

# **Flying from the Enchanter: From Narrative Empathy to the Questioning of Narratorial Reliability in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People***

by

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## **Abstract**

Readers and critics of Chinua Achebe's novel *A Man of the People* (1966) have invariably pilloried Chief Nanga, while they have generally been gushingly sympathetic to Odili Samalu by excessively praising, among other traits, his honesty as a character and his objectivity as a narrator. This paper seriously calls such sympathy and praises into question. From a narratological perspective, I argue that the scandalous bestowal of an *undistorted view*, a *detached position* or a *detached perspective* upon Odili is a normal effect of *narrative empathy* which, however, can be only short-lived in the face of copious textually schematized clues of narratorial unreliability. These clues quell narrative empathy, elicit epistemological doubt from the (implied) reader, and alarm his/her cognitive mechanisms into the exercise of epistemic vigilance. I therefore withdraw the reliability badge from Odili, taking the stance that he is an unreliable narrator and that narratorial unreliability is intentionally encoded in the novel by the implied author as a stylistic device, i.e. for the purpose of generating irony.

**Keywords:** narrative empathy, unreliable narration, unreliability, irony

## **Introduction**

Chinua Achebe's fourth novel, *A Man of the People* (henceforth *MOP*), aptly stages two of the most memorable characters in the African literature of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the protagonist Chief Nanga, a Minister of Culture, and the narrator-antagonist Odili Samalu, a grammar school teacher. The popularity and cultural significance of these characters are such that the words 'Nanga' and 'Odili' have entered the African political dictionary as common nouns in much the same way as, say, Lawino and Ocol. Additionally, the personages themselves have become proverbial prototypes of two opposing approaches to the political future of Africa.

But, while Chief Nanga has invariably been pilloried by readers and critics alike, Odili Samalu has generally enjoyed a gushingly sympathetic and laudatory treatment from them. Cases in point are the appraisals of Bernth Lindfors, Qiang Hu, Vachaspati Dwivedi and Kennedy Lubengu, to name just a handful.

The eagle-eyed American critic, Bernth Lindfors, disparaged Chief Nanga as ‘one of the finest rogues in Nigerian literature;’ as ‘a self-seeking, grossly corrupt politician who lives in flamboyant opulence on his ill-gotten gains’ (Lindfors 1978: 61). Conversely, he commended Odili Samalu as a man who has somehow ‘managed to remain untainted amidst all the surrounding corruption;’ as a commentator whose ‘clear vision provides an *undistorted view* of a warped society’ and whose word ‘can be trusted to be accurate and honest’ (p. 62, emphasis added). Qiang Hu subscribes to this value judgment. He tacitly casts Chief Nanga into the basket of actors on the theater of ‘corruption and political immorality,’ which vices Odili Samalu is said to condemn from a *detached position* (1998: 25, emphasis added). It is worth noting here that Hu’s ascription of ‘objectivity’ to Odili does not mesh at all with his later denunciation of the ‘built-in bias and limitation’ (p. 26) inherent in Odili’s first-person narration. As to Dwivedi, he walks in the footsteps of his predecessors in scorning Chief Nanga as a ‘villain,’ as the embodiment of corruption, and in praising Odili’s *detached first-person perspective* (2008: 3, emphasis added). This critic goes much further as to lyrically eulogize Odili as the incarnation of morality, the mediator of Achebe’s vision (2008: 3) or the character through whom Achebe ‘successfully projected his ideals (p. 10). The same lyrical note tinges Lubengu’s praise of Odili ‘who today remains my undisputed hero of the over 200 literary texts I have read’ (2013: 28) and who is his political role model.

I am concerned with Odili’s (un)reliability as narrator and actor for two major reasons. First, Odili is the communicative bridge and the semantic nexus between the (implied) author and his/her (implied) audience. Second, inasmuch as (un)reliable narration is situated at the interface of aesthetics and ethics, the determination of a narrator’s (un)reliability has far-reaching interpretive consequences (Nünning 2005: 90): it is a gateway to the decoding of authorial communicative intent. In this paper, I argue that the scandalous bestowal of an *undistorted view*, a *detached position* or a *detached perspective* upon Odili is a normal effect of *narrative empathy*. Also, this empathy can be only short-lived in the face of a stupendous amount of textually schematized clues of narratorial unreliability which elicit epistemological doubt from the (implied) reader and alarm his/her cognitive mechanisms into the exercise of epistemic vigilance. I therefore withdraw the reliability badge from Odili, taking the stance that he is an unreliable narrator and that narratorial unreliability is intentionally encoded in *MOP* by the (implied) author as a stylistic device, i.e. for the purpose of generating irony. This being so, my approach is markedly narratological.

