Shades and Nuances of Socio-Political Anomy in Edge of the Brink:
Interpretive Reading of Ifechi Jane Odoe’s Polysemy and Positivist
Polemics

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‘The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is
nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character’ (Chinua Achebe – The Trouble
with Nigeria)

This paper evaluates the multiplex nature of the dramatized decadence and the nuances of
salvation prescribed by Ifechi Jane Odoe1 as encapsulated in her positivist polemics in Edge
of the Brink. Primarily this study’s discussion revolves around interpretive reading of her
shades of representation to extrapolate on the attributions subsumed in her portrayal. To
examine the subject matters, this study leans on the view that social realities are evolutionary
and not permanently static, that the pace of evolutionary trends of social realities vary from
one society to another, and that influential factors such as custom, religion, and human
circumstances contribute in many ways in propelling a continual re-aggregation of social
realities for individuals as well as communities. Hence, this paper discusses the metaphors as
well as trajectories to the dramatized decadent polis and the contextualization of suitable re-
birth as Odoo proposes in the focused play. To this end, this paper adopts Peter Berger and
Thomas Luckmann’s theory on ‘social construction of reality’ as its preferred theoretical
framework. Lastly, the analysis of the focused text and relevant scholarly perspectives is
based essentially on interpretive discuss analysis and attribution polemics.

Keywords: Attribution, Charismatic, Leadership, Polities, Revolution, Social Construction

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1 Ifechi Jane Odoe was born in Mgbidi, Imo State, Nigeria. She was raised in the University town of Nsukka
where her father worked as an Administrative Staff of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Odoe has worked with
The Guardian Newspaper, Abuja Bureau. She covered and wrote articles on sundry issues including State
Matters, Finance, Transport, Internal Security, information, Women and Youth, Arts and Culture. Odoe holds
BA and MA in Mass Communication from University of Nigeria, and University of Lagos, respectively. Edge of
the Brink is her first published play and she is an Executive Director of a leading Agro-Allied Industry in
Nigeria.
We learn from history that human societies are replete with actions and inactions which are interpreted differently in line with varied points of views and inclinations. Hence, it may not be a surprise when we appreciate shades of discordance, divergence and concordance in perspectives on matters and manner of politics and leadership. However, in this paper our humanistic approach towards these human phenomena, politics and leadership is essentially to advance plausible deductions. Thus, the cardinal focus of this paper is to critically discuss the shades of decadence and the factors requisite in a revolutionary leader, who is saddled with the task of salvaging a retrogressive and decadent government as dramatized in Ifechi Odoe’s *Edge of the Brink*. As Gbemisola Adeoti rightly points out, the play *Edge of the Brink* by Odoe is a creative dramatization of “a familiar story with a new passionate voice worthy of attention in recent Nigerian literary drama” (7). Thus, Adeoti’s reference to the context of familiar story brings us to the point where we ask the question, what is familiar story? A familiar story in this regard is the perennial concern of mal-administration that has bedevilled Erega, a metaphoric representation of Nigeria. Although, Odoe in *Edge of the Brink* adopts a preponderant style evident in very many West African creative literatures, which is the technique of applying imaginary setting, she creatively localized her play’s story in Nigeria. This she achieved through a creative application of some telling typical and actual realities which aided her to effectively establish this implication. Odeo’s instances of creative implication include the application of locale specific character names such as Chidi, Uche, and Ojugo, which are widely acknowledged Igbo names. Likewise she applies currency denotation ‘₦’, which represents Nigeria’s currency Naira in several character conversations, where the characters refers to it as the legal tender in Erega. The application of ‘₦’ is evident on pages seventeen, eighteen, twenty-three, twenty-four, and thirty-three, whereas the application of Igbo names are several, beginning from page one through to the last page of the play script. The metaphorical implication of this creative manoeuvre by Odoe is that based on the concept of syllogism and attribution, if the legal tender of Nigeria is naira, and in *Edge of the Brink*, the legal tender of Erega is naira, and the characters in the play go by Nigerian ethnic names, and these characters are domicile in Erega, it is plausible to say that Erega metaphorically represents the actual country called Nigeria. This is because of the definitive nature of the applied actual realities. In line with this deduction, Odoe through this drama addresses the numerous socio-economic and political crises encumbering Nigeria’s socio-economic wellness. Furthermore, Odoe in line with Adeoti’s observation presents a familiar narrative “from a perspective that is wider in scope beyond the usually restrictive prism of gender, ethnicity, religion, and politics” (7). Consequently, Odoe in this drama systematically blames some socio-political factors as the subsisting reasons behind Nigeria’s tottering. Principally, Odoe indicates that amongst these factors militating against Nigeria’s national development, corruption appears to be the most pervasive and destabilizing. Noteworthy, Odoe in *Edge of the Brink* presents familiar realities which she knits creatively as contexts and dimensions of corruption. However, the definition of the expression corruption has continued to generate more and more contextualization, apparently negating consensus in classification by several scholars. Thus the web and arrays of definitions of corruption not only indicate several points of views, rather it shows differing socio-cultural
ideologies and worldviews. According to Inge Amundsen,\(^2\) corruption is “a disease, a cancer that eats into the cultural, political and economic fabric of society and destroys the functioning of vital organs” (1). Furthermore, Amundsen contends that:

