



## Child Narrative Voice as Satire for Rape in Ernest Emenyonu's “What the Babysitter and my Bishop had in Common”

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### **Abstract**

The short story “What the babysitter and my bishop had in common” is a social commentary told from the point of view of an impressionistic child using a child’s narrative voice. In this type of discourse is found tactlessness and few pretentious lexis which are both comical and satirical. This study is a discourse analysis of the text. To carry out this study, some stretches of utterance in the story that exemplify this narrative style have been purposively selected and studied to describe their patterns and illuminate the features that characterise them as satirical. The approach of lexical and literary discourse analysis forms the theoretical base for this analysis. The findings show that the author uses black humour and Menippean satire to discuss sensitive issues in society because the targets for this commentary are people in positions of authority who abuse the trust and goodwill they enjoy. And because the issues raised are sensitive matters within the African context, the author uses the “safe” channel of a child’s narrative voice as a euphemistic tool. The study therefore concludes that children’s discourse is a viable tool for satirizing societal folly.

**Keywords:** Child narrative; Satire; Lexical analysis; Literary Discourse Analysis



## Introduction

The short story “What the Babysitter and my bishop had in Common” is the fourth in a collection of six short stories titled *Princess Mmaeyen and other stories*. The author, Ernest Emenyonu is a professor of African Studies and has authored several children’s literature texts. The text, *Princess Mmaeyen and other stories* are the latest of his short stories. It is likely that the author’s experience as a writer of children’s literature influenced the language of the major character in the story; “What the Babysitter and my bishop had in Common”. In it, the author presents himself as a satirist of some sort and his art is a denouncement of the abuse of power by persons in positions of authority. He also ridicules post-colonial sentiments such as white supremacy and the infallibility of men of the cloth using a child narrative voice to tell the story. The language depicts innocence and is devoid of political correctness or placatory terms. With this kind of language, the author is able to show the absurdity of some ideologies prevalent in the African context and for which there are unspoken oaths of silence; his purpose is to draw attention to them.

This work, therefore, interrogates the use of children’s language in literary forms such as our core text. It identifies the use of this voice as a tool for discussing societal issues that are often unspoken because they are deemed sacrilegious, profane, or disrespectful. This paper contributes to scholarship on the role of children’s narrative voice in contemporary African literature. The findings of this paper are also a pointer to the departure from traditional silence to loquacity and from taciturnity to communicativeness in the African discourse landscape.

To carry out this analysis, some African ideologies, the features of children’s language and the concept of satire are explicated. Thereafter, samples of expressions in the text that depict children’s language are highlighted and analysed to foreground their role in addressing the thematic concerns and ideological constructs of the text as well as underscore the ridiculous manner in which these thematic concerns are addressed. Before we look at the ideologies highlighted in the text, it is pertinent to discuss Literary Discourse Analysis which is the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Literary Discourse Analysis**

Literary Discourse Analysis (LDA) is a relatively recent branch of the Discourse Analysis approach to language study. It focuses on the interpretation of language in literary texts (Maingueneau, 2010). It looks at meaning beyond surface levels but particularly, its concerns are the social meanings embedded in the language of a text (Aboh, 2018). Closely related to it is the contextual theory in semantics. Porras (2011) draws similarities between these two theories. Contextual semantic theories underscore that meaning cannot be generated from the syntagmatic or paradigmatic arrangement of linguistic structures within a text alone. LDA uses insights from the setting in terms of place and time (milieu) of the literary text being analysed as well as the social, political and ideological stance revealed within a text. The “literary discourse analysts, then, are interested in deciphering the various hidden significations of a text” under study (Aboh, p.8). In summary, therefore, a Literary Discourse analysis will account for how society in its varied ramifications, influences a particular literary text to the extent that more meanings can be generated from it that are peculiar to the social, political, ideological, or economic contexts or conventions. The language of a text provides the instrument through which relationships between text and society are expressed. In view of this, the language assigned to characters in a literary text is a window through which the ideologies that facilitate the narrative can be displayed. This paper looks at the discourse of the major character who happens to be a child to identify the role he plays in developing the thematic concerns of the text. The position of this paper is that the child’s language functions as satire. To elaborate on this, the next section will take a critical look at the concept of satire.

