

**SETTING AND CONFLICTS AS INFORMANTS OF CHARACTERS’  
METASTASIS IN CHIGOZIE OBIOMA’S *THE FISHERMEN***

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**Abstract**

This article investigates how setting and conflicts lead to characters’ metastasis (change of behaviour) in Chigozie Obioma’s *The Fishermen* (2015) from the perspective of Psycho-analytical criticism proposed by Jacques Lacan. The main argument is that characters can change behavior under the influence of setting and conflicts. The lack of parental attention and the presence of material precarity bring the characters to grow in experience. The argument holds that there is a certain correlation between setting, conflicts and the aggressive behavior displayed by Ikenna and Boja. Setting therefore entertain intrinsic relationship with characters’ change of behavior, especially when internal and external conflicts respond to the dynamics of plot construction. Approaching the novel from Lacanian psycho-analytic criticism, the study reasserts that precarious family setting and the lack of expected parental care play important roles in thought development and meaningful talking ability in youngsters.

**Key words:** children, speech maturation, affective memory, setting, character.

**Résumé**

Cet article étudie comment le cadre narratif et les conflits conduisent à la métastase (changement de comportement) des personnages dans *The Fishermen* (2015) de Chigozie Obioma de la perspective psycho-analytique proposée par Jacques Lacan. L’argument principal est que les personnages peuvent changer le comportement sous l’influence du cadre narratif et des conflits. Le manque d’attention parentale et la présence de la précarité matérielle amènent les personnages à développer des comportements qui sortent de l’ordinaire. L’argument affirme qu’il existe une certaine corrélation entre le cadre narratif, les conflits et le comportement agressif affiché par Ikenna et Boja. Le cadre narratif entretient donc une relation intrinsèque avec le changement de comportement des personnages, en particulier lorsque les conflits internes et externes répondent à la dynamique de la trame du récit. En approchant le roman de la critique psychanalytique lacanienne, l’étude réaffirme que le cadre familial précaire et le manque de soins parentaux attendus jouent un rôle important dans le développement de la pensée et la capacité de parler significative chez les jeunes.

**Mots clés :** enfants, maturation de la parole, mémoire affective, réglage, caractère.

## Introduction

Critics of the African novel have paid attention to language aesthetics without specifically investigating the factors that attend characters change of behaviour in the narrative, taking as example Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*.<sup>1</sup> Some aspects have been left unexplored, especially how conflicts and setting can attend the change of behavior of characters, from good to bad or vice-versa. Daniel P. Kunene asserts that in the African novel, narrative "language is the means by which the writer reveals his soul [...]"<sup>2</sup> His analysis does not consider the possibility where setting and conflicts can function as the expressive mode of the characters' lived experiences. Elsewhere, critical emphasis has been put on the use and choice of language type without specifying the extent to which language becomes the reflection of characters' internalized experiences. Obiajunwa Wali opines that narrative in the African novel "is the exploitation of the possibilities of language."<sup>3</sup> His submission also has left a gap in the critical examination of literary informants from the perspectives of conflicts, language and setting. It follows that critical approaches to setting, conflicts and language as literary informants of characters' metastasis need further details. That is why, I propose to investigate in this article the extent to which elements of setting and conflicts operate as literary informants of characters' metastasis (their change of behaviour), their speech articulation in their thought formulation and in their growing experiences towards maturity and new world perception. In this essay, I will bring out three types of literary informants that operate in the growing experiences of characters and their speech performances: 1) setting (time, space and mood), 2. conflicts (internal and external) and narrative discourse.

The methodological approach used is Psychoanalytic criticism proposed by Jacques Lacan. This theory examines in the novel characters' behavior as the exteriorization of internalized subconscious drives. It looks at the relationship between missed actions or opportunities and the subconscious manifestations of these acts and how they have incidences on the characters' social behavior.

### I. Setting as Literary Informant of Characters' Metastasis

By characters' metastasis, I refer to the change of behavior of characters throughout the narrative. The change may be negative or positive. I am particularly looking at the factors that influence characters to change in the course of the narrative. Chigozie Obioma's novel *The Fishermen* offers a perspective of narrative aesthetics that charts setting with the growing experiences of characters. In his essay "The agency of the Letter in the Unconscious (1957), Jacques Lacan argued that the unconscious is not the hidden reservoir of repressed desires, but rather a form of rhetorical energy designed both to disguise and to express those desires."<sup>4</sup> "The

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<sup>1</sup> Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2015). All references to this novel are from the same edition. Further references to this novel will be written with abbreviations as *TF* followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel P. Kunene "African-Language Literature: Tragedy and Hope" pp. 315-322 in Tejumola Olanyan and Ato Quayson, eds., *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (New York: Blackwell Publishing 2013), p. 315.

