

Authors' Socio-Economic Background and the Deployment of Literary Devices in Contemporary Nigerian Novels

Emmanuel Oritsema Ikomi

Department of English and Literary Studies
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba. Delta State
Email: Ikomi.emmanuel@dou.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines the influence of authors' socio-economic background on the deployment of literary devices in contemporary Nigerian novels. The research explores how the social, economic, political, and cultural experiences of Nigerian writers shape their thematic concerns and stylistic choices in literary works. Contemporary Nigerian literature reflects various societal realities such as corruption, poverty, unemployment, migration, gender inequality, insecurity, and political instability. Nigerian authors therefore employ literary devices such as realism, satire, symbolism, irony, imagery, flashback, metaphor, code-switching, and personification to portray these realities and communicate their ideological positions. The study adopts the sociological approach to literature, which views literary works as products of society and reflections of social experiences. Through textual analysis of selected contemporary Nigerian novels by writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila, Sefi Atta, Ben Okri, and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, the study reveals that literary devices are not merely decorative elements but important instruments of social criticism, cultural preservation, and artistic expression. Findings from the study show that authors' socio-economic backgrounds significantly influence their worldview, language use, characterization, narrative style, and choice of literary devices. Writers who experienced poverty, political oppression, and social instability often use realism and satire to expose societal injustice, while writers with cosmopolitan exposure and educational privilege tend to employ symbolism, fragmented narration, and transnational themes to portray identity crises and globalization. The study further establishes that literary devices enhance meaning, strengthen emotional appeal, preserve African cultural identity, and improve the artistic quality of literary works. The research concludes that contemporary Nigerian literature remains closely connected to societal realities and that literary devices serve as effective tools for documenting experiences, criticizing social problems, and advocating social transformation.

Keywords: Socio-economic background, literary devices, contemporary Nigerian novels, realism, satire, symbolism, Nigerian literature.

Introduction

Literature has consistently served as a reflection of society by portraying the political, economic, cultural, and social realities of a people. In African societies, literature performs not only artistic functions but also social and ideological functions through which writers communicate their experiences, challenge oppression, and advocate societal transformation. Nigerian literature, in particular, has remained deeply connected to the historical and socio-economic experiences of the nation. From the colonial era to the contemporary democratic period, Nigerian writers have continued to use literary works to address issues such as corruption, poverty, unemployment, migration, gender inequality, insecurity, and political instability (Ogundokun, 2014).

The development of Nigerian literature can be classified into different generations, each responding to the realities of its historical period. The first generation of Nigerian writers, including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Cyprian Ekwensi, focused primarily on colonialism, cultural conflict, and the defense of African identity against Western misrepresentation (Dalley, 2013). The second generation concentrated on post-independence disillusionment, civil war experiences, and military dictatorship. However, contemporary Nigerian writers, often referred to as third-generation writers, have shifted attention to globalization, migration, internet fraud, urbanization, religious extremism, and economic hardship (Dalley, 2013).

This transformation in thematic concerns reflects the changing socio-economic realities of Nigerian society. Contemporary Nigerian writers are products of environments shaped by economic instability, unemployment, corruption, social

inequality, and political uncertainty. As a result, their literary works often mirror these experiences through diverse narrative styles and literary techniques. Literature therefore becomes a medium through which writers document societal realities and express personal as well as collective experiences (Ogundokun, 2014).

The socio-economic background of an author refers to the social and economic conditions surrounding the individual's upbringing, education, occupation, and exposure to social realities. These factors significantly influence the worldview, ideological orientation, and creative imagination of writers. According to sociological literary theory, literature is largely influenced by the environment in which the author lives because writers often draw inspiration from their lived experiences and observations of society (Okeke, 2018). Consequently, authors from different socio-economic backgrounds portray reality differently and adopt literary devices that best communicate their experiences and social concerns.