### **Satire in Language Use**

Satire is a literary art of derogation or ridicule. Simpson (2003) calls it “a complexly interdiscursive mode of communication” (p.62) that operates more in literary discourse. Phiddian (2019) however thinks it is not intrinsically literary and would rather classify it as a mode of communication in popular culture as it has been used extensively in all forms of art. Phiddian also describes satire as “an aspect of some texts which



allows for the expression of hostile attitudes and emotions towards figures, practices and institution of public significance” (p.4). Satire tends towards comedy because an artist could, while using language, cartoons or songs, evoke laughter (Phiddian 2019) but the difference between comedy and satire is that while the aim of comedy is solely to evoke laughter, the purpose of satire is to use wit for social criticism and satire does not necessarily have to be comical. In other words, its import is to make serious matters appear trivial and, in the process, create an awareness and some sort of emotional reaction. So, whereas humour in comedy serves the purpose of pure entertainment, humour in satire is a social commentary wrapped in cloaks of irony, sarcasm, exaggeration and ridicule. In both satirical and comedy works, however, humour depends on its context to make an impact (Ekpang & Basse, 2014). Humour could be introduced into a text through phonological gymnastics, peculiar behavioural traits, allusions or names (Ekpang & Basse, 2014).

In some works of art, elements of satire are used sparingly but in others, it is the predominant tool for discourse. When it is the predominant tool, the text is said to be a satire itself (Phiddian, 2019). The characteristics of satire include poking fun, deriding and ridiculing people who are perceived to be full of self-importance without cause, and seemingly unconscious light-hearted humour. Satire is subtle, so it may not appear obvious to an uninformed listener or reader. Meaning in satirical utterances is therefore embedded in the shared knowledge that connects the decrypting link and advances the mapping for appropriate meaning interpretation in the context (Uwen, 2023). This is so because context plays a vital role in meaning orientations.

Phiddian (2019) asserts that the effect of satire can be measured more in terms of emotional impact. The triad emotions of contempt, anger and disgust (CAD) come into mind here. Bell (2013) is of the opinion that contempt is a rational response to depictions of human follies “like arrogance, hypocrisy and racism” (273). Anger and disgust are also possible reactions to satire, but it is very unlikely that people would immediately react to satire in physical or violent ways (Phiddian, 2019). So, in today’s political, social and ideological world, the function of the short story under

review would most likely be a denigration, disparaging or maligning of an immoral order that is present in the society being chronicled.

There are three types of satire namely, Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean. Of interest to us in this paper is the Menippean satire. This type is often used in fictional narratives. It is indirect because characters in the narrative make themselves appear ridiculous by what they say and do. Usually, such characters are a typology of certain groups of persons in the society and their views are made into arguments during the narrative to showcase the area or areas of the society that the author has chosen to satirize. While Horatian satire ridicules universal human folly, Juvenalian satire is aimed at public officials and governments. Here governments are demonised and condemned with very harsh invectives. Juvenalian satire is not as humorous as the other two types.

Satire is achieved using devices and techniques. For example, a target and its analogy can be extended or sustained, an inverse treatment of serious subject matter (and vice versa) and a tragic event being made to look trivial (black humour). Sometimes, we find a literal inversion that is, where sentences are inverted as would be seen later in the text. Satire invents parody, imitation and mimicry through the use of intertextuality but in a distorted form. Satire also uses irony (discrepancy between what is said and what is meant). This irony could be dramatic, situational, verbal or tonal. In addition, contrastive tools like juxtaposition, paradox and oxymoron can be techniques for achieving hilarious social commentary.

The short story “What the Babysitter and My Bishop Had in Common” is an example of a satirical text since the import of satire is to discuss serious issues such as child sexual abuse in an indirect way, child language is the choice of instrument for achieving this in this fictional prose. To establish that the story is a written satire using child discourse, let us identify the nature of children’s language or discourse.

