

A Critical Study of Emilia Onuegbu's Cartoons

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Abstract

As the world continue to improve its civility to prove that both genders have equal capacity to display skill in various acts, a case in time fails at this. The Punch newspaper like any other has the knack for publishing strips that depict the style of each cartoonist. This style distinguishes each other from the other making it possible to tell the cartoonist apart from the other. This article reveals an act of plagiarism between a male and a female cartoonist that plagiarised, and covertly allowed other male colleagues to make strips with her name on it despite an evident inability in the particular female cartoonist to draw cartoons.

Keywords: depiction, cartooning, originality

Introduction

The cartooning scholarly field in Nigeria continues to grow with a narrow perspective brought to bear on cartoons. This narrow perspective is mostly based on political cartooning as though other issues cannot be raised effectively. The other perspectives such as anthropomorphic, gender, linguistic studies among others have saliently begun to be studied. Other perspectives include stylistic traditions practiced by various Nigerian newspapers extensively studied by Teju Olaniyan while other scholars like Oyin Medubi and Modupe Alimi focus on linguistics. It is worthy to note that most studies exclude the works of female cartoonists as though they did not practice the art form in the over seventy years of cartooning in Nigeria. Hart (1998) avers that

Man has been making funny drawings since the beginning of time. Cave paintings are filled with lion-rips-hunter-to-shred gags, which, frankly, were a bit over the top but at least they had a premise. To learn about humor, a good question to ask is, what makes a drawing funny? An even better one is what techniques can I use to make my drawings funnier? Whatever happened to that lady who sang "I will survive"? is perhaps, the question of all...

The two questions asked above definitely sets the tone for being able to make a funny cartoon albeit the genre Onuegbu made her strips in. He asserts that to practice cartooning, the would-be practitioner must study through a thoughtful and writing process that will characterise the planning of the strip the cartoonist intends to create. Perhaps, one of the down-sides of cartooning in Nigeria is the fact that it is not taught at any of the tiers of the nation's educational system. In an interview with Akila Jibrin on the 12th of March 2013 via text message, he holds that "Drawing is the basic, then ability to exaggerate in an amusing way is the key (amusing drawings alone can pass the intended message). In addition to (Amusing) Drawing is dialogue (constructive

and brief) which helps your readers to understand the message more clearer.” However, the Fine Arts courses coupled with comic books imports continue to be the ‘teaching-learning’ materials relied upon by many, if not all that practice the art form, with or without a fine Arts background especially at the secondary and tertiary school levels. This article focuses on a female cartoonist that practiced the art form and used just a template to express various thoughts on children’s witty way of life.

Adejuwon and Alimi (2011: 66) add that “Planning of the cartoon frame is given a strong character of order, balance...in weight distribution within the image area. This is attributable to the prominence given by the British Art School-influenced artists of the post-colonial era to order and placement of design elements within art compositions”. This is borne out of the dedication informed by the acculturation that has made cartooning to find a foot-hold in the British society. In comparison to Nigeria, Medubi (2009: 211) avers that

From the times of Lasekan to the today, cartooning has been appeared to be the hobby of the so-called cartoonists who have remained essentially painters, sculptors, graphic artists and so on, professions for which they are primarily trained. Not a single cartoonist has any formal training in cartooning, and as stated earlier, no art institution offers cartooning as a course. Thus, cartooning continues to be a by-product of artistic engagement and talents.

This might not be far from why it is difficult for the male artists to teach others what they do not have. It is therefore, on this premise important for cartoonists to hold workshops with the aid of foreign cartooning schools to teach cartooning in Nigeria so as to further improve on the skill.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to reveal the unstated retrogression her cartooning practice was subjected to, without proper assistance and editorial supervision.

Methodology

The purposive research method is adopted for the study since the subject is the only female that practiced the art form under a mannerism condoned when she worked in the Punch newspaper. The qualitative and descriptive research methods are also relied on to discuss her works as a pointer to the competence expected in the cartooning art form. The works presented in the study are randomly selected to fit the purpose of the study so as to reveal the cartooning experience she had in the Punch newspaper. An interview scheduled was used to find out why she used a template in all her works, and why there are works of her colleagues that look similar in their stylistic depiction with her works.

