

**"LITERATURE AND SUB - REGIONAL
INTEGRATION:
THE WAY FORWARD"**

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ABSTRACT

It is generally upheld that literature plays so many important roles in the life of a people, whether as individuals or as a group. One of such roles which is also universally acclaimed the most important, along with entertainment, is education. Literature is an all embracing phenomenon which transcends races, tribes, social classes, educational classes and so on most often exposing their common features with a view to unifying the people. Therefore one can conclude that literature is a prodigy with the ability to integrate the various tribes and peoples of this world. However, for the purpose of this paper we have limited ourselves to the West African sub-region. Towards this end we have examined literature with a view to seeing how it could be employed as a tool for the integration of the West African sub-region. This could not have been properly done without first examining the concepts of literature, sub-region and integration.

I INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the world there has been the quest for unity and peace. As a result so many names have been created by mankind amongst which are organization, association, union and league. Also, the concepts of unity and peace have featured predominantly. One of the oldest attempt at unity which is also almost as old as man is the building of the tower of Babel. It is not

so much in the desire to ascend to God but in the collective will to join forces towards this end that is of interest here. Coming closer to our own time one can easily observe that the frequent trips by the various national leaders and/or world leaders are geared towards unifying the different peoples of the world. Today, the whole world has become like a single giant village with different chiefs controlling different chiefdoms. We now have united Nations (UN) which is the umbrella body controlling the affairs of the whole world. (We are not concerned about how well this duty is performed.) Zeroing in on our sub-region, we have had Organization of African Unity (OAU) (now African Union) (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). A close study of all these Associations and organizations will reveal that although a lot of noise is made about the supposedly huge success in the attempt at unifying members it is not difficult seeing through the thin and porous blanket with which the propagandist machines have tried to hoodwink us. They could best be described as failures. Otherwise, why the so much wars and threats of wars, attacks and threats of attacks, terrorisms and threats of terrorisms both within and outside the nations and sub-regions. These monstrous failures manifesting everywhere in spite of the much efforts made so far at world peace and ultimately unity is due to the perspective from which they are attempting them. All the organ/associations are approaching the issue from one or more of the following angles: political, economic and social, and at best moral and ethical. None of them has attempted to sound the psychology of the peoples and nations. And this is where the problem lies. It is for this reason that they have failed thus far. Truly, nothing moves a man as much as the psychological. It is this that touches his being, his essence and life. Publicly, none will admit to certain ills done; but in the recess of the heart none can deny them. So, the best war-front is in the heart. This is precisely where literature strikes. And there is no doubt whatsoever that literature is psychological through and

through. So should Literature be well employed in the effort at sub-regional integration the result will be most marvelous.

II CONCEPTS

So many people have looked at literature from different perspectives. One of such views is that expressed by The Concise Oxford Dictionary. It says that literature is the "Written works, especially those whose value lies in beauty of language or in emotional effect" Talking about poetry, a genre of literature, a critic R. N. Egudu (10) opines that "the purpose which belongs most uniquely to poetry is the creation of beauty which generates leisure" From these it is clear that the generation of beauty and consequently pleasure is the primary function of literature. It is function of literature that M. H. Abrams has referred to as "mimetic" or "representational" (42). According to him, this is type of literature "which the materials are organized and rendered not for the sake of presenting and enforcing knowledge doctrine, but primary to maximize their human interest and their capacity to move and give aesthetic pleasure to their audience."

However, the creation of beauty is not the sole purpose of literature. Literature is equally functional. This end of literature has to do with the teaching of one moral/doctrine or another. It is the literature performing this kind of function which Abrams calls didactic literature" (42). According to him a work is didactic if it is "designed to expound a branch of theoretical, moral, or practical knowledge, or else to instantiate... a moral, religious, or philosophical *theme* or doctrine" (42). A clear examination of the statement above will show that apart from a few Lullabies and a scanty oasis of nonsensical poems all other pieces of literature are didactic.

The concept of region involves a spatial reference. Sub-region on the other hand has to do with a portion of a region, agreed that region and consequently sub-region has to do with spatial reference, there is some measure of socio-cultural

connotation. It is in this light that our sense of a sub-region could make meaning. For the purpose of this paper, the sub-regional reference is West Africa. This is a geographical (Spatial) locale. There is also a good measure of social as well as cultural similarities amongst the states constituting this sub-region. For instance, more than with any other region or sub-region the states of West Africa share more in common in terms of historic background as well as belief system than with any other region of the world.