### **The Nature of Children’s Language**

Although all children acquire language roughly at about the same time because the skill of speaking is tied to other biological schedules like the



development of speech organs, sitting, standing, walking, etc., communicative competence occurs at differing timelines. Communicative competence here refers to linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic knowledge (Ekpang, Ghevolor & Bassey, 2021). This is because of the role social factors play in the child's acquisition of communicative competence in a language. Nta (1996) describes this role as 'nature' and 'nurture'. Nature in the sense that only the human species has acquired the ability to engage in the complex nature of speaking, and nurture in the sense that the linguistic environment the child finds itself provides the form of the expression the child acquires. The child's development of the grammar of the language is called linguistic knowledge or competence whereas communicative competence is shown in language appropriateness as the child listens, observes reactions and practices the linguistic habits in his interactions with adults and other children (Nta, 1996). The child experiences regularities in the use of distinctive sounds which help him apply them to his own speech. Ironically, the language the child is exposed to at this critical stage of acquisition is the caretaker or motherese speech which is different from adult speech. This kind is characterised by repetitions, exaggerated intonation, simplified words, repeated simple sounds for objects in the child's environment, simple sentence structures and limited semantic distinction in words and other structures (McGregor, 2009). So, the acquisition of language for the child begins with these as examples. Over time, the child acquires the sound, grammar and morphology of the language and gradually begins to acquire deep in addition to surface meanings of expressions which we refer to as communicative competence.

For Nta (1996), communicative competence carries the semantic import (of language) into sociolinguistic dimensions" (p.35). This makes it a determining factor for ascertaining the age of a speaker in forensic discourse analysis as language use reveals, whether consciously or unconsciously, the social awareness of its user. Dore (1975) has proposed that children's discourse (language) be analysed using a speech act frame that is unique to them. He calls this frame "primitive speech acts" because it is made up of primary speech acts. These primary speech acts according to Nta (1996) are unique traits of children's language and the predominant occurrence of these

acts in a text characterises it as child discourse and distinguishes it from an adult conversation as shown in the example below.

Olom: Mummy, I want my toy. Not that one alone, I want some ice cream, mummy mummy some biscuits. Mom, am I disturbing you?

Osisanwo (2008) calls this a ‘complex move’ and even though adults engage in this type of move, theirs perform more complex acts like focusing and framing, opening and answering, follow-up and or feedback rather than the primitive speech acts proposed by Dore.

Children’s conversation is perceived differently from adult talk. Utterances that may be frowned upon as provocative or stupid would elicit laughter or other reactions if they were made by a child. Seraphinoff (2007) in his paper entitled “Through a Child’s Eyes- A Special Role of the Child as Narrator in Macedonian Literature” posits that adults are more tolerant of a child’s voice when uncomfortable or controversial issues are discussed. For example, to address some misconceptions society has about marriage, the following FaceBook post by Ngozi Azuka on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 presents a child’s perspective of the concept of marriage.

Question: What is marriage?

Child: Marriage happens when the parents of a girl say to her “You are a big woman now, we can’t feed you again. Better go and find a man who will start feeding you.” And the girl meets with a man whose parents shout at him; “Please you are now a big man, give us grandchildren.” Both of them test themselves and become happy. Then agree to live together, and start doing nonsense to have children.

The child’s answer to the question, “What is marriage?” shows the child’s perception of marriage as a cohabitation of two adults for the purposes of getting free food (economic benefits) and pro-creation rather than the adult definition of it as a contractual agreement between two adults who love each other and are willing to be life companions to one another. The use of a child’s narrative voice would show the absurdity of this kind of reasoning or the hypocrisy in the unspoken conventions. Also, that the child uses the



adjective “nonsense” instead of a noun for the sexual act, reveals a common trend in African society, where issues pertaining to sex are either not discussed openly or when they are, less direct terms are used. A writer or speaker who finds these misconceptions in society and wants to chronicle them could do so using the voice of a child. For example, a popular Nigerian stand-up comedian, Helen Paul, uses child language to comment on societal follies in her *Tatafo* comedy series. The results have been outstanding and hilarious.

Children’s narrative voice in literature is written with this fact in mind. Its features exemplify simple diction, repetitions and other characteristics of children’s speech. When children use language, they are oblivious to the different layers of meaning. So figurative language, idioms, proverbs and politically correct forms do not occur naturally in their conversation. The language of a child is, therefore, devoid of diplomacy and is mainly unpretentious.

