

A NEW CRITICAL READING OF GENIEVIVE NNAJI'S *LIONHEART*

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ABSTRACT: Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart* represents the creative and artistic qualities of Nollywood cinema. This study examines her film through the prism of New Criticism, focusing on the movie's internal structure rather than its historical and cultural contexts. While Nnaji's *Lionheart* has substantially benefited from feminist and postcolonial interpretations, the aesthetic dimensions of the work have remained underexplored. Adopting a close reading method, this paper analyzes how *Lionheart* heightens dramatic tensions and resolves them to form coherent meanings. The analysis demonstrates that *Lionheart* exploits irony and paradox to establish tension among its characters, expose the intricacies in their portrayals, and utilize ironic twists to reconcile the problems among them. On the one hand, irony plays a vital part in defining the professional rivalry between Adaaze and Samuel, as well as in showing the discord within the Obiagu family. On the other hand, the study reveals that *Lionheart* exploits paradoxical situations to reflect Samuel's manipulative scheme within the company and to convey the tension between Adaaze's interests and her family's communal values, a contradictory space that Igwe Pascal (*Lionheart*'s antagonist) effectively leverages. It argues that the ironic weakness of Adaaze's strength engenders the resolution of ideological differences between Adaaze and the family. By employing the ironic twist, Nnaji's *Lionheart* foregrounds a fundamental theme of communal power and familial solidarity.

KEYWORDS: New Criticism, Nollywood cinema, Irony, Paradox, Genevieve Nnaji, Meanings and Dramatic Tensions

Introduction

In 2018, when *Lionheart* was released, many reviewers and movie producers hailed the movie for its artistic inventiveness. Prior to its debut, the Nollywood industry had been suffering from a lack of quality production, mainly due to producers who viewed film creation primarily as a means to generate revenue rather than as a way to provide aesthetic satisfaction and thrill a broader audience. Aesthetics primarily refers to the beauty a movie can produce through its tension, conflict, and language use. Films that lack these attributes are typically regarded as lacking creative vision. *Lionheart* exhibits artistic characteristics by building suspense and tension through words. The creators of the movie do not merely employ props for glamour but utilize them effectively to enhance the story development and the audience's understanding of the film's primary subject. *Lionheart*'s creative inventiveness could be the reason why it became the first Nigerian movie to be acquired by the popular American streaming platform Netflix. It could also have contributed to the movie's Oscar candidacy before it was rejected in 2019 on the grounds of its overwhelming use of the English language.

Amidst its disqualification, *Lionheart* had been a focus of scrutiny from scholars, with most of them overlooking the movie's beauty and craft. Much of the current work on the movie has emphasized content over the formal aspects that the creators have implemented to help viewers appreciate the picture. For instance, Matheson (2020), Doghudje (2020), and Morah and Nathan (2024) investigate the depictions of women in *Lionheart*. Their interpretations focus on how the movie advocates for women's rights and confronts unfavorable prejudices about them. On the other hand, Victor and Victor (2020) examine the movie from a postcolonial perspective. For Victor and Victor, the movie depicts the worries and uncertainties of the relationship between Hausa and Igbo. To Victor and Victor, the arrangement between the two tribes may indicate the 'expansionist inclination of the Hausa-Fulani to the east' (2020, p.14). From these studies, it can be deduced that there is limited attention to the close reading of Nnaji *Lionheart*'s dramatic elements. As a result of this gap, this study focuses on the structural features of *Lionheart* through the lens of New Criticism.