Corruption is found almost everywhere, but it is stubbornly entrenched in the poor countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, it is widespread in Latin America, it is deep rooted in many of the newly industrialized countries, and it is reaching alarming proportions in several of the post-communist countries. (1)

To this end, Amundsen notes that “corruption has been the subject of a substantial amount of theorizing and empirical research over the last 30 years, and this has produced a bewildering array of alternative explanations, typologies and remedies” (1). Going forward, Amundsen observes that the expression corruption is extensively applied to classify activities and circumstances both in political and social sciences, hence, he contends that it is “being used rather haphazardly” (1). Buttressing, he stresses that:

Corruption is understood as everything from the paying of bribes to civil servants in return for some favour and the theft of public purses, to a wide range of dubious economic and political practices in which politicians and bureaucrats enrich themselves and any abusive use of public power to a personal end. (1)

In her view, Miriam Ikejiani-Clark thinks that, “corruption is an easy method to receive large unearned profits” in order to secure oneself in case of any eventuality, such as ill-health, job retrenchment and other similar realities (147). This mind-set, Ikejiani-Clark believes subsists because there are no functional social safety nets such as reliable national health insurance and other social security schemes; rather what subsists are sub-standard deteriorated and chaotic health care structure and infrastructure. Therefore individuals that have imbibed this mind-set feel the urge to amass huge wealth supposedly for later years. Explaining from a very similar perspective, Jonah Akpan Uwem contends that:

Corruption in Nigeria is caused by factors such as leadership ineptitude, failure to uphold traditional values, poor conditions of services, absence of strong institutions, long period of military rule, external business pressure, nepotism and citizens’ ignorance of their civic rights and apathy. (370)

Clearly, based on these few scholarly perspectives, it is plausible to say that the expression corruption is viewed differently in line with divergent points of views; hence it is in itself a multi-faceted phenomenon. Furthermore, it is plausible to suggest that typologies of corruption are diverse, especially when we consider who the actors, initiators and profiteers, perpetrators are, on the one hand, and on the other, how corruption is perpetrated, as well as to what extent it is practised. We can also appreciate from the contexts and dimensions of the cited scholarly views

\(^2\) Inge Amundsen is a political scientist focusing on democratic institutionalization, parliaments, political parties, political corruption, and natural resources (petroleum resources management and revenue management). His main study area is Malawi, Bangladesh, Angola, Ghana, Nigeria, and francophone West Africa. Amundsen made his PhD in comparative African studies at the University of Tromsø in 1997. He was Research Director at CMI (Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway) from 2000-2003 and Director of the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre from 2002-2006. He has coordinated three CMI institutional cooperation programs, and is currently the coordinator of the research group Democracy and Governance at CMI.
that the causes and the consequences of corruption are multifarious, complicated as well as evolutionary. Again, we can plausibly argue that corruption is clearly a universal common, even though its features are not strictly the same in any two communities or countries. Lastly that corruption exists in differing shades and forms from place to place. Noteworthy, the perspectives projected by Ikejiani-Clark and Uwem are in many ways encapsulated in Odoe’s portrayal in *Edge of the Brink*.

