

## Social Commitment and Didacticism in Children's African Prose Fiction

Ogochuku O. Anigala

### ABSTRACT

In various region of Africa, there has presumably been a remarkable effort to publish and record collections of children literature in prose narratives, folktales, genealogies songs, myths, legends, rhymes, proverbs and riddles. In spite of this remarkable effort, it has not attracted enough scholarship. In light of this, this study aims to assert the relevance and significance of children's literature in Africa by examining the dominant themes and settings present in selected African children's prose fiction, highlighting them as veritable tools for fulfilling the novelists' social commitment. The method of research applied in this paper is qualitative, in that it focuses on textual analysis and interrogation of the selected texts. The theoretical framework that guide this study is post colonialism, as it has proven to be the most appropriate theory that adequately explicate the aim and objectives of this study. The findings of this research revealed that many early African children's prose fiction were originally oral tales which were transcribed into writings, with the aim of teaching morals and preserving tradition. However, modern writings have expanded from this preoccupation to accommodate contemporary issues like cyber morals and education. This paper therefore concludes that African children's prose fiction serves a major role in educating African children on African values. Hence it's importance and continued need for subsequent intellectual scholarship.

### Introduction

Over the years, scholarly interest in African children's literature has presumably been apparent. Despite the remarkable efforts in producing engaging intellectual prose fiction for children, it has not attracted enough scholarship. Considering this, this chapter asserts the relevance and significance of children's literature in African literature and by extension, African societies, presenting the motif of morality as didactics, by examining the dominant themes present in selected African children's prose fiction, (like honesty, kindness, patience, and perseverance, amongst others) highlighting them as veritable tools for fulfilling the novelists' social commitment vision. Due to the extensive nature of the topic under discourse, this research limits its primary data to eight selected African children's written prose fiction.

Ogunyemi Christopher Babatunde, in his article, A meta-critical study of *Akachi Ezeigbo's Perspectives On Children Literature In Nigeria*, asserts that children fictions and imaginary works have been employed by writers to propel the need

“to do good” and shun bad vices. (p. 345). From the time of Plato and Aristotle in the Greek city state, literature has been used to propel societal development, illuminate lessons and good intentions, to fulfil the yearnings of poetic justice. Even among little children, tales by moon-light, mid-night short stories, memoirs and short stories have been espoused to underscore the concept of good over evil. Children fictions were concretized to underscore the motif of morality and didactics in African children epoch. Literature encompasses morality in many ways: in teaching and in man’s interpersonal activities. Morality is derived from the Latin word “mores” which means custom, didactic literature however teaches morality. Morality is sometimes used interchangeably with ethics, which is a branch of philosophy which deals with the principles of human conducts. There are certain actions that would be condemnable in a society. For instance, the act of armed robbery, the embezzlement of public funds, bribery and corruption and other related vices. While there are certain actions that would be considered morally right, for instance, kindness, honesty, generosity, hospitality and respect for human life.

It is in connection with these moral rights and vices that the importance of morality in public life assumes a prestigious pedigree. Through social development individuals develop appropriate social skills, values, and morals for the sustenance of the society (Ogunyemi, 2013). Morality and didactic visualization could be estimated from the selections of social relevance; from this perspective, one would seem to imply that literature has a duty to make the progress of society a fundamental objective, regardless of whatever else it may seek to achieve. It is this fundamental objective that presumably inform both writers and readers using morality as didactics in African children’s literature. Some stories in Africa cannot be traced to any source other than oral tradition. Many tortoise stories were artificial creations to teach the children lessons and the need to prefer good tidings among all ages of children. The Yoruba and Igbo’s of Nigeria and other African communities’ conservative use of recurring and reverberating proverbs were re-constructed for surviving the equal-opportunities African society. The seeming extinction of proverbs in Zulu nations and the supposed eradication of bride price in Kenya were redirected towards post-modernity. Children fiction in Africa generally has a social function. It is perhaps inevitable that modern African literature is highly attuned to the requirement of contemporary African society. The literature under discussion mainly concerns pre-adolescents-children between 7 and 12 years. Akachi Ezigbo opines that Children literature is a literary genre which caters to the interest of children, though many books in this category are enjoyed by adults.

