiaro (2008), Ritchie (2004) observes and concludes from studies done by Morreall (1983) and Raskin (1985) that “perhaps the common classification is the tripartite: relief or release theories, superiority or aggression theories, and incongruity theories” (p. 18). Attardo (1994) provides a similar classification whereby he presents one with “The three families of Theories” (p. 47) in a tabular form and under each of these classifications he has some subheadings. Thus, he has cognitive (incongruity, contrast), social (hostility, aggression, superiority, triumph, derision, disparagement) and psychoanalytical (release, sublimation, liberation, economy). Let us briefly consider the tripartite classification of these theories.

Taking superiority theories, for instance, proponents believe that humour is essentially derisive and that laughter originated as an act of aggression. These theories have their origin from classical times and can be traced to scholars such as Aristotle, Quintilian, Thomas Hobbes and Charles Darwin (Chapman & Foot, 1977). The impression from a superiority theory is that people laugh down at others they perceive to be inferior. As a theory it works quite well with studies conducted in hierarchical institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools, churches, among others. In such institutions, senior members would ordinarily make most jokes about their junior members because of the privilege of hierarchy. Junior members may also make their own jokes which would usually be self-depreciative, especially in the presence of their superiors. A modern proponent of superiority theory is Gruner (1997). His version of the theory is one of “playful aggression”. Here, without any exception Gruner believes that any instance of humour can be scaled to a game scenario which ends with two sides: the winner and the loser. This cannot be the case in some games; that is, even in instances of humour we could have participants all winning or losing together too, sometimes with no clear winner or loser. As a theory that works very well with hierarchical institutions, it will not function too well with a written text like *A Man of the People*, even though it will aid in explaining (for instance) the political rank of Chief Nanga and his subsequent relationship with his people.

Besides superiority theories, release or relief theories “maintain that humor ‘releases’ tensions, psychic energy, or that humor releases one from inhibitions, conversions and laws” (Attardo, 1994, p. 50). It has therefore been hypothesized that an optimum condition of arousal exists to enjoy humour in whatever form it is presented (Apter & Smith, 1977; Rothbart, 1977). The most influential proponent of release theory is Sigmund Freud. Freud looks at humour as a release of excessive sexual or aggressive tension. Having their stronghold in Freud’s views of the unconscious mind, “humour and laughter release the psychic tension related to inhibiting unconscious sexual or aggressive impulses” (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006, p. 351). Laughter is thus considered to be a healthy and pleasurable activity that can reduce anxiety. Considering the strength and limitation of this group of theories, Polimeni & Reiss (2006) observe that there are indeed numerous jokes which have a hostile edge. However, “many others seem to lack prominent aggressive themes (although it is acknowledged that depending on social context, covert or low level aggression could conceivably be interpreted in any humorous comment)” (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006, p. 351).

Incongruity theories are also noted and remarked by Franklyn (2006) to be “the most widely accepted school of thought concerning humour” (p. 77), although it is also noticed that there are marked variations between the theories which come under the umbrella term. The notable authors generally associated with incongruity theories of humour are Immanuel Kant (LaFollette & Shanks, 1993), Norman Maier (Vaid, 1999), Arthur Schopenhauer (Provine, 2000) and Arthur Koestler (1964). Of these writers, Attardo (1994) remarks that Schopenhauer’s definition of laughter has “incongruity” clearly mentioned. Attardo consequently cites Schopenhauer’s definition:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity (p. 48).

Apart from this clearly defined theory of incongruity and the one by McGhee (1979), Veatch (1998) is “perhaps” seen as the one who “has formulated the most precise and encompassing humour theory” (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006, p. 350),

although he builds on Raskin's (1985) linguistic-semantic theory of verbal humour. To Veatch, humour contains two incongruous elements. One element is socially normal while the other is a violation of the "subjective moral order". He explains the "moral order" as the "rich cognitive and emotional system of opinions about the proper order of the social and natural world" (Veatch, 1998, p. 168). Veatch's humour theory, and by reference incongruity theory, will serve in underscoring the various incongruities in Achebe's *A Man of the People*. However, it must be established that not all incongruous instances are humorous. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that one will find all the answers by employing Veatch's incongruity theory. As observed by Ritchie (2004), this inadequacy is noted by Raskin (1985) when he writes that there is "no a priori reason why all aspects of every example of humour should be explicable in terms of a single principle" (p. 40). Nevertheless, for a more interesting and detailed analysis of the make-up of humour in Achebe's novel, the incongruity theory comes as a very resourceful tool.