As earlier observed, Odoe in her recast of a familiar story portrays corruption as the primary problem of Erega and then goes ahead to prescribe therapy for it. Thus, Odoe dramatizes some of her ideas of realities of inequalities, depravity, decadent institutions, prevailing lack of patriotism, as nuances and shades of corruption which has continued to thrive due to subsisting leadership deficit. Odoe blames corruption as the direct and indirect reason for the dysfunctional condition of Nigeria’s health system and structure, and the lingering crushing poverty which makes it difficult for a very large proportion of Nigeria’s citizens to meet their everyday basic social need such as healthcare bills. Odoe portrays the dysfunctional condition of Nigeria’s health structure, which totters mainly because it lacks a robust health insurance scheme that could ensure universal health coverage. Hence Odoe observes that private health care providers feel they are not the ones that will take the responsibility of the individuals who cannot afford their charges. As a result these private health institutions demand complete or huge advance payment before commencement of treatment even in an emergency situation. Consequently, Odoe graphically relates that the delay in commencement of treatment of Uche’s wife, Ijeoma, who was bleeding as a result of pangs of birth-labour, as that which though indirectly, but majorly contributed to her demise. In this instance, Odoe presents corruption as an indirect reason behind the demise of Ijeoma. This is because the political leaders who are busy illicitly and stupendously enriching themselves, their relatives and cronies, either by design or default or even both, neglected the public health institutions thereby rendering them practically ineffectual. Therefore, Odoe see corruption as the reason behind the dysfunctional health structure and system which does not have functional universal health insurance scheme. However, Odoe did not classify the actions of private healthcare providers who refuse to offer prompt medical treatment to individuals who could not afford it as corruption. This is because private health care providers are part of the victims of corruption. The understanding here is that the operators of private health institutions cannot remain operational, if the services they provide are not paid for.

Similarly, Odoe projects the praxis of drug counterfeiting as another form of corruption within the Nigerian healthcare system. To elaborate on this point of view, Odoe presents the character Uche, who visits a medicine vendor to procure drugs for his son, Chidi. Regrettably, the drugs he bought, which he thereafter administered to his son where counterproductive because they are counterfeits. Thus, as Uche took the drugs, not too long after, he developed an adverse reaction to them, which include intense breathing difficulty and rapid feeling of numbness in his limbs.

Again, the playwright alludes to other forms of corruption such as higher-education admission scam. In this instance, Odoe presents Chidi as a young boy seeking admission into a University in Erega to pursue an undergraduate degree program. Unfortunately, he was duped by an admission officer who pretended that he can secure admission for him. Meanwhile, through the following lamentations by Chidi, the playwright mirrors the plight of
Nigerian youths who are desirous of attending University to read a course in a bid to chart a clear knowledge driven career path, rather they are faced with frustrating realities, which render them very vulnerable, either as perpetrators or victims of corruption. The playwright makes this reality poignant through the following character expression.

Chidi: Look me over. (Turns around) Your paddy\(^3\) has suffered at home for two long years. I have moved from school to school. I have even paid money to get an admission. I have given up writing exams and I am on my way to learning a trade before I grow too old. At twenty, I should be doing something or, at least, going somewhere. (40)

Suggestively, through the comment above, Odoe indicates that as a result of corruption perpetrated by some political leaders, which has produced multiple effects, Chidi has became a victim as well as a culprit of another form of corruption which can be tagged ‘obtaining by trick’ and is widely referred to as 419 or ‘advance fee fraud’ in Nigeria. In this instance, a university staff collects ₦10,000 from Chidi and promised to help him secure admission into the university. The university staff collected the said amount from Chidi purely to defraud him, whereas Chidi is adjudged a culprit in corruption because the money he gave is a form of inducement, which in many ways is describable as bribery. Still on the context of bribery as a form of corruption, Odoe relates the instance of a young woman who was seeking for employment from a Bank, only to be given the condition by the Bank Director to either engage in a fling with him or to cough out a significant amount of money as a bribe. In this case the victim Oby narrates the following incidence to Chidi who was her schoolmate when they were in university.

Oby: I’ve been through the rain and the snow, searching frantically. It’s been hard. I have met many wolves willing to offer me a job at the price of ripping my thighs apart. (75)

Through her authorial voice, Odoe blames the Bank Director, noting that corruption strives in a system where everyone wants something before they will perform a legitimate function or to lend a helping hand to another person. Specifically, Odoe thinks that it is pathetic that Oby whom the Bank Director confessed has good result and did graduated from a good school, regardless, had been searching for the elusive job for six years without success. The supposition here, based on the contributions of individuals interviewed by the researcher on this topic is that long period of maladministration of Nigeria is to be blamed. The argument here is that the political leaders failed to structure Nigerian economic system in such a way that jobs will be available for the teeming youth population. Hence, if there were sufficient job openings, the pursuance of job at all cost will not suffice and individuals will not take advantage of despurations in situations and people.

Again, Odoe presents other forms of gratifications as bribery which she classifies as corruption however subtle it may be. In this regard, Odoe points at the negative activities of some policemen as example of corruption as projected in the following character comment.

