

**DEVELOPING AND MOULDING THE CHARACTER OF THE CHILD:
A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN CHILDREN LITERATURE**

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Abstract

A few decades ago, the writing and study of Junior literature in English were either totally neglected in Nigeria or generally left to children themselves and their teachers and parents, who were, in most cases, more enthusiastic than competent, as writers and scholars of children's literature. This disturbing state of affairs persisted in spite of the tremendous advances made in this area of study in the United Kingdom, United States of America, and Canada, to mention a few countries, where considerable attention and resources have, for many decades, been devoted to writing and studying children's literature. This paper posits that children's literature is a powerful instrument for developing, and moulding the character of the child. This therapeutic function of literature can be seen as a new perspective on the writing and study of children literature in Nigeria.

Introduction

Over the years, the focus of literary scholars especially in Nigeria, have been on the study of adult literature. There has been little or no serious effort at promoting and encouraging the writing and study of children's literature. A possible explanation for this unhappy state of neglect according to Unoh (1981) lies in two rather unfortunate circumstances:

The first is the popular misconception that writing and studying children's literature are tasks that are meant exclusively for either amateurs in writing or for persons who are inspired or talented which has unfortunately, survived up till the present day.

The second issue is the widespread ignorance, in educational and other circles in Nigeria, regarding both the dangers of such neglect and the positive values, to the Nigerian society, of promoting and encouraging the writing and study of children literature (vii).

The first factor, Unoh observed, has had the unfortunate effect of discouraging many competent writers, scholars and professional educationists in Nigeria from writing and/or studying children's literature. This has deprived the country of the rich contribution they might have made in this regard.

The second circumstance has resulted not only in apathy and indifference among several potentially able writers, scholars and promoters of children literature, but also in inadequate appreciation of the therapeutic and other values associated with well-written children literature.

A comprehensive bibliography reflecting the writing and study of children's literature in various countries of the world leaves one in no doubt about the growing importance of this literary genre. Contrary to such old fashioned beliefs and popular misconceptions referred to above, the field is engaging the attention of distinguished scholars, researchers and writers from various disciplines, including English, Language Arts, Linguistics, Education, psychology and sociology. Not only are resources and a great deal of attention being devoted by scholars with such varied backgrounds to writing and studying children's literature, many valuable facts are emerging from interdisciplinary and comparative studies of children's literature in various parts of the world.

The most pertinent fact in this regard is that children literature can be used as a means of stimulating and moulding junior minds.

Studies of the functions of children's literature have revealed that good literature can be an important aid to cultural

assimilation or acculturation; language development and competence, conflict resolution; emotional development and stability; development of positive and goal-oriented attitudes to life. Literature can also aid a good liberal education, entertainment, relaxation and the sharing of vicarious experiences of positive values; the development of desired and desirable moral or other attributes, and as a consequence of all these, a stable and mature personality. It is equally true that poor or inappropriate literature can negate these benefits or produce their exact opposites.

According to Unoh (1981), various research reports from foreign countries have shown that children's literature can be, and has been used effectively as reading therapy or bibliotherapy, particularly with children having emotional and other psychological problems which make them incline to deviant and anti-social forms of behaviour. Bibliotherapy may be defined as the deliberate and formal use of selected reading materials as reading therapy, or as aids in remedying emotional and other personality problems. (viii)

The practice of bibliotherapy is essentially based on the well founded belief that people, particularly but not necessarily young people, are affected "for good or evil" by what they read.

Deviant and anti-social behaviour according to Gardner (1971) is "behaviour that is abnormal, extraordinary and socially unacceptable" (35-38) It ranges from truancy, absenteeism, stubbornness or recalcitrance, to forms of social delinquency and criminal tendencies. Among such forms of behaviour the following notes Gray, cited by Unoh, have been shown by research reports to have been successfully modified by means of bibliotherapy:

truancy, absenteeism, stubbornness, negative self perception; lack of achievement motivation; affective behaviour deficits, excessively affective behaviour; aggressive tendencies, hypersensitivity and other manifestations of excessive motor reactions; moral bankruptcy; and forms of juvenile delinquency and social maladjustment (ix).