2. Analysis of Humour in *A Man of the People*

A Man of the People delineates the conflict between morality and corruption by contrasting the protagonist Odili Samalu with his opposite, the Minister of Culture, Chief Nanga. These characters are worlds apart, with radically different ideologies" (Dwivedi, 2008, p. 3). In the story, Odili, the teacher-turned-politician and narrator of the story comes into conflict with Chief Nanga, the corrupt Minister of Culture. For Odili, the reason for the clash is not entirely to address the rot of Chief Nanga and his government, but also because Odili has a personal reason; Chief Nanga seduces his girlfriend, a catalyst that sets into motion his hatred of Chief Nanga and all that he stands for. The novel ends with the narrator's near-death experience in the hands of Chief Nanga's followers, and his subsequent recovery. The final episode of the novel also reveals the overthrow of the government and the arrest of Chief Nanga and other corrupt government officials.

One particular type of humour arises from the titles of characters and also in name-calling. Some of these titles are ridiculous and so exaggerated, often flattering the individuals they refer to and portraying them as incompetent. When the novel opens, the narrator-cum-character, Odili, introduces Chief Nanga as "the most approachable politician in the country" (p. 1). No doubt Chief Nanga is seen as "a man of the people" (p. 1). He is therefore ascribed different titles and some of which are summarily quite humorous and tainted with sarcasm. Two of these titles are "Chief the Honourable M.A Nanga" and "M.A. minus opportunity" (p. 1). Powerful and well-connected, Chief Nanga is highly esteemed by his people despite the fact that a great number of them (including his wife) know that there is nothing honourable about him. Here lie the two incongruous elements. As an honourable person, Chief Nanga should engage in "socially normal" or acceptable acts that are honourable. However, throughout the novel he is seen in dishonest practices like bribery and immoral acts such as sleeping with the wives of others. It therefore becomes incongruous that people should still refer to him as "Chief the Honourable". Chief Nanga's immoral and corrupt deeds, by Veatch's standards, constitute "a violation of the 'subjective moral order'" (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006, p. 350). Chief Nanga's deeds are summarily incongruous to the august office he holds as the "Honourable" Minister of Culture.

Chief Nanga's dishonourable acts do not endear him to the narrator. Early in the reading of the narrative, one senses the narrator's dislike of Chief Nanga, an individual who had risen too quickly like the unnatural growth of the "man-child" in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Chief Nanga had actually taught Odili in "Standard three" and was "something like his favourite pupil" (p. 2). The narrator therefore knows how corrupt Chief Nanga and his government are, but his own people are prepared to turn a blind eye to his corrupt deeds and hold on to their own. The people are thus complicit in the corruption that engulfs their society. As Odili, the narrator, remarks:

Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you – as my father did – if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth (p. 2).

It is therefore incongruous that when one expects the rejection of Chief Nanga due to his corrupt activities, he is rather praised by his people as "a man of the people". What even infuriates the narrator is the consideration given by Chief Nanga's government for one to be appointed into any political office. Thus, experience does not matter for one to be considered for a position in government but "loyalty to the party", as Chief Nanga exhibits. This situation appears to be a major problem in a number of African nations. The congruency is that it is socially acceptable for people to be appointed into offices with regard to their level of competency or experience. It is, however, incongruent to appoint people into office because of how loyal one is to the party in government. But as Achebe depicts in the example of Chief Nanga, people are appointed into political offices without any experience. So now the "M.A. minus opportunity" man (Chief Nanga) remains loyal to the government and is appointed into a ministerial office without sweat at all. To the narrator, Chief Nanga's ascendancy to power is questionable and ridiculous. No more does it become amusing to Chief Nanga (although it does to the narrator and other teachers in his school) when a colleague teacher calls him "M. A." ("M.A. Nanga" being his actual name) and he should respond, "minus opportunity". He now has a position in government, having capitalized on the opportunity to gain one. It thus becomes insulting to him, though he is supposed to find it amusing, that he is still referred to as "M.A. minus opportunity".

