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**Power Dynamics in Nigerian Society in
Uche Nnyagu's *Travails of the Giant***

Adaoma Igwedibia

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ae.igwedibia@unizik.edu.ng

&

Nwokeabia, Ifeanyi John

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
nwokeabiaifeanyijohn@gmail.com

Abstract

In man's efforts to survive in the world, there are some certain forces that man must navigate through in order to get to his destination in life. These challenges may pose serious obstacles to his success in his chosen life's endeavours, and as such delay his speed at attaining the needed height. This paper analyzes the intricate power dynamics within Nigerian society as depicted in Uche Nnyagu's novel, *Travails of the Giant*. Power as a man-made force can appear in different forms, depending on the situation one finds himself or herself. Drawing on sociological criticism, the study examines how various social, political, and cultural forces intersect to shape power relations in Nigeria. Through a close reading of Nnyagu's narrative, the research shows different ways in which power is exercised, contested, and legitimized in the academic sector of Nigerian society. Key themes explored include leadership struggles, and the struggle for social justice and accountability. By exploring the power dynamics portrayed in *Travails of the Giant*, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the power dynamism existing in the Nigerian educational institution.

Keywords: Power, Sociological criticism, Dynamism, Sexual harassment, Betrayal

Introduction

In the contemporary Nigerian literature, Uche Nnyagu's novel, *Travails of the Giant*, stands as a compelling exploration of the power dynamics existing in Nigerian society. Within the pages of Nnyagu's work, readers are immersed in a vivid portrayal of an institution grappling with the dynamism of power, from the corridors of political influence to the intimate dynamics of familial relationships. These happenings are based on Nigeria's sociological context, *Travails of the Giant* offers a nuanced examination of the forces that shape and define power relations within the country.

Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation and a regional powerhouse, is a fertile ground for the study of power dynamics. With its diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural differences, the country presents a complex mosaic of competing interests and identities. Moreover, Nigeria's history of colonial rule and post-independence struggles have left an indelible mark on its socio-political landscape, influencing the distribution and exercise of power in profound ways. In this context, *Travails of the Giant* emerges as a literary work that looks deep into the heart of Nigerian society, interrogating the mechanisms through which power operates and the consequences it yields. Through the experiences of its characters, ranging from lecturers to students, the novel illuminates the various dimensions of power – from the overt displays of political authority to the subtle dynamics of social hierarchy.

This paper aims to explore the power dynamics depicted in *Travails of the Giant* through a multidisciplinary lens, drawing insights from literature, sociology, political science, and cultural studies. By engaging with Nnyagu's narrative, we seek to unravel the fogs of power in Nigerian society, examining the intersections

of class, gender, ethnicity, and religion in the distribution and contestation of power. Additionally, this study endeavours to shed light on the broader implications of power dynamics for governance, democracy, and social justice in contemporary Nigeria.

Through this exploration, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of Nigerian society and its ongoing struggles for empowerment, representation, and equitable development. By analyzing power dynamics in Nigeria and offer valuable insights for academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher adopted the sociological criticism as a theoretical approach fitting as a framework for the analysis of the text. Sociological criticism enjoys much popularity in the twentieth century. It regards a literary work as a product of social factors and forces prevailing in a particular society at a particular time. M H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham are of the opinion that sociological critics should treat a work of literature as inescapably conditioned—in the choice and development of its subject matter, the ways of thinking it incorporates, its evaluations of the modes of life it renders, and even in its formal qualities—by the social, political, and economic organization and forces of its age.

Hyppolyte Taine, the French thinker, pronounced that literature is deeply influenced by the moment, the race and the milieu. It examines a literary work in the context of the social conditions of its author. A work of art is examined in its social context and it also studies its social effects. Henry Levin rightly points out: "The relations between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes, it is also the cause of social effects."

This approach often explores how literature reflects and shapes the social structures, ideologies, and conflicts of its time. Sociological criticism encourages readers to consider literature as a product of its cultural and historical context, offering insights into societal attitudes, tensions, and transformations. By examining literature through this lens, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between literature and society.