All this I believe, should be seen as new perspectives in children literature. The time has come for Nigeria and indeed other African countries to appreciate Junior literature for what it is: a potentially, powerful instrument for developing desired personality attributes and modifying all forms of deviant and anti-social behaviour. African writers must be helped to write with a sense of purpose and commitment; to be sensitive to the needs of children and youth at various developmental stages; to acquire a rich repertoire of literary and related experiences which will make Nigerian children's literature more readable and educative, better appreciated and capable of aiding personality development in all its ramifications. As Unoh rightly noted:

a country like Nigeria which is literally plagued with problems of ethnicity, tribalism, nepotism, opportunism, indiscipline, corruption and inefficiency, at various levels, needs to invest a great deal in Junior literature, as one of several possible means of effecting a positive social change. Nigerian children can and should be helped to acquire desired attributes through exposure to junior literature that deliberately exposes, ridicules and condemns these evils in our society, and also seek to inculcate the virtues of love, courage, honesty, unity, selfless service, respect for authority and the elders and patriotism (x).

The stand of Solomon Unoh in the above quoted lines is indeed very appropriate. The need to inculcate positive attitudes in our children has become absolutely necessary especially in this era of home video; and I believe that exposing children to good and useful literature is one of the best means of effecting a positive social change.

The Nigerian Folklore, Culture and the Rights of the Child

Since the focus of this paper is on the child, it will be pertinent therefore to examine the rights of the child. The General Assembly of the United Nations, in November 1959, proclaimed ten principles in its Declaration of the rights of the child, to the end that the child may have a happy childhood and enjoy for his own good and for the good of society the rights and freedom set forth in the declaration. This paper however, shall be concerned with only principle seven which is directly related to the topic of the paper. The principle states as follow:

The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him on a basis of equal opportunity to develop his abilities, his individual judgment, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society. The best interests of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for his education and guidance; that responsibility lies in the first place with his parents. The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes as education. Society and the public Authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.

To achieve the above principles, the following has to be considered.

Nigeria Folklore and Culture

"He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture", says the principle.

Nigerians of all ethnic groups are familiar with the tradition of folk tales, which have been the earliest attempt to stimulate the imagination of children and to mould their character by inculcating through myth and legend all the values desired by them. Truth is commendable and rewarding, falsehood is damnable and punishable; bravery and strength are admirable in men; elegance, kindness, sympathy and love are the qualities associated with the female kind. Old age must be respected; wisdom belongs to the experienced and to the aged. The great creator is omnipotent and can never be deceived. All these desirable qualities and values filter into the young minds, of children through folklore in those days.

A post independent country such as Nigeria struggling to get a place in the world community of nations in the words of Ekwensi, "has robbed many a family of the leisure so necessary for telling the folk tale, and gradually that direct touch between parent and child is being lost in the whirlwind of industrialization, and urbanization (2). For this reason, if for no other, books must be produced to replace the moonlit stories, and the responsibility now rests with the teacher more heavily than it did with the parent.

Indeed, a good number of books written specifically for junior readers have been produced in recent time. These include such books as Olu Olagoke's The Incorruptible Judge (1981); and There is Hope for the Future (1997); Zulu Sofala's King Emene (1975); Martina Nwakoby's A Lucky Chance (1980); Chinua Achebe's Chike and the River (1989); Cyprian Ekwensi's Drummer Boy (1960); and Trouble in Form Six (1966), to mention but a few. These books were written specifically to help in stimulating and moulding the characters of young readers. A few illustrations from the above mentioned texts will suffice to buttress this point.

In Olagoke's The Incorruptible Judge, Agbalowomeri is convicted and sent to prison because of corruption. The theme of the play is therefore manifestly relevant. It deals with matters of general interest such as seeking a job, demanding and taking bribe and the arrest and trial of an unscrupulous employer. The high moral stance of the author is very clear here. The young readers character is moulded; he is taught through the example of others that truth prevails and that giving or receiving a bribe is a punishable offence.

In There is Hope for the Future, Olagoke portrays the role of the home and the school in the over all education of the child. It is the duty of parents to give proper home training to their children. If this is done, the job of the teacher in inculcating desired values needed for the child's development and well being becomes easier. The play sheds light on the virtues of obedience, humility and hard work and condemns laziness, indolence and indiscipline.

In A Lucky Chance, Chisa the hero of the novel is a very well-brought up young boy. Although his mother is illiterate, she instills the principles of morality and discipline in him, trains him to be honest, to work hard, and be efficient. This early training is responsible for his survival through all the vicissitudes that he confronts during his stay in his uncles house. It is clearly stated that:

Chisa did his work well, especially the cleaning and washing up. He had been very well brought up by his mother. His uncle's wife was pleased to have help from him inspite of

his tender age (26).

Indeed, Chisa is a model for the young generation who would do well to emulate his qualities. He is contrasted with his cousin, Dozie Ikenga who is spoiled and lazy, full of negative tricks, unkindness, like his mother. In addition to these he cannot pass his examination. Dozie becomes a liability for his parents who do not know what to do with him.

