

Harnessing Children's Literature for Nigeria's Transformation Agenda

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Abstract. The greatness of any nation is highly dependent on the ability of that nation to cultivate a deliberate policy that would bring about an enduring legacy for her children or youth, often regarded as “the leaders of tomorrow.” One sure way of safeguarding that desirable legacy for “the tender mind” is through exposure to reading and enactment of stories from literature, especially national literature. This kind of literary experience is indeed critical to the children's personal development. And personal development begets deep sense of responsibility, thereby engendering national orientation, consciousness and patriotism – which are vital indices for peaceful co-existence and development. The aims of this paper is to examine the viability of children's literature as an alternative factor capable of fostering the much talked –about national transformation as postulated in Nigeria's current transformation agenda. Desk research method was used throughout the research. The research identifies challenges against harnessing children's literature in Nigeria ,these challenges include, poor reading culture, non-availability of literary reading materials, non-teaching of literature in most secondary school among others. In conclusion the paper beams its light on the present status quo with a view to recommending resuscitation of this all-important “sector” of development, for ground breaking result.

Keywords: Children, Transformation, Literature, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Children's literature, characterized by essential ingredients such as education, enlightenment and morals is integral to the social transformation of a nation. To this end, children's literature occupies a pertinent position in the socio-cultural, and socio- political sphere of a nation. Hence, its primary target is the young minds, who are widely believed to be the “future leaders.”

In essence, children's literature educate and influence “the tender mind” to respond appropriately to the challenges or exigencies of life, as often captured in their stories. These challenges could be environmental, psychological or spiritual. However, the hall mark of this literature is character or personality molding through participation. David Self (cited in Umukoro 2002:12) rightly posits that: It helps the personality to self-realization by educating the emotions, stimulating the intellect, and coordinating....to the wishes of the mind and spirit.

Thus the young minds would grow both intellectually and physiologically to become responsible adult members of their society.

The stories and activities ascribed to children's literature are two folds: first, the old folk stories preserved orally, and second, the modern stories of adventure and human preoccupations encapsulated in literary texts. In other words, many literary texts today evolved from old fairytales are juxtaposed with modern stories for the enjoyment of the children. As Abate, M.A and Pfeiffe J. (in Wikipedia 2013) assert:“one can trace children's literature back to the stories and songs, part of a wider oral tradition that adults shared with children before publishing existed.”

In many cultures, the history, customs and other values of the society are conveyed to children amidst entertainment. Folktales, legends, myth, or what is commonly known as the “why” stories often tried to explain the origin of certain phenomena and help broaden children's horizon about the world.

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In several Nigerian cultures for example, there exist folktales such as, why the sky is so far away from the earth; why the rainbow appears in the sky; how the leopard got its claw or why you should not sit on a mortal (NTI 2000, cycle 3; module 10: 297). All these stories possess acculturation tendencies and objectives. Our main focus in this paper is therefore to underscore the potency of children's literature as a catalyst for social transformation and the need to make concerted efforts towards resuscitating the sector. But before then, it is pertinent to define children's literature.

2. Definition of Children's Literature

There is almost no single widely acceptable definition of children's literature.

This is perhaps owing to its multi-faceted nature, and also the problem of delimitation between adults and children as well as between genres. Some broadly define it as anything that children read; while others specify it as fiction, non-fiction, poetry or drama intended for and used by children or young people (Abate, A M & Pfeiffer J 2013). Anderson (cited in Wikipedia, 2013) also defines children's literature as all books written for children, excluding works such as comic books, joke books cartoon books, and non-fiction works that are not intended to be read from front to back, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference materials.

However, an elastic but more encompassing definition sees children's literature as: all literature written for, or told to the very young-fairytales, nursery rhymes, songs, school stories, adventure stories, family stories, legends, myths and so on. (NTI, 2000: Cycles 3; Module 10:298).

One notable issue emanating from these definitions as observed is lack of clear cut boundaries of genres and delineation on the basis of childhood or adulthood.

The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature

In Wikipedia (2013), notes that: "the boundaries of genre...are not fixed but blurred. Sometimes no agreement can be reached about whether a given work is best categorized as literature for adults or children". In spite of these difficulties, there are significant categorizations. For examples, Abate, AM & Pfeiffer J. (Cited in Wikipedia 2013), posit that modern children's literature is classified into different ways: Genre or the intended age of the reader". Another categorization according, NTI (2000L cycle 3; Module 10: 298) is itemized thus:

- Age of target audience and their presumed cognitive and effective levels;
- Distinctive literary characteristics of the works such as plot, theme, point of view, language;
- Functions of literature;
- Inclusion of title in a publishers list of children's books.