From the historic-political paradigm the peoples of West Africa are inextricably linked. A look at the old empires of Ghana, Songhai, Mali and Benin will attest to this. Also the early relationship between the people of the region and the Europeans is another indicator. However, the above is not to say that we do not have points of differences, but that our common experiences are more than those differences.

The third concept worthy of examination, however brief, is integration. To integrate connotes to join strongly. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary, to integrate means to "combine (parts) into a whole". The focus of attention here is that integration has to do with the cohesive unification of the West African sub-region into a functional, if not political but at least socio-moral entity. Although there has not been much in terms of conflict among the West African sub-region, there is no gain saying that a closer tie needs be established to foster the existing peace and enhance unity among the states. The effective attainment of this will further reduce the traces of tension which sometimes rears its ugly head in the sub region.

III ... THE WAY FORWARD

If we have accepted literature as being capable of educating, then it could be employed in educating the people of West African sub-region in terms of the lore that is common to them with a view to fostering unity among the people. This duty is one which must be performed by both creative writers of literature

as well as literary critics. One may begin to wonder immediately at the involvement of literary critics in this duty. The reason is that it is my belief, that the creative process is not completed until the last word has been said on a literary work by way of criticism. One will observe that at every reading of a work of art (literature) a new meaning emerges, and as a new statement is made about a literary piece new insights and awareness are created leading to a new knowledge. So it will not be out of place to state that the critic generally and the literary critic particularly is a creator.

To return to the use of Literature to achieve sub-regional integration, let us look at some of the pieces of literature that have been produced by renowned West African Writers. Chinua Achebe in his Things Fall Apart has examined the life of the Igbo society looking at it especially from the social and political points of view. The story is set at the time of the early arrival of Europeans to the West African sub-region, although with references to an earlier period. In this novel we are presented with a strong political moral and social system which is full proof against corruptive influences. The moral code is that one must neither kill nor steal nor commit any of the vices detrimental to the well-being of other individuals as well as the entire community. In fact, this protection covers one against oneself. Suicide was frowned at. Okonkwo kills himself and he loses everything he had achieved in life.

We also see another situation which forms the bed rock of the code of conduct of the Igbo society. None ever goes unpunished if such takes another's life. In fact for every crime, whether mistakenly or deliberately done there must be recompense. Okonkwo defiles the week of peace and he appeases the god of the land; he kills Ikemefuna and his fame begins to wane; he mistakenly kills a son of the land and he goes into exile. these are at individual level. When the people of Mbaino killed a woman of Umuofia they are made to pay. This they accomplished by offering a lad, Ikemefuna, and a young virgin (9). These are practices that once imbibed by people will bar them from taking

the laws into their hands. They will also shun crime and acts capable of leading to disunity and war.

In Arrow of God, Achebe handles a much more spiritual theme with a tinge of politics. We are presented with a very high reverence for the deity Ulu, and its unifying force among the people of Umuaro. Should themes of such nature and magnitude be pursued at the sub-regional level the tendency is that there will be much more unity than that which obtains today. The only problem we have in both novels is that the Western Civilization came and destroyed the very fabric of our society. However, this could be retraced and reinstated, not necessarily just for the tribe mentioned in the novels but for the various people of the sub-region.

Coming closer to our time a young writer Augustine Obiajulu Eziechine in his Wheel of Destiny states unequivocally that people should be left to marry whoever they so desire irrespective of tribe or social class. In this beautiful novel we see Ossai take to Wife Jane against all odds, and at the end we see them much more prosperous than all others who stuck to the practice of marrying within the approved social classes. They give birth to Dominion who turns out to be a genius. The whole idea of the narrative is to prove that there is the need to relate peacefully, affectionately and freely towards ones neighbours. Eziechine, in this novel is strongly advocating inter-tribal and inter-social class marriages.

Other writers of repute left the issue of culture and tradition to examine war, oppression and corruption. These three factors they condemn. Festus Iyayi in Heroes and Violence condemn war and oppression, and in The Contract the focus of attack is corruption. According to Iyayi in Heroes, the privileged class revels in affluence and satisfaction whereas the masses suffer untold hardship. For instance, whereas the Head of States of Nigeria was busy getting married and the Generals on both sides of the war were winning and dinning, the poor soldiers were dying in the different ditches.

Another writer who pursues this theme in Ms works is Wole Soyinka, especially in "Civilian and Soldier" In this poem we see the soldiers fight a war they do not understand and cannot tell the cause. The only reason they fight is that they have been asked to fight by their superiors.

