

Literature and National Development in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper aims to, through the lenses of various prose fictions, highlight the role of Literature as cultural studies in the development of Nigeria as a multicultural nation. It looks at how literature can resolve the existing sociocultural differences and, through the use of common national values, inculcate local national fraternity that is necessary for sustainable national development. This paper deploys the New Historicist theory as its guiding principle and theoretical framework and, the qualitative text-based method as its tool of analysis. It is discovered that, literature as cultural studies, and, through its prose fiction genre, is capable of creating mass national awareness and unity through social mobilisation and sensitisation that impact on national development. The paper concludes that literature is necessary for proper philosophical rationalisation of important national values, transmission of these values and, should therefore, be given its due position in the curriculum, to enable it to adequately contribute to both national harmony, security and national development or regeneration via the promulgation of common national values for national development.

Keywords: National Development, Literature, National Values, Contemporary

1.0 Introduction

Literature denotes a collection of writings chiefly appraised to be in art form, expressly prose fiction, drama, and or poetry that explores human experiences in society and serves as catalyst for personality and identity (Amuta 1989). With the passage of time, the definition integrates oral literature or orature. Literature is a cultural means of recording, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and of entertainment. It also has a psychosocial, spiritual, and political significance (Finnegan 1976).

Literature is a diverse, dynamic and complex entity. It can be subjected to numerous definitions, stressing divergent ideological standpoints. However, each definitional view must bear some general features of literature. In other words, literature is a form of art that expresses ideas and emotions, communicates and allows for the sharing

of thoughts and experiences, and, explores different aspects of human and societal life and experience.

Ogunjimi (1991), views literature as the creative means of representing man, his experiences and his society. It implies a collection of creative writings with diverse significations: aesthetic, cognitive, moral, philosophical, psychological, cultural and historical. Literature views the world through its unique ethnic and cultural value lenses. It uses cultural elements to project and express the history and civilisation of its cultural group.

To this end, national development, like literature, is dynamic, both as a concept and a process. It defies any form of universal definition. Yet, it is perceived to represent any planned efforts at improving the quality of life and living in human society.

Gboyega (2003) believes that development as a concept, is the idea that improvises and highlights every means of improving the entire conditions of human existence in society. Ablu (1982) holds that

development implies economic growth expressed in cumulative terms. Abubakar (1981) emphasises the need for quality in the development of all societies, social groups and individuals in any society. However, Forest (2001) sees development as the conducive situation for self-realisation and individual personality growth that culminates in the reduction of social ills: poverty, unemployment, inequality, malnutrition, disease and mortality, including infant mortality etc.

By implication, development implies economic wherewithal in addition to a purposefully rationalised sense of equity in the provision and distribution of essential social infrastructures: health care, education, housing and other essential services in the efforts to enhance the quality of human life. Hence, development is not only an economic exercise, but also involves both socioeconomic and political issues that determine all aspects of social life.

However, the relationship between literature and national development in Nigeria is established and acknowledged by authors of note. Izevbaye in his book *Nigerian literature and the Crisis of Postcolonial Identity* (2002), explores the relationship between literature and national development in Nigeria, arguing that literature can play a crucial role in shaping national identity and consciousness. Quayson's book, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997), examines the ways in which Nigerian literature reflects and shapes national development, particularly in the context of postcolonialism. Osofisan's essays, collected in *The Nostalgic Drum: Essays on Literature, Culture, and the African Experience* (2002) explore the relationship between literature and national development in Nigeria, highlighting the role of literature in promoting social transformation.

This paper therefore, seeks to highlight how literature stretches beyond the traditional role of entertainment and aesthetic by reaching out to the realms of sustainable national development efforts as cultural response, through representations of national values, as an instrument for enlightenment, public education and mass sensitisation for proactive national development. These critics, and many others that are not mentioned here, have variously made significant contributions to the study of Nigerian literature and its relationship to national development.

