

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF SILENCE PHENOMENON: A PRAGMATICIST STUDY OF CHUKWUEMEKA IKE'S *CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE*

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### Abstract

This paper takes a look at how the linguistic phenomenon, 'silence', is practiced in societies worldwide in relation to another social phenomenon, 'fatherlessness', which is practiced in parts of Igboland. The author of the novel, *Conspiracy of Silence*, noticed that the social malaise, 'fatherlessness' exists in Igboland and nobody says anything about it, or seems to take note of its existence. His novel therefore gives the primary voice to the 'silence' and serves as a protest for its abolition. This paper gives the nature of 'fatherlessness' as indicated in the novel, as well as in the world in general. It also shows some of the manifestations of the evil phenomenon as illustrated in the novel. The partners who are participants or supporters of the evil act are identified in the paper. Through the paper much of the social evil have been brought to light. This paper serves as a secondary step in the protest for the abolition of the social menace.

**Keywords:** Fatherlessness, silence, protest, trauma, abolition

### Introduction

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of linguistic phenomena involving participants in the speech acts and the contexts in which the phenomena take place. Verschueren (1999: 7) has characterized it as 'a general cognitive, social and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in form of behavior.' *Conspiracy of Silence* is a novel reflecting on the incidence of 'fatherlessness' in some communities in Igbo land in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The novel is a project on how to break the 'silence' over the existence of the phenomenon, and hence stop the practice. The plot of *Conspiracy of Silence* is founded on how the life of some of the characters could serve as a mirror of the trauma some traditions inflict on innocent young people, and which could create something positive for posterity out of bitter life experience. The present study is on the world-wide silence over the identical phenomena.

### Synopsis of the Novel

The novelist, Chukwuemeka Ike has written *Conspiracy of Silence* to draw the attention of the world to the existence of the societal evil, 'fatherlessness', which exists in parts of the Igboland and the world at large. He uses the medium of the novel to break the 'silence' over its prevalence in the society. The vast majority of the people who suffer the evil effects of this social malaise have no means of venting their grief

which, it appears no one recognizes; hence 'the conspiracy'.

Ike uses the strategy of ringing up characters that are victims of the phenomenon who narrate their traumatic experiences as if some other people's biographies. The major character, the heroine of *Conspiracy of silence* is Nwanneka Ofoma, a single thirty-three-year-old lady, who is a consultant paediatrician at the University Teaching Hospital. The birth of Nwanneka was the result of incest committed by her mother, Auntie Ukamaka with her elder brother, Brother IK. Auntie Ukamaka was in her fourth year (the penultimate year) in the secondary school when the incident took place. At that age she was a virgin but was enamoured to her elder brother who had just been bereaved of his wife. Ukamaka took advantage of her brother's despondency and drugged him; and adopting the strategy of the daughters of Lot narrated in the Genesis book of the Bible, she ravished her sleeping brother.

The act took place in Brother IK's bedroom. When he was abruptly woken up and recognized what had happened, weeping, he angrily, mercilessly thrashed his erring sister; and fearing the negative consequences of the shameful event, brother and sister conspired not to leak the taboo to a third ear. When some immediate family members became aware of Ukamaka's pregnant state, she obstinately had sealed lips as to the man who owned the pregnancy. Partly to protect her

from her shameful condition, and partly to protect the family from embarrassment, she was temporarily withdrawn from school and sent to some distant place where she stayed and had the baby privately. After Nwanneka was born, she was handed over to Ukamaka's married elder sister, Mrs. Uche Obioha who both suckled her and brought her up like one of her children up to the time she was applying for the common entrance examination for secondary school admission.

It was at this point that the crisis of 'fatherlessness' started. Ukamaka, now married after completing her secondary school education, had been known as Auntie Ukamaka to Nwanneka. She now turned up to reveal herself to Nwanneka as her actual mother. Not only that, she also demanded that the girl's surname, which had hitherto been that of her foster parents, be inexplicably changed to her maiden surname, Ofoma; that is her father's name. Their-father, of course, had long been dead. So, who was the father of Nwanneka?