New Criticism, as a concept, is a form of reading that stresses the careful reading of literary works. Emerging in the 20th century, New Criticism challenged conventional critics who tended to restrict literary appreciation to historical and cultural contexts (Sharma, 2015; Anwari et al., 2021). To

the new American critics, a work of art is a self-contained text and not the product of the author's imagination and emotional experience. That is to say, modern critics consider that an author's background has no direct influence on their content. For this reason, they seek an interpretative style that focuses on the text's components rather than its context (Cain, 2018). To the new critic, the form of a literary piece may provide an objective interpretation of the text rather than its exterior aspects (Francis, 2008). Analyzing historical details may result in deliberate or emotional errors. Intentional error is when a reader incorrectly concludes that a piece of art has a close-knit link with the author's life. In contrast, affective analysis focuses on how a literary work deeply affects the reader's emotions (Searele, 2005). According to them, both methodologies should be subjected to formal analysis that can be confirmed by the text's inherent aspects, such as metaphor, irony, paradox, and other poetic devices (Ritchane, 2021). By paying attention to the essential features of a text, modern Criticism undertakes a scientific study of text interpretation.

Central to its scientific approach in writing is the balance of tension and unity. New Criticism does not just look for a point of tension but also where the text resolves it (Ritchane, 2021). According to New Critics, a literary composition produces tension through ambiguity. Ambiguity refers to words such as sarcasm and paradox, which hold more than one underlying meaning (Ritchane, 2021). The variety of meanings reveals the paradoxes that contribute to conflict in literary writings (Ritchane, 2021). While critics can employ a text's ambiguous language to discover a textual conflict, it is equally vital that they study the point where the text's structural parts converge to generate a harmonious theme or underlying concept. As such, this study examines how the dramatic aspects contribute to the tension and how they holistically unify the conflict into a cohesive narrative in Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart*.

Lionheart is a Nigerian tragi-comic drama that recounts the tribulations of a female heroine, Adaeze. Adaeze, the daughter of Chief Obiagu and the Logistics and Planning Director of Lionheart Company, is an ambitious woman who makes significant contributions to the firm's success. She, however, becomes unhappy with the selection of Chief Godswill, who is to operate as the Managing Director of the firm in the absence of the ailing Chief Obiagu, the former Managing Director. She grapples with accepting her father's nomination, perceiving it as a degradation of her own identity. While she is gradually recovering from the shock, Lionheart starts facing imminent bankruptcy and a threat from Igwe Pascal, who wants to buy off the firm to become the single most powerful transportation company in Enugu. At this moment, Adaeze has no alternative but to collaborate with her uncle to ensure the firm's future and develop her necessary leadership skills within Lionheart. Depending on their teamwork, they achieve a 'merger' with Maikano Northern firm to rescue Lionheart from insolvency. Through the victory of Adaeze and her uncle, the film promotes the significance of teamwork and family values within a commercial context.

A Textual Appreciation of Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart*

New criticism suggests that a text's intrinsic contradiction may be revealed through its interplay of irony and paradox. In Nnaji's *Lionheart*, irony and paradox play a vital part in establishing the struggle between Adaeze, the Logistics and Planning director, and her coworker, Samuel, within the commercial context. The movie lays out the scenario for the competition between the two workers through Samuel's ironic comment that 'they can carry on with the meeting instead of waiting for Adaeze, and that he can manage the BRT presentation just as Adaeze does. Samuel delivers this comment before Adaeze comes to the presentation. His comment shows a breach between him and Adaeze. Hurrying the board of trustees to begin the presentation suggests that he wants to seize the acclaim of the BRT, and the only person standing in his way is Adaeze. His covetous goal generates a sensation of unease in Samuel as he grows progressively agitated every time he sees Adaeze. For instance, Adaeze's sudden entrance into the boardroom causes a sensation of surprise in Samuel, as he is not anticipating her arrival anytime soon.

Samuel's pent-up envy for Adaeze is represented in the movie through the use of visual irony. The use of nonverbal speech foregrounds the relationship between Samuel and Adaeze as one of hostility. Instead of relying exclusively on verbal discourse, the movie utilizes the character's facial expressions to form the perspective through which the viewer can connect with the character. For instance, Samuel's laughter after some thugs furiously pledge to vandalize Lionheart Motors if their

requirements are not met suggests that he may be a potential enemy of the corporation. Her laughing is also ironic because the thugs' furious attack on the engine is not something that should generate amusement among the workers of Lionheart. However, Samuel decides to parody the situation, signaling that he is not just a threat to Adaeze but also a villain to be reckoned with in the organization.