<sup>3</sup> Obiajunwa Wali "The Dead End of African Literature" pp. 281-284 in Tejumola Olanyan and Ato Quayson, eds., *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (New York: Blackwell Publishing 2013), p. 283.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious (1957)" pp. 1290-1302 in Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) p. 1291

unconscious is structured like a language.”<sup>5</sup> This means not that the unconscious is a language, but that the unconscious is like a language, a foreign language. In other words, the unconscious is structured, not amorphous, and it speaks rhetorically through the dreams, mistakes and symptoms of the subject. Characters have gone through four different settings which have impacted their lives and caused them to change behavior: the family setting (Agwu’s house), Omi-Ala river (where Abulu lives), the Omotayo Nursery and Primary school (where Benjamin, and his brothers had their primary education), the prison in Akure (where Benjamin spent five years). The family setting, due to the father’s absence does not offer a suitable educational benefit to the children. Omi-Ala river, where Abulu lives, is the experimental field for aggression and delinquency. It has impacted Ikenna and his brothers’ lives negatively after Abulu’s prophetic curse of sudden death on him. The boys emerged from that place worried and aggressive, living in the fearful expectation of tragic death. The absence of the father from home coupled with this episodic contact with Abulu led Ikenna, Boja, Obembe, Benjamin to an extrovert life, making them become aggressive and harsh. It also changed their worldview by making them see society as a jungle; a place where the strong bully and trample down the weak. Thus, to survive they became nasty and predatory. The narrator discloses: “Ikenna had just turned fifteen, and to my eyes, he was now a full adult able to grow beards. Yet the thought that he was old came with the strong fear that once he grew into an adult, he would disconnect from us” (*TF*: 58). This statement suggests a change of character in Ikenna which Benjamin the narrator perceives as waywardness, carefree attitude and signs for future dissidence and disconnection from the family. Going deep in the novel, the narrative discourse evolves from the first-person perspective where the neglect of family responsibilities by a father, Mr Agwu bascules the household in a tragic deal of homicide committed by Boja on Ikenna, setting the other children on a journey of self-discovery and social experiences. The speech produced by characters is more the product of their internalized experiences than that of free design of their intellect. Such discourse proceeds from a cumulation of internal and external conflicts that have exteriorized into some multifaceted expressive modes of frustrations and self-discoveries under specific family and social settings. When the narrator Benjamin blows out at the beginning of the novel:

We were fishermen. My brothers and I became fishermen in January 1996 after father moved out of Akure, a town in the West of Nigeria, where we had lived together all our lives... So, at times like these, we avoided the television in the eight-columned shelf in our sitting room. We sat in our rooms, studying or feigning to study, anxious, but not asking questions. While there, we stuck out our antennae to gather whatever we could of the situation (*TF*: 3-4).

Here, the narrator uses time – January 1996 –, place – Akure city – and mood – atmosphere of anxiety – to give the reader the foreshadowing of what is to follow as a tragic narrative. The time given is the beginning of the year, January; a moment which symbolically marks a new start of the family agenda. Logically, people live in the expectation of better future for the year. Yet, the novelist introduces a paradox when he has the narrator confide that his brothers and himself are very worried about the future, due to their father’s preparations for departure from home. The place is Akure city. The novelist uses it as springboard to introduce characters into an adventure of conflicts with other characters that lead them to psychological development and a progress towards maturity.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

In studying language and the relationship with setting, Gillian Brown made the point that setting entertains a strong relationship with the language spoken by individuals.<sup>6</sup> Setting refers to the place, time and the socio-political mood within which the narrative discourse evolves. The setting in which characters evolve has strong incidences on their behavior, their life perception and their reactions to the outside world. One would say that the fictional space created by the novelist shapes the mindset of the characters and determine their behavior in society. Chigozie Obioma has established that certain environmental elements contribute to the speech maturation of teenagers in *The Fisherman*. Such elements are high cost of city life and the demand of survival, the departure of the father from home and the hostile society outside. The novel is set in Akure in the 1990s. Akure is a small town in eastern Nigeria that shelters mostly middle-class civil servants and traders. It is set in a period of intense modernized life with money oriented lifestyle. Families with low income must fight hard to have ends meet due to the high cost of education, shelter and foodstuff. The narrative is focused on Agwu's family caught up in the storm of rapid degeneracies of the coming to age of five adolescent children: Ikenna, Boja, Benjamin, David and Obembe. Akure is depicted as a place where education is expensive and middle-class families with more than two school children face serious economic hardship to face educational needs. With six young boys to raise, Agwu is under the economic strain and finds it difficult to offer efficient education to his children. He uses job obligations as an alibi to depart from home and be away from the economic pressure of their educational needs. The exposure to material precarity, the difficulties to have decent school education and the attendant adolescence crisis lead these boys in an adventure of self-discovery and the building of character. The narrative moves from Akure to Yola. Akure, I said, is a contemporary Nigerian city with a middle-class family caught up in the pressures of contemporary material constraints. Yola is the place where father Agwu is transferred to work. It is presented as a volatile city with large-scale violence: "Yola, he reiterated, was a volatile city with a history of frequent large-scale violence especially against people of our tribe – the Igbo" (TF: 7). Although Yola and Akure are said to be distant cities, there are mutual influences of city realities that impacted the growing adolescent boys. Ikenna's brutal-oriented character, his inquisitiveness to venture into the unknown, his desire to explore city life and his love of money and material are sharpened by the influence of city lifestyle. Not only do cities influence the children but they influenced Agwu as well. Being transferred the distant city of Yola to work, the father Agwu is trapped between the pressing demands of his job as a means of survival and the family's solicitation to be present at home for the education of the growing children. The failure to balance the two responsibilities creates a psychological conflict in him as he becomes brutal in his approaches to family matters. Agwu constantly resorts to flogging and compels the father to quit his family and live alone to meet his job's demand. The Postcolonial Nigerian society in the novel reveals the predicament of the modern man caught up in the conflicting demand of the family responsibilities and the solicitation of his job that brings him far away from his home. The tragedy that occurs in the novel and which is marked by the death of two of his sons reveals the profound moral conflicts that resulted from the failure to live a balanced life. The first incidence of the family setting is that it created in the children the extravert perception of life in which they see home as repulsive and the street as a possible place for acquiring experience. The situation that compels these upcoming teenagers to cater for themselves at these tender ages has an incidence on their individual character formation, as they develop in their subconsciousness mechanisms of self-