There was no strategy left unused to make Ukamaka tell her daughter (or anyone else) the man who fathered her; but Ukamaka would not budge. Nwanneka went ahead with her education. First, she attended the Federal Government Girls' College, Benin; and subsequently went and studied medicine, and qualified as a consultant paediatrician at a record age of thirty years. This was the point at which the project of this novel, *Conspiracy of Silence* (henceforth initialled COS), got initiated in what may be styled 'in medias res.' Nwanneka approaches the author of the novel, *The Orphan*, which she had read. Mr. Ayo Femi's novel had made a very great impression on her so much that 'she wants him to write a novel centering on her life, to use her unpleasant experience to draw public attention to the problems of fatherlessness' (COS 7). Gozie, Nwanneka's friend who has accompanied her to the novelist's office adds that a novel woven around her fatherless life could serve as a mirror of the trauma some traditions inflict on innocent young people, and 'could create something positive for posterity out of a bitter life experience' (COS 11). She continued, that granting Nwanneka's request to write the novel would be

helping many people who were suffering in silence.

In the course of the narrative the author gives some illustrations of the phenomenon such as – fatherlessness by design, results of unwanted pregnancy, products of illegal marriages and others. Some of the victims own their narrative of their bitter life experiences, which ring to an end the voicing of the universal social menace.

#### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to campaign for the abolition of the abnormal practice of fatherlessness in parts of Igboland. The first objective is to show the aspects of what is regarded as fatherlessness in Igboland as spelt out in the novel, *Conspiracy of Silence*. The second is to point out those that are regarded as participants in the silence and 'fatherlessness' phenomena. Finally, the study tries to find out if the phenomenon of fatherlessness exists world-wide, and if there is universal silence over it.

#### **Theoretical Basis for Silence as a Linguistic Phenomenon for Pragmatic Study**

Writing on the subject of speech acts across cultures, Mey (2001: 277) says that 'Silence' or the absence of spoken language, can be used in a variety of ways, and is given varying values across cultures. He says (276) that many researchers have worked on the problem of 'speech acts across cultures' trying to find out how speech acting is carried out in different cultures by people using different languages. The study of Scollom and Scollom (1981: 25) show that silence is not interpreted the same way in different cultures. Gumperz (1998) has illustrated this with what Mey (2001: 278) refers to as a 'famous early eighties' court case in Northern California. In the case, a Native American was indicted on a charge of murder. The charges against him were compounded by an accusation of 'conspiracy to murder.' And when the Native American was brought to court for trial, his silence was construed as admission of guilt. Mey (279) says that the act of silence is labeled in different ways in different cultural contexts. For instance, the Native American's culture recognizes silence as a way of stating that one is busy preparing an answer to a question. In his culture silence is no assent, even though in some other cultures silence can

popularly be interpreted as consent. This is illustrated with the Japanese example, when the bride's remaining silent is interpreted as consent when the man proposing to her holds her hand and asks her, 'will you marry me?' What these examples show is that the act of keeping silent is highly dependent, as to its interpretation on cultural contexts in which it is performed or "uttered."

### **Pragmatic analysis of 'fatherlessness' as a linguistic phenomenon:**

Mey (2001:28) says that most of the time neither a purely logical account based solely on the truth or falsity of sentences in isolation nor an exclusively semantic account based on the value of individual lexical items will be satisfactory. He avers, 'we must appeal to pragmatic explanations based on the particular context of a particular utterer.

"I am fatherless!" .....she sat down again, her head bowed, her face blank.

"Come on; how can a medical consultant make such a statement?" "I know what you mean, Sir, I obviously must have a biological father. My problem,

Sir, is that he does not appear to exist in flesh and blood" (COS, 3).