### **Child narrative voice in “What the Babysitter and my Bishop had in Common”**

A narrative voice is a kind of viewpoint from which a story is told. There are usually pointers to indicate this. Pronouns like ‘I’, ‘my’ and ‘me’ for example, indicate 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative where the storyteller is one of the characters in the story. The 1<sup>st</sup> person narrative is commonly used in non-fiction to recount the experiences of the author, but we can also find it being used in fictional works like the one being analysed here.

Child narrative voice is in use when readers experience the story through the eyes of the child and even though this could be quite limiting for the adult author because the narrative voice cannot provide too much information about the real cultural, social, political and economic details of his context, many authors have successfully used this narrative technique to tell their stories. Priebe (2005) advocates that the child narrator should evince a detachment from the comprehensive and refined adult awareness by maintaining its innocence. Unfortunately, some works have failed in this area in using the child narrator voice. Priebe observes that in Ahmadou Kourouma’ novel, *Allah n’est pas Oblige*, the child narrator presents too much multifaceted adult information which renders the character incredible.



In spite of this, the child narrator plays a fundamental role as Wilkinson in Muthusi's (2019) work reveals that “through the capacity of the child’s perspective to cross taboo lines and the adult shame frontier, and to penetrate emotional danger zones easily” (p.2), the child narrator exposes the contradictions and flaws it finds in the adult world and questions established world views in the bid to elicit reader’s reactions (Steinmes, 2011). Muthusi concludes that the child’s voice is used in some African ex-child soldier memoirs to point to the social shortcomings of adults in their inhumanity of having children fight wars that they created.

The story ‘What My Babysitter and Bishop had in Common’ is a narrative of events that took place in a child’s life recounted by the child. The narrative style is the stream of consciousness technique as sometimes the narrator tends to move swiftly from one theme to another presenting an almost disconnected prose. The first two paragraphs of the story, for instance, are loaded with several storylines, with barely any break or transition from one event to the other. This makes it difficult for a first-time reader to follow the trend of thought of the narrator. For example, the story begins with an encounter the narrator had with his elder sister and moves on to an encounter with Peter, James and Paul in the next paragraph. In the same paragraph, he introduces two other distinct events involving Reverend Mark Okonkwo, water baptism and the carcass of Agbara, the monster. All of these are unrelated events to the reader but somehow connected in the mind of the narrator. So, we find six different events crammed into the first two paragraphs of the story. This narrative technique is typical of children’s speech.

Another feature of children’s discourse in the text is the use of repetition. Lexical repetitions appear several times in the narration of the major character in the story. The repeated words and phrases found in the following excerpts have been underlined for foregrounding and marking purposes.

- (1) And I had not yet revealed anything but everyone was in awe of me. Not respectful awe, nothing like being awesome, beautiful, deeply appealing. I was instead dreadful awesome.... I became a celebrity awesome. (Emenyonu, p.58)



- (2) ...three white men they said came from the District colonial office at Owerre to take pictures of the carcass of the Agbara... that three white men had come and taken photos of the carcass. He had no camera and didn't come with soldiers who stood guard as they took pictures of the carcass. (Emenyonu, pp.58-59)
- (3) I liked those stories and wanted to hear them often and often, and again and again (Emenyonu, p.59)
- (4) But if you called them names to their hearing, you'd be beaten up and they could even tell their 'father in God' or 'God their father' to kill you. (Emenyonu, p.61)
- (5) "If you sing the song with anyone else, you will become deaf and dumb immediately" she said and I did not want to be deaf and dumb. (Emenyonu, p.62)
- (6) But by age thirteen, my babysitter and my Bishop had, in turn, several times, *disvirgined* me! And no one knew. No one knew. And no one knew! (Emenyonu, p.67)
- (7) "Everyone hates kids" is repeated four times in the short story.

