

LITERATURE, LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A QUESTION OF ESSENCE

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Abstract

It is an unarguable fact that every country strives to achieve all-round development by formulating different policies; Nigeria is not an exception. In the country, several development plans have been carefully designed and implemented over the years. However, the country continues to experience several social problems and security challenges such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, ethnic rivalry, abductions and terrorism. These problems in totality show that there are still many issues to be resolved before national development can be achieved. Literature, since its formal beginning in Nigeria, has been committed to exposing these social vices and security issues with the aim of effecting correction for national development. The persistence of these problems unavoidably questions the essence of literature as a veritable means of solving these problems, in terms of immediate application of its proffered solutions. This paper critically shows how Nigerian literature has been able to effect positive changes in society, and also its inability to initiate useful transformation in other aspects. Closely linked to the above is the discussion of the place of language in Nigerian literature which is looked at from the angle of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This paper further sheds light on the relationship between literature, language and national development.

Keywords: national development, literature, commitment, national interest, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Introduction

Development is an encompassing term that entails positive growth from a relegated level to a raised platform, in which all potentialities are sedulously explored and managed to effect and ensure a good standard of living. It is from the perspective of the link between these explorations and management of potentialities and the (political) activity of a nation that development has been variously defined by eminent sociologists and scholars in other disciplines. Tolu Lawal and Abe Oluwatoyin aver that “It is reasonable to know that development is not only an economic exercise, but also involves both socio-economic and political issues and pervades all aspects of societal life” (2011: p. 238).

It is an unarguable fact that every country strives to achieve all-round development by formulating different policies: Nigeria is not an exception. In the country, several development plans and policies have been carefully designed and implemented over the years. Some of these plans had a focus on agriculture. For instance, Operation Feed the Nation (1979) and Structural Adjustment Program (1986) were designed to eradicate poverty in the country. Also, several military operations such as Operation Python Dance among others have been carefully designed and implemented to address the problem of insecurity. Educational policies are being periodically reconsidered to (re)vitalise education in the country. However, the

country continues to experience several social problems and security challenges such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, ethnic rivalry, kidnappings and terrorism. Glaringly, these problems in totality show that there are still many issues to be resolved before national development can be achieved through literature.

Literature, since its formal beginning in Nigeria with the literary works of Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Gabriel Okara among others, has been greatly committed to exposing these social vices and security issues with the aim of effecting corrections for national development. Since literature can only prescribe solutions, the persistence of these national problems unavoidably questions the essence of literature as a veritable means of solving these problems, in terms of immediate application of its proffered solutions. Hence, this paper critically shows how Nigerian literature has been able to effect positive changes in society and also its inability to initiate useful transformation in other aspects. Closely linked to the above is the discussion of the place of language in Nigerian literature which is looked at from the angle of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. The paper further sheds light on the relationship between literature, language and national development.

Literature and National Development

It is no doubt that literary critics and scholars in their various publications have established the unmistakable essence of literature in achieving national development. Anthony Olaoye explains that literature helps in awakening and sharpening people's social and political consciousness. He writes specifically about historical literature, claiming

that the knowledge of the past gained in this kind of literature "helps people in charting new and humanistic, socio-political and economic course, which leads to a new world order" (2013: p. 749). Onyebuchi's contribution to this discourse is such that questions how the knowledge gained in literature helps in reforming the individual psyche, and how the reformed psyche can be put to practical use for national development. Onyebuchi writes:

Nigerian literary works attempt to reform the individual psyche of Nigerians, to make them conscious of the state of things in the polity and, thereby awaken in them the need to change their situation and contribute to a sustainable national development. (2013: p.4)

Literature in such a context takes on a pragmatic core that does not merely entertain, but also mainly gravitates towards reformation, inspiration and stimulation.