Literature reflects social values. The two can never be divorced. Edmund Wilson traces sociological criticism to Vico's eighteenth century study of Homer's epics, which revealed the social conditions in which the Greek poet lived. Hicks' Proletarian Literature (1935), Cecil Dony Lewis' The Mind in Chains (1937), Bernard Smith's Forces in American Criticism (1939), V. F. Calvertan's The Liberation of American Literature (1931), Ralph Fox's Novel and the People (1937), F. O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance (1941) and L. C. Knight's Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson (1937) are some of the noticeable studies on sociological criticism.

Travails of The Giant as a Reflection of the Society

The concept of literature reflecting society is enduring, illustrating the values, beliefs, and experiences of its time. Terry Eagleton observes, literature provides a window into the inner lives and perspectives of others (Eagleton, 2012), a notion vividly exemplified in Uche Nnyagu's *Travails of the Giant*. In *A Detention Diary*, Ken Saro Giwa stated that, "literature in a critical situation such as Nigeria's cannot be divorced from politics. Indeed, literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role." (81)

Nnyagu's novel serves as a reflective surface for academic society, laying bare its power struggles, envy, and suppression of intellect.

Through Professor Umeaku's journey amidst university politics, readers confront the harsh realities of ambition, insecurity, and the misuse of authority. This societal reflection is articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who views literature as a cultural tool for both reflecting and shaping social attitudes (Spivak, 1987).

By portraying Professor Umeaku's challenges, Nnyagu holds a mirror to academia, exposing its inherent flaws and challenges that hinder the pursuit of knowledge and truth. According to Harold Bloom, literature mirrors the complexities and contradictions of human existence (Bloom, 1994). In *Travails of the Giant*, these complexities are starkly portrayed, offering a poignant critique of contemporary society.

Travails of the Giant by Uche Nnyagu presents the life, tribulations and survival efforts of a man in the face of a challenging world. The story told using the autobiographic narrative technique explores the enigmatic lifestyle of its protagonist, Dr Okwuchukwu Oscar Umeaku (Onyezobaonweya). As a studious academic, he does not want to be saddled with political appointment like Head of Department, Deanship or Directorship, and so, he focuses on writing papers and working towards actualizing his dream of becoming a full professor. The novel highlights the fact that those at the helm of affairs in public offices exploit their subjects by making unfulfilled promises. They use sugarcoated mouth to get their subjects to do their biddings. Okwuchukwu Umeaku as the protagonist in the novel is used as a scapegoat to illustrate what those at the pinnacle of power can do to their subjects. He gets invitation from Vice Chancellor and on getting there he meets the Vice Chancellor with journalists. After his meeting with the Vice Chancellor he is pronounced the Dean Students' Affairs. The appointment comes with a promise from the Vice Chancellor that he will be made a professor. But what he gets in return as a gift is betrayal.

As the novel continues to reflect the life and living condition of humans in the society, Dr Okwuchukwu experiences betrayal from different individuals holding different offices at Federal University of Global Studies Ifite. It starts with his brother, Mr Uzo who he once recommends for the Head of Department position serving him query for no just cause. Just because Mr Uzo is becoming intoxicated with power and wishes to flex his muscle. It is a pure case of biting the finger that fed you. When Dr Okwuchukwu is yet to mull over the betrayal from Mr Uzo, the HOD blackmailed him before the Vice-Chancellor as she wrongly accuses him of aiding examination malpractice.

Then the inability of the two Vice Chancellors; Professor Paul and Professor Ugokamma to discharge their duties according to Okwuchukwu Umeaku reflects the highest level of betrayal and injustice. Prof Paul that promises to make Dr Okwuchukwu professor ends up betraying him like Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus Christ by accusing of organising students protect against the president. When the same Vice-Chancellor is aware that Okwuchukwu is on official conference to Abuja. The case of Prof Paul and Dr Okwuchukwu is like the case of giving someone a bag of salt and releasing rain upon him. While Prof Ugokamma becomes vile towards Prof Okwuchukwu just because, Prof Okwuchukwu contests against him for the post of Vice Chancellor of the Federal University of Global Studies, Ifite. The novel portrays Prof Ugokamma as one of those politicians who believe that politics is a do or die affair. Such individual lacks the spirit of sportsmanship that is supposed to be associated with politics. And to demonstrate his anger towards Okwuchukwu, Prof Ugokamma fails to renew his contract to remain at the University.

