

THE QUEST FOR PARADIGMS: CHILDREN VERSUS ADULT LITERATURE IN ACHEBE AND NZEKWU

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Abstract

Literature performs a didactic function in mankind's existence and this role is structured in the construct of recognizable paradigms. In Africa and Nigeria especially, this quality of literature is more pronounced and in our responsibility to prepare children for the future, children's literature is laden with the task of presenting firsthand the (harsh) realities of what life is all about. This essay explores the extent to which two popular adult literature writers have fared in this endeavour. It has been found out that their juvenile literatures in all their moralistic didacticism have been ineffectual in the presentation of life as it should be. Though faithful in their mimetic portrayal of life in their adult literature, their efforts in children's literature are not enough especially in our fast-evolving and increasingly challenging contemporary society.

Keywords: *Didacticism, Paradigm, Realism, Quest, Mimesis, Children's Literature, Adult Literature*

Introduction

It is apt to suggest that Children's Literature is the umbrella term that covers the range of stories, books, magazines, poems, etc., enjoyed by children. We are generally dealing with a genre which has literary productions with one thing in common, the fact that the

writers usually adult, have children as their targets. It is adults creating and adjusting productions for a younger audience.

All around the world, more specifically in Africa, a considerable amount of children's literature could be traced to oral tradition; especially folklore. The mostly didactic content, therefore, does not surprise anybody. No matter how original the writers want to be, the folkloristic ambience and characteristics remain constant. If there are any issues there, it is that of the nexus of intended age (a la appropriate content) conflicting with the 'original' adult issue or form in a fast evolving world of so much information where so much access collapses boundaries of age. We are left at least with one critical question. Are writers delivering appropriate productions in terms of the needs of children vis-à-vis the artistic or thematic substance and its function for society?

A rapidly changing world calls for new strategies, or fresh new ways of looking at our world whether that world is real or imaginary. If the import of Achebe's "What Has Literature Got To Do With It?"¹ is anything to go by, then waking up to its realities and demands is morning yet on creation day. We can start now to change what we regard as felicitous themes in our children's literature. Two stories will stand as case in point here.

Children versus Adult Literature: Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River* and Onuora Nzekwu's *Eze Goes to School*

Chike and the River (1966) is an interesting adventure story of a nine-year old boy who leaves his sleepy hamlet of Umuofia to stay with his uncle in the busy commercial riverside town of Onitsha in the then Eastern Nigeria. The plot hinges on Chike's ambition to cross the River Niger to Asaba town in a boat, which is a fairly daunting task for small Chike who has neither the money nor the approval of his stern uncle in order to accomplish his mission. After passing through ordeals that include seeing and subsequently being swindled by a money-doubler, he finally makes up the financial requirements when he is rewarded with a shilling by washing a car. He does the boat crossing into Asaba and lands in trouble when he could not meet up with the boat again to cross into Onitsha.

He is forced to sleep in a parked lorry. There, hidden and trembling with fear, he overhears plans for a robbery and later helps the police in tracking down the thieves in the morning - a daring act of bravery and patriotism which the author contrives for his didactic purpose. Chike gains a lot from his adventure:

Everywhere people spoke of
Chike's adventure. His
photograph appeared in the

local newspapers and his name was mentioned on the radio. Then after the three thieves and the night-watchman had been tried and imprisoned, Chike got a letter from the manager of the shop. He announced that the company which owned the shop had decided to award a scholarship to Chike which would take him right through secondary school. (p 60)

An ideal right-on moral package is not hard to see from the above; and this is the stuff didactic juvenile literature is regularly garlanded with. The hero has passed through ordeals, kept his head above water and ultimately triumphs. This is a mimesis of our adult world, howbeit inchoate. There is an echo here of the quintessential Achebe dealing with the adult world. Will Okonkwo survive his numerous tribulations in *Things Fall Apart*? He does not unlike Eze in novel circumstances. Will Obi Okonkwo survive cultural conflicts in a new dispensation which demands a certain kind of resilience at a time when things are *No Longer at Ease*? Achebe is not new or indeed alone in passing this type of message, sometimes obliquely or rhetorically.

Onuora Nzekwu and Michael Crowder's *Eze Goes to School* has a similar message.