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<sup>6</sup> Gillian Brown, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 27.



defense and survival strategies to face the hostile outside world. These defense mechanisms and survival strategies are aggressive reactions, adult-like thinking and talk, and a developed sense of protest in front of injustice. They exhibit these internal characters in circumstances where they feel cheated. For instance, at school, when the headmistress threatened to punish Boja for replying to an insult, Ikenna saw this as injustice and called him out of the class. Another occasion was at the One such hostile barriers they confront is Abulu the madman who is said to terrify the youngsters by his bad prophecies. The confrontation Despite the fact that the characters Ikenna, Boja, Benjamin who are respectively fifteen, twelve and nine. This perception of life as hostile world

The story line of Chigozi Obioma's *The Fishermen* makes the point that some life difficulties can cause children to develop adult thought-like abilities in front of some problems. Internal and external conflicts contribute to spur up technical abilities and survival strategies that attend the development of children into adulthood. When James Agwu the head of the family moved to Yola leaving his wife to cater alone for the children, this absence created a gap in the children's educational process, which had to be filled by the children themselves. Benjamin the narrator informs us that it is exactly the father's absence that caused the children to abandon childish abstract speculations about unreachable future plans and face life realities, the point of departure of their meditative exercise into survival strategies: "Everything followed its normal course... But father's move to Yola changed the equation of things: time and seasons and the past began to matter and we started to yearn and crave for it even more than the present and the future" (*TF*: 6). From the time the father left home, Ikenna, Boja, David and Obembe became anxious about their future. There is a close connection between the anxiety developed by the children about their father's absence and their desire to see him spend time with them at home. In approaching Lacan, Dylan Evans has shown how he stresses the relationship between anxiety and desire; anxiety is a way of sustaining desire when the object is missing and, conversely, desire is a remedy for anxiety, something easier to bear than anxiety itself. He also argues that "the source of anxiety is not always internal to the subject, but can often come from another, just as it is transmitted from one animal to another in a herd; 'if anxiety is a signal, it means it can come from another'"<sup>7</sup>.

The narrator through this statement is highlighting parental absence as a determinant factor in the children's departure for a series of life experiences and self-discovery. The narrator refers to these series of consciousness development as "A life-changing experience that continued with each passing day" (*TF*: 62). The first exhibition of thought maturity is when Ikenna openly confronted the Headmistress of Omotayo Nursery and Primary School to denounce her unjust punishment of Boja Ikenna's junior brother during a class:

There was a brief pause, after which the headmistress's distinct voice beamed "come here into the megaphone". As Boja made to go out to the podium, Ikenna ran forward, stood in front of him and cried out aloud: "No, ma, this is unfair! What has he done? What? If you are going to punish him, you have to punish all these pupils who laughed at him too. Why should they laugh at him and mock him? The silence that followed these bold words, Ikenna's and Boja's defiance, was for a moment spiritual (*TF*: 65).

This extract describes a public denunciation of injustice by a fifteen-year boy Ikenna. Although he is young he has shown a developed sense of justice and thus felt offended in the unjust application of punishment between his junior brother Boja and the rest of the class who didn't

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<sup>7</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), P. 11

undergo any punishment. The absence of their father has led Ikenna and Boja to face life incidents alone at an early age; and as a matter of fact, have developed moral and intellectual skills in talk exchanges with people, insightful judgement in embarrassing situations and a quick sense of justice and fair treatment in dual conflicts. Ikenna has been able not only to recognize that it is unfair to punish Boja for replying with an insult to his fellows who insulted him, but to also openly tell the headmistress that she did wrong by being unfair to Boja by punishing him alone. There is a gap between the age of Ikenna (fifteen years old) and his intellectual reflection: a developed sense of justice and fairness.