Samuel's vituperative remark during his reaction to Chief Obiagu further exposes his antagonism to Adaeze and his dishonest demeanor. Responding to Chief Obiagu, Samuel argues that 'we have all given to Lionheart, even more than others.' Samuel uses 'we' as a figurative word since the word 'we' indicates inclusion. The inclusion may imply that Samuel is fighting for the rights of the board members, but when we study the negation of 'even though,' it strangely denies the inclusive goal Samuel may have for the board members. Additionally, the negator appears to be a personal vendetta intended at Adaeze and part of Samuel's effort to degrade Adaeze's presence in the organization. By employing the negative non-essential phrase to portray Adaeze, Samuel is promoting himself as the ideal candidate for the role. Samuel's justification of his contribution to the organization is greeted with Chief Obiagu's ironic response. For Obiagu, Samuel has always been known to be eloquent. The Chief's endorsement of Samuel shows that Samuel possesses the persuasive abilities essential for leadership. However, this competence may not be enough to qualify him for the Managing Director role, as the Lionheart firm is 'built on the ideas of the family'. Obiagu's usage of 'family' denotes peace and collaboration. On the contrary, Samuel's clandestine efforts within the corporation undermine the family values upon which the company's foundation depends. Hence, Chief Obiagu's reaction suggests that he finds Samuel inadequate in fostering the family culture of the organization, which means he is not qualified to become the next managing director. Immediately, Samuel loses the Managing Director post to Uncle Godswill (the former Lionheart Managing Director in Owerri and Obiagu's uncle), and he transforms his destructive attitude, portraying himself as a compassionate and collaborative worker. In his dialogue with Uncle Godswill:

Samuel: *Sorry,, Chief, my name is Samuel, the Director of Engineering Services. Please permit me to congratulate you on your appointment. If there is anything you need, just remember me as your man Friday, Sir.*

Godswill: *I am impressed*

Samuel's dialogue with Uncle Godswill is contradictory, as it stands in sharp contrast to his silent, malicious activities within the corporation, notably his aggressive gesture against Adaeze. This paradox is mainly contained in his use of formal language, such as 'permit me,' and his willingness to lend support to Uncle Godswill. The statement paradoxically depicts Samuel as a courteous and cooperative agent to the new Managing Director. However, his quick shift contradicts his caustic denigration of Adaeze in the boardroom. Both his condescending and disdainful actions towards Adaeze and her Uncle, Godswill, lend depth to the character of Samuel, as they highlight contradictions in his conduct.

The appointment of Uncle Godswill dramatically impacts not only Samuel's character development but also Adaeze's transformation. At the beginning of the movie, Adaeze is portrayed as a quietly ambitious woman who, despite pressure from Samuel, diligently focuses on advancing the success of Lionheart. Her serene and polite tone, as evident in statements like 'please go home and let us get on with our life,' is also visible in her conversation with the leader of the thugs who wish to vandalize the company's property. However, her pleasant temperament transforms into a harsher tone due to the movie's utilization of situational irony.

Situational irony occurs when an outcome is contrary to what the character or the viewer might have anticipated (Lucariello, 1994). The movie employs this strategy to build conflict and turn Adaeze into a complicated character. Adaeze's complexity is apparent in her irritable and aggressive tone during the heated dialogue with her mother. For example, her remark to her mother reflects Adaeze's wrath and aggravation about her father's decision. In her words, 'she has been working with her father for more than two years.' Adaeze's comment reflects her sentiments of betrayal and unfairness. This sensation is a culmination of her anticipation that she will be the next M.D. should her father step down as the Managing Director of the organization.