This chapter attempts to examine children books published in Africa to determine what adults believe is important for the younger generation to know,

what cherished values the books pass on, how they equip children to lead the nation in the future. Prior to independence, the books available to African children mainly consisted of biased school texts and leisure books imported from the imperial nations, like Snow White, where the heroine has skin as white as snow and was the most beautiful; it is assumed that majority of Africans are dark-skinned. So where does that live African children? Written from a colonial perspective, these books advanced the colonial agenda through stereotypical plots, characterization and themes. To further assimilate Africans, the colonial masters imposed European languages while the indigenous languages were neglected or forbidden in schools. Francesca Blockreel makes an important observation of this about Portuguese children's literature. She asserts: "All children- whether living in Portugal, Mozambique, Guinea or in any other Portuguese colony- had the same schoolbooks transmitting the same values of God, religion, family and nation to prepare them to be proud of their history and colonial empire" (p12-13). Language became an instrument of subjugation that fostered a sense of inferiority and lack of pride in African languages, culture and history. Because of historical factors and practical considerations, European languages continue as the medium of communication and creative expression even after independence. It is not surprising that many books published thereafter were originally written in English, Spanish or French. Some of the reasons for the continued use of European languages are that they have become part of the educational, publishing and governmental infrastructure. They get a wider audience for ideas among the educated elite both within and outside the country. They are necessary to maintain diplomatic, trade and other national contacts. They provide a uniformity in internal communication amid the cultural and linguistic diversity of African nations; and lack of adequate readership in any one language. The question of language remains a crucial one. Are African children continuing to be colonised through the literature being written and produced for them by both African and non-African authors alike? These are salient questions raised by Meena Khorana (1998) in her book, *Critical Perspectives on Postcolonial African Children's and Young Adult Literature*.

The East African, Kenyan scholar, Colomba Kaburi Muriungi, seems to be of a similar view in his paper titled, *Transformations in Kenyan Children's Prose Fiction*, where he advocates for pertinent children literature in the development of the minds of children. He argues that majority of books readily obtainable in libraries, bookshops and schools were mainly western in 1970's Kenya, which is arguably true for other parts of Africa. Classics like Cinderella, Rapunzel, Beauty and the Beast, and Sleeping Beauty, were what was available and it was unsympathetic to our African context in terms of setting and some other

aspects. The children are the future so some scholars advocated for text relevant to the African child.

One of these scholars include Chinua Achebe, who saw such western children's books as unhealthy for the African audiences and advised African writers to save the African child from what he called "the beautifully packaged poison, imported into the continent in the form of children's story books" (Chakava, 1998, p. 4). Writers of books for children in Africa therefore needed to give variety to this situation by writing books that would provide children with relevant theme, character and setting. Although some of the stories written during this period utilized animal characters because they were directly appropriated from the African oral tale, they nevertheless encompassed people's daily experiences through the activities of these animal characters. Such stories certainly represented the society's history, which some colonial writers tended to delete or manipulate (Dipio, 2011). Writing for children at this time therefore helped to salvage this history.