## **Theoretical Framework: Narrative Empathy and Unreliable Narration**

### **Narrative Empathy**

The British experimental psychologist Edward B. Titchener is credited with introducing the word *empathy* into the English language in 1909 when rendering the German word *Einfühlung* (‘feeling into’), a concept developed by Lotze in his 1858 book titled *Mikrokosmos*.

Empathy refers to the experience of a certain degree of self-identification with an observed human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate object. This experience might be equated with ‘an involuntary projection of ourselves into an object,’ and explained as the result of an ‘inner mimicry’; that is, the observation of an object evokes incipient muscular movements which are not experienced as one’s own sensations, but as though they were attributes of the outer object (Abrams 1999: 74). Thus, a football fan or addict may empathically lift his/her leg when watching a footballer run to kick a penalty, or a ballet lover may seem to pirouette with a ballet dancer.

Empathy comprises a number of subsets, among which *narrative empathy*. This is the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition. As empathizing involves *feeling what the other feels* or *feeling the other’s pain*, neither commonality of identity, situation, and feeling, nor a necessarily complex or realistic characterization is required for readers to feel empathy for fictional characters. Following Keen (2006: 214-220), the key features of narrative fictional texts that are most commonly associated with narrative empathy are first-person narrative situation, character identification (specific aspects of characterization, such as naming, description, indirect implications of trait, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness), narrative situation (including point of view and perspective) and high levels of imagery that invite mental stimulation, immersion and the feeling of transportation or of ‘leaving the real world behind’.

## Unreliable Narration

The concept of *unreliable narrator* was first proposed by Wayne C. Booth in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. ‘I have called a narrator *reliable*,’ he wrote therein, ‘when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not’ (1983 [1961]: 158-9). While this definition has long been institutionalized, its postulation of the ‘implied author’ has never ceased to be a bone of contention between rhetorical narratologists and structuralist/cognitive narratologists. The former have added it to their list of important and indispensable categories of textual analysis; the latter have argued for its abandonment (Nünning 2005: 89). The reasons that have been supplied in support of this call for the rejection of the ‘implied author’ are, inter alia, that a) this notion is very elusive and opaque in the sense that it lacks clarity and theoretical coherence, and that b) the status and norms of the ‘implied author’ are difficult to ascertain.

The rejection of the ‘implied author’ by structuralist/cognitive narratologists has also resulted in the dismissal of the definition of ‘unreliable narrator’ as problematic. It is said to be so insofar as it leaves unclear what unreliability actually is and fails to distinguish between the narrator’s moral and epistemological shortcomings. This rejection has finally led to the call for terminological refinements and typological distinctions. Two rhetorical narratologists, Phelan and Martin (1999), are commended for having proposed the most systematic and useful such refinements and distinctions.

Based on the three (3) main functions performed by narrators – (1) reporting on, (2) evaluating and (3) interpreting [characters, facts and events] -, Phelan and Martin have theorized that narratorial unreliability results from failure or distortion in the carrying out of the aforementioned functions. Thus, six (6) main kinds of unreliability can be distinguished: underreporting and misreporting (axis of facts/events), under-evaluating and misevaluating (axis of ethics/evaluation), and under-interpreting and misinterpreting (axis of knowledge/perception) [Nünning 2005: 94].

On their part, cognitive and constructivist narratologists have continued to warn against the treatment of unreliability as a character trait of a narrator, and have, instead, located it in the text-reader interaction and in the gap between the narrator's worldview and the reader's/critic's world-model and standards of normalcy. But, in an attempt at a conceptual and methodological rapprochement between rhetorical and cognitive/constructivist frameworks, Nünning (2005: 97-98), one of these narratologists, has acknowledged and emphasized that a more reliable theorizing of unreliability should take on board not only the reader's response and world-knowledge, but also the interplay between the author (whether implied or not), textual phenomena and the reader's/critic's world-model, values, norms and conceptual information.