An archaeological perspective is relied on this study in the study since Carpenter (2012: 169) holds that “Archaeology’s emphasis on artifacts, especially its use of reverse engineering of the construction of artifacts to understand creative practices and social relations, has implications for the way in which cultural anthropologist address and theorise cultural production.” This is aimed at learning out the secrecy that characterise the unwillingness of cartoonists to explain the underlying inspiration behind their works.

Data and narrative

Emilia Onuegbu studied Law at the University of Nigeria, Enugu campus. She had started as an Illustrator with Letramed; a publishing company that also make comics, in Lagos while she was a final year student. She later moved to the Punch newspaper as a freelance cartoonist where she

continued throughout her service year (NYSC). In being able to understand an artist's works it is important to speak with the artist about the inspiration and meaning of the work(s). The chance of getting a favourable response is usually very difficult when it comes to the field of cartooning.

This made Duncan (2012: 44) to advice that

If one wants to consider authorial intent, one can read interviews with the author and learn more about what meaning was intended. Then one can analyse how effectively the author's selection and combination of images communicated his or her intended meaning. However, such interviews are not always available and some authors are reluctant to explain intentions, preferring to let the work speak for itself...Even if information on authorial intent is available, you might choose to ignore it and simply do the analysis based on the meaning you drive from applying your own perceptual filter...The third assumption is that images can function to show the reader the story or tell the reader about the story.



Figure I Sunday Punch newspaper, 21 March 2010



Figure II Sunday Punch newspaper, 9 May 2010

The none-response to the interview sent to Onuegbu has led to the decision to read the images, deduce, interpret and form opinion that will reveal possible events that may have led to the results of what forms the interpretation of Onuegbu's works. The only response the author got is the correction in the spelling of her sore name from Onuegbu; which appears on her strips, to Onuegbu. She made two different strips namely SMART KID and WITTY WITZ. Both strips are centered on the world of children as they either tried to outwit an adult or genuinely give answers that are common in the growing brain capacity of a child. On the SMART KID strip, she simply

signs her name on the top right corner as EMILIA, while in the WITTY WITZ strip she has her name written in full in a box to the left of the strip. In the two strips below she actually used another cartoonist's work twice. The name of the cartoonist is signed on the third panel of the strip. The first one is published in colour while the second strip is published in black and white on two different dates.

The third panel of both strips has the name of a cartoonist signed on it which clearly proves that Oniegbu is not the original owner of the strip. It is worthy to add that the strip above is literally repeated to perhaps emphasise in the cartoonist the problem of stubbornness in a handful of students. But the use of a foreign cartoonist's strip, reworked to express a thought can easily be termed as plagiarism; as the author of this article did not get any response from the two cartoonists over the reason why they chose use the strip of another cartoonist to express themselves. Vera (1999: 1) states unequivocally that "A woman must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones". Ineffectiveness is seen here in the fact that both cartoonists have reworked a foreign cartoonist's work by simply changing the words in the voice bubbles to sooth their intention. This practice can lead to the newspaper being sued for copyright violation and eventually the sacking of the cartoonist(s). Moreover, Drazee also used the strip to express his thought which extends the violation by the two cartoonists.