### **Moral Narratives**

Like children elsewhere, "African children seem to have the familiar range of games and verse for their own play..." (Finnegan, 2012, 295), so it is only logical that they have their own fiction tailored to familiar setting and themes. Children's fiction in Africa dwells mainly under these three categories: folktales that have didactic undertones and emphasize African traditional beliefs, and folktales with animal characters whose emphasis is on moral ideals. Collections of folktales range from bare plot summaries to detailed narrations that provide descriptions of setting, circumstances of storytelling, and local customs. In Zimbabwe for example, Norman Atkinson records sixteen fables from the Shona, Ndebele, and Venda cultures in *The Broken Promise*, while Tim Matthews in *Tales of the Secret Valley* preserves the creation of myths, legends and animal stories of the Leya, Inde and Dimba clans before the valley went into extinction. This effort by the two writers "not only preserves an oral tradition that is in danger of being lost as a result of rapid industrialization, modern media, and telecommunications; but it also forges a national and cultural identity" (Khorana, 1998: 5). West African authors fall into two categories, namely, those who are established novelists but who also write children's prose fiction, like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Onuora Nzekwu, and those who write exclusively for children, like Ben Akponine-Samuel, Prince Kelvin A. Ikonne, and Ono Anthony Ogiaga.

Another category of children's fiction in Africa is adventure stories that espouse the need for caution and refrain from reckless ideals. In this category, the works deal with moral tales involving human figures and moral narratives reflective of

society. The prose fiction investigated in this work are: *The Super Girl* by Anthony Ogiaga, *The Fruit of Honesty* by I E Ufondu and Edmund Opare, *The Butter Man* by Elizabeth Alalou, Ali Alaolu, and Julie Essakalli, *My Father's Shop* by Satomi Ichikawa, *My Rows and Piles of Coins* by Tololwa Molle and Earl Lewis, *The Orange Thieves* by Dahal Charity, *The Children of the Forest* by Joel Makumi, *The Orphan and His Goat Friend* by David Maillu, *Beatrice's Goat* by Page McBrier and Lori Lohstoeter, *The Girl who Became Chief* by Amos Isoka, *A Piece of Jasper* by Felicity Keats and *Costly Mistake* by Prince Kelvin A. Ikonne. These works are selected for relevance to the subjects under discussion and ease of accessibility.

There is a survey of literary works across region that share similar thematic preoccupation of morality. An excellent sample of African children's fiction which espouses this ideal is Ono Anthony Ogiaga's *The Super Girl*. It is a short novel which narrates the tale of 6 year old Mimi Aleju and her struggle to further her education in the face of uncertainties. Mimi had it rough when her father lost his job because he was in a serious accident, thereby sustaining major injury that he could only walk with the help of a walker. Her mother had to take care of them and became the sole breadwinner, but times were hard:

One day Mimi's mother started crying and her father consoled her. She cried because their condition was getting worst and there seems to be no way out. (p 3)

As a brilliant and industrious girl, she focuses on her studies, even when her classmates made fun of her because of her old clothes and poor family, she did not succumb to despair. She helps with chores in the house when she can, she did not ask for new clothes or shoes when her friends teased her about her appearance since she knew her parents were struggling financially, because that is what good and responsible children do. Summarily, Mimi's perseverance and commitment paid off when she gained a scholarship and eventually became a doctor, bringing pride to her parents:

Mimi's parents were proud of her. She was their super daughter; the super girl who made it against all odds. (p 10)

The successful manner in which she ended and was praised before her parents is an attempt by the writer to persuade children to be good and patient and conscientious towards their parents and to show to them that good behaviour leads to a celebrated end.

An author who thematises the virtue “honesty” in his fiction is I. E. Ufondu, in his classic *The Fruit of Honesty*. Nkem, a little orphan in the story decided to stick to his father’s advice to all his children before his death. After the father’s death, his elder ones forsook the advice of the father. They denied him his inheritance and sent him out of the house immediately the father died. Nkem had nowhere to go and suffered greatly till he found himself in the house of a couple, whose relationship was laden with extra marital affairs. When there was conflict between the couple, he was honest when he was interrogated by the police which eventually saved the couple’s marriage but at the same time did not stop the couple from sending him out of their house. Nkem suffered the negative effect of always telling the truth, until the villagers needed an honest king and he was remembered to have been very honest even when it was not encouraging to be and was called upon to be the king. The emphasis here as in the text above is the exhortation of the virtues of honesty and also, patience. It was Nkem’s act of patience that made him endure all manner of hardship until he was rewarded at last.