Religious Extremism and Inter-Guild Rivalry: Towards a New Order

Nigeria is at present experiencing different forms of social problems such as terrorism, kidnappings, ritual killings and secession threats. All these are simultaneously happening in different parts of the country. Terrorism, stemming from religious extremism in the country which is very much connected to the Boko Haram insurgency in the early part of the 2000s, brings to the fore the logical conclusion that this extremism evolved, beside other issues, from the misconception of some Islamic principles (Aguwa, 2017; Hansen, 2017). Elnathan John in *Born on a Tuesday*, reveals the reason for this

misconception as “ignorance”, which stems from uncritical reflection and acceptance and misapplication of some Islamic doctrines in certain situational contexts.

In *Born on a Tuesday* (2015), the doctrinal debate between Sheik and Malam Abdul-Nur reveals much about the ignorance of Malam Abdul-Nur who founded the “Mujalrideen Movement” (p. 305). He preaches against Western education and democracy, claiming that both practices are not in sync with Islamic doctrines. However, his sheer ignorance of the doctrine he professes remains glaring in his perfunctory response to Sheik’s crucial question. His inability to provide a workable plan for applying “Sharia” in governing the country, which system of government he intends to displace seriously depicts his spiritual shallowness in Islamic principles. Thus, he is presented as a leader who is unworthy of having ephebes.

Elnathan has unmistakably used the doctrinal debate to awaken the consciousness of the readers to the fact that Islamic clerics who have a profound understanding of Islamic principles can help in solving the problem of religious extremism by redirecting eccentric Islamic scholars, who preach violence under the cover of religion, to the right path. This is clearly shown in Sheik’s hearty advice to Malam Abdul-Nur:

All you want is to give into your lust for power and get Muslims killed unnecessarily in the streets. That is what is ignorance – allowing your feelings to guide you instead of thinking of whether this will be good for Muslims or not. This is a dangerous thing you are preaching and if you have the interest of the Muslimummah at heart, you will stop it. (p. 329)

According to Worldometer elaboration of the latest United Nations data, the current population of Nigeria as of January 1, 2023, is 218, 885, 825 [http/www.worldometer.info.ng]. It is thus very clear that the country is endowed with enough human resources, who are engaged in different occupations to sustain and develop the national economy. Obviously, farming and cattle-rearing are parts of the many occupations practised in Nigeria. In recent times, there have been cases of incessant conflict ensuing between the farmers and the pastoralists, especially in Benue State. The conflict in many cases has led to loss of lives. Okediran rightly perceived this conflict as a threat to sustainable national development. Thus, in *Tenants of the House* (2009), he identifies the issue of land as the root cause of the perennial clashes between the farmers and herdsmen. Hence, he calls for fresh initiatives on Land Use Decrees as a remedy to the problem. He writes that:

If this new wave of conflict is to be avoided, fresh initiatives – set within the framework of the Land Use Decree of 1978 allowing customary rights over land, including grazing reserves – will be needed from the traditional and state institutions on the ground. (p. 143)

Nigerian Literature, Politics and National Development

Nigerian literature has always been committed to exposing the various social vices bedevilling the country. Safe Adewumi’s *A Season of Order*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Helon Habila’s *Oil On Water*, Kaine Agary’s *Yellow Yellow* and Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* among other Nigerian novels clearly show this commitment in their

various contents, thereby showing the tendency to awaken the reader's consciousness to the need to change the socio-political situation to the better as argued by Olaoye (2013) and the persistence of the problems which could have completely effaced with the gained consciousness.

The persistence of these problems calls for the need to provide answers to some thoughtful questions about Nigerian literature. These questions include the following: Does Nigerian literature project any uncommon phenomenon capable of engineering and enhancing national development? Does Nigerian literature really present any transformative blueprint beyond a political revolution? Glaringly, many Nigerian novels merely represent "matters of the moment". Therefore, they only end up re-announcing the inglorious fame of political corruption and its attendant seeming effectual solution – a political revolution that is either jointly or individually championed, thus leading to the banality of commitment in these Nigerian novels.