All the repetitions presented above except the last one, occur in subsequent sentences. This is unlike adult discourse which uses substitution, ellipsis, pronouns, references, synonyms and other cohesive devices to avoid unnecessary repetitions. Repetitions in adult discourse are rare and when they do occur, do so to serve lexical and grammatical cohesion, rhetorical and stylistic purposes of emphasis, or emotional appeal (Ekpang, 2017). The identical lexical elements may alter the semantic description in some instances, but they mainly perform sociopragmatic functions which are understood by the interactants (Uwen & Ugot, 2022). This is why Leech describes repetition as a fundamental device of intensification and a hammering on the confining walls of language. Although the example (6) above appears to fall into this category, it does not appear that this is the case in the other examples above. Rather, its use depicts a constant

reiteration of the limited vocabulary accessible to the child for which he/she must express a varied number of experiences.

Another evident feature of child language in the text is the fact that we are not told the name of the narrator who is the major character of the story. However, his surname is given as *Okoro* and different individuals other than his parents call him Michael, Thomas or Foo-foo as nicknames. This is symbolic because naming is an important feature in African traditional society. Every child has a name. Ideally, the African child is named by his parents, guardians or relatives to depict peculiar circumstances surrounding his/her birth. A child is welcomed and celebrated within a few days of its birth by occasioning a naming ceremony where he/she may be given many names because all family members present names to show their good wishes for the child as well as depict appropriately, the circumstances that surround the child's birth. The name becomes the identity of the child who could have up to four names depending on the naming conventions of the family. Name, in this context, becomes a source of symbolic communication that conveys family and cultural information from the name-giver and bearer to convey circumstances, experiences and expectations at birth (Uwen & Ekpang, 2022).

That the major character is not given a name delineates the character as a minor (albeit unusual) because every adult has a known or fixed name. The author may have used this anonymity or facelessness in view of the sensitive issues the child would narrate in the story. If this were the case, the nameless child could easily be imbued with the boldness that children in traditional African societies do not exhibit because, in this society, children are expected to be quiet and speak only when they are spoken to. The child narrator appears to be vocal and precocious (traits which are uncommon in the context), the writer allows other characters to name him the way they do in the story- each name corresponding with words he had spoken at one time or the other in the text. The absence of a conventional name, the voice and the language habits of the character, delineate the narrator as a child.



### **The Child’s Narrative Voice is Satire in the Text**

Repetition is a feature of caretaker speech or *motherese* (the language the child is first exposed to), it is no wonder that it is a recurrent feature in the child’s initial linguistic experiment. The instance of sarcasm in the following excerpt is achieved through the repetitive technique called literal inversion. This instance, however, only has humorous effects when it is read within the linguistic context of the text.

But if you called them names to their hearing, you’ld be beaten up and they could even tell their ‘**father in God**’ or ‘**God their father**’ to kill you. (Emenyonu, p.61)

Here, the narrator engages in introspection having observed an adult activity around him. He describes this activity as “strange”, “silly” and “stupid” (Emenyonu, p.61) but is quick to add that there would be consequences if he tells the adults what he thinks about them. This restraint is tragic because the child had just been sexually assaulted by his babysitter and even though, in his innocence, does not understand the gravity of what had been done to him, he sees the action as senseless and an act of adult stupidity. When the child says “and if you call them names to their hearing, you’ld be beaten up...”, the writer draws the reader’s attention to the danger of not allowing children to express themselves freely or threatening a child with punishment from an invisible but nevertheless powerful Being. The actions of molesters are enhanced or enabled by the silence of their victims.

Other utterances made by the narrator equally reflect his society’s practices and ideology handed down from one generation to the next. It is through the thoughts and utterances of the narrator, that the writer foregrounds them and draws attention to their ridiculousness. For instance:

My elder sister told me that the white man could do no wrong...

White men can do no wrong? What about those songs they made every kid in Africa sing about a wicked white man in Germany called Hitler who sent his armies to kill African children? (Emenyonu, p.60)

When the narrator’s sister makes the above declaration, she presents it as an analytic argument that was premeditated on some kind of universal truth.