The trend of didactics in children’s fiction cuts across African regions. The emphasis is always on privileging virtues over vices. Page McBrier and Lori Lohstoeter’s novel, *Beatrice’s Goat* captures a story of a young girl from a Ugandan village who longs to go to school. When Beatrice’s family gets a goat, she started caring for it and began earning money. She eventually earns enough to pay for her school fees. The resilience exuded by this little girl is a rear virtue. Just like Mimi in *The Super Girl* and Kadogo in *The Girl Who Became Chief*. The relevance of this is theoretically, to build in children the courage to face difficult situations.

In the northern African region, the emphasis on gratitude is explored. Elizabeth Alalou, Ali Alaolu, and Julie Essakalli in their prose fiction, *The Butter Man*, tells the story of a young girl Nora. On Saturdays, her mother works and it’s just Nora and her baba (father) hanging out. And every Saturday night, Nora’s father makes couscous, but tonight Nora is starving and the couscous is taking too long. While Nora and her father are waiting on dinner to be ready, the father decides to pass the time with a story. He recounted a story to her, of a certain year when they witnessed a drought in Morocco, their native land. Growing up in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, how much food the family had depended on the rain and the crops. Once during a drought, Nora’s grandfather had to leave his family to try and find work, so the family could eat. As the portions of bread Nora’s baba was given decreased in size and the butter disappeared completely, his mother would urge him to go outside and wait for the butter man, to ask him to spare a little. As he would sit and wait he would nibble on the bread and it would finish while still waiting for the butter man. This daily ritual passed the time as his stomach rumbled, and finally after a while

his father returned with flour, couscous, vegetables, and meat. Baba tells Nora that while the butter man never came, the rains did. And just as Nora hopefully appreciates true hunger, so does the reader, Mama then comes home, the couscous is ready, Nora sits down to a delicious Moroccan meal with a new sense of gratitude. Children are therefore, through this story encouraged to be more appreciative of the good things they get in life. Gratitude as such is thematised in this work.

Satomi Ichikawa a Moroccan children novel writer in his hilarious piece *My Father's Shop*, tells the story of a young boy Mustafa, whose father teaches to help sell beautiful Moroccan carpet totourists, his father always welcomes them "Bienvenue" and offers them tea "O cha waikagadesuka?" When Mustafa discovers a beautiful carpet with a hole in it (big enough to fit a head), he proudly throws the carpet over his head and heads to the market to show it to his friends. On his jaunt through the marketplace, Mustafa expectedly attracts customers to his father's shop. Here, the writer put emphasis on children's obligation to their parents. This entails helping them in their works and being obedient to them. The ingenuity of children is also explored by the writer. Mustafa being aware that there are many tourists in town uses the opportunity to showcase his father's product to them which yielded profit for the father as he made a lot of sales through that.

TololwaMollel and E. B Lewis' novel *My Rows and Piles of Coins*, depicts the story of Saruni, a little boy who grew up in a rural village in Tanzania, whom just like Mustafa, exhibited a certain kind of maturity. This is revealed through their (Saruni and Mustafa) sensitivity to the plight of their parents. Saruni while observing the situation at home decided to save coins to purchase a new bicycle.

After a good day at the market, my mother, Yeyo, gave me five whole ten-cent coins. I gaped at the money until Yeyo nudged me. "Saruni, what are you waiting for? Go and buy yourself something."

I plunged into the market. I saw roasted peanuts, chapati, rice cakes, and sambusa. My heart beat excitedly. I wanted to buy everything (at the market), but I clutched my coins tightly in my pocket.

At the edge of the market, I stopped. In a neat sparkling row, stood several big new bicycles. One of them was decorated with red and blue.