Theoretical Framework

This paper deploys the New Historicist theory as its guiding principle. New Historicism is a theory that seeks to find meaning in literature by considering it within the context of the prevailing ideas and social assumptions of the historical era in which the text is produced. Many scholars have criticised this theory which emerged in the 1980s. Eagleton (1990) for instance, accused it of neglecting literary form and theoretical rigor. Jameson (1991) critiques New Historicism for its lack of engagement with Marxism and failure to address the systemic nature of power. Said (1993) critiqued its neglect of imperialism and colonisation. However, this theory is relevant to this study as it allows for critical contextualisation of the historical genesis of Nigeria's lack of development and the relevance of Nigerian literature in the quest for sustainable national development in contemporary Nigeria.

2.0 Materials and Method.

Methodology

This paper deploys the qualitative text-based method as its tool of data/text analysis. This is to say, it draws critical analogy from a randomly selected set of literary text in cognizance of scholarly account of the historical period in which the texts are written. In other words, the paper draws its analogy by juxtaposing literature history and critical scholarly views in seeking solution to Nigeria's development woes. The referenced literary texts were deliberately chosen, though randomly, for their historical reflection and representation of the core purpose of this paper: literature and Nigeria's development.

3.0 Literature and National Development

Literature is crucial to the society and culture of its origin. Writers of literary works are like social philosophers who are concerned with the sociopolitical happenings in their societies. However, many writings on extremely private topics can also have political undertone as they interrogate human social conditions. All literary works that are set in a society, culture, or environment must inform and improve the consciousness of the people about their general conditions.

However, a critical appraisal of nations, regions and continents globally displays Africa's dilapidation and stagnation in both human and material developments. By implication, this low United Nations' index status reflects Africa's near absence of social and economic development. It suffices to say that human development index of any country or continent is primarily inclusive of the life expectancy, education, and the standards of living or income of its citizens. It should be recalled that in 2010, of all the countries in the world, only a few African countries were in the medium group and most, sadly, including Nigeria, ranked 142nd, with very low-level of human development.

In most erudite cultures, it is the writers who envisioned the future societal prospect in the form of literary intuitive speculations that later inspire creative thoughts which facilitate inventions. For instance, Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873) written at a time when it was impracticable to travel round the world in a year. Today, that literary intuition or creative dream has brought about, throughout the entire universe: airplanes and space-crafts that can now travel round the world in a matter of a few hours. In other words, literature can be a catalyst for human development by inspiring people to stretch their imaginative potentials for physical development and the wellbeing of the people. In essence, human development is a necessary requirement for industrial and all other forms of national development. This points to the necessity for a return to the origin, the cultural milieu for all African writers, including those in diaspora, for development oriented explorations of cultural values from within.

This is to create the literary strategies and renewed visions that might advance the African condition in the vast areas of development: living standard, health, education etc. This creative dream from within should also help in the elimination of inequality, poverty, gender gap, and socioeconomic and political insecurities. Globalisation has turned the entire world into a small village. Notwithstanding, African literature requires not only cultural return but a systematic renewal from within, and in line with the global realities of human development: physically, spiritually, and metaphorically for the benefit of the populace, and the nation.

Hence, Nigerian literature is "a product of people in society, a social institution, a super-structural manifestation of a fundamentally material process, the process of creation of ideas and values within limits prescribed by the social essence of language" (Amuta, 1989, p. 9). This suggests that both literature and national development are integral part of the same coin which can mutually facilitate the attainment of sustainable national development in Nigeria. Literature, therefore, reflects the intrinsic intricacies of social growth in time and space, but, empirically, it is the reflection of dreams, and visions of the future of the nation.

The Nigerian literature presents the necessary possibilities of a sustainable national development in its reflections of the society. Literature in Nigeria always portrays the problem, the cause and the solution. This literary strategy of Nigerian literature exposes the readers to the nature and causes of specific social problem, vision etc. and at the same time provides viable means of resolving the problem, or attaining the desired object in a poetic, yet, realistic way.