“In fact”, Ikenna’s voice rose again, above the noise of a colony of birds sailing towards the hills, ‘this is unfair’. We’d rather leave your school than be punished unjustly. My brothers and I will leave. Now. There are better schools out there where we can get better Western education” (TF: 65). Jacques Lacan in theorizing on psychoanalysis suggested that:

when the Father’s No interrupts the imaginary, it casts the infant out of the imaginary and into the symbolic, into language. While in the imaginary, there is no difference, in the symbolic, difference and absence reign. Instead of fullness and immediacy of the imaginary, in the symbolic, there is incompleteness and distance, characteristics inherent to language and representation.<sup>8</sup>

Through this submission, Lacan advocates parental neglect as an ingredient in the wayward adventure of Ikenna and Boja who inflicts their house with a storm of sorrow through their suicidal death. The novelist creates an intrinsic relationship between parental responsibility, children’s waywardness and the conflictual adventure with the hostile society that provokes death of the characters.

Lacan argues that aggressivity is a predisposition to brutality and violence as a defensive means; it ‘underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer’. In taking this stance, Lacan is restating Freud’s concept of ambivalence (the interdependence of love and hate), which Lacan regards as one of the fundamental discoveries of psychoanalysis. This applies to the aggressive attitude of Ikenna in the novel. For instance, he has internalized their father’s parental neglect in his subconsciousness and has also become reactionary to his mother’s unceasing injunctions and threats. The father who has been away from home used to flog Ikenna whenever he came home and received reports of disobedience from the mother. On the other hand, Ikenna’s aggressivity towards his siblings and his excessive desire to control his junior brothers by acting a pedagogue towards them comes from the fact that his subconsciousness has substituted the father by himself.

Lacan situates aggressivity in the dual relation between the ego and the counterpart. In the mirror stage, the infant sees its reflection in the mirror as a wholeness, in contrast with the uncoordination in the real body: this contrast is experienced as an aggressive tension between the specular image and the real body, since the wholeness of the image seems to threaten the body with disintegration and fragmentation. Chigozie Obioma lets us know that when Ikenna was an infant during the mirror stage, he was well loved by both his father and mother: “I remember, in sparkling mirror memory, the unsure movements of Mr Lawrence’s legs, as he reached for the long cane... (TF: 66). But it appears from the physical delineation of the boy that he was not satisfied with his image in the mirror.

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan quoted by Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 139.

The consequent identification with the specular image thus implies an ambivalent relation with the counterpart, involving both eroticism and aggression. This ‘erotic aggression’ continues as a fundamental ambivalence underlying all future forms of identification, and is an essential characteristic of narcissism. Narcissism can thus easily veer from extreme self-love to the opposite extreme of ‘narcissistic suicidal aggression’ (*agression suicidaire narcissique*). Ikenna has displayed narcissism at different stages. First, when he was playing with his junior brothers in the lagoon and Abulu the mad man passed by, he gave a prophecy that discombobulated the children by making them believe that they would die in accordance with that prediction. This very prophecy led Ikenna to retire into an introspecting self-defense against an impending death. Ikenna saw himself as too young and too handsome to confront a premature death. That narcissism or internal self-admiration is the result of the instinct of protection: “My brothers and I spat into the dirt and then by *unquestioned instinct* immediately erased the spittle with the soles of our sandals as we passed” (*TF*: 112). More clearly, the author brings to the surface the internalized quality of self-defense, a character that developed in these boys as a result of precarious exposure to adversity and conflicts.

On the other hand, the author links aggressivity the imaginary order of eros. This means Obioma sees a connection between the desire to love and be loved (which they do not have in the family setting) and the feeling of frustration and resentment they develop a result of that need to be filled. By linking aggressivity to the imaginary order of eros, Lacan seems to diverge significantly from Freud, since Freud sees aggressivity as an outward manifestation of the death drive (which is, in Lacanian terms, situated not in the imaginary but in the symbolic order). Aggressivity is also related by Lacan to the Hegelian concept of the fight to the death, which is a stage in the dialectic of the master and the slave.

Lacan argues that it is important to bring the analysand’s aggressivity into play early in the treatment by causing it to emerge as negative transference. This aggressivity directed towards the analyst then becomes ‘the initial knot of the analytic drama’. This phase of the treatment is very important since if the aggressivity is handled correctly by the analyst, it will be accompanied by ‘a marked decrease in the patient’s deepest resistances’ (Lacan, 1951b:13).

