

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN ETHICAL REVOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

It is true that literature represents a language or a people. But, literature is more important than just a historical or cultural artifact in that, it is universal, it speaks to us, and it affects us. Even when it is ugly, literature is beautiful. This paper therefore takes a cursory look at the importance of ' literature and how it can be used to revolutionize ethical values. It does this by looking at the features/functions of literature as well as some key areas in our society that need corrections for the nation to move forward. In other to take literature to the point where it can make a significant impact in the attempt to revolutionize the ethical standard of this nation, some steps should be taken as a matter of urgency. The strengthening of our educational system to be more productive in terms of literature is very vital. Literature could be empowered in the nation by government and corporate organizations by encouraging writing and literary creativity. Literature as a means of moral projection can be attained if only the film industry can be streamlined by policy makers and experts to curtail such excesses as nudity, sexual immorality and other vices currently permeating the industry. It is hoped that the issues/points raised in this work will serve as an impetus to the regeneration of literature to enable it serve its purpose as a tool for moral re-awakening in Nigeria and indeed Africa.

Introduction

The role of literature in the re-awakening of our moral values is an indispensable one.

The outright denigration of our value system in Nigeria because of the quest to gratify our passion is not only a huge drawback but also a national shame. From the highest seat of power to the ordinary man on the street, there is deliberate disregard for, and a violent distortion of those moral principles that make a people. As a consequence, so much is being lost including lives and unquantifiable amount of resources.

However, it is worth mentioning here that the task of bringing the nation back from its current drift (o its pride of place is not an impossible one.

If the core values of this nation must be revolutionized, literature must take the lead. This is because as a subject that examines, mirrors and corrects human action in broad perspectives, literature appeals to the human conscience. If you must change the character of a man, you. must convince his conscience. What the nation needs at present is character which literature stands the best chance to amend.

For us to advance this purpose, therefore, it is essential for us to examine how literature meets this daunting obligation and the need to strengthen literature to strengthen the nation.

Definition of Key Words

Literature: literature is pieces of writing that are valued as works of art, especially novels, plays and poems. It also can be referred to as pieces of writing or printed information on a particular subject, Literature represents a language or a people. That is, culture and tradition. It introduces us to new worlds of experience. We learn about books and literature and also enjoy the comedies and tragedies of poems, stories and plays. We may even grow and evolve through our literary journey with books.

In literature, we may discover meaning by looking at what the author says and how he/she says it. We may interpret the author's message. In academic circles, this decoding of the text is often carried out through the use of literary theory, using a mythological, sociological, psychological, historical or other approach.

Ethics: By this we mean moral principles that control or influence a person's behaviour. It is that branch of philosophy that deals with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the Tightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions. Ethics are basically your standards for making decisions. These standards of decision making can be different for different people.

Revolution: It means a great change in conditions, ways of working, beliefs etc. that affects large numbers of people. Revolution (from the Latin *revolutio* "a turn-around" is a fundamental change in power or organizational

structures that takes place in a relatively short period of time. Aristotle described two types of political revolution which are (a) complete change from one constitution to another and (b) Modification of an existing constitution. Revolution have occurred through human history and varies widely in terms of methods, duration and motivating ideology. Their results include major changes in culture, economy and socio-political institutions. Scholarly debates about what does and does not constitute a revolution center around several issues. Early studies of revolutions primarily analyzed events in European history from a psychological perspective, but more modern examinations include global events and incorporate perspectives from several social sciences including sociological and political science. However, several generations of scholarly thought on revolution have generated many competing theories and contributed much to the current understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Moral: This is concerned with the principle of right and wrong behaviour. Moral means conforming to a standard of what is right and good. Moral is seen also as a message conveyed or a lesson to be learned from a story or event. The moral may be left to the hearer, reader or viewer to determine for themselves or may be explicitly encapsulated in a maxim. Moral have typically been more obvious in children literature or moral novels.

What is Literature?

Literature is used to describe anything from creative writing to more technical works, but the term is most commonly used to refer to works of the creative imagination, including works of poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction (Esther Lombard! 2009).