"That's what I would buy!" (p1-2)

While saving for this, he practices riding his father's bicycle and dreams of helping his mother carry goods to market on his new bicycle. After months of work, he takes his coins to the bicycle seller, who adds them up and responds with humiliating laughter, Saruni is disappointed to realise he has not saved enough. However, Saruni is rewarded when his father buys a motorbike and "sells" his old bicycle to his son. In the end, Saruni's parents refuse his payment, preferring to give him the bike as a reward for his help. At the end of the story, he is again saving his coins, this time to buy a cart to pull behind his bicycle and further lighten his mother's load. The author also explains how the family makes money by raising crops and selling them at the market.

Dahal's *The Orange Thieves* (1995) is a collection of oral narratives, first published in 1966. In the story *The Orange Thieves* five girls go stealing oranges from a farm and decide to close their eyes as they picked the fruits. However, other than Muthoni, the other four girls conspire to deceive her and open their eyes and Muthoni ends up picking only unripe oranges. She goes back to the farm to pick better oranges, only to have an unfriendly confrontation with Kimakia, the giant, and owner of the farm. Muthoni's slim body saves her from being eaten by Kimakia, because he says she is not fat enough. But worse still, he decides to make her his wife. Muthoni is later saved by two new-born baby boys who Kimakia brings home for food and, out of sympathy; Muthoni hides them and gives Kimakia two big rats for his supper. The two boys then grow up and kill Kimakia and his friends (other giants). Muthoni's good hearted nature is shown when she gets back home and forgives her friends for having betrayed her. The other girls' betrayal of Muthoni in this story is a lesson to the readers concerning friendship, and that is, not all friends can be trusted. Such stories were useful in traditional African societies in sharpening the sensibilities of the young. It is also evident that the setting is that of a patriarchal society as the male has all the power. The giant, male, makes a decision between eating and marrying Muthoni, options that render Muthoni helpless. She also ends up being rescued by boys. The narrative could therefore be said to reflect the organization of African patriarchal society, from where the story emanates. In many oral narratives in Africa, the ogre lures young girls to the forest, then either eats them or, sometimes, human characters (often men), defeats the ogre and succeed in saving the girls' lives. Such tales served to entrench the societal African norms like patriarchy, where women are objectified and treated as chattels or prizes. Nevertheless *The Orange Thieves* has lessons for the readers because goodness is shown to be rewarded as the narrative is constructed to allow Muthoni to live because she was a good girl to those around her. Generally, the other stories in the collection also borrow from the traditional set up, concentrating on the beliefs, practices and daily societal endeavours like blacksmithing, farming, hunting and gathering. Thus these stories from oral

traditions of the people not only helped children to identify with the settings and the activities, but they are also channels that helped in maintaining good behaviour and relationship between people in the society. These familiar settings and the themes are also important to African children, for as Butts (1992) argues they may “reassure the reader psychologically that he or she is on familiar grounds” (p. xii). (Muriung 2014).

In *The Children of the Forest* (2004), Joel Makumi addresses themes like generosity, famine, parental responsibility and patriarchy; issues that are important and visible in many African societies. The narrative takes a formulaic opening of “once upon a time” (p. 1) and later indicates the passage of time with phrases like “the days came and went” (p. 5), signalling a borrowing from the oral tale. In this narrative, two children Gathumbi-Keru, a boy, and Wamanjuruku, a girl, are abandoned in their home by their parents who go in search for food when famine strikes. However, when the parents come back to pick the two, they do not find them because they have been saved by another man and his son who were out guarding their cattle in the bushes near the aforementioned home. When the old man finds the abandoned children:

He killed a goat from his herd and roasted the meat [which] he gave some to the two strange children before he and his son ate their share. The children ate hungrily and by evening they were strong enough to walk home with the old man and his son (p 4-5).