Chidi: You know the usual trouble with policemen on the roads; their palms must be greased or they make you waste an entire day. They stopped the driver and

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\(^3\) The word ‘paddy’ is a pigeon English expression used in Nigeria mostly by youths to suggest or represent the word ‘friend’.
began to ask him stupid questions. It was frustrating. (39)

Pointing at another form of corruption existing within the ivory towers, Odoe relates the act of callousness and cruelty, subsumed in the downright lack of humane disposition to the sanctity of life by student cultists. This penchant is evident in their nefarious and blood-chilling activities, such as the killing and beheading of a rival student cultist, whom they said went for one of their girls. Odoe indicates that parents such as Uche go through mind-wrecking trepidation because their wards will be attending university.

Furthering, Odoe observes that the root of the problems bedevilling Erega is not farfetched. She blames the retrogressive activities of some political class as the root. This she makes evident and poignant through the discussion between the politicians Edu and Kod, who allude that they short-change the country and the citizenry to line their pockets. In their discussion, Kod and Edu allude to the way and manner through which they embark on politics in Erega. Ebulliently, Kod relates: “I go for gubernatorial election; you go for the senate. We can buy anybody up and have the election our way” (95).

ODOE’S NUANCES OF SALVATION IN EDGE OF THE BRINK

Clearly, Odoe attempts to touch on several kinds of indiscretions that subsist in Erega which she classifies as corruption. However, beyond alluding to these retrogressive behaviours, Odoe goes on to proffer solution. To situate this study’s perspective around Odoe’s contribution, this paper describes conceptualization of salvation in the play as revolutionary activism. Essentially, revolutionary activism in this regard embodies the creation of a frontline revolutionary persona, who assumes messianic qualities, which includes an unmistakable forthrightness. The quality of this character should include sufficient aggressiveness, which will lead to actions that will culminate in an assured mass action. Therefore, in analyzing this revolutionary activist character, Betterland, our interest focuses on his quality of action epitomized in his kind of mannerism particularly his speaking skills subsumed in his language quality as well as his social actions encapsulated in his mobilization methods.

To foreground the perceptual bents adopted to pursue the argument in this paper, we commence by explaining clearly a number of prime thematic foci pertinent in the given circumstance such as what we mean by language propriety and leadership charisma. According to Schweitzer charisma represents “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities” (151). Expounding, Max Weber notes that charisma is a personality trait which is strictly displayed by a ‘special’ individual. Furthering, Weber, observes that charisma is not like a college degree which as many as that desire and aspires can obtain; however, he thinks that charisma is a nature’s gift to some individuals, which defines them as ‘special’. In this regard, Weber is of the view that charisma is an innate quality which can be described as a product of an individual’s nature. Buttressing, Martin Spencer observes that Weber’s concept on charisma has been used in at least three trajectories:

- The supernatural ‘gift’ of the leader, charisma as a sacred or revered essence deposited in objects or persons, and charisma as the attractiveness of a personality.

(352)

Furthermore, Robert Tucker adds that in line with Weber’s point of view, “the
possessor of charismatic authority, who may be a religious, political, military, or other kind of leader, is in essence a saviour leader – or one perceived as such” (388). Just like charisma, the other attribute projected by Odoe as requisite in building a revolutionary activist character is language propriety. According to Robert Lowth, language propriety is the concept which suggests that:

The principal design of a grammar of any language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that language, and to enable us to judge every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. (xiii)