## II. Conflicts as Literary Informants

Lacan thinks that the internal conflicts that a subject undergoes can be exteriorized through mistakes he commits. Therefore, conflicts, when they are internal, entertain a strong relationship with the social behavior of the individual.<sup>9</sup> There are two types of conflicts that contribute to the speech maturation and character growth of the protagonists in the novel: internal conflicts and external conflicts. The internal conflicts refer to the psychological and emotional crises that engage the characters Ikenna, Boja, Benjamin, David in a struggle for self-discovery and specific adjustment with the external world, the society. It was said earlier on that these characters are going through puberty and experiencing therefore adolescent crises. Under normal circumstances, their conflictual drives should be oriented towards sexual dreams and self-discovery but this is not the case. The representation of conflicts in *The Fishermen* provides a way for the novelist to expose the true personality of characters involved and their ability to endure or not the difficulties confronting them. H. Porter Abbott submits that

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The signification of the Phallus” pp. 1302-1310 in Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) p. 1291

...the representation of conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least make living difficult). In this view of narrative, its conflicts are not solely about particular characters (or entities). ...In conflicts, and riding on top of the conflict of narrative entities, are conflicts regarding values, ideas, feelings and ways of seeing the world.<sup>10</sup>

Brought in the context of *The Fishermen*, that means conflicts enable characters to talk about themselves, to expose their social identity, to exhibit their flaws, and their strength while contributing to make the narrative progress towards climax. The climax in the novel is the confrontation of Agwu's family with the death of their two children: Ikenna and Boja. Father and mother are so affected that the narrator describes the latter thus: "vacant eyed, sat in an ematiated body that was packed into a black blouse. She'd become frail and pale" (TF: 187).

The lacanian psychological theory enables us to discover that their sexual desires have been repressed and re-oriented towards the desire for heroic affirmation, exploit and subconscious revenge of the parental neglect. That revenge falls on the madman Abulu who is said to have prophesized the death of Ikenna and Boja. In fact, since the day they encountered Abulu at Omi-Ala river they have been living in a schizophrenic fear of death, which they believed would come in fulfilment of Abulu's 'prophecy'. At this point it is relevant to recall Abulu's 'prophecy':

Abulu...cast his eyes above, lifted his hands and shouted: 'Ikenna', you will be bound like a bird on the day you shall die," he cried covering his eyes with his hands to demonstrate blindness. 'Ikenna', you will be mute. 'Ikenna', you will be crippled. 'Ikenna' you shall lift your hands to grasp air, but you will not be able to. Ikenna, you shall open your mouth to speak on that day', the madman opened his mouth and made a loud gasping sound of ah, ah – 'but words will freeze in your mouth'. As the noise tapered off, we heard him say "Ikenna", you shall die like a cock dies' (TF: 83-84).

This passage is the episode where the Abulu the madman prophetically cursed Ikenna. The prophetic curse in essence said that the boy would die a miserable death. The boy has internalized that prophecy and lives in perpetual fear in the expectation of its fulfilment. That very curse set off Ikenna's internal conflictual struggle to conjure the evil he believes shall befall him: death. Conflicts specifically the struggle with fear, worry, and hatred impacted his social behavior as he adopted unusual attitudes.

There are two things to note here. Firstly, Ikenna's internal conflicts is predicated on his belief that the behavior of their father whom he finds irresponsible, brutal and unpredictable does not match with the role model a father should play. His change of behavior started from the day their father left their home in Akure for Yola where he was transferred to work. The mother's injunction comes as a question to lay emphasis on the very fact that father's absence from home will have impact on the psychology and morality of the children: "What kind of job takes a man away from bringing up his growing son? Even if I were born with seven hands, how would I be able to care for these children alone?" (TF: 4) The psychological impact that followed is described thus by the narrator: "Ikenna's frightening metamorphosis" (TF: 46) began at that very moment. Secondly, the very metamorphosis referred to here is the psychological disconnection of Ikenna from parental care, a situation that created in him worry, fear unrest and that made him

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<sup>10</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 55.



change into a brutal and unpredictable boy, setting him in conflicts with his brothers and other children in the neighbourhood:

Ikenna was undergoing a metamorphosis: A life-changing experience that continued with each passing day. He closed himself off from the rest of us. But though he was no longer accessible, he began to leave shattering traces of himself around the house in actions that left lasting impacts on our lives... We had not seen Ikenna in two days because, he'd hardly been at home, and when he was, no one, not even Boja with whom he shared the room, entered it (*TF*: 62)

This extract highlights the inner conflicts which Ikenna is experiencing and how these conflicts translate into external unfamiliar behavior. The boy has broken loose from his psychological serenity and become intermittently introvert or extravert, depending on the prevailing circumstances, because of the father's absence. As a matter of fact, his tendency to bully his peers, to engage in fights with brutality and at time his drive into solitary confinement are the external manifestations of the inner conflicts going on in his mind and psyche which he does not succeed in solving. The fear of an uncertain future, the worries about the impacts of their father's absence and the inability of the mother to manage the house all contribute to raise in Ikenna conflictual struggles that, projected into his subconsciousness, translate into deviated and unfamiliar behavior. Fear is presented in the novel as a strong internal conflicts generator against which he struggles and which discombobulates and destroys his relationships:

The fear, after destroying Ikenna's well-being, health and faith, destroyed his relationships, the closest of which was with us, his brothers. It seemed that he had fought the internal battle for too long, and now wanted to get it over with. As if to dare the prophecy to come true, Ikenna began to do all he could to harm us (*TF*: 116).