But we find perplexity on the part of the narrator who observes that there is a contradiction of thought when placed side by side with other ‘truths’ he is aware of. For him, it is logical that if Hitler is a white man can be termed dangerous, so the statement that “the white man can do no wrong” cannot be true. At another level of meaning, there is the use of dramatic irony here since the readers know that Hitler did not ask his armies to kill African children. And that the statement is only a white colonialist’s propaganda. Again, that questions the integrity of the white man who is said ‘to do no wrong.’ The message that can be drawn from here is that whereas adults in the story do not question authority, the child does try to find a balance between what is handed down as information to him at home and in school with what he observes to be his personal experience and he is not afraid to say so. He paints the confusion he is experiencing and tries to reason out the contradictions in his mind by mentioning some other activities going on around him as shown below:

Our mothers sold palm oil and palm kernel and gave the money to another faraway white man to help him fight Hitler in a war. If they didn’t defeat Hitler all the kids in Africa would be killed by Hitler’s bombs. We kids did not know what the war was all about but we did not want to die. (Emenyonu, p.60)

The above statement reinforces the child’s conviction that the white man is dubious and exploitative. By commenting on the exploitation of African women and children during the Second World War, the narrator gives justification for thinking that Whiteman is not as innocent as society thinks he is. For if ‘the white man can do no wrong’, why then were defenceless children and their mothers in this part of the world emotionally blackmailed into funding a war several miles away? A war for which they had no stake and for which they knew nothing about. These questions resonate in the mind of the child. Later in the story, but still on the same page, we find:

However, I believed my elder sister that the white man could do no wrong. So I held my peace about what that white man, the missionary Assistant Bishop did with me. No, did to me. (Emenyonu, p.60)



Here, we observe further, the mental struggle between reality and indoctrination. First, the character in question is a white man (who should be infallible) and secondly, he is a missionary and a Bishop from whom society expects exemplary uprightness. Ordinarily, men of the cloth are revered and the society frowns on any kind of criticism of them. They are a revered lot said to be above reproach. In fact, it is seen as sacrilegious to speak evil of them. In the story, we see that such men occupy positions of trust so that the narrator's mother does not hesitate to spend her meagre resources to send her son to him as often as he requests. But in the course of the tale, we see that this trust is abused when the child is repeatedly sexually abused by the same Bishop in whose custody he is kept. By saying: "No, did to me", the narrator shows his repudiation of the act. He (the child) recognises the act as a non-consensual invasion of his person. The replacement of the lexical item 'with' with 'to' is a marker of oppression. Whereas 'with' would indicate mutual consent, 'to' is an indication of power dynamics showing that an act of oppression was carried out on him.

The narrator's reaction to another sexual act by his babysitter (Maria) is different. He appears not to mind it and shows an indication that he even enjoyed it. This is seen in his pleas to prevent Maria from going back to her parents when they requested that she return. The gratifications of peppermint, meat and fish may have influenced this but then, the author may be making a subtle distinction between same-sex coupling and heterosexual coupling as the child innocently perceives it to be. This interpretation takes into consideration the traditional African context which is the setting of the story. The traditional African society labels all forms of same-sex coupling as taboo and alien to its culture. The following excerpt from the story reveals that the child contemplates the difference:

He was doing the same thing Maria had done to me eight years or so ago but in a different fashion. (p.67)

And the following illustrates that his attitude towards each act is different:

I begged her to stay and told her she didn't have to give me sweets again after our song and that I had told nobody about the game and I would never tell on her. (p.63)

The "song" being referred to here is a name both Maria and the narrator call the sexual act between them. The act was usually accompanied by the song:

Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream  
Merrily. Merrily. Merrily, merrily  
Life is but a dream. (p.62)

This song is a popular nursery rhyme and the fact that it is used in this context is humorous and at the same time, despicable. The babysitter exploits the child's innocence by using a known song to introduce the child to an unknown act. She introduces a song that depicts innocence, as all nursery rhymes do, to introduce him prematurely to sex. This is manipulative as the song must have made the child comfortable before the predator launched her attack on him. The song here is a metaphor for sex and the child is compromised when he later becomes a willing partner in the atrocity he has been made to commit.

When an author raises sensitive and grave issues in such a manner as to elicit laughter as seen in the song used above, but with the aim of drawing attention or correcting societal folly, it can be correctly regarded as satire at work. In the short story, the author has highlighted three salient issues in the society. He has, in a subtle manner, questioned Africans' colonial and post-colonial ideology of white supremacy. He does this by the unpretentious arguments that go on in the narrative of the child who questions the contradictions in the utterances of the adults around him and compares them to his reality. In relating the saying that a white man does no wrong to another white man who his fellow white men call a monster, the child enables us to see the irrationality in this kind of belief. Satire is seen to be used to offer the alternative that the white man is human too.