Chief Obiagu's choice is perplexing as it contradicts his prior appreciation of Adaeze following the BRT presentation. After making a good presentation, Chief Obiagu added, 'I am proud of my

daughter,' which means that he admires Adaeze's intelligence and leadership ability. With this adulation, one may have expected him to recommend his daughter for the role. Instead, he suddenly forces his Uncle, Godswill, on the board of trustees, an action Adaeze finds unfair to her important position in Lionheart.

The humorous situational experiences of Obiagu and her daughter culminate in a family fracas that nearly threatens the unity of Obiagu's family. Lionheart depicts the debacle through Adaeze's dramatic exchanges with her mother, Mrs Obiagu:

Mrs Obiagu: *Your father started this company with your uncle*

Adaeze: *I have been working side by side with Daddy for over seven years. I should be acting M.D.*

Mrs Obiagu: *I am sure he has his reason. You just have to trust him.*

Adaeze: *I guess those reasons would not exist if Obiora had been in my shoes.*

The passionate interaction between Mrs Obiagu and her daughter illustrates a period of strain in the Obiagu family. Adaeze's oppositional answer to her mother reveals that she is angry and does not trust her father's decision. Although Mrs. Obiagu seeks to reconcile the breach in the family, her efforts are not powerful enough to assuage Adaeze's fury. As a result, Adaeze's rivalry experience changes from the commercial arena to the familial level as she begins to compete with her Uncle, Godswill.

It is strange that Adaeze's family, which was once the core of togetherness, suddenly becomes a focal point of discord. Adaeze's misunderstanding with the member is hilariously presented with the conflict between the pronouns 'I and we.' Within the context of Nnaji's *Lionheart*, the personal pronoun emphasizes autonomy, whereas "we" indicates collaboration and teamwork. There is a dialectical contradiction between the 'I' personified by Adaeze and the 'we' represented by Adaeze's family. While the protagonist's parents believe in collaboration, Adaeze believes in her strength and potential. For instance, her comment, 'I should be the M.D.,' implies that Adaeze is more concerned with her vision than with sharing the family's vision. This clash between personal interest and Obiagu's idea of collaboration undermines the bond between Adaeze and her Uncle Godswill and often leads to subtle ideological disagreement between the two:

Adaeze: *I have an offer today which is...Now. I have to go.*

Godswill: *No. We have to go.*

Adaeze: *No, Uncle, I have got this, and besides, you said one of us needs to stay here*

Godswill: *It does not apply here. Listen. If we have to fight this war, Adan-nla, we have to fight it together unless we want to lose. I am at your service nationwide.*

Uncle Godswill's modification of Adaeze's vocabulary shows an attempt to shape Adaeze's ideas and align her with the family's community standards. His emphasis on 'No, we have to go' is an ironic way of warning Adaeze that she cannot handle the company's burden alone. That is to say, they must work together uniformly to attain the same aim. However, Adaeze, being philosophically a world apart from the family, believes in her strength, meaning that she can handle the company's difficulties without her uncle's presence. Although Adaeze's tenacity may signify confidence in what she can do alone, her perseverance reveals a dialectic of personal and collective 'values' inside the Obiagu home.

Nnaji's *Lionheart*, however, makes its lesson on collaboration plain with the repeating motifs of 'hand' and 'head.' For Mrs. Obiagu, 'two hands are always helpful,' while for Chief Obiagu, 'two heads are always better than one.' The characters' portrayal of human anatomy underscores the film's underlying notion of togetherness. The words 'hand' and 'heads' highlight the movie's emphasis on 'support.' The movie dramatizes this 'support' through the action of Uncle Godswill. For example, when Adaeze asks Uncle Godswill to pick an office, he answers by claiming he does not 'need something elaborate' and he has not come to replace 'Odogwu.' His denial suggests that he is not here for personal aggrandizement; instead, he is there to aid the company in spraying 'insecticides' on 'cockroaches' and 'scorpions'. Metaphorically, both 'cockroaches' and pesticides are lexical irony for the fights between Lionheart and its enemies, represented by Igwe Pascal and Samuel. Both Igwe Pascal