Happily, the main thrusts of the contemporary Nigerian literary works emphasise the crusade against postcolonial vices and stimulate the virtues of honesty, justice, truth, hard-work, love, spirituality and uprightness as positive values. The writers consider these as very significant national core values that are necessary to the entirety of the Nigerian national development. These positive values are creatively contrasted with other negative values: dishonesty, injustice, laziness, corruption, prejudice, ethnicity and hate as a logical means of augmenting the way to viably progressive and sustainable national development. This creative technique is employed to tactfully and conveniently reduce or entirely remove the dominance of both postcolonial vices and the licentious desires that follow modernity. For instance, Achebe, in *No Longer at Ease* explores the challenges faced by Obi Okonkwo as he navigates the complexities of traditional culture, colonialism and modernity. Through Obi's struggles, Achebe contrasts decency, uprightness with vices of corruption, bribery and moral decay in Nigerian society.

How Nigerian Literature Encourages National Development

Nigerian literature endeavours to improve the individual psychology of Nigerians, to be

consciously sensitive and responsive to the politico-economic happenings in the society. The sole aim is to rectify any anomalous situation and to help in achieving a people oriented and sustainable national development. The inspiration for these is drawn and strengthened by the improved cognitive ability to conceive and actualise realities beyond the narrative and, to attain to new realities beyond the immediately attainable convention. According to Soyinka (1995), one must disrupt the accepted conventions in order to free the society from the clutches of historical dogmas and retrogressive superstitions. For instance, in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), the ambivalent situation of Azaro, the hitherto dreaded spirit child, is transfigured. By this, Okri pursued a creative path to upset the convention or the myth of abiku belief system to unshackle the Yorubas from this historical and superstitious belief. This poetic act of upsetting the societal convention, laid open the historical past and allows Okri to recognise and portray his society's transition to its various stages of development. This understanding equally enables Okri not only to predict developmental possibilities but also to infuse his visions of the future with the aim of changing the society and its systems (Nwanko 1989). This is achievable because the text embodies both objective and subjective realities of existence as its components. As the reader grasps the absurd situations that are portrayed in the texts, it becomes possible, as Soyinka (1995) opines, to enforce a change in the situations. This shows that literature responds to the pressing needs of human existence and reflects the various aspects of human experience which, as a result, rekindles reader's consciousness about the realities of his/her situations in relation to global events. This allows literature to stimulate reader's appropriate response to both negative and positive situations in the society (Irele 1981). This conscious desire to change one's situation is the practical manifestation of Nigerian literature's functions in sensitising the populace for positive change or, the attainment of sustainable national development. This also supports Eagleton's (1989) idea of the transformative function of literature, while the social context provides the raw material for this transformation. Therefore, literature provides the reading public with the necessary stimulating inspiration and modelled course of action in

societal transformation and development of the individual, group and society.

Therefore, this literature's desire and concern for improved human condition is what nurtures literary interest in the political situations as a whole. Most of the postcolonial Nigerian literature is concerned with political representations in various ways and through numerous cultural motifs. For instance, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, (1991) Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* (1968) and Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (), have differently portrayed the situations of political corruption in their respective domiciles and, how it retards and devastates generic social development and the material conditions of man in those societies. However, the thematic concerns of Nigerian literature are not preoccupied only with political, and amoral arguments, it equips its reading public with the ability to genuinely engage in logical and objective analysis and arguments about their material conditions. It provides readers with insightful critical thinking tools to identify the relations or otherwise between differing qualities, values, and, the entire situations of human existence in this country, with preference to achieving feasible national cohesion and development. Every literary work is merely an instrument of knowledge, readers are expected to appropriately discern the information in the texts and transmute these into knowledge: an objective history of the Nigerian condition - corruption, injustice, ethnic conflicts, gender issues. This information can be processed into knowledge as essential tool for action in the resolution of conflicts. This intrinsic literary quality to prepare the populace in resolving the Nigerian conflicts is a monumental effort to social change and national development. This is the poetic intent in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (). Nigerian literature provides its readers with knowledge of self through literary quest for identity. The reader, through this understanding, acquires a sense of appreciation for the divergent identities, histories and cultures that cohere to make Nigeria. By this, tolerance and cooperation are inculcated. In Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman* (1987) for example, the protagonist girl child proved her willpower as she suffered from male chauvinism, sexual harassment yet, was not distracted from her quest for education which she believed to be the only means to her emancipation – a University