Another instance of satire can be found in the conversation between the narrator and the bishop. When the narrator responds, “utara” which the cook translates as “foofoo”, to the question “What will you eat?” (Emenyonu, p.66), there was spontaneous laughter from the people around him. The narrator says the retort was a reflex action because, unlike the previous answers he provided, he was not prepared to answer this particular question.

“Good afternoon, my Lord Bishop”  
“I’m fine, thank you, my Lord.”



“My parents are fine; they send their greetings my Lord”.  
But my teacher forgot to tell me what to say in English if  
the Bishop asked me what I would like to eat for dinner!

His responses were rehearsed and when he got stuck in unfamiliar linguistic territory, he reverted to what he was used to - “utara” which earned him a new name: “foo-foo.” It is likely that the author is addressing the language issue in Africa where for numerous reasons (economic and social inclusive), indigenous languages have been abandoned or relegated to insignificant usage in the quest to acquire the English Language, French and other languages of colonialists. The acquisition of these foreign languages is a social marker and economic booster in these climes. The effect of this is first, a gradual decline and sometimes death of these African languages and secondly, the proliferation of sub-varieties of English that are characterised by mother tongue interference at syntactic, semantic, phonological and even morphological levels. Because the body of language rules in foreign and second languages is different from those of indigenous languages, there are instances of *nativisation* or *indigenisation* of these preferred foreign languages especially when they (foreign languages) cannot sufficiently capture the African experience because they do not have the appropriate diction for it. The child in the story does not know the literal translation of “utara” in English, so even though he was discussing it in English, he resorted to his native code to make up for this deficiency. This concept, technically called code-switching or code-mixing, is a very common language feature in the African setting.

Another feature of child conversation as satire is presented in the honesty of the child on occasions where adults would normally look the other way or pretend and play along with a falsity. In the expression;

He gave each of us a Bible. The Bible wasn't really free.  
We had paid for it in advance the day we passed the  
confirmation exam. (Emenyonu, pp. 64-65)

It can be observed here that appearances can be deceptive. Whereas to the uninformed spectator, the Bishop had presented gifts of new bibles to the successful candidates, in reality, the pupils had paid for them in advance. It is likely that the author's message here is that the so-called foreign



assistance, palliatives, debt relief and monetary interventions received from Western nations are not free after all. African nations pay for them at one time or another either through the explorations of mineral resources or by inordinate interferences on the political and economic life of the people. The child sees this as hypocritical and because this takes place in the church, he questions the virtue of honesty that the Christian faith preaches when he ponders on the meaning of the song “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so”. He wonders if all the restrictions placed on children were not more an indication of ‘hate’ than ‘love’. Hence, he repeats the statement: “everybody hates kids” and adds; “but if you said that the Bible had lied to kids, they will cut off your neck” (Emenyonu, p.63). The reader observes that the child knows that such criticisms are unwelcome in his society which regards such riposte as sacrilegious.

### **Conclusion**

The underlying message which runs through the length of this story is the abuse of positions of authority and trust. When women sold their wares to fund the war, it was because they believed the tales of the white colonialists. When children marched every morning to derogatory songs about Hitler, it was because they believed they would otherwise be killed by him (Hitler). When the narrator’s family left the 4 or 5-year-old narrator in the custody of Maria, the babysitter, it was because they trusted her to take care of him and when the narrator’s mother paid the cyclist for several trips to take the narrator to see the white man in Egbu, it was because she believed that the white man Bishop would be of some benefit to her son. She probably hoped he would provide a scholarship for him. She may have envisaged the respect she would get from her friends as being the mother of someone who dines with the white man.

The targets in this satire are people in positions of trust. Black humour and Menippean satire are used in most of the identified instances. Sexual abuse is most often not discussed, and victims are stigmatised in the African context. Children are forbidden from discussing it and when they do, are hushed by their parents. This fact generates an unspoken code of silence by both adults and children. To discuss this sensitive issue as well as others identified above, the author uses the “safe” channel of child narrative voice that is hilarious but nevertheless generates sober reflection.



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