This is part of the introductory dialogue between Ayo, the purported novelist and Nwanneka, the heroine in *Conspiracy of Silence*. The extract above goes to show that 'fatherlessness' is an aberrant linguistic social phenomenon. This is to say that even the test-tube baby must have a male parent – a father – even if a sperm donor. So, 'fatherlessness' concept as the various groups of the society see it depends on the perspectives of individuals and relationships ideologies of various peoples and societies.

### **Nature of 'fatherlessness' in Igboland as shown in *Conspiracy of Silence*.**

Haberland and Mey (1977:5) say that since users and their language are the core of all things pragmatic, 'the world of users is the very condition for doing any pragmatics.' In the first place, 'fatherlessness' is a social concept which does not seem to exist in Igbo society. Here, every person, even a mad-man, is seen to come from a family; and so, must have a father. In the second place, 'fatherlessness' as envisaged in this novel,

is not an entire Igbo society phenomenon. It relates to some communities in and around Ideato Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria, mentioned in the novel (COS, 130). This area is a minuscule part of the Igbo society. To say that the phenomenon is an entire Igbo society affair (COS, 18) would be akin to saying that same sex marriage is now the practice in America or even in Europe.

In other parts of Igboland the nuclear family structure holds just as in the Christian Western society except with modifications in the extended family patterns. It is notable that the Igbo family structure does not discriminate in the status of children in the family. The tradition is, every child born by a wife after her husband has paid the bride price on her account is a legitimate child of the man (COS 32).

It is also Igbo tradition that children born of a man's daughter do not belong to the man's family, but to the lady's husband. But unfortunately, there is an infraction of this tradition in the communities involved in this 'fatherlessness' cases. Because of some selfish considerations of parents involved in the cases, those parents make some of the children of their daughters to remain as members of their families (COS 32). This infraction of the tradition has led to diverse, regrettable cases which have given rise to what is now seen as fatherlessness' with its attendant problems.

There is a primary cultural tenet of the Igbo society which has caused this breaking of the tradition in some communities. The Igbo society is mostly patrilineal. This is to say that inheritance in the family is through male children. The implication is that if a man does not have a male child, at his death that family lineage closes. (COS 83). This is one thing the Igbo family does not want to happen.

This tradition has originated from both the religion and ideology of the Igbo ancestors. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958:108), for instance, the hero, Okonkwo, deplored his son's embracing the Western Christian religion because he, Okonkwo, ruminates that at his death there would be no male inheritor to offer sacrifices of food, chicken and wine to him and his ancestral

spirits. They would be starving while the sacrifices go to foreign gods. And so, with the passage of time, the maintenance of the family lineage through male inheritance has become the tradition – feeding ancestral spirit or no feeding ancestral spirit.

Aside from this, there are other considerations why the Igbo family very much wants male children. Ugochukwu, one of the participants in the provision of evidence of the incidence of fatherlessness has this to say.

The incidence of fatherless children is on the increase because ..... Igbo society attaches undue importance to children. A child is seen as a priceless asset, always welcome, no matter from what source. The Igbo man is happy to litter his compound with children, regardless of whether or not he can take adequate care of them. We have a saying at ndiagu that the ruler or the great man derives his prestige from the number of children he fathers. How he fathers them is of little consequence. The absence of the concept of an illegitimate child in Igbo culture, is a reflection of the importance attached to the child (COS 130).

This statement is true of the Igbo traditional family albeit the derogatory undertone. In addition, history has it that the occupation of Igbo ancestors prior to the coming of the Europeans was primarily farming. And a rich man was a farmer who had many hands-on deck – children – from as many wives as he could marry. Igbo ancestors were no Christians, but chapter 127 of the book of Psalms of the Bible clearly vindicates the ideology of those ancestors.

Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hands of a mighty man; so are the children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:3-5)

### **Some examples of the manifestations of ‘fatherlessness’ as illustrated in *Conspiracy of Silence***

Bilmes (1986:127) says that ‘the meaning of an utterance is determined in large part by how it responds, and how it is responded to by its place in an interactional sequence’ –that is a context of use. The several cases of fatherlessness’ narrated in this novel have different causes.

#### 1. Fatherless by design:

This is the case of a man, whose wife, legally wedded in church, had all six children female. The man went and married a second wife, for her to bear a male child for him. By the time he died he had got male children by this second wife. His first wife who had become wealthy was jealous, that her name would be obliterated from the family at her own death, and so, went off with her daughters and sons-in-law to arrange for a wife who made male children in her own name (COS, 46).

#### 2. The case of unwanted pregnancy:

When a girl’s pregnancy involves a man whose identity, she refuses to disclose either because she does not want to marry him or cannot marry him under any circumstance, the child that is born as a result becomes ‘fatherless.’ This is the case in the plot of the story of this project. (COS, 32). The child so born remains a member of the family of its mother, hence fatherless because the biological father is not identified.

#### 3. In the case of misunderstanding between husband and wife:

The case in view is a story from “Vanguard Newspaper for the day.” In the story, a man who was impotent, discreetly consents to his wife’s getting children from other men of her choice. When the marriage relationship went sour the woman told the children that the man was not their father; another case of fatherlessness. (COS, 20).

#### 4. Product of an illegal marriage:

In this story, a woman had a son for her husband before the man died. She was allowed by members of her late husband’s extended family to remain in the family. But subsequently she was taken over by an influential traditional ruler; and she had a daughter by him. At the death of the traditional ruler the woman was thrown out with her daughter who becomes ‘fatherless’ (COS, 21).

5. Even, highly – placed church people are involved:

At the burial of the woman who had married another woman to make male children to keep her name alive after her own death, a man pointed at a reverend Canon. It was said that after ten years of marriage the Canon and his wife could not have a child. Thereafter the Canon's mother had married a wife, who had given birth to seven sons. It is understood that his mother's so called marriage was a clever device to enable her Reverend Canon son to have a wife without being accused of taking a second wife (COS, 46).

6. A handful of other cases of the manifestation of fatherlessness exist in the novel, *Conspiracy of Silence*, including Barrister Ejindu who declined giving the circumstances that gave rise to his fatherlessness.

#### **Partners involved in the phenomenon of silence in *Conspiracy of Silence***

Mey (2001:30) specifies context as 'one in which the users are of paramount interest inasmuch as they represent the driving force behind the linguistic enterprise both in its theoretical and its practical aspect.' A major issue identified in the novel is the matter of partners in the *Conspiracy of Silence*. In the first instance, individuals are the first people involved in the phenomenon. This is illustrated with the incident of incest between Ukamaka and her elder brother, Brother IK, after which brother and sister conspired not to mention the shameful episode to a third person (COS, 181). The second participants in the conspiracy are the society. The communities in which this heinous social act of fatherlessness is propagated are also responsible for its continuity. Thirdly, the church is accused of turning a blind eye to the practice of fatherlessness of which its principal members are also perpetrators. Take the case of Ayo, the project writer, speaking to his other project participants:

Not long ago I discussed with the Madus the role of the church in this matter, and what emerged was that the church was shirking its responsibility (COS, 130).

Note the instance of the Rev. Canon already reported (COS, 46). The impression of Nduka is

that the church finds it convenient to maintain silence over the matter (COS, 49).

#### **The Effects of Fatherlessness in COS**

The commission by Nwanneka to Ayo to write this novel, *Conspiracy of Silence*, on her life is to show the horrible effects of 'fatherlessness' not only on her life, but also on all the people who suffer the same or are indirectly affected by the phenomenon. The narrator explains:

A novel woven around her fatherless life, could serve as a mirror of the trauma some traditions inflict on innocent young people, and could create something positive for posterity out of a bitter life experience (COS, 11).

