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## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND NATIONHOOD IN AFRICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

Africa has a wide variety of beliefs and practices which are sometimes shared by many other societies. Such beliefs and practices are derived from the people's cherished cultural heritage that connects the past with the present. Children's literature is one channel through which such beliefs and practices are employed and transmitted to build and inculcate morality in children, morality being an important ingredient in nation building for a viable nationhood, especially in the 21st century. The major problem staring Africa in the face in her attempt to attain genuine nationhood is the problem of failed leadership, occasioned by corruption, ineptitude and bad governance. This paper, therefore, evaluates the importance of children's literature in society as a viable tool for laying solid foundation and effecting moral uprightness in the youths who are said to be leaders of tomorrow. It advocates a re-invigoration of Literature and History at the lower levels of education in schools in order to help children make moral choices.

**Keywords:** *Children's Literature, Morality, Culture, Nationhood, 21st Century.*

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### Introduction

Kehinde Ayo[1] in "Indigenous traditions and modern African writers" defines children's literature as: The body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The genre encompasses a wide range of works including acknowledged classics of world literature, pictures, books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairytales, lullabies, fables, folk songs and other orally transmitted materials.(25)

This paper however defines children's literature as that written and unwritten literary material that is carefully selected and formulated by scholars, teachers and parents for the education of children. Such material suits children's young abilities. They are aimed at inculcating morals, building creative skills and helping them to make moral choices as they grow from childhood to adulthood. This literature has passed through various stages of development and today, it has come to stay as a distinctive genre of literature for the young minds. African literature today has taken care of these young minds by portraying authentic African historical experiences, distinct from the former European or Western Literature which had dominated children's literary material before now. Today, there are African children's books and folktales that reflect African cultural values that African children are familiar with. This literary genre has come of age for the would-be leaders of tomorrow to tap from.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is the sociological theory of literary criticism introduced by Kenneth Burke. It is a 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific study of nature and development of society and social behaviour. Sociological criticism analyses how the social functions in literature and how literature works in society. It adds a sociological element and considers art as a manifestation of society. These manifestations contain metaphors and references which are directly applicable to existing situations, events or phenomena happening at the time of its creation. It, therefore, proves that literature has a direct link with societal happenings and it aids the understanding of societal dynamics.

### Characteristics of Children's Literature

Children's literature is expected to possess the following qualities or features:

- It should focus on actions which attract attention and interest of the young minds.
- It should be simple and straight forward for children's understanding.
- It shall be about childhood.
- It should always emphasize reward for honesty and punishment for evil.
- It must contain moral lessons for children.

Modern Africa today has taken care of the aforementioned qualities in diverse ways to help young adults cope with the challenges of life as they grow up to make major decisions that would affect them later in life.

### Importance of Children's Literature

- Apart from introducing children to early imaginative and creative abilities, children's literature helps them acquire historical and factual information, especially about their society.

- Literature is a powerful tool for making children to understand their world, especially their homes and immediate communities.
- It helps children to learn about other people's cultural experiences. This is an important tool in national integration leading to genuine and virile nationhood. This diverse cultural awareness fosters tolerance as well.
- Literature helps children in making moral choices through experiences in stories.
- It helps improve children's self-image.
- When children are exposed to literature at an early age, it helps them develop critical imaginative abilities among others.

### **Problems of Nationhood in Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

One major problem confronting Africa in her bid to attain genuine nationhood is that of bad leadership especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many African countries are at the verge of collapse as a result of insensitive leaders. This is occasioned mainly by corruption. Many Africans live in abject poverty as a result of insecurity, which is promoted by the ruling class to maintain themselves in power, even when it is glaring that they are no more needed. A situation where the competing for leadership is way out of the reach of the youths leaves much to be desired. Again, the age bracket for certain political leadership positions makes impossible for the youths to have a level playing ground, thereby denying them the opportunity to showcase their potentials. Instead, the older generation of political elites resort to exploiting the youths who are unemployed to ensure divide and rule through violent crises. This makes it difficult for African nations to progress and attain nationhood. If these youths are empowered or employed, they can contribute their quota in the development processes especially, after being inculcated with adequate moral habits at an early stage in school through Children's Literature. For any nation of the world to achieve any meaningful development, there must be mutual respect, trust, unity and mutual understanding. Where these values are lacking, cohesion can only be imagined and desired but cannot be achieved. Africa and Nigeria in particular is facing this big challenge because of suspicion and mistrust. Literature, especially children's literature plays an important role in character development of individuals and groups especially in a multilingual and multi-cultural society like Nigeria. This is where African children literature comes in to play an important role in shaping, moulding and developing young minds who will tomorrow take responsibility of reshaping and building virile society in Africa that is free from the ills already created and enshrined in African polity by greedy ruling elites.

BalogunJames [2] in "Human Resources Development (HRD) Morality and State of Nigerian Nation", argues that "corruption is one of the obvious symptoms of any society that perches precariously on a weak moral foundation" (237). This statement is a clear indication of one of the major problems facing African countries today. Political corruption has been one endemic problem that is preventing Africa from attaining genuine nationhood. Ngugi, while decrying the sorry state of corruption in Kenya states that:

Nairobi is soulless and corrupt ... but it is not Nairobi alone that is affected in this way. The same is true of all the cities in every country that has recently slipped the noose of colonialism .... They have been taught the principle and system of self-interest and have been taught to forget the ancient songs that glorify the notion of collective good. They have been taught new songs, new hymns that celebrate the acquisition of money.[3]

The above statement is a result of the distortion of African moral values by African political elites who could not chart any meaningful ideology for development long after independence. Ngugi goes on to explain their failure in leadership that:

The African bourgeoisie that inherited the flag from the departing colonial powers was created within the cultural womb of imperialism. That is, it was a bourgeoisie with a mentality, an outlook which was in harmony with the outlook of the bourgeoisie in the colonizing countries. So even after they inherited the flag, their mental outlook, their attitudes towards their own societies, towards their own history, towards their own languages, towards anything national tended to be foreign: they saw things through eye glasses given them by their European bourgeois mentors.[4]

This mentality has created a wide gap between the African leaders and their subjects. This is where children's literature comes in to play the missing role in governance in a bid to achieve nationhood for African countries.