Hence, Elechi Amadi's statement that writers "must recognise the paradox that the more immediately relevant to society a work of art is, the more quickly it becomes irrelevant" [as cited in Sweeney, 1986: p. 114] remains helpful in (re)considering the lost initiative in Nigerian literature (novel) towards effecting national development. Based on Amadi's statement, Nigerian literature must brace up beyond the realm of immediate relevance; its commitment must transcend the mere re-announcement of well-known political corrupt practices. Thus, for Nigerian literature to successfully effect national development, Nigerian writers should be intrepid explorers: they should courageously upset political conventions that reek of abashed and

retrogressive practices. Aptly, writers should indulge themselves in intense, in-depth and comprehensive psychological probing of the operational modalities of democracy as the world-acclaimed best governing system and highly philosophical presentation of their findings that could prompt trial of these findings in the natural world.

Nigerian Literature and Science Fiction: Towards Consolidating National Development

The dynamism of human culture which is evident in the cultural shift from primitiveness to techno-scientific culture has led to the evolution of a technologically driven narrative known as science fiction. Suvin remarks that the imagination employed in Science Fiction questions the "essence of phenomena" (Suvin, 1972: p. 375). Science fiction problematises essence and only resolves them through profound explorative explications that would make them transcend the "mythical static identity" (Suvin, 1972: p. 375), the identity in which norms are seen as unchangeable. Also, Csicsery-Ronay remarks that the emergence of Science Fiction is premised not on aesthetic entertainment afforded by it, but on the specific kind of mood and attitude it elicits from its readers. This attitude, which he calls "science – fictionality" is "a mode of response that frames and tests experiences as if they were aspects of science fiction" (2008: p. 2). The fact that Science Fiction is a genre for imagining possible future horizons, then it unavoidably influences some of its readers to create more technological artefacts that could bring about national development in terms of technological advancement.

A number of African critics have acknowledged the importance of science and technology to national development, which by extension is the

jurisdiction of Science Fiction. Nyamndi is one of such critics. He strongly asserts that “literature should be put at the services of society’s future, and that future cannot be imagined away from the defining influence of science and technology; at least not in today’s world. Ultimately, any culture that ignores this prescription also causes itself to be ignored” (2006: p. 577). Also, Oyewale avers that “technology is capable of evolving new media expression that can compete with existing ones” (2008: p. 158). In relating this to Nigerian literature in the discourse of national development, it is glaring that no Nigerian novel or work of prose fiction can be conveniently called a work of Science Fiction. Thus, Nigerian writers have not been very active in proposing literary solutions to scientific and technological problems beleaguering the country.

Language, Literature and National Development

Literature, without doubt, performs different functions in society as revealed above. For it to maximally perform these functions, the issue of the medium through which it is written becomes very significant. The issue of language in which Nigerian literature should be written with a particular reference to Nigerian novels has been a highly controversial one. This is not surprising in that language is an important medium of interpreting reality and making both personal and communal experiences as well as culture known to society. The effect of the choice of a particular language used in passing across certain ideas or messages is revealed by Obafemi (2009: p. 17) by writing that:

In some quarters, ideas are believed to be the product of a thought pattern, ideology with an equivalent linguistic representation. Thus, a

thought cannot be isolated from the language in which it is transmitted in the same way we cannot dismiss the ideology that informs the thought content because all combine to suggest meaning.

There are several notable themes to be passed across to readers about Nigeria through the medium of literature (novel, specifically) which may border on culture, language, economy, politics, security, religion, international relations and so on. Since all these issues have direct effects on national development, the language to be adopted in writing Nigerian novels becomes a subject of real interest. In the literature, different positions have been canvassed on the language to be used in writing African/Nigerian literature. We will briefly summarise this using insight from Babatunde Adigun’s (2020) work. The nature of this paper does not make it possible to go deeply into the merits and demerits of each position which are easily available in the literature. In essence, our aim is just to add to the existing ones our position on the appropriate language to be used in writing Nigerian novels.

The different positions outlined in the work are supported with linguistic concepts or hypotheses to make it clearer. The first position is termed the Nativist School of Thought. This school of thought emphasises using African indigenous languages as “the grand media of expressions of African literary imaginations” (Babatunde Adigun, 2020: p. 2). The position is mainly premised on the argument that African thoughts, African culture and the African way of life can only be maximally projected through African languages. Thus, Akinwumi Ishola (1985) cited in Adigun (2020: p. 3) posits that: “If one wants to get African thoughts, African

culture and the African way of thinking across, I think it is best done in African languages... language is the vehicle of culture.”