It also appears that the people in power in the novel are preoccupied with titles to the chagrin of the narrator and other concerned activists like Max. Chief Nanga himself remarks in a conversation with others how he will soon be given the title, "Doctor of Laws, L.L.D". As if he is not content with just "Doctor", he even expresses interest in the title of his colleague minister, "Chief the Honourable Alhaji Doctor Mongo Sego, M.P." (p. 18). Although Chief Sego is regarded

as corrupt as Chief Nanga (and so it is incongruous to refer to him too as “Honourable”), his name is remarked not to match Chief Nanga’s new name: “Chief the Honourable D.M.A. Nanga, M.P., L.L.D.”, when Chief Nanga is awarded his “Doctor of Laws”. These long titles portray a humorous and sarcastic situation as these leaders are bent on acquiring empty titles that do not encapsulate their performance. Following Chief Nanga’s expression of interest in Chief Sego’s name, the narrator “mischievously” asks Chief Nanga what he thinks about “Chief Dr Mrs”. Chief Nanga immediately retorts, “That one no sweet for mouth...E no catch” (P. 19). This means that the title is so undesirable that it does not even permit one to utter it. A bit of a giggle or a stronger form of laughter may be realised here (because of the outright dismissal by the speaker and his use of pidgin English), but one cannot gloss over the depiction of the patriarchal setting of the novel and the gender imbalance in the distribution of titles. To this effect, Mrs. John, a party loyalist and a friend to Chief Nanga remarks that: “Because na woman get am e no go sweet for mouth. I done talk say na only for election time woman de get equality for dis our country” (p. 19). Obviously Mrs. John has a valid point since no woman is presented with such titles as Chief Nanga and Chief Sego or any other male political figure in the novel. In the words of the journalist who accompanies Chief Nanga, this title: “Dr Chief Mrs” (making an inversion of it) “rough like sand-paper for mouth...E no catch at all” (p. 19). This remark will likely elicit some desired laughter or giggle from the participants and the reader as well. In the world of this patriarchal setting, it is incongruous for the woman to have such esteemed titles as those carried by male contenders such as Chief Sego and Chief Nanga.

Besides, Chief Nanga’s own Prime Minister is referred to as “The Tiger, the Lion, the One and Only, the Sky, the Ocean and many other names of praise” (p. 5). These titles are heard when the Prime Minister addresses the people in “Parliament”. They are praise names given to the Prime Minister to flatter him. In this charged atmosphere he justifies sacking the Minister of Finance and “two-thirds of the Cabinet” for refusing to support him in printing million pounds, instead of cutting down the price paid to coffee planters as a way of managing the financial crises in the country. The Prime Minister fails to adhere to the advice of the sacked ministers because coffee farmers are the “bulwark” of the party and he does not want to risk his re-election chances.

Incongruity between the expected actions and the actual actions is presented in the immediate paragraph. Now the sacked Minister of Finance and others who deserve genuine praise for their nationalistic efforts are rather condemned and ascribed all manner of names. Name-calling thus becomes an avenue for others to be humorous in Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. The sacked Minister of Finance, for instance, is referred to as “Traitor”, “Coward”, and “Doctor of Fork your Mother” (p. 6). This last name-calling, though serious in its intent, is also humorous considering the corruption of the word “fuck” for “fork”. The corruption of the word places a greater strength on the middle vowel in the word and enforces the intent of the utterance. The corruption of the word may also portray the ignorance of “the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*” who contributes this one from the public gallery of “Parliament”. To this effect, the narrator remarks about the editor that: “Encouraged, no doubt, by the volume of laughter this piece of witticism had earned him in the gallery he proceeded the next morning to print it in his paper. The spelling is his” (P.6).