Eze Adi in *Eze Goes to School* is about the same age as Chike (and also lost a father) who leaves his somnolent village of Ohia to Ama and later Obodo; the latter being more of a township than the others. His adventure though not as exciting or colorful as Chike's is centered on his quest to go to school which he achieves mainly through focus and hardwork. His ordeals include keeping to his late father's wishes, overcoming meager resources and indifferent, profligate and hostile uncles, scraping a living, supporting a sick mother, subduing his own later pride and snobbery, passing entrance examinations, impressing his teachers, winning a scholarship and ultimately surviving an accident. At the end, a familiar trope plays again:

When Mr. Okafor told Eze that he did not know whether he would be able to start school, Eze guessed the truth from the smile on Mr. Okafor's face. He knew then he would be going to school despite everything. (p 163)

Though both Achebe's and Nzekwu's stories differ in content, plot, and narration, the same intended pattern

of basic ordeal and subsequent triumph yokes the authors together. For Chike, Eze and all other young ones out there, the message is more or less couched in this form: once you are determined, hardworking and focused, you may pass through a crucible and the final reward will be worth it. That is what life and the world is all about, at least the Igbo foundations of this kind of story. There is here the strong echo of one of the numerous poly-semantic messages in Okonkwo's *Things Fall Apart* world of material struggle and eventual recognition by society with the Igbo proverbial fulcrum of *if you wash your hands, you will eat with kings*. We will later find out that such a sugar-coated hard lesson is in congruence with other literature and the realities of life. Achebe and Nzekwu in their children's literature lead the pack in their stories which move us from the simple mimesis of adult world morality to a human condition with roots that are virtually or almost archetypal.

In adult literature, the message, treatment, and content predictably changes as we will find in a selection below of synopses of adult literature from the same authors.

Achebe's Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease and Arrow of God

The story of *Things Fall Apart* revolves around the novel's hero, Okonkwo who is a respected and wealthy 'strong man' of an Igbo village, Umuofia. Okonkwo lives in fear of being a failure and would rather not end

like his good-for-nothing, flute-playing father, Unoka. He survives the ordeals of Igbo machismo and achievement driven world. He has wealth, fame and respect. However, through his tragic flaws, all that success culminate in his down-fall and ruin and eventually suicide. Coincidentally at the return from his exile from his natal home and the devastating arrival of the white man, he is overwhelmed by the changing times most poignantly signalled by the unwillingness of his clansmen to join in fighting the white man.

Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease* tells the tale of Obi Okonkwo, an English-trained civil servant who schools overseas and comes back to Nigeria with a degree in English instead of Law which he abandoned; much to the dissatisfaction and chagrin of his clansmen. In his job at the scholarship board, he is plagued by the bribe offers from people expecting him to pull a string or two in order to influence their fortunes at the scholarship scheme. He idealistically rejects and rebuffs these offers but eventually goes into personal financial problems that make him give in and accept the bribes. Eventually, his acceptances of bribes become habitual, but when he finally decides he would stop and takes his last bribe, he is caught and tried. He loses his job and faces jail time.

Arrow of God, a novel again like *Things Fall Apart* centres on the major character, Ezeulu, an Igbo chief priest of

the deity, Ulu. Ezeulu is portrayed as an intelligent and arrogant man who is battling to assert his authority as chief priest and remain relevant in the onslaught of the missionaries and again tackle the opposition by two other influential men in Umuaro – wealthy Nwaka, and Ezidemili, chief priest of the rival deity of the python's cult. Ezeulu is a righteous man who maintains his just cause when he refuses to support his Umuaro people in a war over a disputed land with their Okperi neighbours. This act endears him to T.K. Winterbottom, the British colonial overseer who makes the mistake of asking Ezeulu to be his chief. Ezeulu promptly refuses and is in turn imprisoned by Winterbottom who would not stand anyone questioning his authority. The conflict pits the chief priest against everyone: his family, his people, Winterbottom, his god, etc., in which he scores a sort of Pyrrhic victory. Out of anger and the quest for revenge, he reneges in his priestly function, is abandoned by his god and people (who opt for Christianity) and eventually runs mad.