According to Lewis C. S. as quoted by Manali Oak (2009), "Literature adds to reality, it does not describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become",

Lewis definition of literature is adopted as the most appropriate for this paper. Literature reminds us of stories, epics, sacred scriptures and classical works of the ancient and modern times. It is therefore seen as a body of written works of a language, period or culture, produced by scholars and researches, specialized in a given field.

Features of Literature

The features of literature are also the genres of Literature. They are prose, poetry and drama.

Drama-According to Ogunba (1978), "drama in Aristotelian model, is a representation of action. Drama is a creation or invention of action or series of action on stage". Drama is a concrete way of stimulating creative impulse in the learners and one advantage of drama over other forms of literature is its communicative ability (Vincent 1979). Dramatization or acting many involve character modeling and as such intelligence, sense of imagination, flexibility and fluency comes into play.

Drama has the ability to influence a person's behaviour. It is usually a call for change from the wrong to the right. For instance, the drama text *The Trial of Dedankimathi* by Ngugi WaThiongo and Micere Githae Mugo, satirizes the British imperialism and their African collaborators as well as exposes the dehumanizing activities of the imperialists. The play is a call for freedom. The author uses Kimathi to lead the people to fight against British imperialism. The British imperialist captured and imprisoned Kimathi in their bid to end the peoples struggle for freedom. He was later sentenced to death by hanging by the imperialist court judge.

The play is thought provocation no doubt, but endeared to all who hate injustice and undemocratic rules in African as a whole. It condemns imperialism and geared towards upholding moral principles. If the society has a strong moral value, then, it will be devoid of all forms of inhuman treatment and as such become a better place.

Prose Fiction- Prose is a basic genre of literature which deals with invented story or series of stories. Two important form of prose are the short story and the novel. Two important distinguishing factors between the short story and the novel are length and level of character development. A short story is necessarily shorter than a novel and its character are not as well developed as those in a novel. However, Okonkwo (1990) pointed out that "both the short story and the novel take their subject matter from man's life and social experience"

Literature comments on these experiences so as to correct them thereby bringing an upright change. For instance in *The Beggars Strike* by Aminat Sow Fall, the author tries to point out that 'no one is an island'. The rich

need the poor and vice versa. The poor beggars in the story deliberately snubbed Mour Ndiaye to show him that he needs them. To this end, they deserve a better treatment and respect because the poor are part of the society.

Poetry- Poetry is that form of literature written in verse. Poetry makes special use of language and communicates by invented pictures or images. It is written in such a way that it enjoys peculiarrhythm. Poetry often has a formal structure or even a cadence while you are reading it. Good poetry exploits the imagination and adds to our capacity for enjoyment and experience. Poetry as a feature of literature can be used to appeal to our conscience. The aim is to change our attitude towards issues. This change is usually from negative to positive. One poet that clamours for change is William Wordsworth. He desires change as a revolutionary and most of his poem reflects his mind. One of such poem is 'The World is too Much with us' were he called on man to return to nature. He says that instead of man taking interest in natural things, he lavishes his energy more on things that have no lasting benefits. The poet tells us that we are experiencing sorrow and pains because we have failed to recognize the role nature and natural things play in our lives. Not until we realize this, the world will not be light with us.

Wordsworth wants to change our attitude towards nature hence this poem. With the change of heart from worldly desires to nature, the world will definitely be a better place.

The Functions of Literature

The functions of literature cannot be over-emphasized. It performs certain functions both for society and individuals.

First, literature educates. It is taught in our colleges and institutions. Its goal is to educate people on various aspects of life. Every literary work has a message to convey to its reader or listeners, thus enlightens. One very good example is the poem "A Taxi Driver on His Death" by Timothy Wangusa, a Ugandan. In this poem, Wangusa tries to educate us by pointing out the danger of reckless driving as well as the dangers of excessive love for money. The taxi driver in his reckless driving, ignores the traffic men directing traffic, not even afraid of arrest and detention. He is just taking risk in order to make more gains for himself. Wangusa foresees how the taxi driver will die one day on the same road he plies.