The novelist presents here one aspect of narrative device that contributes to make conflicts in the characters grow: ergodics. Ergodics is a situation in which a chain of events has been produced by non-trivial efforts of one or more individuals or mechanisms. In *The Fishermen*, there is cause/effect relationship between the father's departure from home and the tragic death of Ikenna and Boja, and their mother's hysteria. Through the ergodic presentation of events: Agwe's departure from home, the fear of inability to manage the children, the children's waywardness, their encounter with Abulu the madman, Abulu's prophetic curse, and the ensuing death of Ikenna and Boja, and the revenge of that death by Obembe and Benjamin through the killing of Abulu, the novelist highlights causation as a powerful narrative device that spurs up the chain of interconnectedness between conflicts and character growth. Another example about Ikenna's fight with Boja will help me make the point:

In those early days of Ikenna's metamorphosis... He hit Boja after a heated argument a week or so later. Obembe and I were in our room when this happened because we had started to avoid the living room whenever Ikenna was there, but Boja often stayed put. It must have been Ikenna's anger at his persistence that caused the argument. All I heard was blows and their voices as they argued and swore at each other (*TF*: 52).

"At around the same time, Ikenna and Boja hassled one of Mr Agbati's children, our cross-wall neighbours" (*TF*: 48).

He could have brought along his family to live with, but he didn't do so. The narrator describes him thus:

Father was an eagle: the mighty bird planted his nest high above the rest of his peers... Our home – a three-bedroom bungalow he bought the year Ikenna was born – was his cupped eyrie; a place he ruled with a clenched fist. This is why everyone has come to believe that, had he not left Akure, our home would not have become vulnerable in the first place, and that the kind of adversity that befell us would not have happened (*TF*: 25). The narrator uses a strong metaphor to describe their father. “Father was an eagle” establishes the negative parallelism between the life of an eagle and that of Agwu the father. The metaphor brings out the fact that Agwu has created a distance between him and his family, especially his children at the moment they needed him badly. At a deeper level of interpretation, one can infer that Father’s isolation stands as negative incentive for his children to dive into the unknown. They strive to scratch out from what the society outside could offer as ingredients to complement their moral education. Obioma’s authorial ideology brings us face to face with what responsibility parents are called to carry out in the character development and educational process of their children. Seen from the angle of Lacanian developmental psychology, one would say that the adult person’s behaviour is the reflection of what his/her childhood had been through. As a matter of fact, early disconnection with parental custody and guidance will surely influence negatively the social, moral and intellectual behavior of children, as has been the cases of Ikenna and Boja. The tragedy that happened in the middle of the novel as Boja killed Ikenna by sword and soon after drowned in the well, is the result of this lack of parental custody and arbitration. In the absence of the father, the boys believed in the absence of censure, in the absence of law that could refrain them from going astray. Parents, especially fathers, constitute a reference for boys, a role model to follow. Their failure to play that role causes children to sink in lawlessness and licentiousness.

### III. Language as Literary Informant

Language in Lacan’s analysis operates on us as much as we operate on it. Language speaks us. In other words, our language betrays our total being, our innermost personality.<sup>11</sup> Language displays in a certain number of variants that come to inform why characters have changed the course of their lives. The narrative discourse flows from the mouth of Benjamin the narrator who tells the story in the first-person point of view. The discourse shows a certain growing experience in the development of ideas and in speech performance. Before analyzing Benjamin’s language, it is useful to look at the Father’s. Father’s constantly warn his children against the consequences of waywardness through proverbs: for instance, “Always remember that a coconut that falls into a cistern will need a good washing before it can be eaten. What I mean is if you do wrong, you will need to be corrected” (*TF*: 39). The father is heir of traditional education and modern education. He uses aspects of his traditional education to impart it on his children, by for instance teaching them proverbs. Through this proverb the father also participates in their understanding of social norms, specifically “the bad behavior results in punishment” principle. In other words, the children are being warned that their misbehaving can earn them punishment. This warning has caused some of them, especially Ikenna, David and Benjamin to grow in wisdom, though that wisdom was short-lived for Ikenna. The warning produced some effects for Ikenna said: “I want to go and study. I am a student, not a fisherman” (*TF*: 19). Proverbs also serve to express the ontological view of life and particularly the belief that gods manipulate human destiny: “Those the gods have chosen to destroy, they inflict with madness”,

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan, op. cit, p. 1295.