There are also other individual words or phrases, not titles as such, that evoke so much humour in Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. One of such words is “anikilija”, an onomatopoeic name for Mr. Nwege’s rickety bicycle with faulty brakes. This particular humour in the novel is captured as “a popular Anata joke”. In this joke, there is shared knowledge between Mr. Nwege and the inhabitants of Anata, Chief Nanga’s hometown. Thus, this “anikilija” initially becomes incongruous to readers of the novel, but we come to be part of the “shared-audience” when the narrator relays the story of “anikilija” to us in the following words:

One day as he was cascading down a steep slope that led to a narrow bridge at the bottom of the hill he saw a lorry – an unusual phenomenon in those days – coming down the opposite slope. It looked like a head-on meeting on the bridge. In his extremity Mr. Nwege had raised his voice and cried to the passing pedestrians: ‘In the name of God push me down!’ apparently nobody did, and so he added an inducement: ‘Push me down and my three pence is yours!’ From that day ‘Push me down and take my three pence’ became a popular Anata joke (p. 13).

From the extract, one can understand Mr. Nwege’s confused state of mind when he sees a lorry, an incongruous phenomenon, and it appears his own life will come to an end because of the possibility of a head-on collision. His fear is expressed in the first utterance of “In the name of God push me down”. The force of the humour is felt here, and more pronounced too when Mr. Nwege adds an inducement (because no one pushes him the first time): “Push me down and my three pence is yours!” This situation may elicit an explosive laughter from the reader, especially when the laughter has already been teased out of him or her with “In the name of God push me down!” This explosive laughter is due to the element of fear and surprise on Mr. Nwege’s face when he sees the lorry and realises his helplessness. The reader actually imagines Mr. Nwege on his faulty and rickety bicycle as he repeatedly shouts for people to help him. Incongruity is strongly established here, as it becomes bizarre that instead of helping Mr. Nwege people actually stare and laugh at the helpless man. People may just look on too since they are themselves powerless. Mr. Nwege’s situation is serious because it involves his life; but the use of humour here belittles the seriousness of the situation. It is as if Achebe wanted to say that Mr. Nwege survived the situation after all.

There are further examples that bring about explosive laughter, but the punch of the humour is often delayed. Thus, the effect or force of the humour is often not realised immediately after a humorous utterance. This is perhaps what Ritchie (2010) captures when he notes that “some presentations of humour leave some of the necessary linguistic connections implicit, so that the audience must fill these in for themselves” (p. 41). In such a situation, humour is achieved by the

audience or reader after a careful thought of the utterance, or when all the details such as the context, the butt of the joke, the mood and atmosphere have been revealed. A good example in the text is when someone comes knocking at Odili's door while he is lighting his "Tilley lamp". In response, Odili declares: "Come in if you are good-looking" (p. 20). It is congruent for one to knock and expect to be asked to come in; of course not because one is "good-looking" as Odili makes it appear. It is perhaps this addition by Odili that makes his utterance incongruous. Society may regard Odili as biased in receiving only "good-looking" people into his home. That established, this utterance by Odili would not necessarily bring out any form of laughter or smile in the reader. However, when the corresponding response is, "Is Odili in?" asked an unnatural, high-pitched voice" (P. 20), there is a gradual built-up of smile on the reader's face. This smile is consequently prominent when one reads further that, to this response Odili remarks, "Come in, fool" (p. 20). It is here that the "unnatural, high-pitched voice" is actualized as Andrew, a jovial male friend of Odili. The reader then wonders why Andrew would play such a prank on Odili since it is likely the case that Odili expects a female companion. This situation is finally clarified by Odili when he reveals that it is a "silly joke" he plays with Andrew. To Odili, "the idea was to sound like a girl and so send the other's blood pressure up" (p. 20). Odili's blood pressure (that is, excitement) rises up, no doubt, when he hears the knock. But when he realises that it is his friend, Andrew, disappointment sets in; hence, his remark of "Come in, fool". The reader receives the effect of this humour as he or she continues to laugh loudly or lightly in his or her head because of the disappointment of Odili.

Closely linked to this example is the interest in girls by these two friends. When Odili asks Andrew if he had found out about a girl he showed interest in some time ago, Andrew condemns Odili for being too interested in girls all the time. The clever retort by Odili to this accusation is what sparks the laughter in the reader; thus, Odili declares: "'O.K., Mr Gentleman'... 'Any person wey first mention about girl again for this room make him tongue cut. How is the weather?' He laughed" (p. 21). In actual fact the catalyst that elicits humour in the exchange between the two is the seriousness with which Odili makes his defence in pidgin English. His sudden shift in the topic of conversation to the "weather" is quite incongruous, truly amusing and makes the reader laugh. Andrew joins in the laughter because there is shared knowledge between these two (that they will surely talk about girls again).