From this perspective of rapprochement, Nünning (2005: 94-103) has drawn from Riggan (1981) a typology of unreliable narrators, and has proceeded to a generous and balanced compilation of textual, extra-textual and other indices that can serve as clues of narratorial unreliability. Different types of unreliable narrators are the madman, the naïve narrator, the hypocrite, the pervert, the morally debased narrator, the picaro, the liar, the trickster and the clown (Riggan 1981). As to indices of narratorial unreliability, they include narrator's limited knowledge, personal involvement and problematic value-scheme; conflict between story (the content or chain of events plus the existents) and discourse (the expression, the means by which the content is communicated) [Chatman 1978: 19], i.e. oddity between narrator's commentary and evidence presented in the scene s/he comments upon; internal contradictions within the discourse; conflict between the narrator's representation of events and his/her explanations, evaluations, and interpretations of them; discrepancies between utterances and actions, between personal actions and moral views propounded; multiperspectival accounts of the same event; narrator's pompous and effusive self-characterization and disdain for others; narrator's unwitting self-exposure, unintentional self-incrimination or betrayal of personal shortcomings; narrator's linguistic expressions of subjectivity and stylistic evocation of cognitive limitations; narrator's idiosyncratic verbal habits, etc.

## **Narrative Empathy and Narratorial Unreliability in *MOP***

Achebe's *MOP* is Odili Samalu's first-person account of his political and romantic rivalry with Chief Nanga, his ethnic group brother, former elementary school teacher and now a powerful minister. This rivalry was sparked by Chief Nanga's sleeping with Elsie, Odili's girl-friend, when Odili was a guest of the minister's. The minister had actually invited Odili to his mansion in the capital, and offered to get him a scholarship for postgraduate studies overseas.

It is during this short, blissful stay together that they fell out over Chief Nanga's sexual intercourse with Elsie, which act propelled an infuriated Odili to seek revenge by contesting Nanga's seat in parliament and seducing his prospective second wife, Edna.

Odili plays a central role in the story he tells us: he is both narrator and major character (antagonist). As a first-person narrator – a narrator who more readily evokes feeling responsiveness than the whole variety of third person narrators (Keen 2006: 216) -, Odili obviously intends to tell his story impartially and in such a way that it 'makes sense' (*MOP*: 1) to readers. His expressed promise and willingness to 'admit' in his story-telling what is admissible for the purpose of sharable sense-making and readers' enlightenment readily triggers in readers some sort of empathetic complicity. Thus, as Odili next embarks on the emotionally evocative account of the genesis of his anti-Nanga sentiment and his political disillusionment as well as on his indictment of the society that makes Machiavellian politicians prosper, readers feel enticed into feeling-sharing and perspective-taking with him. And so overpowering is this feeling responsiveness that it literally deprives them of 'the luxury of questioning' (Keen 2006: 222) the narrator's reliability.

But much as readers' narrative empathy is spontaneous, genuine, and overwhelming, the implied author - i.e. a streamlined version of the real author or the agent responsible for bringing the text into existence (Phelan 2005: 45 quoted in Nünning 2005: 99) - has ensured that it is short-lived. For the implied author has carefully strewn the text (*MOP*) and Odili's storytelling with profuse clues of unreliability which naturally impede the (implied) reader's empathy, elicit epistemological doubt from him/her, and alert his/her cognitive mechanisms into the exercise of epistemic vigilance as well as into a redeeming flight from Odili the enchanter and the questioning of his believability. Such clues of unreliability include, inter alia, narrator (Odili)'s idiosyncratic verbal habits and linguistic expressions of self-defensiveness; narrator's self-advocacy, pompous and effusive self-characterization coupled with his disdain for others; discrepancies between narrator's utterances, actions and moral views propounded, as well as narrator's unwitting betrayal of personal shortcomings.

To begin with, there is no doubt that Odili's storytelling intention is to perform autopsy on his society, analyze what has gone awry in it, indict political leaders and other people in the process, and come out clean. Ironically, the verbal, linguistic and narrative mannerisms - with which the implied author has somewhat intentionally endowed Odili - betray his lack of objectivity, his complacency and his self-defensiveness. The language of Odili is highly subjective: it is saturated with superfluous metaphors, overused expressions and commonplace phrases which cause a critical reader to call under question the credibility of Odili as narrator. This kind of language weakens progressively the reader's trust in the narrator inasmuch as it sometimes betrays the latter's complacent and biased attitudes.