In Achebe's *Chike and the River*, and Sofola's *King Emene*, there is a sort of continuity and functional correlation between oral literature and cultural materials in the texts. In both texts, aspects of oral literature are well integrated into the story and help to highlight the themes, of morals and language. The folk tale of the little bird "Nza" in Igbo culture underscores the concept of self awareness and personal fulfillment on the part of Chike. The proverb "why should we live by the Niger and wash our hands with spittle?" is used by Samuel to back up his attitude to free spending and dissuade Chike from reserving his money. This is a good example of peer influence on young adolescents and the psychology of conformity as presented by the central character.

The speeches of the elders in *King Emene*, are couched in very apt proverbs as can be found on pages 17, 18 and 24. These proverbs underscore allegiance to the values of the community which are epitomized in the themes of truth, honesty and justice as presented in the play.

The moral values of the play are outstanding. The protagonist is a foolhardy king whose allegiance to his immediate family overshadows his duty to the state. He is too arrogant to heed the promptings of the mature elders and deliberately conceals the evil in his household and dishonestly manipulates the prophecy of the oracle. In the end, he takes the most damnable way out of his predicament by committing suicide. The story of this play teaches the child that it is not good to be proud or to be power drunk.

Cyprian Ekwensi's *Drummer Boy* and *Trouble in Form Six* seek to inculcate a sense of pride and identity in children. The books are meant to teach the children about the values, morals and practices of their heritage. This is particularly very important now that the foundations of African society have been battered by the forces of modernism and those traditional values that make for the resilience of society eroded.

Choice of Books for Junior Readers

In recent times, book publication has become a very lucrative business in Nigeria. The result is that all manner of books have been published and pushed into the market. It is as a result of this that it has become necessary to consider some criteria for choosing junior books.

In choosing books for junior readers therefore, we must take into cognizance the culture of the people who are to read the book. Books for young readers must reflect their culture, their philosophy and belief system. Books that are capable of developing and moulding junior minds should be recommended for children. Such books must be simple and direct rather than being circuitous and unnecessarily verbose. Such books must contain credible characters. These characters must project high moral standards of honesty, courage, truth, honour, integrity, and all those virtues that lift the human being from the level of the savage and make him/her a finer being. Books for junior readers must be strongly related to the age group and class for which they are intended. The choice of vocabulary of such books must be simple and within the level of understanding of the children.

Finally, the subject matter of any book that is recommended for children has to be the type is simple, interesting and related to their everyday life.

Provision of Junior Library

The library is the repository or should be the repository of all published works. The library acquires all published works, and makes these available to readers either within or outside its walls. Children's interest in literature could be developed rapidly if they have access to good library facilities. No one can purchase all published books, but a library should be up-to-date with titles and to assist the junior reader to map out his/her way. And since the body of knowledge

which the children are all trying to acquire is in the pages of books and in English, the library has a vital role to play in making such knowledge readily available.

The future of Junior Literature

Junior literature has been responsible in many countries of the world for shaping not only the character of children but also directing them, towards the right path, for literature, notes Eziechine (2004) "stirs and develops the imagination" (12). Young people have a way of identifying themselves with the heroes and heroines of the books they have read. The childhood period is the period of all social, cultural, emotional and spiritual development.

In this formative stage of child development, good literature books will help to shape the thinking of the child. For the Nigerian child growing up in a corrupt and unhealthy society, children literature is a necessity. This paper therefore recommends as follows:

- 1) That the Nigerian child should be exposed early enough to the study of children literature. The quality and content of literature to be taught of course, must be chosen with care.
- 2) The paper also recommends that Government and other relevant agencies should encourage the teaching and learning of children literature in schools by building and equipping libraries with relevant children's literature texts.
- 3) Writer and publishers should be more actively involved in the business of writing and publishing relevant books for the study of Junior literature.
- 4) Finally, Nigerians should disabuse their minds of the popular misconception that writing and studying children's literature are tasks that are meant exclusively for either amateurs in writing, or for persons who are inspired or talented.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the role of children literature in developing reshaping and moulding the character of the child. The paper is of the view that moulding the child to become a worthy and positive Nigerian requires exposing him/her to works in which such qualities are extolled. This is a sure way to building the nation called Nigeria. Our fathers and forefathers recognized the values of children literature which they handed down to us in form of anecdotes and folk tales and which today we are in grave danger of losing but for the printed word. Therefore, all teachers, educationists, local, state and federal Government, owe it as a duty to children and junior citizens to ensure that sterling qualities are inculcated in them in their formative years by exposing them to worthy books. This is the only way to forestall the problems associated with youth development and to ensure that young children are prepared as worthy citizens for the future.

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