education. She tolerated societal disruption to redefine her identity anew.

Ibrahim Babangida, then the Nigerian head of state, at the occasion of the Nigerian literature and science award, had admonished Nigeria that her pursuit of scientific knowledge must not be at the detriment of the humanities, specifically literature. He concludes that:

“Literature, more than any other discipline in humanities and I dare say, even science, provides us with the best prism through which we could take a holistic view of ourselves, our social environment and even our comparative location in our material world made possible by science, in order to ensure that we protect our humanity, and even raise it to a higher level of honour and integrity” (Babangida, as cited in Sun News, 2007).

A genuinely sustainable national development requires the knowledge of literature as a basic human component of realistic development through cultural development. Self-knowledge, that of one's environment and of others make the application of knowledge for development appropriate.

It suffices to say that literature articulates national development in its holistic and multidimensional form. In other words, literary representation embodies the entire facets of society and human experiences in the quest for not only better living condition but also improved material relation and communication with the world outside.

Grassroots Development in Literature

Development is a tool for enhancing the capacity of people at the grassroots level to equip their future mechanisation for a better life. It means doing what is necessary to expand and optimise resources on the path of Change (Mathur, 1985). Accordingly, literature, as shown in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), exposes the deplorable struggles for survival of the rural poor in the ghetto. Dad is seen toiling from one demeaning job to another until when he attains self-realisation and begins to oppose the oppressive system to better his condition.

The satisfaction of the basic necessities of life of the poor is an important element in alternative development strategies. According to Friedman

(1993), man's primary needs include categories of basic needs. The first category includes the minimum requirements of a family: adequate food, shelter, clothing, and essential household furniture. The second category encompasses essential services provided for the community at large: stable and safe water supply, sanitation, public transport, health and educational facilities. Both Achebe, in *A Man of the People* (1966) and Okri, in his *The Famished Road*, (1991), like most of the postcolonial authors, have, in their different creative acts, interrogated the failure to provide for these basic needs which create awareness of the fact that development does not in any way, benefit the poor and, the question of deplorable social condition of the rural majority is still unanswered.

Gender and development in Literature

Literature also draws public attention to the role and impact of women or gender in societal development. This includes women's participation alongside men in determining the decision-making processes. Literature also highlights the contribution of women to the improvement of rural life and the achievement of the widest possible rural development. This theme, in addition to her toiling in the market, is represented when Mum, in company of seven other women, resisted the police and secure the freedom of her husband, Dad, in Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). In *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe portrays Maxwell's girlfriend, engaged in serious discussion about state issues with her male colleagues. Thus, literature reveals the social equality between man and woman in the construction of the new nation state.

However, sociology has identified sex “as a biological term that describes biological and physical differences between men and women” and, gender “as a sociological term that describes these differences as being socially and culturally constructed” (Barnett, 1988, pp. 158-160). These differences are reflected in: roles, responsibilities, access to resources, constraints, opportunities, needs and perceptions held by both sexes (Barnett, 1988; Foster-Carter, 1985).

Perhaps, because of their usually subordinate position to men, women have particular needs that differ from those of men. Generally, women have two forms of needs: practical and strategic. Practical needs imply provisions for feminine personal and family health facilities and services,

enhanced feminine earning and reduction in workload. Strategic needs include provisions for: improved access to education, equal employment opportunity, ownership of properties and, cumulative participation in policy and decision making processes (Moser, 1993; Foster-Carter, 1985).