There is also delayed humour in the conversation that ensues between Chief Nanga and Odili when the latter goes to visit the former in the city. It becomes clear that these two are womanisers and that Chief Nanga has some mistresses besides his wife. As a result, both Chief Nanga and Odili often engage in "tales of conquest" where they discuss their experiences with women. In one of such tales, Chief Nanga talks about his conquest of a "young married woman who never took her brassiere off" even after many encounters with Chief Nanga. This weird act by the woman does not elicit any sense of humour but curiosity in the reader - curiosity because of the incongruous nature of the situation. It is therefore significant that this curiosity turns into sheer humour and subsequent laughter when the woman admits finally "that the husband (apparently a very jealous man) had put some juju on her breasts to scare her into faithfulness; his idea being presumably that she would not dare expose that part of her to another man much less other parts" (p. 59). The reader laughs at this situation especially because of the man's fruitless attempt to keep the wife faithful to him.

Though serious, the above situation has a morale that even the adulterer Chief Nanga and the flirtatious Odili highlight in their discourse, further reinforcing the humorous mood of the reader. Both Chief Nanga and Odili accept that a man cannot force his wife to be faithful to him if the woman decides otherwise. Chief Nanga remarks about the husband of his mistress that: "E fool pass garri... Which person tell am na bobby them de take do the thing? Nonsense" (p. 59). Certainly the husband forgets that it is the penetration of the wife that should have mattered to him and not the "bobby" or breasts that could entirely be abandoned in the scheme of sexual intercourse. This idea and similar ones like how the wife manages to cheat on the husband are elements that flood through the mind of the reader and make him or her laugh the more.

A more creative example of a piece of humour in Achebe's novel where the author dedicates three pages to its gradual development is realised in the fear of death by Honourable Simon Koko. The full force of the humour is delayed and gradually released as details are given. Thus, in this instance, the effect of the humour (which is mostly laughter) is heightened and released soon, only to be raised again and suddenly released until the full force of the humour is achieved. When Chief Nanga and Odili decide to visit Chief Koko, the Minister for Overseas Training, in order for him to assist Odili, Chief Koko decides to drink coffee while he offers his guests whisky and soda. Apparently enjoying his coffee with his "satisfied Ahh!" Chief Koko suddenly drops "the cup and saucer on the drinks-table by his chair" and jumps "as though a scorpion had stung him" (p. 33). Curiosity then fills the reader's mind, as it does in the minds of Chief Nanga and Odili. Chief Koko then starts wailing, "They have killed me" (p. 33); yet, he gets the energy to threaten his cook, whom he believes has poisoned him. Humorous enough, this poisoned man has a last wish: he desires to kill his cook before he dies. He fruitlessly resists the attempt by Chief Nanga and Odili to call a doctor for him. The desire of Chief Koko to kill his cook and how he insists that no doctor is called for him are arguably two incongruous wishes that could be asked by a poisoned man who was apparently afraid of dying. At least a congruent situation would be to seek the service of a doctor, as was suggested by Chief Nanga. However, Chief Koko desires otherwise. Thus, Chief Koko resigns himself to fate and moans: "'What is the use of a doctor?'... 'Do they know about African poison? They have killed me. What have I done to them? Did I owe them anything? Oh! Oh! Oh! What have I done?'" (p. 34). Laughter is strong here, since Chief Koko is helpless and refuses any doctor's help. He shows his confused state of mind when he starts blaming "them" (his supposed perpetrators) when he initially singles out his cook as the perpetrator.