Still on the theme of war, Ken Saro-Wiwa adds his voice to the avalanche of its condemnation. This is explicitly and unequivocally presented in Sozaboy: A Novel in rotten English. Pursuing the theme further

Saro-Wiwa in the conditional poem "Where you there" graphically presents a gory picture of a war scene. We see bombs falling into thick corpses buried in shallow graves; young soldiers arms reduced to stump and many more of such gory pictures. He finally cautions that the so much song about the glory of victories would be abhorred if we were to witness fully the situation at the war front.

Cyprian Ekwensi in Survive the Peace states that war is bad but that it is much more easier to survive war than the peace that follows: "the war which lies ahead [after war], to live or to die, that is a greater war" (180). This is a good summary of the after war situation. The aftermath of the war is portrayed as being much more difficult and dangerous than the war itself. The message put across by all these writers discussed above is that war is bad. So they are advocating peace and unity. What could be more integrating? The pursuance of these kinds of theme through out the sub-region will no doubt usher in peace and unity.

Turning from the wider society Mariama Ba brings us back into the close circuit family in So long A Letter. She examines a disturbing disquiet in the protagonists' family. If one understands the place of the family in the scheme of things as they affect the wider society, one will appreciate the enormous strength of the work. What is iMariama Ba advocating in this beautiful epistolary narrative?: The family should be held close knit and sacrosanct, there must be strong family unity. This is borne out of the fact that whatever happens in the family, by ripple effect,

Affects the whole nation and world. No one could argue the fact that the family is the cradle of both national and international unity.

Having said the above it is necessary to point out that the writers so far discussed have in one way or the other advocated unity. We find that war, what many will prefer to call conflict, has been the concern of all the stones. Is it corruption, war itself, family rancour or oppression? These are all different faces of war: war seen from different perspectives.

As stated earlier, literature teaches. This being the case and in the light of the cases discussed above it becomes clear that literature is capable of teaching ethics and acceptable codes of conducts. One thing must be pointed out here, and that is that the issues raised in the works discussed above are universal. The messages are corruption is bad. oppression is bad. disunity is bad and war is bad. These create distrust and disunity which starts a new vicious circle of war, oppression, corruption and further disunity.

Another point raised by Achebe is that cultural and moral values must be upheld so that the society could be held in tact, and so that the bond that held us together could be rebuilt. It might be important to point out here that the very thing that has wielded the knife into the bond that held our societies together is Western culture. African writers of fifties and sixties realized this and so pursued a reaffirmation of African values. It is this trend that Eldred D. Jones observed:

In the treatment of the Neo-African culture, the traditional aspects (which by and large out weights the foreign aspects) is restated to emphasize its logic, its dignity and intrinsic beauty whereas the foreign aspect appears as disintegrative, corruptive... (31)

Truly, one cannot help but believe that Western culture is disintegrative and corruptive. Therefore, there is the need to defend and propagate with vigour the African culture and

particularly West African culture. The need for this becomes very strong if one realizes that the culture of a people is their identity and influences their general attitudes in all aspects of life. Emphasizing the importance of culture and the need to defend it, Barbeshina et al,

Culture must be politically committed. All of us, who care for the future of future advancement, cannot stand aloof from the worldwide struggle for the lofty ideas of a truly active way of life in the material and cultural senses. The idea of culture is to defend the human policy of peace, democracy and socialism, to save guard the achievement of civilization. (187)

Finally, one can conclude that a purposeful positive portrayal of our common West African cultures and lore by both literary critics and artists could generate the kind of unity that is capable of fostering sub-regional integration. Let the writers write portraying West Africa as a family that must be kept close knit, and let this be fed to all of us, the younger generation and those coming after them and we would have started on the course of sub-regional integration. Let me point out here that in as much as one would want to admit that there exist some differences in the particular cultures of the various tribes within the West African sub-region it should be understood that there exist stronger links (culturally) among the peoples. It is this common cultures and lore that must be emphasized and projected so as to foster stronger bond among the nations within the sub-region.

IV Conclusion

In this paper attempt has been made at x-raying the concepts of literature, sub-region as it affects us and integration. I have also tried to examine some literary works of West African writers pointing out the experience that we have had in the past and in some cases are still having. The hallmark of this exercise is the identification of how literature functions getting at the roots of situations and how powerful it is a tool at reaching the heart

(Psychology) of man. Having gone thus far it is therefore my humble postulation that should West African writers of literary works concentrate on the promotion of the positive aspects of our culture this seemingly elusive Sub-regional integration will be achieved within a short space of time.

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