In contemporary Nigerian fiction, literary devices such as symbolism, satire, irony, realism, imagery, flashback, code-switching, and metaphor are widely employed to represent social realities and enhance thematic expression. Literary devices are important tools that help writers create emotional effects, deepen meaning, and communicate social criticism effectively. Nigerian novelists use these devices not merely for artistic beauty but also to expose societal problems and advocate social change (Ofie, 2025).

One of the most dominant literary devices in contemporary Nigerian novels is realism. Realism refers to the accurate representation of life and social conditions as they exist in society. Many Nigerian writers use realism to

portray poverty, corruption, unemployment, insecurity, and political oppression. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses realism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* to recreate the Nigerian Civil War and depict the suffering, displacement, and hunger experienced during the Biafran conflict (Adichie, 2006). Her realistic descriptions of war and political instability reflect both historical realities and personal ideological concerns.

Similarly, Helon Habila employs realism and satire in *Waiting for an Angel* to expose military dictatorship, press censorship, and social suffering in Nigeria (Habila, 2003). Through satirical characterization and ironic situations, Habila criticizes corrupt leadership and the abuse of political power. His experiences of political instability and economic hardship in Nigeria significantly influence his literary style and thematic focus.

Another important literary device common in contemporary Nigerian fiction is symbolism. Symbolism allows writers to communicate deeper meanings through objects, characters, or events. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* uses symbolic and magical realist techniques to portray poverty, political instability, and spiritual uncertainty in Nigerian society (Okri, 1991). The spirit-child Azaro symbolizes the endless struggles and instability confronting postcolonial Nigeria. Okri's deployment of magical realism is closely linked to his socio-economic experiences and philosophical understanding of Nigerian society.

Language use is equally an important aspect of literary expression in contemporary Nigerian novels. Many Nigerian writers incorporate indigenous languages, pidgin English, and local expressions into their works through code-switching and code-mixing. According to Ibhawagbe and Edokpayi (2012), code-switching and code-

mixing function as stylistic devices that enhance realism and cultural authenticity in Nigerian prose fiction. Writers use local languages and proverbs to preserve African cultural identity and reflect the multilingual nature of Nigerian society. For instance, Sefi Atta uses pidgin English, Yoruba expressions, and conversational language in *Everything Good Will Come* to portray urban Nigerian experiences and social class differences (Atta, 2005). Her linguistic choices reflect both her socio-cultural environment and her commitment to representing authentic Nigerian realities. Through language variation, Atta distinguishes between educated elites and lower-class characters, thereby revealing the socio-economic structure of Nigerian society.

Furthermore, contemporary Nigerian literature has increasingly been influenced by globalization and migration. Many Nigerian writers now live abroad or interact with global literary communities, leading to the emergence of transnational themes and hybrid literary styles. Contemporary novels frequently address migration, racism, identity crises, and diaspora experiences. Teju Cole's *Open City*, for example, explores themes of migration, alienation, and identity through reflective narration and urban imagery. Such literary styles are influenced by cosmopolitan exposure and multicultural experiences.

The rise of digital technology and internet culture has also transformed contemporary Nigerian literature. Modern Nigerian novels increasingly portray cybercrime, social media influence, and youth unemployment as reflections of present socio-economic realities. Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* uses satire and irony to examine internet fraud and economic frustration among Nigerian youths (Nwaubani, 2009). Through humor and comic characterization, the novel exposes the

moral contradictions created by poverty and unemployment.

Gender issues have equally become central in contemporary Nigerian fiction. Female writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta employ feminist literary devices to challenge patriarchy and advocate women's empowerment. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie uses symbolism and characterization to portray domestic violence, religious oppression, and female silence (Adichie, 2003). The purple hibiscus flower symbolizes freedom, resistance, and transformation within a patriarchal society. Despite the increasing scholarship on Nigerian literature, there remains a need for more studies examining the direct relationship between authors' socio-economic backgrounds and their deployment of literary devices. Many existing studies focus mainly on thematic analysis without adequately exploring how writers' personal experiences and class positions shape their artistic techniques. Understanding this relationship is important because literature is not created in isolation but emerges from specific social, political, and economic realities.

