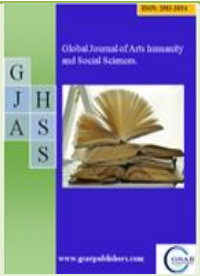


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Irony and the Politics of Nationhood in Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation: A Postcolonial Reading of Leadership and Representation in Nigeria*.

By

Chukwuka Eugene OFIE, PhD.

Department of English and Literary Studies, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria. ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0009-0009-3489-8975>



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Corresponding author

**Chukwuka Eugene
OFIE, PhD.**

Abstract

This study examines Henry Barlow's poem Building the Nation as a satirical representation of leadership, class relations, and the contradictions of nation-building in postcolonial societies, with a particular focus on Nigeria as a contextual reference point. Drawing primarily on Postcolonial Theory, complemented by insights from satire and irony as literary devices, the paper interrogates how the poem exposes the disjunction between official rhetoric and lived realities of governance. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals how Henry Barlow employs irony to critique the performative nature of public service, where political elites appear committed to national development while engaging in self-serving indulgence. Furthermore, the research explores the poem's depiction of class disparity, symbolized by the contrast between the privileged Permanent Secretary and the working-class driver, to illustrate broader socio-economic inequalities that persist in many postcolonial African states. Nigeria is used as a reflective case to demonstrate how the thematic concerns of the poem resonate with contemporary issues of leadership, accountability, corruption and uneven development. The study argues that Building the Nation remains relevant as a literary work that challenges dominant narratives of nation-building by foregrounding the experiences of marginalized social actors. Eventually, the paper concludes that Henry Barlow's poem uses satire not only to expose political hypocrisy but also to question who truly participates in the process of nation-building in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Satire, Postcolonial, Irony, Nation-building, Leadership, Class inequality, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nation-building remains one of the most contested concepts in postcolonial discourse, particularly within African societies where the promises of independence have often been undermined by persistent challenges of governance, inequality and corruption. Scholars note that nation-building is not merely a political project but a complex socio-cultural process involving the creation of "a sense of shared destiny" among diverse peoples within a single political entity (2017: 2). In many postcolonial states, however, this ideal has been complicated by the emergence of elite structures that reproduce colonial hierarchies under new forms of governance.

Literature has long served as a critical space for interrogating these contradictions. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, "literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction

and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society" (1986:94). In this regard, African literary texts often function as reflective surfaces through which issues of leadership, inequality and national identity are examined. Henry Barlow's poem *Building the Nation* exemplifies this tradition of socially engaged literature through its satirical depiction of post-independence governance and class disparity.

Set around the experiences of government driver and a Permanent Secretary, the poem exposes the irony embedded in the concept of nation-building. While both characters claim to be contributing to national development, their lived realities reveal a sharp contradiction: the elite class indulges in state-sponsored luxury while the working class endures neglect and deprivation. Critics have observed that Henry Barlow uses satire to highlight "the self-serving attitudes of elites and the silent endurance of the working



class" (Literature PADI 2025). This ironic juxtaposition raises fundamental questions about who truly participates in the process of nation-building.

This study adopts Postcolonial Theory as its primary analytical framework, drawing on its concern with power, identity and the lingering effects of colonial structures in independent African states. As Frantz Fanon observes, "the national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement" (2004:152), suggesting that postcolonial governance often replicates rather than transforms colonial systems of exploitation. Complementing this perspective, satire and irony as literary tools are employed to unpack how Henry Barlow constructs meaning through contrast and contradiction.

In the Nigerian context, these thematic concerns resonate strongly with contemporary realities of governance, corruption and socio-economic inequality. Although *Building the Nation* is set in Uganda, its representation of elite privilege and working-class marginalization reflects larger postcolonial conditions across Africa, including Nigeria. Recent scholarship on nationhood in Nigeria emphasizes that nation-building remains fragile, due to unresolved tensions around equity, governance and national integration (2022:3). This study therefore reimagines Henry Barlow's poem within the Nigerian socio-political landscape, using it as a literary lens to interrogate contemporary challenges of leadership and development.