The old man’s generosity is worth mentioning here because he subsequently adopts the two children, disciplines and brings them up as responsible human beings. His gesture demonstrates that individualism was shunned in the African traditional society in preference of communalism. It is clear from the narrative that this was a pastoralist community, and that disasters like famine befell them. Such economic activities and occurrences were common in African societies, thus the story has verisimilitude and shows the authenticity of reality. The arrival of the two children at the old man’s home allows the readers to see the role of the man as the head of the family because while the wife initially refuses to accept the two, the husband commands her to do so. The motif of the mean and jealous step-mother (in this case foster mother) seen in African oral narratives is also evident here because the woman does not seem to like the idea that she was supposed to feed two more mouths:

As the old man approached the hut, his wife ran out shouting angrily and shaking her fists.

“My son has told me about the children,” she screamed. “I don’t want wild creatures from the forest in my house. Take them back and leave them where you found them.”

“They are little children,” said the old man softly, “unwanted children left all alone with no one to care for them. You will look after them and bring them up as your own.”

“I have enough with my own flesh and blood to look after,” said the woman excitedly. “I don’t want any children here that don’t belong to me.”

“But now they belong to you,” said her husband. “You will do as I say and take them in and treat them as if they were your own.”

The days went and came. The old man’s wife was forced to look after the children, after a time she became quite fond of them (p 5-6).

Patriarchy is discernible here because it is the man that dictates the happenings in the household. The roles are also set for men and women because while Gathumbi-keru and the old man’s son are trained in manly activities like hunting and looking after the animals, the girl is taught womanly chores like cooking, gathering firewood, weeding, fetching water, going to the market and weaving baskets, to prepare them to take up their place in the society when they grow up. Child readers with an African upbringing would easily identify with such activities as opposed to foreign narratives as mentioned earlier. The appropriation of the oral tale into children’s written stories therefore helped to slowly shift the content of these stories from a European version to an African version in postcolonial Africa in general and Kenya in particular.

Maillu’s *The Orphan and his Goat Friend* (1993), is also an appropriation from the traditional folklore of the Kenyan society. It is a didactic text through which readers witness how evil is punished, while good deeds are rewarded. This comes clear when Kakuthi, a jealous step-mother digs a hole next to her step-son’s bed in order to trap and kill him, but she instead falls into the hole and dies. It is clear in this story that though the stepmother is usually associated with jealousy and cruelty, her character is often essential. This is because while she has subversive intentions, her character often always leads the protagonist to

better fortunes (Wittmann 2011), so this is a lesson in itself. You sometimes need enemies for to thrive. Maillu's text projects similar lessons as *The Orange Thieves* discussed earlier because like Muthoni who is rewarded for her kindness, the step-son does not fall into the hole as intended by his stepmother because he was innocent. The step-mother on the other hand dies like the giants that were planning to feast on Muthoni. As mentioned earlier, these stories help children in seeing life from other perspectives, especially in discerning the difference between good and evil, coaching them to always be good to others and to avoid being punished like the bad characters in the narratives. According to Wittmann (2011), such tales have the power to not only influence the children's beliefs but they also have the ability to shape the under-aged recipients' perception of reality and the society even in the modern set-up. With the penetration of feminist movement in Africa in the 20th century, which advocated for the liberation of the female figure from patriarchy and other forms of subordination in both the traditional and modern society, literature became one of the tools for suggesting these liberating paths. Children's literature in Africa also started responding to such changes in the society through the publication of books that could give the girl child, room to think outside the patriarchal box; creating characters that could battle the giants/ogres, and thus providing the girl child with model characters. One such book is Isoka's (1995) *The Girl who became Chief*. It is a story of a young girl named Kadogo, who manages to save the chief's daughter and the whole society from the troubles of Ang'ala, a notorious man-eating ogre, after all the men in the village are defeated. For this, Kadogo is made the village chief. Kadogo is a Kiswahili word meaning small or miniature in size and (in this context) in age but she is given an adult role of becoming a leader and more specifically debunking and renouncing the myth that women cannot be leaders. Using wisdom from her mother, she lures the ogre with beer and afterwards she and the captured daughter of the chief kill the beast. In this story women are empowered because it is their wisdom that helps in formulating the plan that kills Ang'ala. Although the presentation of Kadogo in this text could be viewed as an inversion of gender roles, such a revision of oral narratives for child readers is important in modern society where the girl child must stand up to the contemporary giants. Such changes in narratives for children indicate that, like adult literature, children's literature is keen to embrace transformations that allow women to empower themselves. (Muriung 2014).