Chief Koko's confusion and helplessness create humour for the reader, but not his guests who remain alarmed

throughout this experience. For his guests the incongruity of the situation lies in the expected action and the actual action of Chief Koko after drinking just coffee. When Chief Koko's supposed perpetrator is brought before them, he calms nerves by drinking the supposedly poisoned coffee as a show of his innocence. The cook reveals that he had to brew his locally processed coffee for his master when he realised that his master's coffee was finished. The ironic twist to this event is fully foregrounded. The situation is even sarcastic since Chief Koko as well as his government promotes "OHMS – Our Home Made Stuff". Now, here he is thinking that he has been poisoned when he has actually drunk an "OHMS" coffee. Typical of Chief Nanga, he sets another stage of laughter when he teases his friend in the following words: "But S.I...you too fear death. Small thing you begin holler 'they done kill me, they done kill me!' Like person wey scorpion done lego am for him prick" (p. 35). It is Chief Nanga's use of simile to compare Chief Koko to a person who has been bitten at his penis by a scorpion that strongly evicts the desired laughter in the interlocutors and readers alike. Hence, in response to the aforementioned remark by Chief Nanga, Chief Koko himself begins to laugh "foolishly"; after all he is alive and will prefer it that way. Laughter indeed facilitates further laughter in others (Chapman, 1976) and this is the situation Chief Koko creates when he (already laughing) sets the stage for further humour by informing his colleague that he (Chief Nanga) would have pissed in his trousers if it had been him in his situation. It is Odili, the narrator, who brings the reader back to reality from his or her humorous mood. The reality is that Chief Nanga fears for his own life seeing that Chief Koko could have indeed been poisoned and that it could have been him.

As a way of achieving humour, the author also makes use of pun. Ritchie (2010) observes that puns "also feature in fictional dialogues, for e.g. novels" (p. 45) and they are "the most widely discussed type of verbal joke" (p. 42). With puns, "the technique is to use an expression which, while making sense at the moment of use also evokes some other expression, either well-known in the culture, or associated in some way with the context in which the utterance is made" (Ritchie, 2010, p. 45). Thus, some people can subvert the meaning of a word or a phrase to achieve a certain effect such as humour. A perfect example is seen in the ambiguous use of the word, "bar", by the "Senior Tutor". In Achebe's *A Man of the People*, the "Senior Tutor", "a jolly old rogue", decides to walk out of the lodge of Mr. Nwege "with one bottle of beer under each armpit - to the amusement of everyone except Mr. Nwege who had clearly not gone out of his way to buy beer at its present impossible price for members of his staff to take home" (p. 20). The scene itself is humorous as one can imagine the drunken "jolly old rogue" with extra beer tucked under his armpit for home. Not bothered by the impression he creates, the Senior Tutor asks those present "why so many young people travelled to Britain to be called to the Bar when he could call them all to Josiah's bar" (p. 20). With "a fine sense of humour", the Senior Tutor plays on the word "bar" as he acknowledges that there is the legal term "bar", but he is interested in "bar" as a pub. It is therefore not surprising that as "a great frequenter of Josiah's bar across the road" the Senior Tutor would wish to invite others to join him there. And, of course, it will certainly be incongruous for anyone to be called to the "bar" only to realise that it is a drinking bar and not the law fraternity as suggested by the drunken "jolly old rogue".

Another example is the play on the catch-phrase, V.I.P. (Very Important Person). A drunken kinsman and trader who visits the home of Chief Nanga during Christmas remarks that Chief Nanga is "what white man call V.I.P." (p. 96). Now this does not strike any cord of humour in the reader. Instead, the kinsman may be pitied because he has to flatter Chief Nanga in order to get the bottle of beer he desperately wants. What makes the situation humorous and perhaps incongruous is when this drunken man adds "Me na P.I.V. - Poor Innocent Victim", after which he laughs. If this wit of his does not create a smile on one's face, then his own laughter alone could make the engaging reader to laugh too (if not smile the more). The wit of his utterance does not escape the comment of the narrator as he writes: "I couldn't help smiling; the wit and inventiveness of our traders is of course world famous" (p. 96). The analogy the drunken man creates out of the situation is that he wants his "national cake" from Chief Nanga's wealth. So for him, a "common beer, common five shilling beer" can be afforded by Chief Nanga who is building a new house, "four storeys". The mention of a new house indirectly points out the corruption of Chief Nanga as the narrator observes that the building is "a 'dash' from the European building firm of Antonio and Sons whom Nanga had recently given the half-million-pound contract to build the National Academy of Arts and Sciences" (p. 96). For all his wit and inventiveness, the drunken man is not rewarded with his "common beer" but persuaded to leave and come back later. Here, one may sympathize with him especially after he succeeds in creating a desired emotion (at least a smile) with his inventiveness, P.I.V. – Poor Innocent Victim.