In the course of his interaction with one of the sufferers of this phenomenon Ayo notes:

It must be a harrowing experience for all concerned; for the man who parades himself as the father and grandfather, but knows he is not; for the biological father who cannot assert paternity over his offspring; for the mothers who live double lives; and for the children who are forced to call the wrong man their father when they know their biological father is alive and well (COS, 41).

When Ukamaka eventually unveils to her daughter, Nwanneka, who has suffered the effects of fatherlessness until the age of thirty-three, how she gave birth to her, she exposes the effects of this act on herself:

From that night, thirty four years ago when I committed the abominable act which gave me the pregnancy that resulted in your birth, I have cursed myself and suffered hell on earth for my misdeed. You see how flat-chested and gaunt I have become? You see the plateful of tablets I consume everyday to fight migraine? This is because I realized when it was too late, how what began as a demonstration of intense love, ended up as a source of perpetual punishment, not only for me but for the two persons who were dearest to me, Brother IK, and you, my daughter

(COS, 178).

For Nwanneka, her fatherlessness and its secrecy weighed her down all through her secondary school days. For a girl of her age she could not express the type of pride her peers enjoyed in the discussion of their families among their friends in the school. For instance, she could not think of what to write when they were given an assignment to write an essay on “My father” (COS, 56). When she came back on holidays the situation was even worse. She stated:

Each time I returned on holidays I felt like Tantalus of Greek mythology, with my dream family and father figure dangling before my nose only to vanish into thin air each time I stretched out to grab them (COS, 55).

The Editor of The Vanguard Newspaper who was helping the group collate people’s responses to the request for their experiences on this phenomenon had this interaction with Ayo.

To assist you with your work, I thought I should whisper to you, in the strictest confidence, my own experience as a fatherless child (COS, 74).

This statement shows how people who are fatherless have no pride of showing off their status in their families within the society. Gozie, the friend of Nwanneka, who had gone with her the first time to the novelist’s office to apply for the case of the project, happens also to be a secret fatherless person. Ayo has paid them a visit (she and Chijioke, her husband) in their family house. Later that night, when in bed, Gozie and her husband started making confessions and asking for forgiveness of each other. Each of them is a fatherless person but had deliberately concealed the fact from each other in the course of their marriage arrangements for fear that each would be discredited before the intending spouse. Each had earlier narrated their fatherlessness story as if it was about someone else. (COS, 108-110). From these, it would seem that all the participants championing the abolition of fatherlessness in this project are all fatherless people.

#### **Fatherlessness Worldwide**

The project novelist has requested the features Editor of the popular newspaper, ‘The Voice of the People’, to invite comments on the

issue of fatherlessness from readers who had experienced the phenomenon, and to devote one page of the paper to the responses received (COS, 66). A letter came from a ‘Professional woman’ who argued that from her experiences on the matter, ‘the issue of fatherlessness was being over flogged.’ She had lived in London, was thrice engaged in marriage relationships, and had thrice been tragically disappointed. She was put in a family way and had a fatherless child (COS, 69). She advised the editor to stop wasting his time and valuable space on the issue of fatherlessness as the ‘Igbo society has evolved successful methods of playing the role of father without the natural father’ (COS, 70). The fatherlessness project writer, Ayo, wants to know from Barrister Ejindu, who is also a fatherless case if the heroine, Nwanneka, was not ‘hypersensitive’ over wanting to know her father. Barrister Ejindu’s response was in the affirmative; the phenomenon did not start with her and most likely would not stop with her, he maintains (COS, 81). He concludes his dialogue with Ayo:

I see this hullabaloo about fatherless children as a storm in a teacup. It is a non-issue. If you were to eliminate all Igbo men and women classified as fatherless by your definition, how many would be left? (COS, 85).