This categorization for instance could serve as a parameter for allotting books and literary texts according to children's age grade. This would range from beginner books (ages Zero to four): lap books; ABC books; concept books; picture books or picture story books. Books for older children (ages six to eight): live *No Supper for Eze*, *Ropoto finds a Home*, *Ade our Naughty Little Brother* and *The Dancing Plates and Spoons*. Also, books for ages nine and thirteen such as Macmillan Winner series, Palm Library series or African Readers Series.

This classification complements Piaget's theory which identifies four major stages in the mental growth of the average child, listed as:

The sensory-motor stage: from birth to about two years; the intuitive stage; from about two to seven years; The concrete operational stage; from about seven to eleven years. The formal operational stage: from eleven to fifteen years (Umukoro 2002: 21).

3. Origin and Development of Children's Literature

The origin of children's literature like any other literature, usually stemmed from the socio-cultural peculiarities of the society Abate, AM & Pfeiffer J (in wikipedia 2013) collaborate this that: The development of children's literature anywhere in the world follows the basic path...spoken stories, songs

and poems. In the beginning the same tales that adults enjoy were created specifically to educate, instruct and entertain children.

The status quo described here later culminated in distinct literary categories of genres, styles and their expectations on the target audience.

Perhaps, the earliest accounts of folk or epic stories such as *Panchatantra*, from India, composed about 2000AD and Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" composed around 9TH Century BC significantly influenced the development of literature in general and children's literature in particular. However, we shall not delve into the chronological history of children's literature around the world but rather try to elicit its potency and viability for social transformation.

In Nigeria, children's literature was greatly influenced by colonization. Like the theory of modern African literature which is (Ker 2004:24). Believed to have first asserted itself as protest literature (Ker 2004:24).

The protest was against the colonialists who used their literature according to Gbilekaa (1997:50) as a process of civilizing and humanizing Africans. Apart from the rich oral tradition through which a good number of stories for children evolved, suitable literature relevant to the lives of the children, particularly those who went to school was not a priority. British children's books were used as texts in Nigerian schools and for leisure reading. *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*, novels by Charles Dickens and other European writers, dominated the scene.

This situation propelled writers like Achebe, Ekwensi, Okoro etc to also write for children, having realized the potency of children's literature in acculturation and education. The realization has helped to evolve a "national" children's literature with wide range of stories across various genres. The most dominant of these being biographies of great Nigerian heroes and heroines: *Emotan of Benin*, *Moremi of Ife*, *Amina of (Zazzau) Zaria*, *King Jaja of Opobo*, *Herbert Macauley* among other drama stories and poems with nationalistic themes.

4. Children's Literature and Nigeria's Transformation Agenda

Transformation entails total or complete change usually from undesirable state to an enviable state. It involves paradigm shift that would engender growth and attainment. It also portends a fundamental reappraisal of the basic assumptions that underlie our reforms and developmental efforts that will and should alter the essence and substance of our national life (Osisioma 2012).

Nigeria's current transformation agenda hinges on the policy of 3Cs: continuity, consistency and commitment. Government believed that the disregard for these 3Cs has resulted in rising unemployment, inequality and poverty, and is convinced to come out with a holistic transformation policy that would recognize these 3Cs (Usigbe 2011). The agenda as anchored on vision 20:2020 highlights key priority areas of government such as: Macroeconomic framework and economic direction, job creation, education, power sector reforms, the rule of laws, health sector reforms, information and technology transformation, infrastructural programme, Niger Delta and transportation among others. All these have been planned for between 2011 and 2015 when the tenure of the present administration is expected to end.

The prime target of government is to achieve the vision 20:2020 which stipulates that Nigeria would become at least the 20th strongest economy in the world by the year 2020. In other words, Nigeria is positioning herself to become the 20th most industrialized nation of the world by the year 2020.

Looking at the transformation agenda and what it entails for children who would grow up to take over the affairs of this nation, one is apt to think about education often describes as the spring bold of development. A number of policies and programmes have been lined up for the education sector, as encapsulated in the agenda. Usigbe (2011) captured the priority areas as follows: To promote primary enrolment of all children of school going age, irrespective of the income profile of the policies; engage in provision of infrastructure such as classrooms across all levels so as to ease over – crowding; increase access and reduce pupil/teacher ratio; and enhance the efficiency, resourcefulness and competence of teachers and other educational personnel through training, capacity building and motivation.

These priority policies in education even judging from the tone, they are obviously targeted at the younger children in schools. The key question is, what is the position of literature; the children's literature in the transformation agenda?

As we noted earlier, the hall mark of the current transformation agenda in Nigeria is the fulfillment of vision 20:2020 – which emphasized economic attainment. Whether economic empowerment is synonymous with sustainable development is however a matter of another academic discourse. For instance, Dandaura (1995:14) provides an attractive definition of development when he says that: Development is a process of change, which should start with man himself. It should strive to raise his dignity and intellectual abilities so that he can effectively transform his economic, social, cultural and political environment into a better environment.