Igbo proverb. The author has the narrator quote that proverb to explain the belief that most of his characters' fate are pre-ordained and decided by the gods. For instance, Abulu's madness is beyond human understanding and is said to be a curse. Ikenna and Boja's deaths are said to be the fulfilment of Abulu's prophetic curse. The belief that the gods manipulate human destiny reinforces the argument that characters' change of attitude is also contingent upon the nature of their relationship with such deities. Monika Fludernick has found out that speech and thought representation are important narratological devices in discourse analysis.<sup>12</sup> By this, the critic establishes a relationship between authorial ideology and some characters' worldview. In other words, the novelist may choose to express important ideological concerns through the language that proceeds from the characters' mouths. As such, it is plausible to see Chigozie Obioma's narrative proverbs as an extension of his authorial ideology, through which he condemns Africans' dependency on magical incantations to harm others.

Hyperbole is a figure a speech in which the speaker uses exaggeration to make a point. It is used in the novel by Agwu to emphasize the point that there is an odd discrepancy between his expectations by sending his children to school and what they turned out to become, wayward boys fishing in the river. Agwu says to his children: "I sweat and suffer to send you to school to receive a *Western education* as civilized men, but you chose instead to be fishermen" (*TF*: 33). That truth is explained further: "Listen, what you did was truly bad. Bad. Just how could kids receiving Western education engage in such a barbaric endeavor? (*TF*: 35)" The emphasis is put on how the children betrayed the dreams of the father by turning out to be careless about their education.

Obioma's *The Fishermen* is replete with metaphors describing each character's behavior growth. Metaphors are used to support language propensity and vitality and the narrative captures the attention of the reader as an important display of rhetoric. For instance, "Ikenna was a python" (*TF*: 41). This metaphor alludes to the new behavior of Ikenna who changed drastically from a sympathetic brother to a destructive and quarrelsome boy. "Ikenna was a sparrow" (*TF*: 144), illustrates another aspect of Ikenna's life especially when he became restless and nomadic. "Mother was a falconer" (*TF*: 97), alludes to the mother's inability to manage the teenagers and his incessant fear of the tragic turn in the growth of the children. This explains her constant resort to prayers and counselling sessions with Pastor Collins. The critic James Phelan has said that narrative becomes rhetoric when the author deploys side by side his creative craft with stylistics to support thought and narrative focus.<sup>13</sup> "Boja was a fungus" (*TF*: 155). This metaphor alludes to Boja's dependency on Ikenna's lifestyle. Ikenna was Boja's role model, even when he went astray. "Obembe was a searchdog" (*TF*: 192), This denotes Obembe's inquisitiveness and his desire to explore the unknown, to dig deep in the mysteries and attempt to understand life. "Benjamin was a moot" (*TF*: 272). This explains the ability of the Benjamin to avenge his brother. "Hatred is a leech" (*TF*: 207). This alludes to the nature of hatred as a feeling of unease and restlessness. When a person nurtures hatred, he/she is emotionally uncomfortable at the sight of the subject of his hatred and is likely to develop cardio-vascular diseases when the feeling lasts for long. "Abulu was a leviathan" (*TF*: 215), "Hope was a tadpole" (*TF*: 239), "My brothers and I were roosters" (*TF*: 252).

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<sup>12</sup> Monika Fludernick, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> James Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), p. 59.

Proverbs contribute a great deal to teach wisdom. Eme the mother uses proverbs to teach the children respect towards parents. “The eye that mocks a father, that scorns an aged mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures” (*TF*: 24). But beyond the didactic function of proverbs, they are also used to express an ontological view of society and life and to offer a tentative explanation of the predicament characters are passing through.

Colloquialism, native language like Yoruba or Igbo and Pidgin English are used to narrate the psychological condition and emotional inclination of characters especially when they are grappling with the uncertainties of life and social predicament. An example of colloquialism is “The next time I came home was three weeks after they took me away, long after my entrance into the new and frightening world devoid of my brothers” (*TF*: 274). This sentence is uttered by Benjamin the narrator, to describe his feeling after being summoned to the court after killing Abulu the madman. The structure of the sentence, though acceptable, does not however reveal a high standard English. The novelist uses these instances of colloquialism to explain the fact that some situations call for a defamiliarization of the social norms. In other words, he has Benjamin, a teenager commit homicide and be questioned for that action to show how social experiences of children with hardship can lead them astray into committing unusual crimes. Code-switching and Pidgin are used by Iya Iyabo when speaking to Adaku. For instance, when Iya Iyabo visited Paulina Adaku Agwu to narrate an episode of murder after witnessing a woman killing her husband she narrated the story stammering between Yoruba and Pidgin:

‘Aderonke killed her husband today.’ ‘E-who!’ Mother screamed. ‘*Wo, bi o se, shele ni*’, the woman began. She often spoke Yoruba to mother, who perfectly understood the language, although she never believed herself proficient in it... ‘Biyi drunk again last night and came home naked’, Iya Igbo said, switching to Pidgin English... ‘Please, Iya Iyabo, calm and tell me’. Her pikin, Onyiladun, dey sick. As her husband come inside, she tell am make im give medicine money, but im start to beat-beat am and im pikin.’ Chi-neke! Mother gasped, and covered her mouth with her hands (*TF*: 107).