Apart from the above examples, there is humour that arises out of the shared knowledge and experience the reader of Achebe's novel has with the speaker of an utterance. In such situations, the speaker does not need to give further details as is done in "the popular Anata joke". For example, at the book exhibition hosted by the President of the Writers' Society, the narrator describes the attire worn by the President in such terms: "He had on a white and blue squarish gown, with a round neck and no buttons, over brown, striped, baggy trousers made from the kind of light linen material we sometimes called *Obey the Wind*" (p. 61). The expression that teases out at least a smile from the reader is "Obey the Wind" which is originally italicised in the text, as if to bring out the humour in it by giving it prominence. One could therefore imagine, because of the shared knowledge with the speaker, how the wind could blow the President's trousers open anytime it became intense. A scene like that will certainly be humorous to observe.

In addition, one finds it understandable that Chief Nanga's desire to give Odili more girls to sleep with is not amusing to his friend. It becomes awkward for Odili that Chief Nanga outsmarts him by sleeping with his "good-time girl", Elsie, when Odili goes to visit him in the city. But as friends should do when one hurts the other, Chief Nanga offers his "unreserved apology" and adds an inducement. Thus, he tells Odili: "If you like I can bring you six girls this evening. You go do the thing sotay you go beg say you no want again. Ha, ha, ha, ha!" (p. 72). The speaker himself laughs,

perhaps together with the reader who understands the import of Chief Nanga's utterance and how tempting it could be for anyone truly interested in flirting with women to take the offer. It is shocking to Chief Nanga when Odili turns down his offer and insults him for betraying him with Elsie. Elsie actually informs Chief Nanga that there is nothing serious between Odili and her. This situation marks the beginning of the marred relationship between Odili and Chief Nanga. This soar relationship makes Odili to contest Chief Nanga as Member of Parliament on the ticket of another party.

The irony of situations is also another source of humour in Achebe's *A Man of the People*. For example, it is humorous but also ironical that "The Speaker" of "Parliament" will break "his mallet ostensibly trying to maintain order, but you could see he was enjoying the commotion" (p. 6). The commotion results from the attempts by the "entire house, including the Prime Minister", to shout down the dismissed Minister of Finance, Dr. Makinde. It is very incongruous that the Prime Minister of a nation, together with the Speaker, will join forces with colleagues in shouting down one of their own. One could imagine the smirk on the speaker's face as he enjoys the chaos in his own house, the House of Parliament.

It is further ironical but humorous too for Chief Nanga to advise "another teacher" that a position in government as a minister shouldn't be desired by anyone. To him, teaching is a very noble profession: "Sometimes I use to regret ever leaving the teaching field. Although I am a minister today I can swear to God that I am not as happy as when I was a teacher" (p. 9). The candid admission here makes the teachers "collapse" with laughter because they cannot believe Chief Nanga's assurance. As Polimeni and Reiss (2006) note, "perhaps, the overarching use of humorous communication is to help navigate contentious social situations" (p. 348). Chief Nanga's admission comes as a surprise to his audience because teachers all over the country are in "an ugly, rebellious mood" (p. 9). His frank admission effectively lightens the mood of the present teachers and helps him to "navigate" through this "contentious" social situation. His speech is therefore welcome by all.

Similarly, Chief Nanga affirms his belief that being a minister is full of problems and so no one should desire it. This is re-echoed by him to his audience when he is invited to the proprietor's lodge (Mr. Nwege's house). However, to Chief Nanga's surprise Josiah, the "one-eyed man" and "owner of a nearby shop-and-bar" retorts: "I no kuku mind the katakata wey de for inside. Make you put Minister money for my hand and all the wahala on top. I no mind at all" (p. 15). The reader subsequently laughs at Josiah's jovial use of pidgin English to express his heart desire, and of course "everyone laughed" too. Josiah therefore prefers all the problems that come with being a minister as far as he continues to enjoy the wealth that comes with it too.