Having being educated on the danger of reckless driving and the resultant effect, it is now left for us to change our ways as this is what literature stands to correct.

Literature is a very good medium for entertainment. It affords its audience leisure which is useful for relaxation and enjoyment. It amuses, that is, provokes laughter and provides unlimited fun. A very good example is the famous comedy 'Papa, Ajasco and Company' by Wale Adenuga productions.

Literature is a useful instrument for the propagation of history, culture and politics. Most cultures, history and politics are brought to the knowledge of people through literature that is why today for example, we are able to have acquaintance with literature like English, Afro-American literature, America literature and French literature. We can therefore say that literature widens the scope and experience of its audience about different people and culture of the world.

Another very important function of literature is that it comments on society and by this, points out the bad aspect of the institution of society so as to pave way for reformation which is usually for the benefit of the people. *Much Ado About Nothing*_by William Shakespeare is a drama text that comments on the deceptive nature of man. This is one aspect of society Shakespeare wants to correct. You find out that there is much self-deception among the characters. It is less easy to identify motives. People are what they are even in deceiving themselves or trying to do so. Beatrice and Benedick both deceive themselves into believing that they will never fall in love and get married, least of all to one another.

In Shakespeare's own day and also in the time he wrote this story, noble or well- to- do families were greatly concerned with the chastity of women who become their kin by marriage. Premarital relationships were considered immoral. That was why Claudio's rejection of Hero on the belief which is false that she is not a virgin affected her and the father.

In earnest, literature teaches morality (didactic). The essence is to impact moral lessons into the people. Folklores and moon light tales in African society try to teach children morality so as to conform to society's needs and to avoid the ways of the deviants.

Literature and Ethical Change

Literature is the most effective tool for ethical revolution. Every literary piece is geared towards affecting the reader in one way or the other. This is seen in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson as quoted by Esther Lombard! (2009) that "The difficulty of literature is not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish".

As earlier stated in the quotation by Lewis C.S. that literature not only describes reality but also adds to it, is not an understatement. Literature is not merely a depiction of reality, it is rather a value addition. Literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms in society. They are a depiction of the different facets of common man's life.

Works which can be grouped as literature are prose, poetry and drama. Others may include essays, fiction, literary works based on philosophy, art, history, religion and culture. Certain extremely technical writings such as those on logistics and mathematics are also believed to be part of literature. Scientific and legal writings are grouped under the category of literature as well as creative non-fiction of the ancient times and literary journalism.

All these have the potentials of bringing change to the society. For instance, the periods, such as Renaissance, Victorian etc. have various characteristics that marked them. The characteristics and activities were acted or written on to portray the various changes that took place during these periods. The Victorian age for example is a period significant for its flux of ideas. The Victorian age is an age of Darwinism, Scientific discoveries, Philosophical writings, treatises, discoveries etc. Above all these, the Victorian age is an age known for its high level of immorality and Queen Victoria advocated for a return to moral values. Everything now borders on this strict moral convention. George Elliot despite breaking her moral code was one of these who upheld the fact that society can only be held together by a moral basis. The writers saw this strict social convention as tyrannical. One of such writers is Thomas Hardy. He condemns all these because they cannot improve mankind. Part of his Philosophy is how mankind can always be made better which is the focus of literature. Hardy, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, uses Tess to criticize the hypocritical nature of the age. Tess lost her virginity in the circumstances the Victorians query yet Hardy sees her as a 'pure woman'. He does this to undermine the going on of the age. He is trying to say that 'he who is guiltless should cast the first stone'. Hardy, in opposing, is trying to create a good sense of direction for amendment and corrections.

Note however that the corrections are not just for the immediate age, but for future generations. What happened during these ages and the criticisms that were documented could be very useful as those yet unborn can grow up and start reading them. Thus making many abreast with the various events or occurrences of the different age. This awareness no doubt can change and improve mankind.