This study therefore seeks to investigate how the socio-economic backgrounds of contemporary Nigerian authors influence their deployment of literary devices in selected Nigerian novels. The study aims to establish that literary devices are not merely artistic ornaments but reflections of authors' lived experiences, ideological commitments, and social realities. By examining selected contemporary Nigerian novels, the research contributes to the understanding of literature as both an artistic and social product. Ultimately, contemporary Nigerian literature remains a powerful medium for social criticism, cultural preservation, and historical documentation. Nigerian writers continue to use literary devices creatively to expose

societal problems, preserve cultural identity, and advocate social transformation. The socio-economic experiences of these writers significantly shape both the content and stylistic patterns of their works, making literature an important reflection of Nigerian society and human experience.

Socio-Economic Background of Authors

Socio-economic background refers to the social and economic conditions that influence an individual's upbringing, lifestyle, opportunities, and worldview. It encompasses factors such as family income, educational level, occupation, social class, cultural exposure, and access to resources. In literary studies, the socio-economic background of an author is important because it shapes the writer's perception of society, thematic concerns, and artistic expression. Writers often draw inspiration from their lived experiences, social environment, and economic realities when creating literary works (Ogundokun, 2014).

The concept of socio-economic background is closely connected to the sociological approach to literature, which views literature as a product of society. According to this perspective, literary works reflect the economic, political, and cultural realities surrounding the author. An author's experiences with poverty, privilege, inequality, education, migration, or political oppression may significantly influence the themes, characters, and literary devices employed in literary texts (Okeke, 2018).

In the Nigerian context, socio-economic background is particularly important because of the country's diverse social structure and economic challenges. Nigeria is characterized by social inequality, unemployment, corruption, political instability, and class divisions. These realities shape the experiences of Nigerian writers and influence their literary productions.

Contemporary Nigerian authors often portray the struggles of ordinary citizens, the effects of corruption, and the challenges of survival within a difficult socio-economic environment.

Writers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may focus more on themes of poverty, oppression, unemployment, and survival. Such authors often deploy realism and satire to expose social injustice and criticize political leaders. On the other hand, writers from educated middle-class or cosmopolitan backgrounds may emphasize issues such as migration, globalization, identity crisis, and transnational experiences. Their exposure to global cultures and educational opportunities often influences their narrative techniques and literary styles (Dalley, 2013).

For example, Helon Habila's experiences during periods of military dictatorship and economic hardship in Nigeria influenced his realistic and satirical portrayal of oppression in *Waiting for an Angel* (Habila, 2003). Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's educated and cosmopolitan background contributes to her exploration of identity, migration, and gender issues in novels such as *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (Adichie, 2006).

Socio-economic background also affects language use and literary style. Many Nigerian writers incorporate indigenous languages, pidgin English, proverbs, and local expressions into their works to reflect their cultural and social environments. According to Ibhawaegbele and Edokpayi (2012), code-switching and code-mixing in Nigerian literature help to create realism and cultural authenticity. Authors use language variations to distinguish social classes, educational levels, and cultural identities within society.

Furthermore, socio-economic background influences the ideological orientation of writers. Authors who experience social marginalization or political oppression are more likely to produce literature that challenges injustice and advocates social change. This explains why many contemporary Nigerian novels contain strong elements of social criticism, protest, and resistance against corruption and inequality. In literary criticism, understanding an author's socio-economic background helps readers and scholars interpret literary texts more effectively. It provides insight into why certain themes, characters, and literary devices dominate particular works. Literature therefore becomes not only an artistic creation but also a reflection of the author's interaction with society and material conditions.