Figure III: EXPENSIVE JOKE, Drazee, Sunday Punch newspaper, 6 November 2011

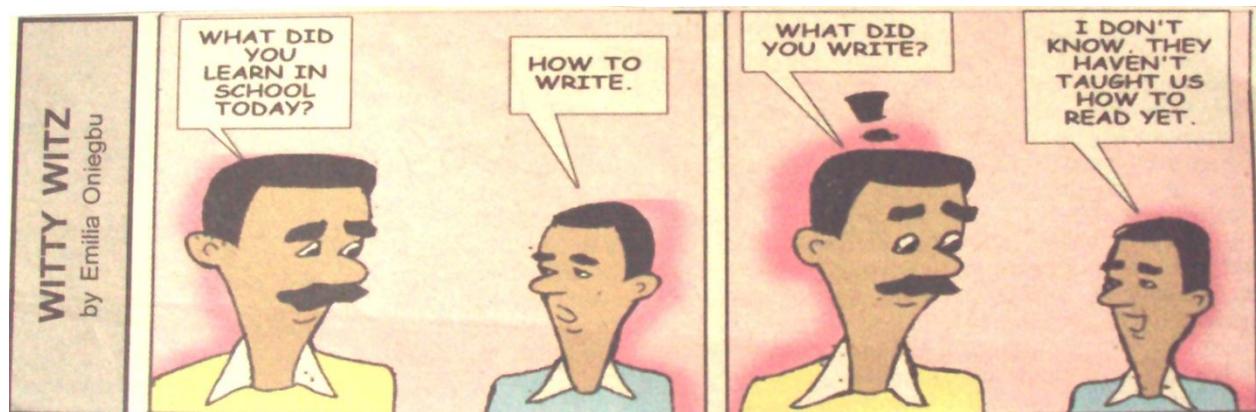


Figure IV Sunday Punch newspaper, August 30 2009

This act of sharing strips is also seen in plates XVII and XVIII as Drazee and Onuegbu both share a depiction that is not ordinarily hers but might be attributed to Drazee since the strips above are clearly not his. This study holds on an observation of a practise among male students in some Fine Arts department of tertiary institutions where the male students assist some of their female classmates to do their assignments in the practical courses.

The next four strips have different messages but the images are all the same with a coloured rendition on the four strips. The two characters, a father and his son are engaged in a conversation but the depiction in the four strips is all the same with different messages.

The wit of a boy is depicted here that leaves the father quizzing in surprise at the response he got from his son. In all the second panel of the next four strips is an exclamation that appears consistently while the overall depiction does not change which means she only relies on a depiction as a template and changes the words in the voice bubbles in each publication.

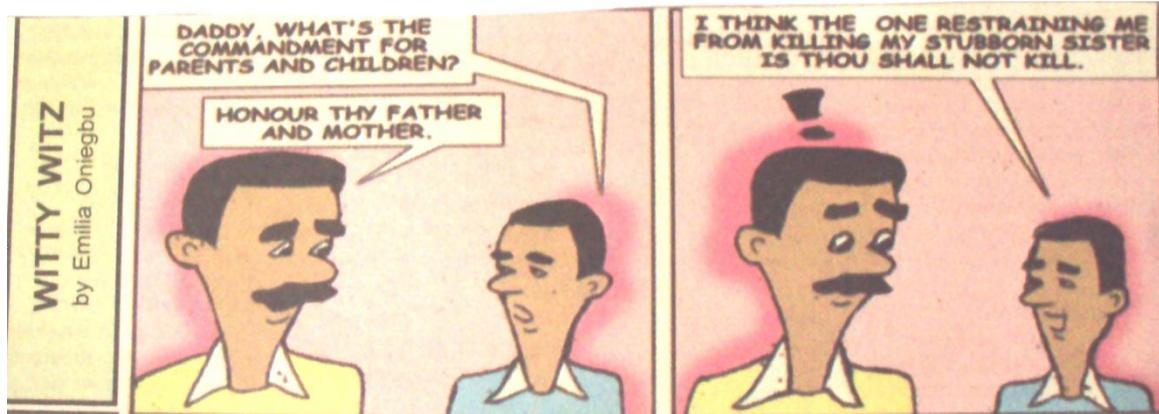


Figure V Sunday Punch newspaper, 30 January 2010

Onuegbu again presents the boy's wit with a touch of humour to it. However, the tone of the humour will quickly earn the strip to be attributed to the work of a male cartoonist yet, the perspective she draws on the text is the overt maleness of the world we live. Witek (2012: 28) avers that "Contemporary comics are rooted stylistically in the confluence of two distinct traditions of visual representation. The first grows out of caricature, with its basic principles of simplification and exaggeration, while the other drives from the recreation of physical appearances in realistic illustration". The two principles are evident in Onuegbu's work but she fell short of taking the next step at making other depictions. Instead she continued to repeat the characters by merely changing the words in the voice bubbles.



Figure VI Sunday Punch newspaper, 24 June 2010

With eager wittiness he replies his father readily to prevent being caught chewing gum. The reply, like the other strips above emphasis the thrust of the strip itself and the tendency for readers and scholars to hold in their minds that only males make cartoons.