Apart from these examples, another comical and ironical situation is seen when Odili wakes up from his coma at the hospital after his near-death experience at the inaugural campaign meeting of Chief Nanga. Making the political mistake of attending his political rival's rally, disguised Odili is identified and terribly beaten into unconsciousness. Though his near-death experience is serious, it is ironical that he wakes up from coma and belittles his situation: "I remember the first time I woke up in the hospital and felt my head turbanned like an Alhaji. Everything seemed unreal and larger than life and I was sure I was dreaming" (p. 140). The art of comparing his "turbanned" head to an "Alhaji" through the use of simile is what makes his serious situation comical, less serious and even incongruous.

There are a few other examples in Achebe's *A Man of the People* which are not as explosive as others but are very light examples of humour, often meant as satire. For instance, Chief Nanga is presented as insulting his colleague Minister of Public Construction, Hon. T.C. Kobino, because he delays in constructing the road between Giligili and Anata, Chief Nanga's home town. Here too there is light humour and ridicule of the government as the government employs incompetent people into public offices. According to Chief Nanga, the Minister for Public Construction delays in executing the road project because "one small boy from his town – whom" they "all helped to promote last year" advises that "the road should not be tarred before next dry season since he wants to carry out tests in the soil" (p. 42). However, Chief Nanga wants the road tarred before the next elections. His frustrations are summed up in the comment he makes about the "small boy", the expert, that: "He has become an earthworm" (p. 42). Though this remark is serious to Chief Nanga, he makes light humour of it and makes the narrator laugh. It is possible to understand the fury of Chief Nanga since he wants to win elections at all cost; but his efforts are frustrated by a colleague Minister whose constituency is not Anata.

Finally, there is a mixture of humour and satire when the narrator describes the opportunistic nature of Chief Nanga. Unlike other followers of Chief Nanga in the novel, the narrator asserts that he has no reason to be enthusiastic about Nanga. The narrator comments on the opportunistic nature of Nanga when he writes that on "seeing the empty ministerial seats", Chief Nanga "had yapped and snarled so shamelessly for the meaty prize" (p. 6-7). The dog image here makes the whole episode lightly humorous as one could imagine Chief Nanga cursing and yelling at the dismissed two-thirds of Cabinet ministers, all because he wants to be seen as a loyal party fellow. It does not come as a surprise to the narrator when Chief Nanga is later made Minister of Culture. His change in outlook after his ministerial appointment is described by the narrator with a taint of sarcasm:

As soon as the Minister's Cadillac arrived at the head of a long motorcade the hunters dashed this way and that and left off their last shots...The Minister stepped out wearing damask and gold chains and acknowledging cheers with his ever-present fan of animal skin which they said fanned away all evil designs and shafts of malevolence thrown at him by the wicked (p. 7).

The "Cadillac", "damask" and "gold chains" portray Chief Nanga's newly acquired wealth, and for protection his fan of

animal skin serves him well. One may wonder, and perhaps this is the intention of the narrator, whether truly Chief Nanga's fan really performs the protective role for him. For a fact, his government is overthrown and he is arrested trying to escape by canoe, dressed like a fisherman. Chief Nanga's ever-present fan of animal skin is not able to fan away the calamity that befalls him and his government.

3. Conclusion

All in all, "humour is a complex cognitive function which often leads to laughter" (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006, p. 347). Employing the theory of incongruity this write-up considers an analysis of humour in Achebe's *A Man of the People*. It establishes that there are several sources of humour in the text and they all play significant roles in underscoring the concerns of the text, particularly the subject of corruption. It thus points out that humour results from titles, name-calling, puns, use of pidgin English, irony of situations, comparisons (through devices such as simile) and satire, among other means. These various means bring about the many instances of humour that have both congruent and incongruent elements. Anchoring each other in several instances of the text, the aforementioned means of humour succeed in evicting the desired smile, giggle, or chuckle in a reader. Sometimes too, the laughter is pronounced but short-lived after the punch of the humour wears off. Other times, there is delayed humour as details are given in bits, and then one's curiosity is suddenly eclipsed by laughter that may be long or short. Most times also, the result of the humour is explosive laughter that could continue for a while and even resurface later. This last situation does not only bring about an abrupt stop in reading, but also a greater desire to continue reading the text when one's emotional state settles. In actual fact, Achebe employs humour to satirize people in the community, deliver his major theme of corruption, and make his work, *A Man of the People*, interesting to read.

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