In this extract, it can be seen that the conversation between Iya Igbo and Pauline Adaku Agwu revolves around an unusual event, a drunk woman killing her husband. This unfamiliar tragedy in Akure city has shaken negatively the emotions and feelings of people including Iya Igbo. In reporting the scene to her mate, she is experiencing a kind of emotional crisis and irritation that makes the choice of linguistic code unstable and difficult for her. She switches from Yoruba to Pidgin English and vice-versa. This linguistic instability of the character betrays fear, disgust and critical view of what city life displays to the view of city dwellers. The novelist also uses Pidgin and native language to explain through the voice of the speaker an aspect of a reality that cannot be uttered in a foreign language like English. Pidgin and Yoruba become domesticated communicative media through which local realities and confidential emotions can be expressed. The novelist remains in the canvass of the choice of indigenous means of expression as the carbon copy of African originality, a linguistic choice that reinforces the narrative craft of the author as a genuine creative writer.

Songs and music are used by the novelist for multiple purposes: to express characters’ wishes and expectations, to highlight the state of emotional euphoria and to reveal aspects of characters entrenchment in their indigenous culture. Let us illustrate these with examples:

As the wind cannot blow  
 without touching the trees



As no one can block the light  
Of the moon with a sheet  
Oh father of the host  
For whom I'm an oracle  
I implore you to tear the  
firmament and give rain  
that the green things  
I have sown will live  
Mutilate the seasons so my words can breathe,  
That they yield fruit (*TF*: 85).

This song is sung by Abulu who is said to be insane. Yet the novelist endows this song with strong philosophical outlook in the culture of the people of Akure in Western Nigeria. First, the song is an invocation prayer, beseeching God Almighty to send down rain. The singer relies heavily on the religious belief of the Igbo and Yoruba that only God Almighty is the giver of rain, abundant harvest and fertility. Rain is the subject matter or the request of the prayer. In the ontological perception of the local communities, rain symbolizes life, breath, blessing and happiness, for it brings with it crops plantation and the expectation of plenty harvest. The novelist has chosen and put that particular song in the fifth chapter of the novel to express the optimism of the narrator in their future, for he has been nourishing an ambition for a bright education and prosperous future. Through this song, Obioma also highlights the ideological outlook of Nigeria as a promising African nation that is expected to be regenerated in terms of human and economic development. The next song which is interpreted by a child [whose name is not disclosed in the novel] articulates the necessity of seasonal variations and the regulatory necessity of rain:

Rain, rain, go away  
Come another day  
Little children want to play... (*TF*: 134)

Through this song, the singer brings out the child's wish to play. Majority of the characters are young and their expectations is beyond the legacy of education a dream for brilliant future. As a matter of fact, the novelist uses this song as a metaphoric indication to the wish to be free, happy and to enjoy life by overcoming the daily stress and common hostilities. Songs of this type are introduced as devices to project optimistic view of life in the midst of difficulties. Another function of songs is to reveal the characters inner growth to wisdom:

MKO, you are beautiful beyond description.  
Too marvelous for words.  
The most wonderful of all creatures,  
Like nothing never seen nor heard.  
Who can touch your infinite wisdom?  
Who can fathom the depths of your love?  
MKO, you are beautiful beyond description.  
Your majesty is enthroned above (*TF*: 70).

This is a praise song to the address of M.K.O. This song was composed and sung by Ikenna, Boja and Benjamin as a strategy to draw M.K.O.'s attention to their presence in order to have him grant them some gifts. M.K.O. is a political party leader contesting the presidency of the state. Through this song, the novelist shows the thought maturation and growth in wisdom of the youngsters who are displaying this craft for survival strategy. It can be said that Chigozie

Obioma gives to these youngsters a wisdom beyond their age due to the difficulties they confronted, they needed to design strategies to find money to finance their education.

### Conclusion

The focus of this article was to show the psycho-social factors that contribute to the thought design and speech maturation of characters in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*. Two key ideas have emerged from this study. Firstly, Setting, conflicts and language are used as literary informants to highlight characters growth, though design, speech maturation and performance. Places namely Akure city and Yola and the time the 1990 are used as references to bring to reflexive maturity the characters and build their personality, their social perception and philosophical outlook. Secondly, the narrative progression has been able thanks to the internal and external conflicts that have worked through the novel to sustain the plot. The death of family members has enabled Agwu the family leader to do introspection and criticism and change by becoming closer to his wife and plan for the children to further their education abroad, in Canada.

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