Figure VII Sunday Punch newspaper, 7 November 2010

With the Nigerian police holding a none-tolerant stance against the use of fire-crackers, she brings humour to this as she plays pun with the issue by raising the bar. Witek (ibed: 29) adds that “Typical conventions in the cartoon mode include the extensive use of the icons called ‘emanata’, such as the sweat beads, dust clouds, speed lines, and many other symbols that have become closely associated with traditional humor cartooning”. As part of the evidence of her poor understanding of the required cartooning skill, she was blinded by the fact that the newspaper condoned her use of a template which resulted in her use of the exclamation mark in most of her strips.



Figure VIII Sunday Punch newspaper, 30 August 2009

The strip under the SMART KID platform displays the smartness both girls put to play to outwit each other. The reason why the strips in plates VIII and IX are presented here is to wonder at the importance of repeating the same strip but presented in colour and black and white after almost a year of the first publication.

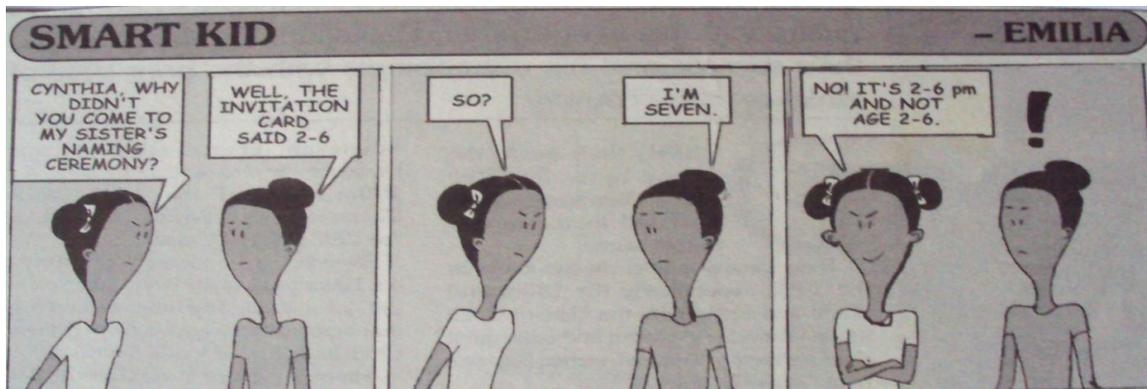


Figure IX Sunday Punch newspaper, 9 May 2010

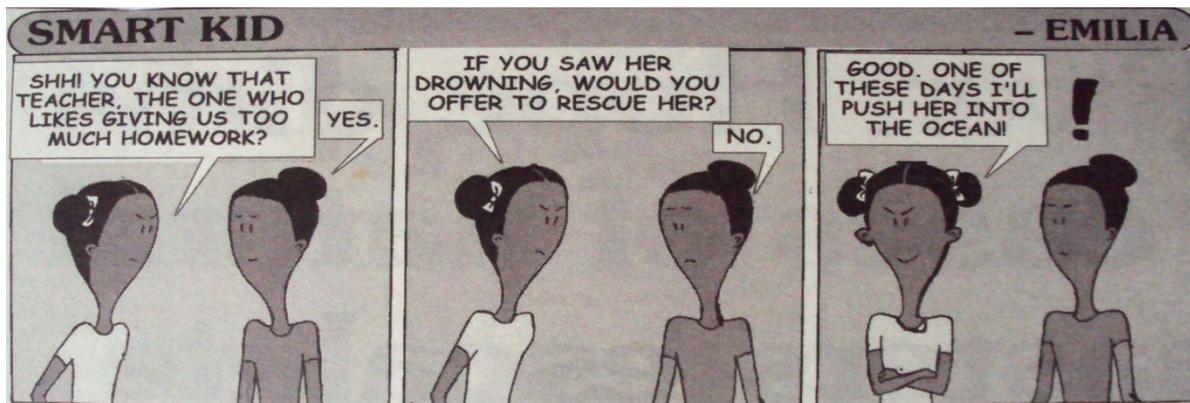


Figure X Sunday Punch newspaper, May 16 2010



Figure XI Sunday Punch newspaper, 25 July 2010

In the strip above, she presents the mind of a girl who is taking it to the extreme as she expresses her dislike for her teacher. It is worthy to note however, that any young reader who is equally the possible audience she might have could read the message wrongly enough to hate her teacher. Cynthia in the last panel holds out her shock with an exclamation mark in dismay over her friend's rash suggestion.