Nzekwu's Wand of Noble Wood and Blade Among the Boys

For Onuora Nzekwu, the pattern of tragedy is evident again in his adult literature in the form of two novels – *Wand of Noble Wood* and *Blade Among the Boys*. In the first work, Peter Obiesie, the major character is a young magazine journalist who wants a wife. In a common Nigerian inclination, he wants to marry from his

ethnicity, although his mistress from another ethnic group is pregnant by him. Avoiding the normal tribal practice of asking his people to get a wife for him, he fortunately comes across Nneka, a village school teacher who meets his choice and level of sophistication and immediately falls in love with her. He proposes marriage and she accepts. But problems start again when it is discovered that the bride to be is under a curse. They (Peter and family) conduct propitiatory rites to neutralize the curse but Nneka finds out that a rival suitor has invalidated the ritual. She commits suicide in order to save Peter from the dire consequences of going ahead to marry her. Peter is devastated and heartbroken.

In *Blade Among the Boys*, Nzekwu presents the protagonist, Patrick Ikenga, who is destined to be the *okpala* ('spiritual head') of his people but has other plans for himself other than the spiritual predestination. At Catholic boarding school, he is enamoured of Christianity and makes moves to become a priest. This career trajectory pits him against the trappings of the *okpala* where he would be required to marry and have children. Incidentally, he is unjustly expelled from the school and takes a job as a railway clerk, gets into mundane life and gets serious about marrying Nkiru, his beautiful betrothed. After surviving a train mishap, he changes his mind and gets serious about being a priest and enrolls in the seminary. Armed with a love

potion, Nkiru visits him there, seduces him and he is expelled from the seminary when it is revealed that she is pregnant by him. Patrick loses out in his Catholic priesthood ambition.

The obvious differences between the didactically contrived and happy endings of the children's literatures and the bleak, pessimistic and tragic finale(s) of their adult equivalents are obvious and commonplace. The differences lie in the somewhat idealistic worlds created in the juvenile literatures where contrivances are always in place for didactic and moralistic effect. Adult texts are more subtle and realistic. These examples and the conclusion this paper projects are not absolute. We can without much labour find vice versa instances where the situations swap places. But the convention, stock-in-trade and generally accepted disposition are what have been portrayed so far; that children's literature is tailored to conveniently portray morals while adult stories are left mostly to reflect what is fairly common with real life. The contention is not with what has been established but with the justification(s), effects and overall outcome of these delineations and consecutions.

Considerations

Children are what they are: children. But the wide spectrum of humanity that falls into this nomenclatural category is large; and more befuddling is the also

confusing synonymous phrase: “young persons”. Children’s remarkable age-ranges of development are 4-5 years, 7-8 years and 9-12 years. Incidentally, the age range of Chike and Eze used in this paper fall in the 9-12 range which is important as it is the threshold of the conventional teenage and adolescence; the stage best characterized by the onset of biological maturity, psychological unpredictability, and fragile, exasperating dispositions. Nana Wilson-Tagoë underscores the importance of this age range:

At 9-12 years, as a child approaches adult-hood, his psychology, understanding and interest become mature and distinctive more than his linguistic skills and conceptual powers have by now developed sufficiently to enable him derive aesthetic pleasure from his reading. (p19)

Since they are still children, the texts intended for their consumption are still laced with the phoney and idealistic stuff that one who endures or surmounts impediments (albeit with determination) *usually* succeeds. Given their inclusion into the crucial, sensitive but precarious stage of adolescence, the best and most

realistic of mental and psychological equipping is seriously needed.

Adults, especially adults who write children's books know the influence of literature on the malleable impressions of the young persons that make up their target; and if, according to Achebe that literature gives us a 'second handle on reality';² then why give them the impression that life's fangs are not harmful? Yes, ordeals are presented in the stories (which is congruous with the realities of life), but are the often depicted triumphs also consonant?

The ancient Greeks of Sparta knew better.³ They prepared their children more effectively for the harsh realities of life. They clearly did not want to dye themselves in the wool of Wordsworth-ian caring depictions of Mother Nature. Had the Spartans been contemporaneous with Coleridge, they may have preferred his dispositions about existence: harsh, indifferent and many a time, unforgiving. At present, with the simulated blood and gore themed video games, real life insurgencies and the violence plaguing countries and peoples, natural disasters, pogroms, and irrational shooting rampages and sprees from the electronic media (children's favorite pastime), the continual contrivance of idealistically triumphant endings to their literature seems a poor and ineffectual mimesis, artistically and functionally.