This practical definition places children's literature in a very pertinent position, hence it possesses all the potent qualities of development. These qualities, ranging from pedagogical to didactic and acculturation are imperative for growth and development. For education as one of the priority areas in the transformation agenda to successfully meet its set goals, children's literature needs to be given the pride of place. It will go a long way in equipping the young minds with right information, orientation and deep sense of patriotism.

Nigeria is in dire need of a robust national children's literature programme. The type that would engender cultural awareness, unity and patriotism. The likes of Chinua Achebe, Cyprain Ekwensi (both of blessed memory) among others wrote significant works for children mainly to educate and help awaken the spirit of nationalism in them. Great children's texts like *Chike and the River*; *Eze Goes to School*, *The PastPort of Mallam Illia*, were shining examples in this regard.

Transformation is a practical phenomenon which can be felt or experienced. It does not end up at the level of infrastructural projects like roads, hospitals, schools, or industries. Rather the human person should be the one to transform from ignorance to awareness or illiteracy to education. Children's literature therefore if properly harnessed would bring about total transformation. Literature is a literary composition that mirrors the happenings in human society. That is why it is said that if a society is corrupt or violent its literary works will depict it. As a mirror or watch dog of the society, it points out where things are wrong. It identifies various societal problems and develops themes on them. For instance as corruption is ravaging Nigerian nation now, children's literature should be developed around the theme of corruption by way of discouraging the act. Armah and Achebe have demonstrated that, using their literary texts ("The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" and "A Man of the People") where evils of corruption are enormously exposed. Character moldings should therefore be the cardinal objective of children's Literature. Children's Literature could be used to teach patriotism which is lacking in our national life today. Patriotism is act of showing deep love for one's country and willingness to defend it and even die for it if need be. Creative writers have enormously and tremendously used their creative works to teach this virtue. For instance, in "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi" by Ngugi and Mugo the theme of patriotism is fully explored. Dedan kimathi himself is a patriot worthy of emulation. Children's Literature if properly harnessed will no doubt transform Nigerian nation for better.

5. Challenges

There are some challenges, militating against harnessing children's Literature for Nigeria's transformation agenda. Some of these challenges include the following:

- Poor reading culture: Children these days lack enthusiasm towards reading. They rather prefer to watch films for hours. The culture of reading is therefore gradually dying away in our children. This of course, no doubt, affects the harnessing of children's literature for Nigeria's transformation agenda.
- Non-availability of literary reading materials: Literary reading materials are in short supply. Where they are available, they are not affordable. This definitely affects exploring children's literature for national transformation.
- Non-teaching of Literature in most secondary schools especially in Kano state. Literature as subject is not taught in most public schools in Kano state and in some other states within the north-west

zone. No reason was however given for this act of neglect. This situation affects harnessing of children's Literature for Nigeria's transformation agenda.

- Non-availability of qualified literature teachers: Qualified literature teachers who can effectively handle the teaching of Literature are not readily available. Language teachers who are non Literature specialists are often made to teach Literature. This hampers the harnessing of children's Literature for national transformation.
- Problem of demarcating between adults and children's Literature (literary texts). Literary texts considered as adults' Literature are often used by children. For instance, texts like "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe; "The Concubine" by Elechi Amadi; "The Lion and the Jewel" by Wole Soyinka; "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi" by Ngugi and Mugo are equally used by secondary school children.

Those identified challenges above among others, hamper the harnessing of children's Literature for national transformation.

6. Conclusion

The notion that "Leaders are readers" underscores the importance of children's literature in our national life. Reading begets inspiration for taking informed decisions. We are in the 21st century the era of technology, the period some people refer to as the period of "anything goes". For example: these days it is a herculean task to separate children from activities such as video games; mobile phone chatting; internet browsing; watching movies on TV or their favourite European clubs on television such as Chelsea and Manchester United. Many adults have joined the band wagon jostling over the same things.

Owing to this situation, coupled with other challenges of globalization, concerted efforts must be made to resuscitate children's literature programme. In many government schools in some parts of the north, literature is not even taught as a subject in both primary and secondary schools. This situation if not quickly addressed would spell danger for the future. If workable plan of action is taken to use literature as a yardstick for children's total development then, transformation would be better enhanced.

7. Recommendations

- The importance of children's literature in our national life should not be treated with levity. There is need to create a legislation that would ensure the teaching and learning of national literature in all Nigerian Schools.
- The federal government through the office of the first lady should create a biannual children's literary festival with prizes for best children's texts, reading and acting. This will not only encourage unity but also elicit the spirit of nationalism.

If the words of Jim Rohn: "formal education will make you a living but self education will make you a fortune" are anything to go by parents must live by example for their children to emulate. They should read to acquire more experience and impart same on to their younger ones. As Achebe once posed an intriguing question, what do African intellectuals read?

8. References

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