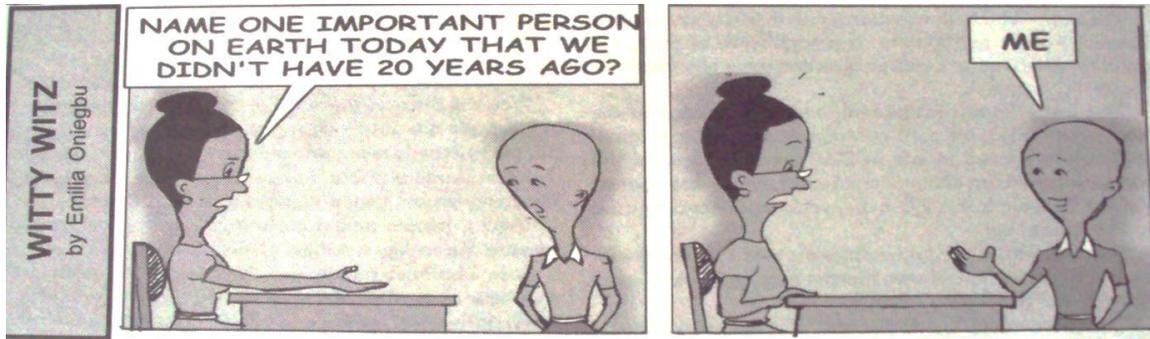


Figure XII Sunday Punch newspaper, May 16 2010

This strip in plate XI on page 10 holds a position against the stereotype that women would not know anything about football. In the light of this, scholars might still believe that it will only take a male cartoonist to do this work. On looking at the last four strips, the images read like a set of selected film frames without the voice bubbles included.

In the thrust of the wittiness in children, she continues with these four monotonous depictions to advance her thoughts. In the second panel in the work above, the shock is well expressed by the teacher yet; it is depicted without any exclamation mark as she did in the other two sets of strips above.

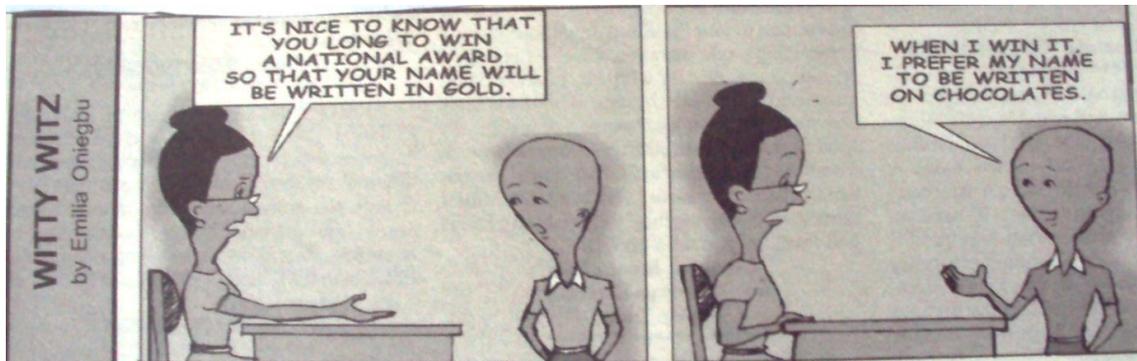


Figure XIII Sunday Punch newspaper, July 25 2010

It is indicative that the teacher and the student are both of the elite class of the Nigerian society. The first panel depicts posture of a boy with his hands in his pockets which is a rude way to stand and talk to an adult within the Nigeria cultural context. The boy also continues with his hand in his left pocket in the second panel of the strips.