Ayo had recently had a discussion with an American friend who told him that homosexuals did have children. The female homosexuals (lesbians) would go to sperm banks and arrange to be inseminated with the sperm from some specified homosexual donors. If a baby is born it would be fatherless. (COS, 156). Same sex marriage has been legalized in some countries both in the United States of America and in Europe.

#### **The Universality of Silence in the fatherlessness phenomenon**

These two linguistic phenomena are related, in that it is the one, ‘fatherlessness,’ which gives rise to the other, silence, in this context. Fatherlessness in all its ramifications is a cultural creation arising from the ideological considerations of the people in the community where the phenomenon is practiced in the contexts under consideration. Looking back to what had

been stated on the matter, it is the issue of the maintenance of family lineage in Igboland which has given rise to the procreation of children whose fathers could either not be traced or legitimized.

The project writer, Ayo, is a Yoruba; and he argues that in his culture, biologically fathering a child legitimizes ownership of the child to its biological father. In the Igbo communities under study, this is not necessarily the case. Children are owned by the person who has traditionally married their mother; otherwise they belong to the family of their mother's father (COS, 32). This is not to state that in the Yoruba society men do not father children who are not given recognition in their father's family. This is attested to by the fact that it is a common occurrence in the Yoruba society that at the death of some men you often see children who turn up to claim that they were fathered by the deceased. This hardly happens in the Igboland society. So, in the Yoruba society, there is also silence at times over fatherlessness.

The phenomenon is understood according to the meaning attributed to it in the community, or by the individuals affected. In the Igbo communities under this study, the children who are made to remain in the family of their mother's parents are not regarded as fatherless by that family. They are some of such children who want to see themselves in the light of Western tradition who start considering themselves as fatherless, as in the case of Nwanneka, the heroine of this project. Also, when some of such persons make phenomenal progress in the community and start flaunting their personality, their jealous counterparts cast derogatory aspersions on their offspring legitimacy to deflate their ego (COS, 110-120).

In a global context we had the 1994 WHO news release on the changing pattern of the family world-wide. It had stated that single parent families were changing the structure of the family world-wide. It revealed also that ninety percent of single parent families were headed by women. Although it did not indicate how those female family heads came by their children, a research into the matter would reveal that many of such children are extramarital products (COS, 172).

Those children, obviously, would be first – rate 'fatherless.' Of the 'fatherless' ones who

recognize their mother's father as their father, they would be second-rate 'fatherless.' The test-tube babies of lesbian homo-sexual and products of same-sex marriages of western societies would be the highest rated fatherless children. Of course, fatherless by all considerations. So, if a census was taken of the world with regard to the legitimacy of their offspring status, the result would reveal a staggering rate of fatherlessness as considered here.

### **Conclusion**

Now, our study is on the universality of silence phenomenon. But we had stated at the beginning of this section that fatherlessness and silence phenomena are related, and that the latter – silence – results from the former. Fatherlessness is an unhealthy family, social phenomenon, and it thrives under silence. So, the conclusion is that silence is universal alongside fatherlessness which it protects, and consequently promotes.

### **Recommendation**

The Igbo traditional society which does not acknowledge 'fatherlessness' in its family set-up does not seem to have serious social problem with this phenomenon since the father in the family does not question 'from where the child comes' and other members of the family do not other about it. Also, barrister Ejindu cited in the study under the section: fatherlessness worldwide has referred to this issue as 'a storm in a tea cup', and had gone on to ask that 'if we were to eliminate all men and women classified as 'fatherless' by our definition, how many would be left?'

Then there is society cultural family set-up and western religious adherence. These are the rest who are bothered by the effects of 'fatherlessness'. This should be so because of the universally acknowledged social menace and aberrance in the character of many children brought up without a father or in a natural family set-up. Ut more worrying is the trauma suffered by the victims of the social menace.

This paper gives a voice to the 'silence' over the 'fatherlessness' phenomenon and hopes that others would hear and continue from here.

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