Thus, socio-economic background plays a significant role in shaping literary creativity and expression. Contemporary Nigerian writers are greatly influenced by their social and economic experiences, which determine their thematic concerns and deployment of literary devices. The study of socio-economic background is therefore essential in understanding the relationship between literature and society, particularly in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Literary Devices IN Contemporary Nigerian Novels

Literary devices are artistic techniques and stylistic tools employed by writers to enhance meaning, create emotional effects, and communicate ideas effectively in literary works. These devices help authors present themes, develop characters, create vivid imagery, and engage readers' imagination. In literature, literary devices are important because they contribute to the beauty, depth, and effectiveness of a text. Writers use them not only for aesthetic purposes but also to

express social, political, cultural, and ideological concerns (Ofie, 2025). In contemporary Nigerian literature, literary devices play a significant role in portraying societal realities and criticizing social problems such as corruption, poverty, political oppression, gender inequality, migration, and cultural conflict. Nigerian authors creatively deploy literary devices to reflect the complexities of Nigerian society and communicate their personal experiences and ideological positions. According to Ogundokun (2014), literature serves as a reflection of socio-political realities, and literary devices function as instruments through which writers express these realities. One of the most common literary devices in contemporary Nigerian novels is **realism**. Realism refers to the accurate and truthful representation of life and human experiences as they exist in society. Nigerian writers often use realism to portray poverty, unemployment, corruption, violence, and political instability. For instance, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie employs realism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* to depict the Nigerian Civil War and the suffering experienced during the Biafran conflict (Adichie, 2006). Through realistic descriptions, believable characters, and historical events, the author recreates the social realities of war and displacement. In Nigerian literature, literary devices are influenced by oral traditions, indigenous cultures, and socio-economic realities. Nigerian writers combine traditional African storytelling techniques with modern literary styles to portray the realities of African society.

Realism

Realism is a literary device that presents life and society as they truly exist. Writers use realism to portray everyday experiences, social conditions, and human struggles accurately. Contemporary Nigerian writers

frequently use realism to depict poverty, corruption, unemployment, insecurity, and political oppression. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie employs realism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* to portray the Nigerian Civil War and the suffering experienced by civilians during the Biafran conflict (Adichie, 2006). In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie vividly describes starvation, refugee camps, bomb explosions, and the emotional trauma experienced by families during the war. These realistic descriptions help readers understand the painful realities of the Nigerian Civil War. Similarly, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* realistically portrays military dictatorship, police brutality, and press censorship in Nigeria (Habila, 2003).

Satire

Satire is the use of humor, ridicule, exaggeration, or irony to criticize societal problems and human weaknesses. Nigerian writers often use satire to expose corruption, hypocrisy, and bad governance. In Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, satire is used to criticize internet fraud and society's obsession with wealth (Nwaubani, 2009). The novel humorously portrays how young Nigerians engage in cybercrime because of unemployment and economic hardship. Another example is found in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, where politicians and military leaders are ridiculed for oppressing citizens while pretending to serve the nation.

Symbolism

Symbolism is a literary device in which objects, characters, places, or events represent deeper meanings beyond their ordinary interpretation. Writers use symbolism to communicate hidden messages and ideological concerns in literary works. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie uses the purple hibiscus flower as a symbol of freedom and liberation from oppression (Adichie, 2003). The flower represents the gradual transformation of Kambili and her family from fear to independence. In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Azaro, the spirit-child, symbolizes Nigeria's political instability and endless struggles after independence (Okri, 1991).

Irony

Irony occurs when there is a contrast between expectation and reality. Writers use irony to expose hypocrisy, contradictions, and societal injustice. In many Nigerian novels, political leaders promise to improve citizens' lives but later become corrupt and oppressive. This creates irony because the leaders fail to fulfill the promises they made to the people. In *Waiting for an Angel*, the government claims to protect democracy while silencing journalists and imprisoning innocent citizens. This contradiction creates dramatic irony in the novel (Habila, 2003).