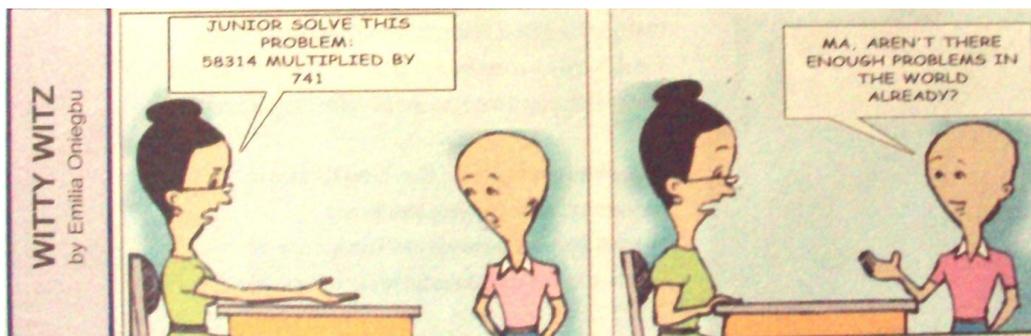


Figure XIV Sunday Punch newspaper, 14 November 2010

In the strip above, the JUNIOR avoids answering the question with an answer that is made to outwit the teacher. He easily retorts with another of his wit to answer his teacher. It is important to add that his sober expression is most appropriate in the first panel of this work as it compares to the two other panels above.

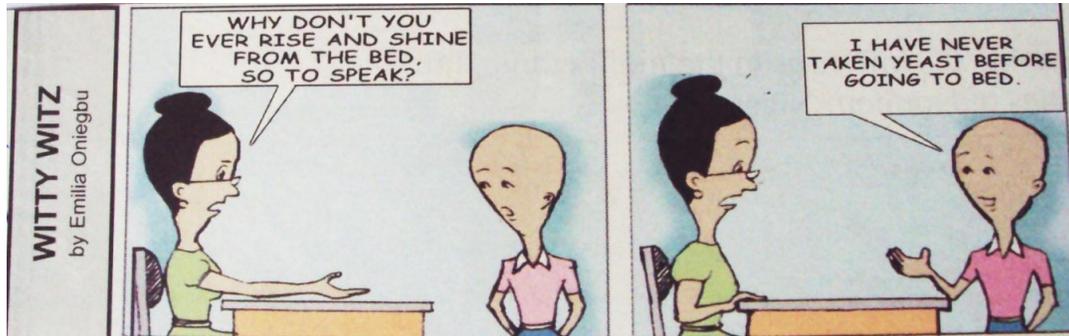


Figure XV Sunday Punch newspaper, 5 December 2010

Onuegbu has other strips under the various platforms she made that are centered on the family. She is able to achieve the ability of depicting two views of the kitchen just the same way a camera would have done in panning round the two characters. Though, in the first panel, she makes the window to give way to the voice bubble instead of allowing to be drawn over the window in an overlap; just like she did in the second panel. Berona (2012: 9) explains that

Characters and objects...play an important role within this diegesis or the 'functional world constructed by the narration'. Although this is true in any narrative, without the use of word balloons, other facial expressions is an essential mechanism to indicate mood and personal emotions, and so additional importance needs to be placed on body posture and gesture which, Will Eisner observed, in all comics occupy a position of primacy over text.

Most of the works under the WITTY-WITZ stream of repetitive narrative have no change in gesture, facial expression, mood, body posture and personal emotions. This is surprising perhaps, because her colleagues gored her on as a way to keep her in the profession to jump start the evident dearth of female cartoonists in the profession. This might have led the colleagues to see the mode of use a template to imply a style that is nouvelle to the cartooning art form.



Figure XVI Sunday Punch newspaper,

In the first panel, the window is depicted to the left of the woman while the second panel shows her facing the window. This reveals an inability to depict a continuity that proves an

understanding of diegesis; the physical reality of the world of a story. However, one could as well accept that there two windows in front and beside the woman to justify the depiction as being correct. Nevertheless, the work cannot be attributed to Onuegbu owing to the SMART KID and WITTY-WITZ strips earlier discussed.

