

The Role of Children's Literature in the Declaration of Nigeria as a Multicultural State

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Abstract- *This paper considers the role of children's literature in the declaration of Nigeria as a multicultural State. Nigeria is generally noted for its numerous languages, cultures and dialects. Children's literature has always provided opportunity for cultivation of individual and group's cultural heritage promoting its appreciation and internalization. The growth and development of children's self-perception is impacted, resulting in transference of such to future use as well as generation unborn. This paper, therefore, proposes that given the inherent role literature plays in character molding, children's literature should be replete with topics and ideas that promote better understanding of cultures and diversities represented within Nigeria. This will thereby make children's literature a vital tool for promoting the declaration of Nigeria as a multicultural state.*

Key words- Role; Children's literature; Multicultural; Declaration; Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism denotes more than one cultural practice. It projects inclusive policy which accommodates the various socio-economic groups or nationalities in a given state. The ideology promotes justice and equity in a society. The cultural plurality of Nigeria, created as a result of colonialism has made her multilingual and multicultural in nature. Managing this plurality and diversity is however, a big challenge to her survival and relevance as an entity.

Children literature can be distinguished from other forms of literature by its ability to appeal to children's imaginations and emotions. The concept of children literature is the collection of books, stories, magazines and poems that are written for and enjoyed by children. The characteristics of, and the values inherent in children's literature makes it a veritable tool for the declaration of Nigeria as a multicultural state (Adetuyi, 2016)[2].

All over the world, children are regarded as vessels for the visionary optimism of the adult world (Obi, 2015)[21]. Children are the leaders of tomorrow. This is corroborated by the Yoruba adage that says, "Eyin ni di akuko" (it is the egg that metamorphoses into a Cockerel). The relevance of multicultural education in a multilingual and multiethnic nation like Nigeria becomes very important for positive integration of the populace towards the path of national building. This education can be achieved to a large extent through children's literature.

Children's multicultural stories are very important in mending the impaired future of the Nigerian society due

to cultural dichotomy. Stories have been used to dispose and to malign but stories can also be used to empower. Stories can be used to break the dignity of the people, dehumanize and cause discord and segregation; but stories can also be used to repair broken dignity, disillusionment and disunity that exist in Nigeria (Adetuyi et al 2015[4]; Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2015[10]).

2. CULTURE AND MULTICULTURALISM

2.1 Culture

To better understand the discourse of the role of children's literature to the declaration of Nigeria as a multicultural state, it is imperative to look at the definitions of culture and multiculturalism.

Culture can be understood as all the ways in which people live and think in the world. Geertz (1973) defines culture as "the shared patterns that set the tone, character, and quality of people's lives". These patterns include race, ethnicity, gender, social class, language, religion, age, sexual orientation, nationality, geographical regions, and so on. Banks (2001) states that most social scientists define culture as primarily consisting of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of society the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one group of people from another. He also argues that cultures are always dynamic, complex, and changing and must be viewed as wholes, rather than as composed of discrete parts.

2.2 Multiculturalism

According to Mendie (2015)[15], multiculturalism can be viewed from two perspectives:

- as a concept that describes the nature of the society and
- as a policy that responds to cultural diversity.

He further explains that multiculturalism as a societal concept describes the diversities that exist in a particular society. This is a society where diverse cultures coexist for common social, economic and political goal. Nigeria falls into this category having various tribes and people like the Yorubas, Hausas, Igbos, Fulanis, Kanuris, Tiv, to mention a few. Diversity manifests in people's culture, language and religion. Every culture is important and has the right to be celebrated and respected.

As a policy, multiculturalism denotes two main characteristics:

- To examine the different demands of cultural groups (ethnic discord, internal liberalism, federal autonomy and other issues linked to cultural diversity)

To provide means by which individuals or ethnic groups can pursue their cultural differences with the objective of preserving their cultural practices. (Mendie, 2015)[15] Multiculturalism is often viewed as a curriculum reform movement that involves changing the curriculum to include more content and children's books about ethnic groups, women, and other cultural groups. A curriculum reform movement in the Nigerian educational set up would go a long way in promoting multicultural children's literature that would create an awareness and acceptance on the cultural plurality of the Nigerian nation.

3. THE ROLE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE DECLARATION OF NIGERIA AS A MULTICULTURAL STATE

As Rosenblatt (1995) rightly opines, literature has the potential to be a powerful educational force, fostering the kind of sensitivity and imagination needed in a democracy. This potent force, combined with dynamic and informed teaching, can enable young people to empathize with others, develop moral attitudes, make sound choices, think critically about emotionally charged issues, and understand the consequences of their actions. All literature may be read as "voices from the heart" that, "once heard, can change other hearts" (Cai & Bishop, 1994).