### **Children's Literature and Nationhood in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The adage, "Catch them Young" applies in this respect. Since children's literature contains moral lessons for the young minds, it is important that such materials be made easily available and used appropriately to groom a set of new leaders with a mentality that is truly African and devoid of the corrupting nature of the older generation. African writers of children's literary materials are aware of this dire need and constantly portray this in their literary works both for adults and the younger generations. Gabriel Okara in his poem "Once Upon a Time" asks his son to teach him how he (Okara) used to laugh when he was a child because his laughter in the mirror shows only bare fangs as a result of the hypocrisy of modern society. Now that the adult society is failing, it is better to turn to the younger generation for

solutions to Africa's problem in attaining nationhood. Ngugi wa Thiongo[5] categorically state this in *Petals of Blood* that:

Our children must look at the things that deformed us yesterday, that are deforming us today. They must also look at the things which formed us yesterday, that will creatively form us into a new breed of men and women who will not be afraid to link hands with children from other lands on the basis of an unashamed immersion in the struggle against those things that dwarf us. (247)

The above quotation stresses the importance of children's literature in moulding and shaping children for future development. This is because children are like a time-bomb. They are vibrant and full of capabilities. If these capabilities are conditioned and shaped positively, they will move society forward and Africa can think of nationhood contrary to the crop of leaders we have today who are individualistic and self-centered.

Olu Olagoke's [6]*The Incorruptible Judge* is one good example of drama text for children to learn lessons from. It dramatizes the conflict between morality and corruption. It is a simple drama that is concerned with moral uprightness and the web of corruption in society. It portrays Ajala Oni as a brilliant young school leaver from a poor family background, in search of a job and his experience at the Government Development Department in Lagos, under Mr. Agbolowomeri who demands for five pounds bribe before offering Ajala the job. Ajala remembers his school principal's advice and warning to them while in secondary school, not to give or receive bribe. He summarily reports the matter to the police and with the help of the police, Agbolowomeri is sentenced to three years imprisonment with hard labour as a deterrent to others.

When morality is inculcated in children at an early age, despite peer-group influence and societal interference, that element of morality still finds fertile ground to blossom. Chinua Achebe's [7]*Chike and the River* exhibits this and shows the example of a good parent in Chike's mother. Chike, the hero of the novella leaves the village at the age of eleven to stay with his uncle in Onitsha. Going to the city for the first time, Chike's mother admonishes him as a good mother would do to her child. She urges him to be an obedient child to his uncle. This can be seen thus:

Go well, my son. Listen to whatever your uncle says and obey him. Onitsha is a big city, full of dangerous people and kidnappers. Therefore, do not wander about the city. In particular, do not go near the River Niger: many people get drowned there every year ... she gave Chike many other words of advice. (6)

The above warnings continue to be Chike's watch words. Despite his adventurous escapades, he did not forget his mother's advice of being obedient. This, to a large extent, is what earns Chike wide publicity and a scholarship because of his moral upbringing at the end of the novella. When such morality is inculcated in children at an early stage, it helps them to make sound moral choices that will in turn move society forward and guarantee genuine nationhood.

Achebe's employment of folktale in the story shows the depth of richness of African children's literary material. It is important to note here that Chike's interest in River Niger got deepened by the story of the little bird and the River Niger. The river had always despised the size of the bird. But the bird in turn swooped down and sipped some water from the River Niger. The bird, therefore, challenged the River Niger to fly and follow it if it could, but the river was unable to do so. The River Niger then discovered that in spite of its size, it could not fly like the little bird (26). This short story teaches that greatness is not achieved by size but by brevity. This simple folktale helps in enriching the novella and plays an important and significant role in teaching some moral lessons to the young minds. The children's literature book is therefore, a simple narrative story on childhood innocence, adventure, ambition and follies with their attendant consequences.

It, therefore, means that if children are introduced to children's literature at an early age, this literature will condition their sense of reasoning to aspire for what is right since children naturally aspire to excel, learning lessons and admiring past heroes and legends. When they do that, they dream of a society that is upright, a society where they can showcase their own capabilities and distinguish themselves for greater exploits.

## Conclusion

Since culture is the bedrock of development in any given society, a healthy culture, devoid of corruption, nepotism, individualism and self-centeredness is what is needed through children's literature, by enshrining it hand in hand with history in the educational curriculum at the lowest level of education. This will cultivate healthy habits in children who would take over as leaders from their older leaders. Since the older generation of African political leaders have failed the continent, it is better to focus attention on the younger generation who are leaders of tomorrow. This can be achieved through re-channeling efforts in the education of the youths at the family level and the lowest stage of education. One major tool for attaining such objective is proper introduction of children to children's literary materials which contains morality and history. These two are basic ingredients in laying the foundation for sound minds and maturity in the children to make positive moral choices right from a tender age to become leaders.

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