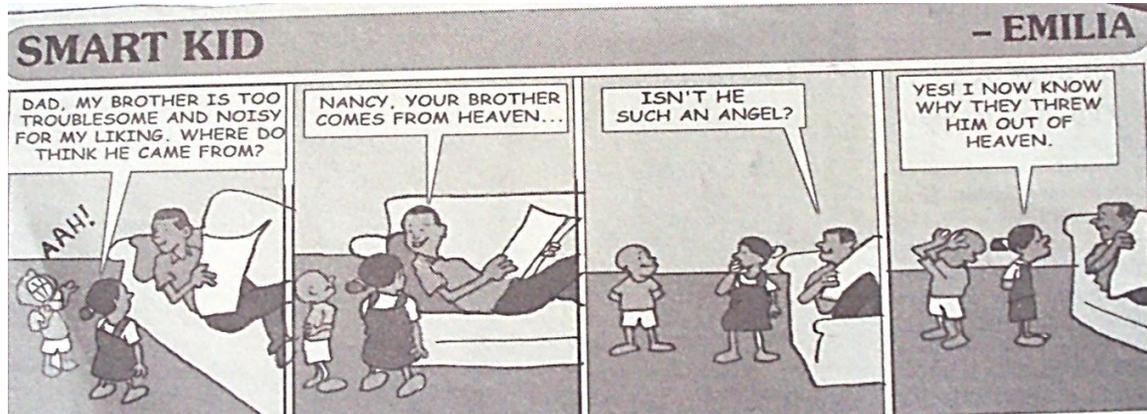


Figure XVII Sunday Punch newspaper, Sunday Punch newspaper, no date



Figure XVIII EXPENSIVE JOKE, Drazee, Sunday Punch newspaper, 20 February 2011

This practice of sharing a panel is common between Onuegbu and Drazee is another pointer to the inability that led to make a template as her idea of depiction and creativity, perhaps. In this regard, cartooning has been taken with levity that differs from the tradition of individuality in depiction that is known with the Punch newspaper. The works of the remaining cartoonists in the Punch newspaper where she worked show their individual styles such that even if their names were to be covered, a constant reader of cartoons in this newspaper will easily tell each of the other cartoonists' works apart. This is the same with Onuegbu's depictions but there is so much to be desired of her drawing ability instead of the use of a template as mode of depiction.



Figure XIX Sunday Punch newspaper, 8 May 2011

In the strip above, she avers that wittiness is not about being a child but is also found among adults too. The time depicted between the two panels is not justified by the use of a gutter. This is based on the objects in the background that proves that it took some seconds between the two panels before the house help gave her reply. This technique is not common knowledge to most Nigerian cartoonists as they all learnt the skill of depiction and use of text from observation. The study observes that Onuegbu clearly does not have the ability to make cartoons beyond the repetitive images earlier presented. Suffice to say that the study at this juncture hold that the strip above was made by Tosin John and Chukky Nwakky whose work is presented in figures XXIV and XXV.

This inability in itself if redirected towards editorial cartooning, which is openly what earns cartoonists, their recognition could have earned her recon in the eyes of researchers and male editorial cartoonists alike. Yet, she makes up for inability to draw in the use of words that are humourous. This why Hart (ibid: 68-9) avers that

The joke always comes first. It's just not possible to craft a funny joke based on a few randomly drawn panels. The artist won't have a single visual idea until the writer comes up with the premise for the for the joke...Sometimes, a funny image can inspire an idea for a multiple-panel gag, but the multiple-panel gag must still be written out panel by panel before the actual art is drawn...Cartoonist and gag writers often allow an idea to percolate in their heads. Then, once it's ready, they jot it down on a pad. The next step is to lay the joke out panel by panel for the artist to illustrate. Even if you're both the writer and artist for your strip, it's a good idea to lay everything out.

Judging by the fact that the team of cartoonists in the Punch newspaper accepted her mode of practise, this study holds that Hart's process of making strips is definitely the right way to go about making strips. Her educational level has contributed greatly to her ability to craft some jokes, but an in-depth practise of drawing and cartooning skills will go a long way to aid her improving on her cartooning inadequacies. It is worthy to add that she made strips along with the likes of Aliu Eroje, Tosin John, Niyi Aragbaola (NEARO), Ayo Oyerinde, Henry Cheche Egbune, Bayo Daniel, Bennett Omeke Chukky Nwakky and Abayomi O. Only Eroje, Egbune, Nwakky and NEARO are the cartoonists that make editorial cartoons and familial cartoons.