The novel does not only explore the power tussle amongst academics in an academic environment in a Nigerian society, but also looks at the bullying attitudes of some lecturers towards their students. Those lecturers sexually harass students and resort to

failing the students that fail to comply with their demands. The case of betrayal and sexual harassment as portrayed in the novel is not alien to our present society as they prevalently occur on daily basis. *Travails of the Giant* is the truest portrayal of power dynamics in our contemporary society.

Stylistics Analysis of Travails of the Giant

Style is one thing that can make a writer special or endearing to his or her reader. Afam Ebeogu and Uzoma Nwokocha posit that “style is a distinctive way of saying, writing or doing things, as in, the style of an address, a book or carving. Style is therefore a kind of art, both inherent and acquired, and is often associated with the creative imagination” (206).

Uche Nnyagu’s novel *Travails of the Giants* adopts a simple but yet interesting easy flowing narrative style. Its ‘un-put-down-able’ nature is built through the writer’s magical suspense created from the beginning to the end. The novel comprises three parts (part one is subtitled ‘Dr Okwuchukwu Umeaku,’ part two is subtitled ‘Professor Okwuchukwu Umeaku and part three is subtitled ‘Things Fall Apart’). It has a total number of nineteen (19) chapters and two hundred and forty (240) pages. The neat blend of compound sentences, complex sentences, Italics, Code-switching and occasional use of classical allusion give the novel a uniqueness that is both pleasing and exquisite.

Uche Nnyagu employs a distinctive literary style in *Travails of the Giant* that showcases his adeptness with language, effectively capturing the intricacies of human experience. Through skillful use of imagery, symbolism, and irony, Nnyagu constructs a narrative that is deeply moving and intellectually stimulating. His writing is concise yet powerful, effortlessly portraying Professor Umeaku's emotional struggles and the bureaucratic absurdities within academia. As Chinua Achebe asserts, style is not merely decorative but integral to conveying meaning (Achebe, 1975), and

Nnyagu's stylistic choices significantly contribute to the novel's thematic depth and character development.

Furthermore, Nnyagu incorporates satire and social commentary to further enrich his stylistics. By employing humor and satire, he exposes the contradictions and pretensions of academic institutions, shedding light on the underlying power dynamics and political intrigues. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, satire serves as a potent tool for critiquing societal norms (Bakhtin, 1984), and Nnyagu masterfully utilizes these elements to underscore literature's role in challenging and reshaping societal perspectives.

The Blending of Fiction and Fact in *Travails of the Giant*

Uche Nnyagu's *Travails of the Giant* illustrates how fiction can skillfully blend fact and imagination, crafting a narrative that is firmly rooted in reality yet enriched by creative storytelling. Chinua Achebe recognizes art as man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence through his imagination. Through this, it can be deciphered that an artist is a creator and decides how its creation will be (fact or fiction). By integrating prominent figures such as Olusegun Obasanjo and Chris Ngige into the story-line, Nnyagu foregrounds the historical context of the novel, drawing from Nigeria's cultural and political milieu during Obasanjo's regime as president. The characters' retention of their real names in the novel showcases the political period of the novel in Nigeria. Concurrently, he employs imaginative elements to construct a fictional university environment and characters like Professor Umeaku, whose personal challenges reflect broader societal issues. This interplay between reality and invention allows Nnyagu to address real-world issues while delving into the emotional depths of his characters.

More so, David Hume quoted in Timothy M. Costelloe juxtaposes the craft of the historian to the art of the poet: whereas the former

relies on memory to reiterate the sequence of past events in a narrative that conforms to real existence and matter of fact, the latter employs the imagination to create a fictional world that deliberately leaves experience behind. When historians depart from matter of fact, their narrative becomes fictional and false; when poets depart from fictions, their productions become real and un-poetic. At the same time, however, Hume also compares the historian with the poet, recognizing that historical writing itself depends on the imagination. This comparison is explored by showing how the same principles that govern literary creativity are applicable to history: both poets and historians draw on the magical power of imagination to transform ordinary experience into something. If Hume's idea is something to reckon with, it is right to recognize the physical semblance of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Ifite Awka and Federal University of Global Studies, Ifite. They are both located along the Onitsha – Enugu expressway. Even the characters are prototypes of different individuals that once graced the English Language and Literary Studies Department. The writer's source of inspiration as written on the front cover of the novel, "The inspiration that triggered the writing of this fiction came partly from the story told by Mrs Ijeoma Okey-Umeh" justifies the researcher's claim.