Essentially, this research asserts that *Building the Nation* is not exclusively a satirical poem about bureaucratic inefficiency but a more extensive criticism of the contradictions integrated in postcolonial nation-building. Through a close reading of the poem, the study validates how literature continues to function as a powerful medium for exposing socio-political realities and rethinking the meaning of national development in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study is built on Postcolonial Theory as its primary framework, supported by Satire and Irony theory as an interpretive literal tool. These frameworks are appropriate because Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation* is a postcolonial satirical poem that criticize leadership, class relations and the contradictions of nation-building. The combination of these theories allows for both a socio-political and stylistic reading of the poem, especially in relation to Nigerian governance realities.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial Theory provides a critical lens for examining how formerly colonized societies continue to struggle with power imbalance, identity formation and governance structures inherited from colonial systems. One of the central concerns of postcolonial criticism is how elites in independent African states often reproduce colonial patterns of domination. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin observe, postcolonial discourse is concerned with "the effects of colonization on cultures and societies and how these effects continue even after independence" (2002:2).

In relation to African postcolonial structures, Achille Mbembe posits that postcolonial power often operates through a system of excess and performance rather than accountability. He describes the postcolonial state as one where power is frequently expressed through, "the aesthetics of vulgarity" (2001:102), suggesting that authority is often displayed through luxury, privilege and spectacle rather than service delivery. This perspective is particularly useful in reading Henry Barlow's depiction of the Permanent Secretary, whose indulgence in a lavish lunch contrasts sharply with the rhetoric of national development.

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes that postcolonial identity is shaped by contradiction and hybridity, noting that colonial discourse produces "ambivalence in the structure of authority" (1994:112). In *Building the Nation*, this ambivalence is reflected in the gap between official declarations of service and the lived experiences of elite privilege. The poem thus becomes a space where the promises of nationhood are destabilized by contradictory practices of governance.

Satire and Irony as Literary Framework

Satire provides a complementary framework for analyzing how Henry Barlow constructs meaning through humour, exaggeration and contradiction. According to Northrop Frye, satire is a literary mode that uses, "wit, irony and ridicule to expose human vice or folly" (1957:223). In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye further explains that satire often emerges when literature seeks to correct social behaviour through exposure rather than direct instruction.

Irony, as a key component of satire, plays a central role in Henry Barlow's poem. Wayne C. Booth defines irony as a situation in which, "what is said is different from what is meant, or what appears to be true is contradicted by reality" (1974:5). This is evident in the poem's portrayal of "nation-building" as both a serious national project and a cover for elite indulgence. The Permanent Secretary's claim of working for the nation while engaging in leisure exemplifies situational irony, which exposes the gap between appearance and reality.

Furthermore, Linda Hutcheson expands the understanding of satire by describing it as a, "discursive practice that operates through critical distance and double meaning" (1985:16). This duality allows readers to interpret the poem both as humour and as social critique. In Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation*, satire is not merely entertainment but a tool for political interrogation, revealing the contradictions embedded in postcolonial governance structures.

Application to the Study

By combining Postcolonial Theory with Satire and Irony Theory, this study is able to examine both the contextual realities of power and governance and the literary strategies used to represent them. Postcolonial Theory explains the structural conditions that produce inequality and elite dominance in societies such as Nigeria, while satire and irony reveal how these conditions are artistically represented and evaluated in Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation*.

Together, these frameworks support a reading of *Building the Nation* as a poem that not only reflects postcolonial realities but actively interrogates them through literary form. This dual approach enables a deeper understanding of how literature participates in debates about nation-building, leadership accountability and socio-political transformation in Africa.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with African postcolonial literature consistently highlights its function as a critical response to political authority, social inequality and the unfinished project of nationhood. Within this tradition, satire has been widely recognized as one of the most effective literary strategies for exposing contradictions in governance and public life. Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation* is often read within this satirical tradition because it dramatizes the gap between official declarations of national service and the realities of elite privilege.

African literary criticism has long emphasized the social responsibility of the writer. Chinua Achebe argues that the African writer is not detached from society but is expected to participate in its transformation, stating that literature must contribute to, "the task of re-education and regeneration" of society (1988:45). This viewpoint situates literary production as a form of civic engagement, where literature becomes an instrument for questioning power structures. In a similar direction, Simon Gikandi notes that African writing frequently emerges from tensions surrounding modern identity formation and political disappointment, describing it as shaped by, "the crisis of postcolonial modernity" (1987:78). These critical positions help explain why satirical poems like Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation* continue to attract scholarly attention, especially in discussions of governance and national development.

The concept of nation-building in postcolonial African states has also been widely debated in political and literary scholarship. Crawford Young observes that many African countries inherited institutional frameworks that were not fully adapted to local realities, resulting in persistent governance challenges and structural instability (1994:112). This inherited fragility often produces a gap between state authority and public welfare. Likewise, Ali Mazrui suggests that postcolonial leadership sometimes mirrors colonial administrative patterns, where indigenous elites assume roles that maintain rather than transform existing power relations (1986:59). These insights are useful for understanding how Henry Barlow's portrayal of bureaucratic leadership reflects wider systemic issues in post-independence African states.