In the urban and rural areas of 21st century Africa, specifically Nigeria, social evils like internet fraud, fraudulent money doubling schemes or ritual killings for money due to the waning economy, moral stance and outlook in life, is supposedly the new norm. So it also has to be reflected in children literature to educate our children. One such literature is Ikonne's *Costly Mistake* (2017), it is

the story of a boy named Ezeako and it tells of the unhealthy crave for wealth which can be disastrous, as it was for Dama, his uncle, and himself.

Years gone by and Ezeako continued to grow in his love for money, while his education suffers greatly. (p 14)

The questions that the reader is forced to ask however are: who will save the misguided children from their future suffering? What can be done to stop this continually rising menace? Or, can the religious houses help? God forbid that the holy places are also polluted.

Today's children's literature in Africa can therefore be said to have actively responded to the changing situations in the society, as evident in Nigeria, speaking to issues old and new, like theft, ritual killing, betrayal, greed and death. *Costly Mistake* contains relevant emergent issues in modern Nigeria, which are important for young readers.

### **Issues Affecting Children that Prose Fiction Addresses**

In her discussion of the dominant themes in African children's prose fiction, Khorana observes that literature for children attempts to fill the void created by the "rootlessness" or "nonbelonging" that is a legacy of colonialism (7). She further notes that the dominant thematic preoccupation in many children's literature are themes of protest, alienation, corruption and the harsh realities of urban life. Authors of children's prose fiction in Africa purportedly treat these themes with a view to providing a coping or thriving formula for children.

Issues affecting children are varied and many, so the writers of prose fiction for children in one way or the other, addresses these varied issues in diverse ways. The psychological development of a child is as important as their physical growth. This is why writers of children's novels go deeper to explore issues that can affect or may be affecting a child's psyche. These matters include divorced parents, dysfunctional family, early marriage as is prevalent in the northern region, parents forced chosen career for the children, step mother and sibling issues. Felicity Jasper in the novel *A Piece of Jasper*, describes the life of a little girl Sally-Fay whose contented peaceful life is thrown upside down when her father remarries his business partner who has a clever confident son of Sally's own age. The family starts off knowing each other and bonding. Her father books a short holiday in the Guest Farm at Lesotho border. Sally is desperately unhappy with her new brother and mother and goes off a lot on her own, into the mountains where the San people once lived. It is whilst she is walking here that she finds a piece of jasper and picks it up, unaware at that time that it is an

ancient San artefact which connects her with a San family and in particular with the lovely young medicine woman, Kamma, who has great wisdom and helps Sally Fay to make the adjustment she needs to make in order to be happy. This is a picture of a depressed child who was struck with the feeling of inferiority complex, as a result of exposure to the harsh reality of life. It is a great difficulty for children dealing with stereotypical step mother issues because more often than not, their matriarchal bond may have been severed when they are still tender. Hence the problem faced by these set of children was explored by the writer and through the character of Kamma, the young medicine woman, a hope for survival was placed into the heart of the children.

Writers also try to inculcate in young readers a respect for tradition, sense of community, time-honoured beliefs and custom, kinship with nature and the land. While recognising the importance of progress. A good example is Musa Nagenda's *Dogs of Fear*, where the protagonist realizes that book knowledge and the practical lessons of his traditional upbringing can be reconciled.

## Conclusion

It is the suggestion therefore of the researcher that more intellectual interest should be allotted to the production, study and critiquing of children's fiction. Government educational bodies should invest generously in the entirety of young-adult and children literature. Courses tailored specifically to the study of children's literature should be established at the university level as some of the university graduates end up becoming teachers to children, and how can one teach what he/she does not know?