and Samuel are unreformed enemies who form a league to pursue their separate agendas. While Samuel aspires to be the Managing Director of the firm, Igwe Pascal seeks to acquire Lionheart, leveraging its financial insolvency. Their activities ironically undermine Obiagu's goal, which is to continue the family business. Both Igwe Pascal and Samuel, for instance, attempt to undermine the familial relationships that Lionheart is encouraging. As Adaeze explains, if Pascal gains possession of the corporation, 'everybody would lose their jobs.' Pascal's possible relocation of personnel in the firm implies his desire to fragment the Obiagu family through the holding of the company. By subsequently 'spraying' pesticides, Uncle Godswill expresses his desire to save Lionheart from the corporation's adversaries by creating allies with Adaeze.

However, Uncle Godswill's collaborative intention is delayed by Adaeze's ambivalence. Adaeze's hesitation to entirely embrace the support of their uncle is clear in her rejection of Godswill's idea of a 'merger' with the Maikaino firm. To her, the notion of a merger is less successful than 'her three-point agenda,' which involves gaining a loan extension, borrowing loans from banks, and finding money from other individuals. Her total nullification of the scheme illustrates Adaeze's suspicious relationship with her uncle. Instead of merely disregarding the notion, she may have evaluated it as an alternative to her three-point plan. This thought might have brought the two together to overpower Igwe Pascal. Instead, it heightens the drama of the play as it gives Igwe Pascal the tools to frustrate Adaeze's attempts and keep his goal of controlling the firm alive.

New Criticism does not merely seek conflicts in a text but also investigates where a text bridges such tensions (Ritchane, 2021). Lionheart intervenes in the tension with an ironic twist. The failure of Adaeze's three-point agenda defies her expectations since she believes the approach may help save Lionheart from financial troubles. Her willingness to, thus, embrace her uncle's notion of a 'merge' reflects Adaeze's entire acceptance of teamwork, a philosophy she initially opposes. In her words, 'I finally comprehend what you have been saying for a while.' This shows that Adaeze has reached a moment of understanding, where she recognizes that her efforts cannot potentially influence the company's future. This transformation in her character leads to her acceptance of the 'merger,' which she utilizes to revive Lionheart and defeat both Igwe Pascal and Samuel. Hence, Adaeze's usage of the 'merger' coincides with the basic theme of Nnaji's *Lionheart*, which is that power does not exist solely in individual strength but in joint efforts.

Conclusion

Through the lens of New Criticism, which promotes attentive textual analysis, this study examines Nnaji's *Lionheart*, investigating its inherent conflicts and how they are resolved. The analysis revealed that *Lionheart* employs sarcastic and paradoxical events and language to generate conflicts and develop character complexity. It was proven that Samuel's usage of ironic language underlines the professional competition between him and Adaeze. It was also revealed that the character leverages the paradoxical spaces to falsely manipulate the company's management in pursuit of his aims. Beyond the Adeaze-Samuel relationship, the publication discovered that the movie builds up friction in Obiagu's family through the sarcastic appointment of Uncle Godswill, which makes Adaeze an ambiguous figure, caught between her genuine interest in the firm and her rejection of her family's neglect. The paper suggested that Adaeze's contradictory connection is mirrored in the dichotomy between 'I' and 'we,' the language that generates a misunderstanding between Adaeze's individualistic principles and the family's cooperative character. However, with the ironic twist, Adaeze conforms to the family spirit of collaboration. This not only bridges the fault in the family but also helps Lionheart (Obiagu's company) overcome its foes. Thus, the article argues that Lionheart relies on irony to emphasize that power resides only in collective effort.

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