Moreover, Odili's stance is ridiculously self-defensive, when he is giving accounts of events in which his role or behaviour could draw the reader's suspicions or doubts on his moral or intellectual integrity. In such accounts, he organizes his story and discourse to suit his self-justification. But when he is making comments on the political catastrophe, or passing value judgments on the comportment of others, he takes on what Arthur Ravenscroft described as "the smirking, familiar, I-know-what-I'm-talking-about tone of so many TV commentators" (Griffiths 1971: 98).

The brief account of the first time Odili took Elsie to bed is a fine example of Odili's clichéd style of expression and of his self-justifying penchant: in the twenty lines or so of the first paragraph, the reader easily identifies a number of slickly phrased clichés like 'for that matter still is', 'slept with', 'in fact within', 'the way it happened', 'having as usual put off...', 'having a rough time', 'in spite of my arrears of work', 'give my brain time to cool off', 'made straight for her', 'turned out to be', 'most vivacious girl', 'no doubt without meaning to', 'took a hand in the matter', etc. These clichés betray, to Odili's disadvantage, his arrogant and self-satisfied tone and the untruth in his discourse. What is more, Odili shuts himself away in a compromising defensiveness right at the beginning of this account: 'I... am not entering', 'nor am I trying to prejudice', 'I only put it down because...' These denials only make it even clearer that this is exactly what he is trying to do (Griffiths 1971: 102).

Odili's discursive predisposition to complacency and self-defense and his application of double-standards in moral judgements, which serve as clear indications of his narratorial unreliability, go hand in hand with his displayed self-advocacy and his pompous, effusive self-characterization whose corollary is the disdain for others. Good cases of Odili's self-advocacy include his explication of the reasons why a man like him – 'who simply couldn't stoop to lick any Big Man's boots' (*MOP*: 19) or who is not 'capable of stooping to obtain a scholarship in any underhand way' (*MOP*: 24) - accepted Chief Nanga's offer to get him a scholarship: he himself did not ask for it, and the Minister's proposals did not seem any offensive to him. Much earlier in the story, Odili said that he 'had no reason to be enthusiastic' (*MOP*: 6) about Chief Nanga's arrival at Anata Grammar School. But then, soon after the minister had asked Odili to see him at the end of the reception, he released a sudden, exuberant exclamation in approval of a comment designed to laud the great man. What is ludicrous is that Odili instantly justified himself by claiming that he 'meant it [this exclamation] to be sarcastic' (*MOP*: 10). Such self-advocatory statements springing from the mouth/pen of a complacent youth like Odili should be taken with a pinch of salt. And so should other utterances in the narration and comments of a fellow (Odili) who seems to take pleasure in unceremoniously dismissing the people around him as 'silly, ignorant villagers,' as 'poor contemptible people,' as 'ignorant and cynical' (*MOP*: 2), as 'this vast contemptible crowd' (*MOP*: 138), placing himself above them and others by bragging about his 'own merit' (*MOP*: 17), his expertise on African art (*MOP*: 49-50), his 'high-minded thinking' (*MOP*: 115) and his 'moral position' (*MOP*: 128).

Now, it is highly self-deceptive and ironical for Odili to pride himself on his so-called 'moral position': much of his unreliability as a character issues from the gaps between what he says and what he does, between the moral views he propounds and his personal actions. As a character, Odili undoubtedly has a clear sight of the discrepancy between speech and reality in his society. An aristocrat in spirit, he surely wishes to take Mother Africa back into mainstream philosophies, politics, languages, religions, myths and cultures from which European colonization had violently excluded her. He also feels morally indignant at the socio-political mess in his country, and consequently decides to keep at bay the values of the wicked Chiefs Nanga and Koko, and to abide by different ideals. As best he can, Odili strains to live up to his standards.

He courageously tries to invent an operable morality which can reduce the disparity between his ideals and the moving soggy ground of inherited beliefs and principles. However, in spite of his resolutions, he is repeatedly betrayed into self-deception and pretence – indeed, rather undeliberately: he is unconsciously held in thrall by the very values he loathes and struggles to distance himself from.