In language studies, this position is supported by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis put forward around 1929. The central idea of the hypothesis is that language shapes thought. According to Hoiyer (1968: p. 406) cited in Oluwabamide (2003: p. 19), the crux of the hypothesis is that:

Language is not merely or more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so naively assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organisation, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actively defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of its implicit expectation into field of experience.

The summary of the hypothesis partly quoted above according to Oluwabamide (2003: p.18) is that the “vocabulary of a people inventories their culture and reflects with greater accuracy, the particular interests and emphasis a people may have in such areas of their culture as technology, social organisation, religion and folklore.” The simple fact from the above is that indigenous languages should be the best means of writing African/Nigerian novels in that they will be able to capture the various aspects of culture inherent in the languages.

The second position concerning the language debate for African/Nigerian literature centres on the Continentialist View which believes that African writers should adopt one general language in Africa. Adigun

(2020: p. 7) writes that “one comeback on the continentalist view borders on the unanimous agreement of all Africans to accept Swahili as proposed by Wole Soyinka.”

The third position is that of the Internationalist School of Thought. This position believes in adopting the English language, especially the nativised form of the language to write African/Nigerian literature to achieve international intelligibility and popularity of African literature. Further observations on each of the above are as follows: On the first one which is the use of African/Nigerian languages in writing Nigerian novels, though the position is well supported by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the problem of the audience/reader seems to have been overlooked. The fact is that nowadays, it appears as if the number of those who can read fluently and comprehend texts written in indigenous languages seems to be far lower than those who can read and comprehend what they read in the English language. This is because the majority of children now start speaking the English language right from birth. So, when authors write in indigenous languages and only a few people can read their works nowadays, it does not make much sense.

The second position which is the Intercontinentalist View equally does not take into account the interest of the readers or audience. In other words, if the few authors/novelists in Nigeria, for example, are made to write in one of the indigenous languages that is generally agreed on, the problem of readership will still surface in that the readers will still be made to learn the grammar, orthography, sentence structure, idioms, phrasal verbs etc. of the chosen language. What the authors of this paper are saying in essence is that many students nowadays cannot read in their own indigenous language let alone introduce another one just for the

purpose of reading literary works. Also, if the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis holds which is linguistic determinism, then this second position is not tenable.

Linguistic determinism, which is the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis holds that people who speak different languages will view the world differently. Then for writers who already speak their language but are made to learn another one because they are required to write their works in it, then which worldview or culture will they project in the work? That is, is it the original worldview inherent in the first language they speak or the second one they have to learn in order to write in it?

The third option which is the adoption of English in its nativised form is based on the concept of Language of Wider Communication. In other words, this third option will make it possible for a literary work to have a reasonable number of audience throughout the country as many students are already being exposed to the language since their childhood. In essence, all the ideas, philosophies, and ideologies that are espoused in a literary work to solve the nation's problems and bring about development can be easily assessed by all those who have an average knowledge of English. So, based on the above, the authors will align with the group of scholars who believe that the English language is the best medium for writing African/Nigerian novels.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Nigerian literature has tremendously contributed to national development through its unquestionable capacity to awaken and sharpen the consciousness of the readers. There is no reader of Nigerian literature that will claim to be ignorant of the recurrent theme of

political corruption in most Nigerian novels. However, the persistence of this corruption in various shades in the country clearly shows that Nigerian writers should do more than foreground political problems; they should represent uncommon phenomena beyond political revolution which can be experimented with in the natural world. Also, the time is now that Nigerian writers should actively participate in either solving or ameliorating scientific-cum-technological problems in the country by writing more science fiction novels in which scientific research and technological artefacts are being proposed. Nigerian writers are also enjoined to use (nativised) English to expose ideas, philosophy and ideologies that can easily solve Nigeria's problems and effect national development.

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