Imagery

Imagery refers to descriptive language used to create mental pictures and appeal to the senses of readers. Imagery helps readers visualize scenes, emotions, and events clearly. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie uses vivid imagery to describe hunger and suffering during the civil war. She describes children with swollen stomachs, overcrowded refugee camps, and destroyed buildings (Adichie, 2006). These descriptions create emotional effects and help readers visualize the horrors of war. Ben Okri also uses strong imagery in *The Famished Road* to portray dirty streets, poverty, and spiritual confusion in urban Nigeria (Okri, 1991).

Flashback

Flashback is a narrative technique in which past events are introduced into the present story to explain characters' experiences or historical background. Many Nigerian novels use flashback to revisit colonialism, military dictatorship, or childhood experiences. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili often remembers past incidents of violence and fear in her father's house. These flashbacks help readers understand her emotional trauma and character development (Adichie, 2003).

Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unlike things directly without using "like" or "as." Nigerian writers often describe corruption as a "disease" destroying society. This metaphor emphasizes the destructive nature of corruption. In many contemporary novels, poverty is metaphorically presented as a "chain" that prevents individuals from achieving freedom and success.

Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that compares two things using "like" or "as." An example of simile in literature is: "Her face shone like the morning sun." "The city was as noisy as a marketplace." Similes help writers create vivid descriptions and improve readers' understanding of situations.

Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages during communication, while code-mixing involves the blending of words or phrases from different languages within a sentence. In contemporary Nigerian literature, writers frequently combine English language with indigenous Nigerian languages and pidgin English to create realism, cultural identity,

and authenticity in their works (Ibhawagbele & Edokpayi, 2012).

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with hundreds of indigenous languages. As a result, many Nigerian writers incorporate local expressions, proverbs, and pidgin English into literary texts to reflect the everyday speech patterns of Nigerians. Code-switching and code-mixing also help writers portray social class differences, educational background, ethnicity, and cultural identity.

Contemporary Nigerian writers such as Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Helon Habila frequently use these linguistic devices to make their narratives more realistic and culturally relevant. Through language variation, writers are able to preserve African cultural heritage while also portraying the multilingual nature of Nigerian society. In Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, characters switch between English, Yoruba expressions, and pidgin English during conversations (Atta, 2005). Examples include:

- “You dey go where?”
- “È káàrò, my sister.”
- “Abeg, help me with this matter.”

These expressions reflect everyday communication patterns among Nigerians. The use of Yoruba greetings and pidgin English creates realism and helps readers connect with the social environment portrayed in the novel.

Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie incorporates Igbo expressions into her novels to preserve cultural identity and reflect authentic Nigerian speech patterns. For example:

- “Nno, welcome.”

- “Kedu ndụ gị?” meaning “How are you?”

Such linguistic expressions enrich literary texts and strengthen cultural representation.

Personification

Personification is a literary device in which human qualities, emotions, or actions are attributed to animals, objects, or abstract ideas. Writers use personification to create vivid imagery and make descriptions more imaginative and expressive. Personification helps readers visualize scenes and connect emotionally with literary works. Contemporary Nigerian writers often use personification to describe nature, emotions, political situations, and environmental conditions creatively. Examples of personification include:

- “The wind whispered through the trees.”
- “The angry storm attacked the village.”
- “The sun smiled on the children.”
- “Death knocked at the door of the community.”

In these examples, non-human elements such as wind, storm, sun, and death are given human qualities or actions. This makes descriptions more vivid and emotionally engaging. In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, personification is frequently used to create mystical and imaginative effects. The environment, spirits, and natural elements often appear alive and active, contributing to the magical realist style of the novel (Okri, 1991).

Functions of Literary Devices

Enhancement of Meaning

Literary devices help writers communicate ideas, themes, and messages more effectively. Through symbolism, metaphor, irony, and imagery, authors are able to express deeper meanings beyond the ordinary interpretation of words.

Promotion of Social Criticism

Contemporary Nigerian writers use literary devices such as satire, irony, and symbolism to criticize corruption, oppression, poverty, inequality, and bad leadership in society. These devices help expose societal problems and encourage readers to reflect critically on social realities.