Interestingly, Charlton (1984) asserts that Ester Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development*, has "helped to put women and development into an international context by clarifying both the human dimension of economic development and the policy issues raised by the development projects undertaken in the 1960s" (p. 1). The African women artists see woman's possibility in the educational empowerment of the girl child. Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1984) and *The Virtuous Woman* (1987) portray the feminine resolve to pursue education as the only and necessary tool to her self-salvation, participation in the politico-economic life of society and contributing in her chosen endeavour, to national development. The Nigerian novel seeks a redefinition of the woman. This is one view of the woman operating within the context of and in conformity with her tradition. This idealisation is what Boserup conceptualised as "Women in Development" (WID) which emphasised women's needs by assimilating them into development (Boserup, as cited in Charlton, 1984, p. 39; Braidotti, et al., 1994, p. 79).

Both rural men and women worldwide are agrarian in order to support life. They are profoundly engaged in subsistence agricultural production and other petty economic activities to support and maintain the family. Women's role in agriculture is relative to culture and location. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, rural women provide roughly 60-80 percent of the needed agricultural labour for the production of food, its preservation, transportation and sale. This is in addition to their conventional reproduction and nurturing obligation: childbearing, rearing, preparing food, gathering fire-wood and fetching water. Women are said to spend up to 16 hours every day in their domestic and farm tasks (Moser, 1993). The toiling of Mum in Okri's *The Famished Road* has adequately highlights the author's recreation of the character of the Nigerian woman. She compliments in the struggles, along with other women, to contribute to the making of a better Nigeria.

There are many gender discriminatory practices and inequalities identified in lower literate women. These, according to Barnett (1988), include (i) restricted access to means of production: land, credits, technology and social services. (ii) Lack of health and legal services and, (iii) limited participation in decision-making processes. Various interpretations have been given to these discriminatory practices against women. One explanation of the conservative methodology hinges on physiological differences. Other approaches focus on "the political, cultural and ideological explanations" (Barnett, 1988, p. 31). While Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* linked this to the conservative notion of biological and cultural determinants, Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) blames political ideology that suppresses the woman's efforts.

From a cultural and ideological point of view, Afsher (1991) radically argues that there are ideological misconceptions related to women's productive role that deny them the right to work and idealise their image as "home-based, child-rearing women" (p. 9). Development could take place "only if and when it addresses the double-burdens of production and reproduction carried by women" (Afsher, 1991, p. 2), as is typically the case with Ramatoulaye, in *So Long a Letter*.

4.0 Conclusion

Both "literature" and "development" have various meanings to different people with differing ideological inclinations. Generally, it is shown that the two elements complement each other in society. In this context, development is seen to mean a deliberately organised effort aimed at attaining the identified and lofty societal goals - best possible condition of existence that conforms to relative global standards in relation to time. This suggests the attainment of a state of existence with increasing happiness and receding suffering, absence of poverty and guaranteed human rights, both of action and of choice.

However, literature on the other hand, provides the basic inspirations for cultural change and development. It creatively envisions the future society through its numerous employment of cultural elements, creative intuitions and the artfully regenerative portrayal of thought provoking cultural stimulus. By so doing, literature ignites logical reflection, purposeful cognition and

idealisation of one's material condition and that of the society as a result of reading. This ontological function apart, literature provides psychological therapy through its numerous modes of entertainments. These literary functions combine to create a focused man with balanced and complete potentials for all-round national development visions: social, cultural, political economic, physical, philological etc. As the track-recorder of societal activities in time, literature serves not only an historical purpose but also as an analytical board for articulating and analysing strategic core social changes. Hence, functioning as a viable tool for the stimulation of sustainable national development.

It suffices to stress therefore, that the study of literature as a necessary component of the humanities should be given the official attention it deserves in the national curriculum, manpower and funding to enable it to fully develop the human capacity, man being the sole agent of sustainable national development.

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