Escapist or fantastical literature, the type offered by traditional folkloristic children's literature probably provides more suitable template and paradigm for modern children's literature. It is not necessary here to assemble a list or typology of themes and artistic directions because it is generally known that the old method is based on the classical ancient Horatian thing of entertaining and instructing. By and large, Realism, the creative path of a familiar world, adopted by writers, especially from the inception of nineteenth century European Realism, indicated that the whole thing about literature, Romantic or Realistic, is in the effectiveness of thematic portraiture. It does not matter whether it is from the hands of Zola, Pushkin or Stendhal, from Europe or that of Chinua Achebe or Onuora Nzekwu from Nigeria, it is a world of labour and reward and crime and punishment. Major characters from the works of those African writers like Okonkwo, Ezeulu, Obi Okonkwo, Peter and Patrick, represent humanity in their conscious endeavours to excel. Along with the adventurous characters in children's literature, they are all kindred to the humanity Thomas Fuller had in mind when he said that "We are born crying, live complaining, and die disappointed"⁴ in a world marked always by frequent adventure and occasional triumph.

The point, generally, is that paradigms portrayed by children's literature will serve both children and the

wider society better if the world of children anticipate more effectively that of the adult world. In other words, the adult should know what children are growing up to meet down the road, and produce what might serve thematically and where necessary, technically what one might regard as a literature of preparation and induction. According to Ashimole, Elizabeth “it goes without saying that from the technological preparatory point, 99.9% of children’s books are anachronistic. *They are replete with obsolete notions which are out of time with social realities*” (emphasis mine) (p 72).

There should be greater dedication to relevance in the literary production of children’s literature, and a commitment to the timing of our interventions in what really amounts to the formation of a national consciousness which anticipates the future with enthusiasm and matching optimism. Here again is Ashimole in useful and germane posture: “how best do we cope with this reality? Writing for children should most certainly move with the times – after all, we are preparing the young for the challenges of tomorrow” (p 80).

Conclusion

“What Has Literature Got To Do With It?” asks Achebe in one of his old essays engaging the issue of relevance in adult literature. Inimitably, Achebe discusses the importance of relevant literature to the positive

formation of the psyche and fabric of a nation through its people; especially the young and impressionable ones. It is obvious that life is not what it is portrayed to be in most children's literature. (This is worse in children's video games.) Adult African literature has been remarkably effective in national development by strengthening the culture and confidence of African peoples especially during the contest with colonial forces. Producers of African literature for children should therefore return always to that stable of engagement to harvest those things which powered adult African literature and its successes. Whatever is found in that stable should be garnished by this last word from Chinua Achebe which suggests to us that modern tragedy is like a bowl of bitter wormwood, sipped a little at a time.⁵ But then its effects could be mitigated – by being prepared.

Notes

1. In this paper published in the collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987*, Achebe tries to establish the importance of literature especially the folktales of a people in the development of a people's psyche, physical and material gains. The 'it' in the title represents all the positive endeavours and achievements of a race.
2. Mentioned in the same essay, Achebe reiterates the simulated preparedness that literature offers us in

the course of dealing with life's uncertainties; thereby fore-arming the reader to be better equipped in tackling the vicissitudes that accompany existence.

3. Stories are told of ancient Sparta, one of the Greek city-states of how their children are ruggedly trained, living almost all their childhood and early youth in harsh military camps. They are taught how to survive in the most improbable conditions; and are praised on the virtues of laconic conversations, stoic silence in the event of severe physical pain, and in stealing without being caught. One of the popular Spartan stories involved a boy who stole a fox, hid it under his cloak and was gnawed to death by the animal as he refused to admit stealing and therefore revealing the fox. All the while he was being questioned, he never cried out nor showed any pains or discomfort. cf: "The Brave Spartan Boy" in H.A. Guerber's *The Story of the Greeks*.

4. Thomas Fuller was a 17th cc English clergyman and historian, a prolific author and famous for his many quotes on life. This quote appears in his work titled *Gnomologia: Adagies and Proverbs; Wise Sentences and Witty Sayings, Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British* published post humously in 1732; on page 236.

5. Achebe's character Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* gives us an insight in the nature of modern tragedy; as one that is importunately calamitous. Achebe here

compares it with conventional tragedy which is too easy as it ends with the hero's death and the purgation of emotions. For him, real tragedy never really ends; it goes on forever. cf: *No Longer at Ease*, p. 36.

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