Children's literature is so important in removing racial and ethnic prejudice and promoting inter-racial and ethnic understanding. Although multicultural literature is typically defined as books about specific cultural groups, either people of color or people who are members of groups considered to be outside of the dominant sociopolitical culture, Rudine Sims Bishop, Mingshui Cai, Joel Taxel, and Laura Smolkin and Joseph Suina all point out that the definition of multicultural literature has more

to do with its ultimate purpose than with its literary characteristics. They state that multicultural literature is a pedagogical construct that has the goal of challenging the existing standard by including literature from a variety of cultural groups.

Children are not race or ethnic blind. Researches have shown that children, as early as two and half years of age are aware of cultural differences and that they harbor the tendency to interpret these differences negatively. Similarly, intolerance based on cultural prejudices is not inborn. Findings have shown that a child is born absolutely free from cultural prejudice. Children acquire prejudices mostly from family environment (Milner, 1983).

If "multicultural literature" is a pedagogical term rather than a literary term, then the issues of cultural authenticity take on significance related to the role of literature in children's lives, specifically in the power of literature to change the world. Viewed in this way, literature serves a crucial role in multicultural education, social justice, and reform. Cai and Bishop (1994) argue that multicultural literature "opens the group's heart to the reading public, showing their joy and grief, love and hatred, hope and despair, expectations and frustrations, and perhaps most importantly, the effects of living in a racist society" (p. 68).

4. VALUES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTICULTURAL STATE

Although there are countless values in exposing children to literature, Donna Norton (2010) identifies the value of literature for young people in her book *Through the Eyes of a Child*. Children's literature is important because it provides students with opportunities to respond to literature; it gives students appreciation about their own cultural heritage as well as those of others; it helps students develop emotional intelligence and creativity; it nurtures growth and development of the student's personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next.

a. Provides opportunity to respond to literature and develop own opinions

The first value to note is that children's literature provides students with the opportunity to respond to literature and develop their own opinions about the topic. This strengthens the cognitive developmental domain as it encourages deeper thought about literature. Quality literature does not tell the reader everything he/she needs to know; it allows for some difference in opinion. One reader may take something completely different away from the piece of literature than the next reader, based on the two personal viewpoints and experiences. Students can learn to evaluate and analyze literature, as well as summarize and hypothesize about the topic. Norton says that for children, "wordless picture books are excellent stimuli for oral and written language" (2010, p. 9).

Students reading wordless books like *A Ball for Daisy* (Raschka, 2011)[25], *The Yellow Umbrella* (Liu, 1987)[12], or *The Red Book* (Lehmann, 2004) will be able to analyze the illustrations and develop their own dialogue for the story. This strengthens students' cognitive functions in being able to form opinions on their own and to express themselves through language in summarizing the plot of a wordless book.

b. Provides an avenue to learn about own cultural heritage and cultures of others.

Second, children's literature provides an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. It is crucial for children to learn these values because, "developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development" (Norton, 2010, p. 3)[20]. In saying this, however, when teaching students about the cultural heritage of others, one should be very careful in selecting which books to recommend to young readers.

Many books are available that depict culture as an important piece of society that is to be treasured and valued, and those books can have great value for students.

c. Develop emotional intelligence

Third, children's literature helps students develop emotional intelligence. Stories have the power to promote emotional and moral development. Children's literature "contains numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions," an important skill for children to see modeled (Norton, 2010, p. 34)[20]. *Guji Guji* (Chen, 2004)[7], for example, is a story about a crocodile who is adopted into a family of ducks. Ultimately he must choose between betraying his adopted family and going back to his own "species," and he decides to remain true to his beliefs and not betray his family. Another book that encourages emotional intelligence is *Selma* (Bauer, 2002)[5], which discusses what it takes for a young sheep to be happy. It is a philosophical story within a picture book, and challenges students to think about what happiness really is. *The Big Box* (Morrison, 1999)[16] is a story about children who have their freedom taken away by being put into a box and the deeper problems that exist with not being given one's freedom. Children's literature encourages students to think deeper about their own feelings.

d. Encourages Creativity

Children's literature also encourages creativity. Norton stresses "the role that literature plays in nurturing and expanding the imagination" (2010, p. 4). *The House in the Night* (Swanson, 2008)[26] depicts the creativity that a young girl has in her dreams at night, as she flies about the dark neighborhood on the wings of a bird. Children's literature promotes the development of students' internal imaginations.