Through this fusion of fact and imagination, Nnyagu achieves a compelling sense of authenticity, imbuing the fictional narrative with credibility and impact. As James Wood observes, fiction serves as a medium for exploring the complexities and contradictions inherent in human life (Wood, 2008). By melding recognizable historical events and personalities with imaginative storytelling, Nnyagu not only reflects our familiar world but also prompts readers to reconsider their perceptions and interpretations of it. This adept blending of fact and imagination exposes beautifully Nnyagu's narrative skill, and elevates *Travails of the Giant* into a captivating exploration of societal dynamics and individual resilience.

Power Dynamics in *Travails of the Giant*

In *Travails of the Giant* by Uche Nnyagu, power dynamics are prominently depicted within the academic environment of Nigerian society. The protagonist, Dr. Okwuchukwu Oscar Umeaku (Onyezobaonweya), navigates a series of challenges and betrayals as he seeks to advance his career and fulfill his aspirations. Through the lens of Dr. Umeaku's experiences, the novel sheds light on the complexities of power struggles and the consequences of ambition and betrayal within institutional settings.

One notable aspect of power dynamics in the novel is the manipulation and betrayal faced by Dr. Umeaku at the hands of those in positions of authority. Despite his dedication to academic pursuits and reluctance to engage in political appointments, he finds himself thrust into a position of authority as the Dean of Students' Affairs through the machinations of the Vice-Chancellor. This appointment comes with the promise of further advancement to the rank of professor, but instead, Dr. Umeaku is met with sabotage and betrayal. This reluctance can be seen in the excerpt below;

...Prof, it is no other thing than I want to work hard for my professorship. I don't want anything that would constitute a plight for my scholarship. I want to dedicate my time to writing and researching further to get to the peak of my career. Prof, I want to become a professor of English. That has been my dream and I wouldn't want anything that would hinder me from writing and writing as to achieve my dream in life." The Vice Chancellor looked at him and laughed. "Dr Okwuchukwu Umeaku! You have spoken like a naïve person. Anyway, that is what it should be because you don't know me well." He struck his chest. "Okwuchukwu, you have nothing to fear about. I assure you, with me, Professor Paul as the Chief Executive of this

University, look at your professorship her,” “...my friend, Onyezobaonweya, if what you have just told me now is your fear and your reason for not accepting the offer, then I assure you that you have no problems at all. Accept the offer and you will see that in less than two years, I , Professor Paul would announce your professorship. You know I can do that (11 -12).

Betrayal becomes more painful and pathetic when you are betrayed by the people you least expected it from. Dr. Umeaku's own brother, Mr. Uzo (who he recommended as HOD) betrays him by serving him query for no just course, while the later HOD, Dr Onyisi falsely accuse him (Dr Okwuchukwu) of aiding examination malpractice, thereby jeopardizing his reputation and career prospects. This betrayal highlights the personal and familial dynamics that can influence power struggles within academic institutions. The agony of betrayal is better felt in the words of Dr Okwy while speaking to his friend, Chinyelugo after coming out from the Vice-Chancellor's office, thus;

...it is a terrible thing. The Vice Chancellor said that the HOD told him that I encourage examination malpractice. Imagine me, Okwuchukwu nwa Umeaku, encouraging malpractice (186). Furthermore, the Vice Chancellor's failure to fulfill his promise of promotion to professorship and his subsequent betrayal by involving the police in a false accusation further underscores the abuse of power and manipulation within the institutional hierarchy. This betrayal not only undermines Dr. Umeaku's professional integrity but also exposes the systemic corruption and injustice within the academic establishment. This is succinctly put;

...I was in an official duty to Abuja. I left three days before Chief Obasanjo came. The students never confided in me that they had any plan. If they had, you know I wouldn't have supported them. I

am surprise that the Vice Chancellor is not here yet to attest to the fact. He knows the truth because he knew I was away and I saw his driver in Abuja. I even gave his driver an enlarged photo of me, he snapped at the conference.” “...Inspector Agbo scrutinized the photograph, saluted and left. The DPO looked at the priest. “Sir, he would release him,” he said and handed the picture to him and he left euphorically. Monsignor and other people walked to Agbo’s office. He signed the bail and Okwy was set free. It was like a dream (104 – 106).