Class relations remain another important focus in African literary studies. Frantz Fanon's discussion of the postcolonial elite highlights how a new national bourgeoisie often emerges to replace colonial administrators without fundamentally altering exploitative economic structures. He describes this class as acting as "an intermediary between the nation and external capital" (1967:98). This analysis resonates with literary depictions of social stratification, where the ruling class is frequently separated from

the everyday struggles of ordinary citizens. In Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation*, the contrast between the Permanent Secretary and the driver reflects the social divide, symbolizing unequal access to privilege, comfort and state resources.

African satire has also been widely studied as both an aesthetic and political tool. Biodun Jeyifo emphasizes that satire in African literary traditions often operates as a form of resistance, arguing that it functions as "a weapon against authoritarian structures and social injustice" (1985:134). Through exaggeration, irony and contrast, satirical literary texts encourage readers to question normalized forms of inequality. Supporting this view, Olatunji Akinyemi explains that satire creates interpretive distance that allow audiences to recognize contradictions within everyday governance systems (2019:41). This understanding is particularly relevant to Henry Barlow's poem, where the concept of "nation-building" is ironically reduced to a scene of bureaucratic leisure rather than productive public service.

While existing scholarship provides valuable insights into African satire, governance and postcolonial class structures, fewer studies have specifically explored *Building the Nation* as a text that can be reinterpreted within contemporary African contexts such as Nigeria. Much of the available criticism tends to generalize its themes of corruption and inequality without fully examining how the poem can be applied to specific national realities. This study addresses this gap by re-reading Henry Barlow's poem through a Nigerian socio-political lens, thereby extending its relevance to ongoing debates about leadership accountability, public service ethics and uneven development.

Overall, the literature suggests that African postcolonial writing is deeply concerned with exposing contradictions in nation-building processes. However, there remains room for more context-sensitive interpretations that connect literary critique with specific contemporary political environments. This study contributes to that direction by situating Henry Barlow's satirical vision within Nigeria's ongoing struggles with governance and development.

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Satire, Leadership and the Contradictions of Nation-Building in Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation*

Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation* presents a satirical reconfiguration of what appears, on the surface, to be a routine governmental activity, but which ultimately exposes deep contradictions in leadership ethics and national development. Through dialogue between a government driver and a Permanent Secretary, the poem constructs a symbolic representation of postcolonial governance where nation-building is reduced to personal comfort, bureaucratic detachment, and class privilege. The poem's strength lies in its ability to use everyday interaction to reveal systemic dysfunction.

The poem opens by establishing a work-related journey that immediately becomes a site of irony:

Building the Nation
 Today I did my share
 In building the nation.
 I drove a Permanent Secretary
 To an important urgent function,
 In fact to a luncheon at the Vic (59).

The driver recalls how they were engaged in official duty, stating that they "took the Permanent Secretary to lunch". This seemingly simple line sets the tone for the entire poem, as the act of serving the state is ironically transformed into a moment of indulgence rather than productivity. Instead of administrative seriousness or developmental planning, the reader is introduced to a setting dominated by leisure and consumption. This contrast destabilizes conventional expectations of governmental responsibility.

As the narrative unfolds, the Permanent Secretary's behaviour becomes central to the poem's critique of elite leadership. During the luncheon, he is depicted as engaging in excessive eating and drinking while simultaneously performing the identity of a committed public servant:

The menu reflected its importance
 Cold Bell beer with small talk,
 Then fried chicken with niceties
 Wine to fill the hollowness of the laughs
 Ice-cream to cover the stereotype jokes
 Coffee to keep the PS awake on return journey. (59)

I drove the Permanent Secretary back.
 He yawned many times at the back of the car
 Then to keep awake, he suddenly asked,
 Did you have any lunch friend?
 I replied looking straight ahead
 And secretly smiling at his belated concern (59).

The driver observes that the official "yawned many times at the back of the car". This description is not merely physical but symbolic, suggesting insatiable consumption and a deeper metaphor for political greed. The exaggeration incorporated in this imagery functions as a satire, highlighting how those entrusted with public responsibility often convert state privileges into personal gratification.

The irony of "nation-building" becomes more pronounced when the Permanent Secretary later complains about health concerns resulting from intemperance:

Upon which he said with a seriousness
 That amused more than annoyed me
 Mwananchi, I too had none
 I attended to matters of State,
 Highly delicate diplomatic duties you know,
 And friend, it goes against my grain,
 Causes me stomach ulcers and wind.
 Ah, he continued, yawning again,
 The pains we suffer in building the nation! (60).