e. Fosters Personality and Social Development

Children's literature is of value because it fosters personality and social development. Children are very

impressionable during the formative years, and children's literature can help them develop into caring, intelligent, and friendly people. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget says that when students move from the pre-operational to the operational stage of cognitive development, they become less egocentric. Whereas students in preschool and kindergarten may be entirely focused on themselves, as students grow older they begin to take into account the feelings and viewpoints of others. Being able to understand other people's viewpoints and to not be selfish are important skills that adults must nurture in children, as Norton says that "acceptable relationships require an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of others" (2010, p. 27). Children's literature can foster social development by encouraging students to accept other people and their differences. Books like *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005)[23], *Molly's Family* (Garden, 2004), *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Souza, 1989)[19] and *Daddy's Roommate* (Wilhoite, 2000) present situations that might encourage students to become more open-minded to different types of families and understand that love is the most important thing in a family. Children's literature can also encourage students to develop relationships with people, encouraging social contact. Literature encourages students to be considerate and friendly people, and these traits may be consistent with developing students into quality citizens.

f. Transmits Literary Heritage

Finally, children's literature is of value because it is a timeless tradition, one in which "books are the major means of transmitting our literary heritage from one generation to the next" (Norton, 2010, p. 3)[20]. Encouraging the authorship of multicultural children's literature will help to preserve the cultures present across the nation of Nigeria. Classic stories like, *Why The Sky Is Far Away: A Nigerian Folktale* (Mary-Joan Gerson, 1995), *African Folk Tales* (Dover Children's Thrift Classics) (Hugh Vernon-Jackson, 1999), *African Myths and Folk Tales* (Dover Children's Thrift Classics) (Carter Godwin Woodson, 2009), *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears: A West African Tale*, (Verna Aardema, 1992), *A Is for Africa*, (Ifeoma Onyefulu, 1997) transmit literary heritage and values.

Children are only young for a short time, and so we must give them access to a basic literary heritage of timeless books. Quality children's literature has the great power to captivate audiences for many generations.

Children's literature is extremely valuable in both the school setting and at home. Teachers and parents should both be able to differentiate between quality and mediocre literature, in order to give students access to the best books to encourage these important values of literature and considering developmental domains. Children's literature is valuable in providing an opportunity to respond to literature, as well as cultural knowledge, emotional intelligence and creativity, social and personality development, and literature history to students

across generations. Exposing children to quality literature can contribute to the creation of responsible, successful, and caring individuals.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Giving children access to all varieties of literature is extremely important for their success. Educators, parents, and community members should help students develop a love and passion for reading. Not only is reading literature important in developing cognitive skills to be able to succeed in a school or work setting, but it is valuable for other reasons as well.

Children's literature is so important in removing racial and ethnic prejudice and promoting inter-racial and ethnic understanding. Based on the multicultural state of Nigeria, Nigerian writers and publishers should strive to produce multicultural books for children so as to have better understanding of cultures represented in the nation. This will go a long way to foster unity and national development.

a. Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that the following be reflected by writers and publishers in various multicultural children's literature books. In other words, topics such as language, music, art and craft and so on should be themes in children's multicultural literature.

Multicultural authors and publishers should include and reflect the following in children's literature:

b. Language

Language is perhaps the most important and distinguishing aspect of any culture. According to the Centre for Endangered Languages in its universal declaration of linguistic rights in Barcelona (1996: 10), "Language is the key to the heart of a people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. A lost language is a lost tribe, a lost tribe is a lost culture, a lost culture is a lost civilization. A lost civilization is invaluable knowledge lost... the whole vast archives of knowledge and experience in them will be consigned to oblivion"

The promotion of indigenous languages has positive impact on education, books production, health, human dignity and so on.

c. Arts & Crafts

Like language, arts and crafts reflect a people. It also has a positive impact on the economic development of an area or a people. The arts and crafts prevalent in various parts of the country should be shown in children's Literature.

d. Music

Music and dance are essential elements of all human societies and should be promoted in children's literature.

e. Clothing and Dress Culture

Clothing and dress culture should be reflected in pictorial format in children's literature with an explanation of the cultural outfit of the various tribes and culture and why the people dress the way they do.

f. Political Culture

It is a known fact that Northern Nigerians are politically versed than their southern counterpart. Multicultural Children's literature could serve as a political enlightenment avenue to upgrade the knowledge of children and develop their interest in politics. This may also help them to become better citizens politically.

g. Marriage Institutions and Ceremonies

Different groups in Nigeria have different types of weddings. Usually, marriage institutions and ceremonies vary from culture to culture. For example, marriage ceremonies and traditions in the North defer to that of the South. Yoruba marriage rites and traditions are different from that of the Igbos. Multicultural children's literature should discuss the similarities and differences. This may lead to more inter-tribal marriages.

h. Female Circumcision

Female circumcision is a cultural practice shared by many ethnic nationalities in Africa. In the past, it was compulsory to circumcise all women. In fact, in some societies, it was almost an abomination for a girl not to be circumcised and there are festivals or ceremonies tied to female circumcision. This practice should be discussed and decried in multicultural children's literature. Children will thereby grow up understanding what female circumcision is and resist any attempt to make them or their sister/wife undergo such.

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