For example, Odili was initially attracted to Elsie by her ‘vivaciousness’ and ‘attainability’ which he praised as ‘virtues’. But later, when Chief Nanga takes Elsie away from him, Odili is utterly upset. In his bitterness and moral indignation, Odili unconsciously contradicts his early value judgment: Elsie’s ‘virtues’ become her ‘vices’, and he rebukes her as ‘a common harlot’ (*MOP*: 80). Next, Odili criticizes political authorities as being hardly prepared for leadership, while he himself is running for a seat in Parliament, aware of the nebulousness of his political plans (*MOP*: 146). He also wavers in his criticism of politics as soon as he receives Chief Nanga’s invitation to the Capital. After he has been asked by the Minister to meet him at the end of the reception, Odili gets into some kind of trance:

I became a hero in the eyes of the crowd. *I was dazed*. Everything around me became unreal; the voices receded to a vague border zone. I knew I ought to be angry with myself but I wasn’t. *I found myself wondering whether – perhaps – I had been applying to politics stringent standards that didn’t belong to it*. When I came back to the immediate present... (*MOP*: 10, emphasis added).

This sudden intrusion of uncertainty into Odili’s mind, or this quick change of opinion, gives evidence against his integrity. It accuses him as a morally and intellectually ambivalent character whose self-avowed ethical steadfastness can easily be subdued by temptations of prestige, comfort and luxury. In fact, Odili himself confesses, much later in the story, that he was so ‘hypnotized by the luxury of the great suite assigned’ to him at Chief Nanga’s that if he was at that moment made a minister, he ‘would be most anxious to remain one for ever’ (*MOP*: 37). Additionally, the ‘proprietary air’ (*MOP*: 58) with which Odili sat in Chief Nanga’s Cadillac when he left Elsie’s hospital, the ‘bold, proprietary gesture’ (*MOP*: 67) in which he threw his arm across her shoulders in the minister’s famous car when they left the book exhibition, and his unconcealed attachment to his own brand-new Volkswagen – although he claims to have vowed at university ‘never to be corrupted by bourgeois privileges of which the car was the most visible symbol in our country’ (*MOP*: 109) – seem to operate as Odili’s unwitting betrayal of his personal shortcomings. Such behaviours blur, to a certain extent, the line between (the future) Odili and those fellows who have not “been indoors long enough to be able to say ‘To hell with it all’” (*MOP*: 37). That is, those individuals who are committed to a compulsive pursuit and accumulation of wealth at the expense of national welfare.

Here is yet another example of Odili's ambivalence, which proves that he is a morally debased narrator: he condemns Chief Nanga's behaviour with women, yet he himself is not blameless on this ground. Firstly, he takes pride in his sexual prowess (*MOP*: 28). Secondly, he had sex with Jean, a married woman, in the night she was planning to have Chief Nanga in bed (*MOP*: 58). Thirdly, his initial plan to entice Edna, Chief Nanga's prospective second wife, into a love affair was triggered by his desire for a cynical sexual revenge.

These examples of ambivalence and contradiction seriously call into question Odili's 'moral position' and reliability. They show that he shares the very defects which destroy the people around him, and that he is unaware of it because he is not 'detached' enough to be able to see his own flaws as perspicaciously as he sees those of the people around him. Viewed against this background, Odili appears, following the words of Arthur Ravenscroft, as 'both serious accuser and comically self-accused in the rotten society of *A Man of the People*' (Griffiths 1971: 98). He is like a smoker who lashes out at a company that pollutes the air with noxious fumes. It is this dilemmatic situation, in which Odili awkwardly stands, that is most instrumental in making *MOP* 'an ironic novel of high distinction' (Griffiths 1971: 100).

## Conclusion

This paper has taken issue with readers and critics who bestow an *undistorted view*, a *detached position* or a *detached perspective* upon Odili, the narrator and antagonist in *MOP*. From a narratological perspective, it has argued that this scandalous bestowal is a normal effect of first-person-narration-induced narrative empathy which, however, can be only ephemeral in the face of abundant textually schematized clues of narratorial unreliability. And that this unreliability is intentionally encoded in the novel by the implied author as a stylistic device, i.e. for the purpose of generating irony. The paper has then attempted to demonstrate that Odili is unreliable both in his narratorial functions and his actantial performances: Odili's unreliability is betrayed by his idiosyncratic self-defensiveness; his self-advocacy and immodest self-characterization; his disdain for others; by discrepancies between his speech, behaviour and personal moral views, as well as by his unintentional self-incrimination.

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