Creation of Emotional Effects

Literary devices such as imagery, realism, and personification help readers connect emotionally with literary works. Vivid descriptions of suffering, war, poverty, and violence create sympathy and emotional understanding among readers.

Preservation of Culture

Code-switching, code-mixing, proverbs, folktales, and indigenous expressions help preserve African cultural identity and traditions. Nigerian writers use these devices to promote local languages and maintain cultural heritage within modern literary texts.

Improvement of Artistic Quality

Literary devices contribute to the beauty, creativity, and artistic value of literary works. They make narratives more engaging, imaginative, and memorable for readers.

Development of Character and Plot

Literary devices also assist writers in developing characters and advancing plot structures. Flashbacks, dialogue, symbolism, and irony help reveal characters' personalities, motivations, and experiences.

Creation of Realism

Devices such as realism, code-switching, and imagery help writers portray life as it truly exists in society. These techniques make literary texts believable and relatable to readers.

Conclusion

This study has examined the concept of literary devices and their significance in contemporary Nigerian literature. The study revealed that literary devices are essential artistic tools used by writers to communicate ideas, portray themes, create emotional effects, and improve the aesthetic quality of literary works. Contemporary Nigerian writers creatively employ literary devices such as realism, satire, symbolism, irony, imagery, flashback, metaphor, simile, personification, code-switching, and code-mixing to reflect the socio-political and economic realities of Nigerian society. The study further established that literary devices are not merely decorative elements in literature but important instruments for social criticism, cultural preservation, and ideological expression. Through realism and imagery, Nigerian writers portray poverty, corruption, insecurity, war, and unemployment. Through satire and irony, they criticize bad leadership, hypocrisy, and social injustice. Symbolism and metaphor enable writers to communicate deeper meanings and complex societal issues, while code-switching and code-mixing help preserve African cultural identity and reflect the multilingual nature of Nigerian society. The study therefore concludes that literary devices play vital roles in strengthening both the artistic and social functions of literature. Through these devices, contemporary Nigerian literature continues to educate, entertain, criticize societal problems, and preserve African cultural heritage. Literary devices remain indispensable tools for

effective communication and creative expression in Nigerian novels.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- ❖ Educational institutions should encourage the teaching and study of literary devices in schools and universities to improve students' understanding and appreciation of literature.
- ❖ Writers should continue to incorporate indigenous languages, proverbs, and cultural expressions in literary works through code-switching and code-mixing in order to preserve African cultural identity and heritage.
- ❖ Contemporary Nigerian writers should continue to use literary devices as tools for exposing corruption, oppression, insecurity, and other societal problems with the aim of promoting social change and national development.
- ❖ Government agencies, literary organizations, and publishers should provide support for emerging Nigerian writers through grants, workshops, seminars, and literary competitions to encourage creative writing and literary development.
- ❖ Researchers and scholars should conduct more studies on literary devices in contemporary African literature, especially in relation to globalization, migration, feminism, and digital culture.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2003). *Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos: Farafina.
- Adichie, C. N. (2006). *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Lagos: Farafina.
- Atta, S. (2005). *Everything Good Will Come*. Lagos: Farafina.
- Dalley, H. (2013). *The idea of "Third Generation Nigerian Literature": Conceptualizing historical change and territorial affiliation in the contemporary Nigerian novel*.
- Habila, H. (2003). *Waiting for an Angel*. Lagos: Cassava Republic.
- Ibhawegbele, F. O., & Edokpayi, J. N. (2012). Code-switching and code-mixing as stylistic devices in Nigerian prose fiction.
- Nwaubani, A. T. (2009). *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*. Lagos: Hyperion.
- Ofie, C. E. (2025). Literary techniques in selected Nigerian novels.
- Ogundokun, S. A. (2014). Literature as a reflection on socio-political realities: An examination of three Nigerian writers.
- Okeke, E. N. (2018). Violence and subordination: Reinforcing voices of a cohesive vision in three contemporary Nigerian novels.
- Okri, B. (1991). *The Famished Road*. London: Jonathan Cape.