Areas of need

Our moral values have obviously been compromised. Literature can serve as an effective tool to correcting them. The areas in dare need of corrections are;

Corruption-Corruption according to the Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary is defined "as a dishonest or illegal behaviour or a change from moral to immoral standards of behaviour". Corruption threatens people and their governments. It makes societies unfair. It is argued that bribery is a negotiated rent, as the beginning of all illegalities and tyranny. There is no more powerful engine of injustice and cruelty for bribery destroys both faith and state. The serious consequences of corruption thus is not only State Capture but also Mind Capture. Rent-seeking behaviour occupies the human mind and removes it from useful task (Bansal).

Corruption is found in nearly all facet of the economy. It is found among politicians whose activities may include money laundering, poor execution of contracts and outright embezzlement of public funds.

There is perversion in the judiciary (The Nigerian Judicial Council has often sanctioned judges for corruption).

We also observe corruption in the educational sector where the acquisition of certificates has become by wealth instead of intellect. Parents are seen perpetrating examination malpractice for their children.

Other level of corruption may include high profile oil bunkering, hoarding of petroleum products for profiteering, employment by cronyism (who you know) not by merit as well as sexual revolution among young star's etc.

Election - According to Nwankwo (1992) "Elections are defined as the process or means through which the electorates choose their representatives into government positions. In Nigeria, we have the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Charged with the responsibility of conducting elections in the country. Our elections is supposed to allow full participation of its citizens to elect a political leader acceptable by the people. But today the reverse is the case we experience the imposition of candidates, stealing or stuffing of ballot boxes during elections etc. The members of the commission are not truly independent as the name implies. They are not allowed to freely do their jobs, rather faced with pressure from the government and influential people in the society. The commissions take money from political parties to help these parties rig the election.

Wealth -Wealth is the totality of goods, property and money owned by an individual (Brown and Clow 1990). In another development, Samuelson and Nordhaus (2001) see wealth as "consist of the net dollar value of assets owned at a given point in time".

Adam Smith in his seminar work *The Wealth of Nations* describes wealth as "the annual produce of the land and labour of the society". This "produce" is at its simplest, that which satisfies human needs and wants of utility. In popular usage, wealth can be described as an abundance of items of economic value or the state of controlling or possessing such items, usually in the form of money, real estate and personal property.

The attitude to wealth is very alarming as people more or less worship wealth. The wealthy in the society gain recognition and respect. No wonder, there is so much emphasis on it. For example today, chieftaincy title is given based on ones wealth. For you to be given a chieftaincy title, you must have accumulated substantial wealth relative to others in your society or reference group. Those given titles see it as an avenue to show case their wealth. These are people who should have displayed utmost modesty in the use of money. We should however begin to celebrate brains and character (integrity) as against emphasis on wealth.

Literature and Change of Attitude

Before visiting the attitudes of civil servants to their duties, it is paramount to examine the difference between the term "civil service" and "civil servant ".The Civil Service is made up of the government ministries and departments while the Civil Servants are the staff of employees of these ministries and departments. In other words, the civil service is manned by civil servants. According to Nwankwo (1992), "the term 'Civil Service' is used to describe the body of permanent officials whose duty is to assist the political executive in formulating governmental policies and implementing them".

The civil servants are known to have poor attitude to work, most of them are perpetual latecomers, they play truancy and hardly stay in the office to do their work. They are seen as unproductive, not inventive and innovative. Their bureaucratic ways of doing things slows their pace of work down and has lead to bribery as most of them demand money to facilitate a process for their business associate or client.

Literature is a discipline which comments, mirrors and corrects human action. Literature tries to convince the conscience of a character to change from bad to good, from the wrong way of doing things to the right way of doing things.

Nigeria has been experiencing a draw back in the core areas mentioned above no doubt, most people are guilty of these offences. This is where the relevance of literature comes alive. It can use either of the genres which are prose, poetry or drama to satirize or criticize human actions to bring reformation to human conduct. One very good poem that satirizes the activities of the government is "And so it came to pass" by Funso Ayejina. In this poem Funso tries to criticize the corrupt leaders of our present day, society especially the government whether Military or Civilian who at first present themselves as saviours or messiahs, but at the end, they are worse than the previous regimes they overthrew, dashing the hopes and aspirations of the people and leaving the society worse than they met it.