In the course of this research, it became apparent that many early African children's prose fiction were originally oral tales which were transcribed into writings, with the aim of teaching morals and preserving tradition. However, modern writings have shifted from this preoccupation to accommodate new issues like gender-equality and the importance of education. This chapter has attempted to portray the didactic nature and the value of social commitment in children's fiction by exploring the themes prevalent in African children's prose fiction across regions. Children fiction here, are stories about children every-day experiences, at home and at school, put in contexts which they can easily empathise with. These stories often have African setting, characters and relatable themes as the prevailing beliefs like Dahal's *The Orange Thieves* and Ogiaga's *The Super Girl*. It has also examined some children narratives that depict transition to modernity like Ikonne's *Costly Mistake*. It has been observed that African children literature much like African adult literature is often socially didactic, 'arts for life's sake' and as such encourages children to be good and to shun evil for the growth of a morally focused society because it is well known

and widely believed that children are the future of any society, region and nation.

This chapter therefore concludes that African children's prose fiction serves a major role in educating African children on African values. However, more can, and should be done in the production and promotion of prose fiction for the African children.

## References

- Dahal Charity. *The orange thieves*. 3rd Ed. Nairobi: Phoenix publishers, 1995.
- Elizabeth Alalou, Ali Alaolu, and Julie Essakalli. *The Butter Man*. Charlesbridge Publishers, 2008.
- Felicity Keats. *A piece of Jasper*. South Africa: Umsinsi Press, 2013.
- Finnegan Ruth. Oral Literature in Africa. New edition [online]. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012. <<http://books.openedition.org/obp/1154>>. ISBN: 9781906924720.
- Prince Kelvin A. Ikonne. *Costly Mistake*. Lagos, Nigeria: DK\_Legend Communications, 2017.
- Isoka Amos. *The girl who became chief*. Nairobi: Phoenix Publishers, 1995.
- Khorana Meena. *Critical perspectives on postcolonial African children's and young adult literature*. Greenwood publishing group, 1998.
- Kwaku Osei-Bonsu. *Lami's nightmare*. Ghana: African publications, 2012.
- Nagenda Musa. *Dogs of fear: A story of modern Africa*. Heinemann secondary readers. Heinemann, 1971.
- Makumi Joel. *The children of the forest* (12th Ed.). Nairobi: Phoenix publishers, 2004.
- Muriungi Colomba Kaburi. *Transformations in Kenyan Children's Prose Fiction*. Journal of Arts and Humanities (JAH), Volume 3, NO. 4, 2014.
- Ogiaga Ono Anthony. *The Super Girl*. Lagos, Nigeria: Tonog Global Concept, 2019.

Ogunyemi Christopher Babatunde. *A meta-critical study of Akachi Ezigbo's perspectives on children's literature in Nigeria: narratology as scientific instrument, morality and didactics in analysis*. International Journal of English Language. Vol 4, 2013.

Oripeloye Henri. *Public morality: A panacea for democratic attitude and sustainable development* accepted for publications by J. sustainable Develop, 2012.

Page McBrier and Lori Lohstoeter. *Beatrice's goat*. Uganda: Penguin Books, 2010.

Satomi Ichikwa. *My Father's Shop*. Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 2004.

Tolowa M. Mollel and Earl B. Lewis. *My Rows and Piles of Coins*. Tanzania: African writers' series, 2012.

Ufondu, I.E. and Edmund Opare. *The fruit of honesty*. Nigeria: Lagos State, Nigeria: IEU Communications, 1993.

Wellek René and Warren Austin. *Theory of literature*. Hamondsworth: penguin books, 1982.

<http://delightfulchildrensbooks.com/2011/03/31/africa/>

<http://fusenumber8.blogspot.nl/2006/05/review-of-day-my-fathers-shop.html?m=1>

<http://www.onlinenigeria.com/nigerianliterature/?blurb=648#ixzz4PDtsPdQB>