Figure XX Sunday Punch newspaper, no date

Eroje uses the second panel to reveal that the bus is a public transport vehicle to show that there are more onlookers watching the argument going on between the police man and the bus conductor highlighting police brutality.



Figure XXI Sunday Punch newspaper, no date

Oyerinde uses his strip to decry the stereotype set against women's ownership of property and their ability to be overbearing like males, in a patrilineal society like Nigeria.



Figure XXII Sunday Punch newspaper, no date

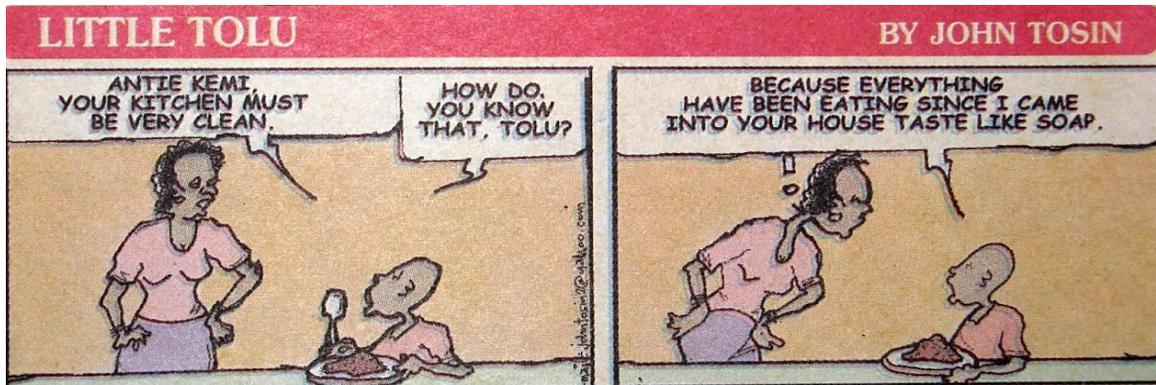


Figure XXIV Sunday Punch newspaper, no date

Daniel depicts one of the challenges faced by families of police officers in the face of dwindling resources. Moreover, he goes further to reveal the level of dishonesty in the police force as bribery and extortion takes its toll on their integrity. However, the second panel may imply that he is either labelled as a fraud because of the practice among some police officers, or that the husband is accustomed the illicit practice of taking bribe from offenders instead of having them booked.

Tosin also holds onto the children genre, which may have inspired Onuegbu to also make strips that reveal the wittiness in children. Despite the number of male cartoonists she worked with, they instead had a negative and uncreative influence on her.

Suffice to say that most of these male cartoonists do not earn the focus of scholars since they do not make editorial cartoons. This also opens up the need to direct studies into the familial genre of cartooning that many cartoonists use as a platform to express their thoughts. Various issues ranging from the family to social commentaries that have no political undertone to them are popular among many of the cartoonists that can be studied within the cartooning epistemology.

In describing the body of work selected from the four years Onuegbu practiced as a cartoonist, she was not able to develop the required skill in depicting characters in cartooning. The cartooning editor may have seen this but might not have seen anything wrong with the practice of the use of a repetitive use of a template to make strips. Aidoo (1999: 9) holds that "But Adjoa has legs; Nana would insist; except that they are too long. And also too long for a woman...But if any female child decides to come to this world with legs, then they might as well be legs". Inference is drawn from this statement to explain that Onuegbu showed interest to make cartoons but ought to have been given assistance through training to develop the skills required. This would have enabled her to learn over the time she spent at the Punch newspaper.

Conclusion

Cartooning in Nigeria is an all-comers profession and continues to be plagued by poor training that reveals practising gaps that need to be corrected. The lack of an art background in Onuegbu left her without any skill judging from the use of a template to make her strips. This also resulted in her inability to carve a cartooning niche for herself as some of her colleagues were giving her helping hands that were not the type that aid her learning and improvement. The depictions that had her name but the skill of others will continue to leave so much to be desired of more study to be carried to reveal what led to the making of the strips.

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Interviewed persons

Akila Jibrin, Cartoonist, Daily Trust newspaper, Abuja, Nigeria.

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