Additionally, the denial of Dr. Umeaku's contract renewal by the new Vice Chancellor, Professor Ugokamma, serves as a final blow to his aspirations and underscores the ruthless nature of power dynamics within academia. Dr. Umeaku's decision to contest against Professor Ugokamma for the Vice Chancellor position further exacerbates the power struggle, leading to repercussions that ultimately hinder his career progression. Let the excerpt below point to the furtherance of the Vice Chancellor’s hatred for Dr Umeaku;

...Professor Okwuchukwu Oscar Umeaku,” he called with rancor. “You had the effrontery to come and compete with me over the post of Vice Chancellorship and now, you came for me to sign contract appointment for you. Professor Okwuchukwu Oscar Umeaku, you have no shame. If you had shame and were reasonable too, you would have simply covered your face with ignominy and left unnoticed. Professor Okwuchukwu Oscar Umeaku, I have deliberately kept your own so that I will know if you will have no shame to come and demand for it.” ...this is me sitting on the executive seat of the Vice Chancellor.” He picked up a file from the table.

“This is your file. I deliberately kept it here waiting for you to come because I knew you would and here you are (237).

The idea of exposing such vital issue in the society like sexual harassment resonates with the thought of Ogunbesan Kolawole's that African writers have been very much influenced by politics, probably because the African intellectual is a part of the political elite. The writer is a sensitive point within his society. The writer sees something and writes something.

Sexual Harassment as a Dynamics of Power in *Travails of the Giant*

Sexual harassment according to SAPAC is defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when either:

- The conduct is made as a term or condition of an individual's employment, education, living environment or participation in a University community.
- The acceptance or refusal of such conduct is used as the basis or a factor in decisions affecting an individual's employment, education, living environment, or participation in a University community.
- The conduct unreasonably impacts an individual's employment or academic performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment for that individual's employment, education, living environment, or participation in a University community.

Furthermore, Sexual harassment is also seen to include requests for sexual favors, sexual advances or other sexual conduct when (1) Submission is either explicitly or implicitly a condition affecting academic or employment decisions; (2) the behavior is sufficiently severe or pervasive as to create an intimidating, hostile or

repugnant environment; or (3) the behavior persists despite objection by the person to whom the conduct is directed.

It is an exploration of power dynamism when a lecturer fails a student for not submitting to his or her sexual wishes or tries to malign a student for the same act. Exploring this issue of sexual harassment shows the awareness of Nnyagu of the happenings in his environment. The lecturers who perpetrate such evils do not care whether an individual is married or not. They are not selective of their prey. The case of Angela, a married female student of Economics and Chief Anota showcases the sexual penchant of some lecturers towards their students. This is a realist occurrence in our universities in the present times. Just as the Igbo adage says, "The death that will kill a dog will not allow it to perceive the smell of faeces." The incessant warnings to Chief against his evil act fall on deaf ear, until he is caught and expelled. The last straw on the camels back came after Chief made the following statement;

...Why are you here? I have told you, as long as you remain intractable, I am ever ready for you. I promise that you should be ready to remain in this University with me. You feel your husband has enough money to spend unnecessarily, I will help you to ensure that the money petters out." He laughed rather mischievously. "Chief is not a coward and he can never be cowered. You can go and ask anybody about me and you would realize that Chief is not such a feeble minded fellow anybody can cower. I hear all you say about me but I am not perturbed. Even if you call the Vice Chancellor and he comes here, once he sees me, he will tell you to go and settle with Chief (145).

Another aspect in the novel that explores the issue of sexual harassment of student is the one Precious. Precious is a student that is seen in the novel complaining to her friend about the unmerited

failure given to her by a lecturer, who is insistent that she must sleep with him. Although the case of Precious can be regarded as the case of *deus ex-machina* as the lecturer is later sent on sabbatical leave and his course given to Dr Okoye.

In conclusion, *Travails of the Giant* by Uche Nnyagu provides a poignant exploration of power dynamics within academic institutions, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals striving for success amidst betrayal, manipulation, and institutional politics. University of Global Studies, Ifite plays an important role as a setting and through Dr. Umeaku's narrative, the novel offers critical insights into the complexities of power tussles and the ethical dilemmas inherent in the pursuit of professional advancement. The use of sociological criticism shows to a great extent how literary stories x-ray the situational struggles of man in his environment. *Travails of the Giant* by Uche Nnyagu wonderfully showcases man's struggles in climbing the success ladder of academics.

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