According to Funso, the politicians are worse during electioneering campaigns. They make promises to receive the people's votes, as soon as they are sworn in, they forget their promises and pursue their selfish goal which is to aggrandize wealth.

Another work of literature that deals decisively with this issue of corruption and electioneering deceit is *The Carcasses* by B.A. Okoro. He portrays the social political circumstance of the Nigerian society where the political elite in the country embezzle the public treasury and spend the money

recklessly for their Individual enjoyment and aggrandizement leaving the people to suffer. He uses Akpo, a character to typify the condition of the youth today in the society where most people are under-employed because of lack of job.

The comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde treats issue of wealth. The book was written during the Victorian age where materialism was the order of the day. There is crave for money and not for love which is manifested by the love between Jack worthing and Gwendolen Fairfax and that of Algernon Moncrieff and Cecily Cardew.

The Government Inspector., a drama text written by Nikolai GoGol is another very good work of literature which satirizes the Russian provincial life. This is not different from what is happening today in Nigeria. It deals on bribery and corruption as well as sexual immorality. The activities of the people could be likened to our present day civil service. When the corrupt local officials got information about the visit of the Government Inspector, there was panic to the extent that Hlestakov was mistaken for the real Government Inspector. He was well feted, bribed for protection, betrothed to the Mayor's daughter with a view to influencing him to cover up their sharp practices. Eventually the real Government Inspector came, the day of reckoning is come for all the corrupt officials.

We also see in the play the issue of sexual immorality. This is evident in Hlestakov's flirting with the wife and daughter of the Mayor.

Nikolai GoGol satirizes the general attitudes to work. The corrupt officials are not limited to Russia alone, they are used to mirror similar characters and situations in the world. We cannot but say that literature touches every aspect of society. It uses satires to ridicule the vices in the society for reformation to take place.

However, there is need for literature to be strengthened to enable it play its role effectively. In the Film Industry for example where you have actors and actresses who perform on the stage or television, you find out that they pose more problems than solutions to the society. Nolly-Wood is supposed to be an industry meant for corrections instead, it is projecting prostitution and nudity. This means, they project immorality instead of morality. This is a big retrogression on our moral values. There should be a change in the mode of dressing of these female actresses to be precise. Modesty should be their watch word in all the dramas acted as they stand to be copied by the younger generation. The effect on them is really adverse. That is why I make bold to say that the 'Rebranding' exercise being projected by the Minister of Information Professor Dora Akunyili is indeed a welcome development.

Conclusion

One can say that literature provides society with the guiding principles of life. It is through reading literary works that one understands life. That is why literature is life. Without mincing words, literature helps a person to take a closer look at the different facets of life. In many ways, it can change one's perspective towards life, ethically. Little wonder Manali Oak (2009) did say "literature is definitely much more than its literary meaning, which defines it as an 'acquaintance to letter'? It infact, lays the foundation of an enriched life; it adds 'life' to living."

Recommendation

As a follow up on the discuss, this paper presents the following recommendations.

- Literature should be empowered in the nation by government and corporate organizations by encouraging writing or literary creativity; strengthening our educational system to be more productive in terms of literature.
- " The National Educational Curriculum should be designed to give adequate attention to literature from the primary to the senior secondary school.
- There should be a restructuring in the film industry to include financial empowerment and a vigorous fight against piracy so that the industry can play its role effectively.
- The film industry should be streamlined by policy makers and experts or professionals to curtail such excesses as nudity, sexual immorality and other vices currently permeating the system so that the essence of literature as a means of moral projection can be attained.
- There should be robust funding and accelerated attention by the government on literature as a discipline. By this, the critical issues bedeviling the growth of literature in Nigeria can be averted and as such allow for the effective strengthening of the nation.

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