Furthering, Lowth explains that “the plain way of doing this, is to lay down rules, and to illustrate them by examples” which means that “besides showing what is right, the matter may be further explained by pointing out what is wrong” (xiv). In line Lowth to achieve language will require the speaker’s knowledge of the connotation and implication of choice of words as stipulated in the culture and environment were such speech is made. Hence, paramount in achieving language propriety is the ability to correctly speak a language by stringing correct words together effectively, and then properly imply suitability as regards to choice of words at all times. Similarly, Stephen McKenna observes that the concept of rhetorical propriety, otherwise language propriety, represents “that stylistic virtue that wins audience sympathy by communicating correctly, clearly, and appropriately” (1). Furthermore Mckenna observes that in many ways, the concept of language propriety “may seem so obvious and intuitive, so rooted in the very nature of human experience as to be pre-theoretical”, because some Marxists and critics such as Roland Barthes view propriety as “groundable only on ideological or foundational premises” (3). From these points of views, we can add that language propriety is primarily locale and location specific, situation specific, time specific and generally, culture defined. By locale and location specific, we suggest that language is viewed differently from one locale or location to another. In essence an expression made in a bed room can be viewed as appropriate, whereas that same comment when it is made at a family dinner can be viewed as inappropriate. Similarly, every given situation influences the nature of language individuals are expected to use; hence comments appropriate at child-naming ceremony may be viewed as inappropriate at funeral gathering. Again, it is deemed inappropriate to say ‘good-morning’ at night, hence individuals are expected to use the appropriate language suitable for the time, be it morning, afternoon, evening or night. Likewise, individuals are expected to appreciate the suitable language appropriate for time of seasons, such as Christmas. Hence it is deemed inappropriate to use merry Christmas during Easter. Thus our supposition is that the quality of nurture an individual acquires goes a long way in shaping their language propriety. Consequently, Odoe’s dramatization in Edge of the Brink, elevates the propensity and propriety of language as an integral factor in assessing the quality of leadership propriety and charisma within culture specific perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Thus this paper examines the praxis and contexts of corruption as portrayed by Odoe in the focused play, as well as her views on the reasons corruption festers in Nigeria, and her view on the remedy, her philosophy on whether corruption can be eradicated or merely reduced to insignificance. Again, this paper looks at Odoe’s dramatic creativity in examples of application of metaphorical and symbolic representation of Nigeria in her play. The
The play story is placed in Nigeria of 1999 to 2016. This is indicative in the following statement by the character Chidi, how states, “I didn’t tell my dad I would be spending the night here. I better call him before he gets worried” (40). Through this we deduce that since the character speaks of making calls, we can say that 1999 being the year GSM was rolled out in Nigeria, it is plausible place the range of the story from 1999, whereas, the period of publication of the play being 2016, we place the period covered by the story to be 2016. In scene seven the playwright indicates that there are growing numbers of vibrant, articulate, focused, brave youths who have decided to agitate against the ills of the society. She attempts to blame mostly the entire problem on leadership deficit which manifests ineptitude, selfishness, and lack of national patriotism. To her in the play the solution is to set aside the ineffectual leadership and then replace them with conscientious individuals.

Again, this paper explores the correlation between features of Weber’s theory on ‘charismatic leadership’ and the dramatization in Odoe’s *Edge of the Brink*. Weber’s thesis offers a perspective on how we can analyze language propriety and this paper identifies limitations of Weber’s theories and potential areas in need of further research. Investigating the relationship between ‘charisma’ and leadership based on a drama text can offer insights for clarifying certain political concepts and shaping future theory building, data collection, and testing. The playwright proffers solution to the problem of the state in form mass action. The character Betterland is presented as a model individual who is resolute and determined to get result regardless of the potential danger to life. He eventually loses his life after he was targeted and shot in response to orders from the chief security officer. The playwright sums up her supposition in the words emanating from the wounded and dying activist revolutionary leader Betterland, who says:

> I am dying, but this seed will grow. I am certain that a new country is born. I am happy that my children will have a better life. (136)

To this end the playwright indicates that the struggle to liberate Nigeria from the suggested anomalies will be met will vicious response from the ruling class, hence those who began the process of rallying the masses against the rulers, will be ready to pay the supreme price. Thus the playwright prescribes nothing less than revolution, and a violent one at that. Another interesting twist in the quest to change the existing negative status quo is the act carried out by Chidi, who covertly sponsored the insurrection and provided concrete evidence of the enormous plunder that has gone on for long in the corridors of powers. Here, Odoe may be suggesting that to liberate Nigeria from the status quo, proponents could employ scheming and calculating manoeuvres to achieve result.

Again, this paper indicates that language propriety is one of the most essential tools required to galvanize the masses into action. Language is used creatively for a variety of purposes in addition to communication. The playwright employs language as a shield for self-defence, a tool for defining and hiding identity. She also placed language as tool for misleading and manipulating others, a means of search for reality, and a tool for punishment, among other functions. The study findings invite further research into Odoe’s use of language in her plays. This paper focuses on the dramatization of the influence of an individual’s nature and nurture in his/her display of acquired language propriety as a means of achieving leadership correctness and charisma. Primarily, the paper focuses on Odoe’s *Edge of the Brink*, to evaluate how this playwright applies the medium of
drama to philosophize on these thematic views. Consequently, this paper evaluates the ideological positions that constitute challenges and prospects towards leadership charisma as represented in the play. Furthermore, this paper emphasises the following conceptual suppositions as its thematic trajectories to this analysis: that it is plausible to say that in such and similar climes as dramatized in *Edge of the Brink*, the notion of language propriety is integral in enhancing charisma requisite for revolutionary leadership; that in such and similar climes dramatized in *Edge of the Brink*, the texture and flavour of language culture is consistently re-aggregated by complex web of social forces; and that language culture is primarily a product of nurture.

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