The Permanent Secretary reportedly laments that he now suffers from "ulcers" due to the stress of "building the nation". This statement is particularly significant because it reverses moral expectations: rather than the hardships of citizens defining national struggle, it is the comfort and excess of the elite that is framed as sacrifice. The poem thus exposes a distorted logic in which privilege is rebranded as public service and consumption is mistaken for contribution.

A critical turning point in the poem lies in its structural revelation that both the driver and the Permanent Secretary claim to be "building the nation", though in radically different ways:

So the PS had ulcers too!
 My ulcers I think are equally painful
 Only they are caused by hunger,
 Not sumptuous lunches!
 So two nation builders
 Arrived home this evening
 With terrible stomach pains
 The result of building the nation— Different ways (60).

The driver who performs the physical labour of transporting the official, is excluded from the benefits of the system he sustains. Yet, he is also implicated in the same national rhetoric. This duality creates a layered irony: while the Permanent Secretary's "nation-building" is marked by excess, the driver's version is characterized by endurance and invisibility. The repetition of the phrase, "building the nation" throughout the poem becomes increasingly ironic, functioning as a criticism of how political language can be emptied of genuine meaning.

The class structure entrenched in the poem further strengthens its satirical critique. The Permanent Secretary represents the bureaucratic elite who have access to privilege, comfort and institutional protection, while the driver embodies the working class whose labour sustains the system but remains unrecognized. The poem subtly reveals that the functioning of the state depends on individuals like the driver, yet they remain peripheral to official narratives of development. This tension illustrates a larger contradiction in postcolonial governance, where visibility and reward are unevenly distributed.

The poem's ending reinforces its central irony by refusing resolution. There is no transformation in the attitudes of the elite,

nor any recognition of the driver's contribution. Instead, the narrative closes with the persistence of the same system in which "nation-building" remains a slogan detached from reality. This lack of closure is deliberate, emphasizing that the contradictions exposed are not isolated incidents but structural conditions.

When read within a Nigerian context, the poem's criticism becomes even more resonant. The depiction of bureaucratic privilege and rhetorical commitment to national development mirrors contemporary concerns about governance, accountability and public resource management. However, the poem does not function as a direct political commentary; rather, it uses satire to invite readers to question how national progress is defined and who benefits from it. In this way, Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation* transcends its immediate setting and becomes a wider reflection on postcolonial state formation.

Finally, the poem reveals that "nation-building" as presented by Henry Barlow, is not a unified national effort but a fragmented process shaped by inequality, contradiction and rhetorical manipulation. Through irony, exaggerated imagery and character contrast, the poem dismantles the assumption that political leadership is inherently aligned with national progress. Instead, it suggests that the language of nation-building can itself become a mask that conceals systemic imbalance.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine Henry Barlow's *Building the Nation* as a satirical representation of leadership contradictions and the complexities of nation-building, with particular attention to its relevance within the Nigerian socio-political context. Through a close reading of the poem, it becomes evident that Henry Barlow constructs a layered criticism of governance where official language of national service is consistently undermined by practices of privilege, consumption and institutional detachment.

The analysis demonstrates that the poem does not merely describe bureaucratic routine but uses it as a symbolic space to expose deeper tensions within postcolonial governance systems. The recurring irony surrounding the idea of "building the nation" highlights how political rhetoric can be detached from meaningful developmental impact. Instead of functioning as a collective national project, nation-building is presented as a fragmented experience shaped by unequal access to power and resources.

Furthermore, the poem's representation of contrasting social positions reinforces the persistence of structural imbalance in postcolonial societies. While elite figures operate within spaces of comfort and institutional privilege, the labour of ordinary individuals remains essential yet largely unacknowledged. This imbalance underscores the gap between official narratives of development and the lived realities of those who sustain the system.

By positioning the poem within a Nigerian frame of reference, the study has also shown that Henry Barlow's criticism extends beyond its immediate literary context. It resonates with ongoing discussions about governance accountability, ethical leadership and

the distribution of national resources in contemporary African states. However, rather than offering direct political commentary, the poem encourages critical reflection on how national progress is defined and who is included in its processes.

In the final analysis, *Building the Nation* remains significant as a work of literature that uses satire to question the authenticity of national development narratives. It challenges readers to reconsider the meaning of nationhood beyond official discourse and to recognize the contradictions that often exist between political representation and social reality. The poem therefore stands as a sustained interrogation of postcolonial statehood and its unresolved tensions.

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