



CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN AFRICA: CONTENT AND NARRATIVE FORM

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Abstract

Literature, among other things, serves as the conveyor of a people's history and culture by sustaining it to keep it alive if it does not go extinct. Children's Literature in Africa, though not given the needed attention as adult literature, is central to preserving and sustaining the African heritage. What constitutes Children's Literature in Africa, and how it is made manifest or passed, forms the crux of this paper. The paper adopts Social-reader Response Literary Theory: So that, the readers (African children) can read and perform literary content in more innovative ways as they like it. Literature written for the African child should both carry African imagery and be of interest to them if they must enjoy and cherish it. Whether Children's Literature in Africa is written in local or other colonial languages such as Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, Italian, Afrikaans, or Spanish, it can be given such a status when the message it conveys is African. Aside from educative, rich moral lessons and entertainment children derive, the common strand that runs through the content and narrative form of Children's Literature in Africa is, the shared nature of its themes, performance across the continent, and self-identity that makes it African, as no other can do better.

Keywords: Africa, Children's Literature, Content, Narrative form, Orature, Preliterate.

INTRODUCTION

Literature peculiar to children is increasingly becoming essential in children's literacy and overall mental and academic development. Lending credence to this, Muller Ian opines that children's books are used to teach the rudiments of language and its referent system; issues of knowledge and power would relate to the larger society and culture than just the child's place within it (3). Most often, content related to children is not given the needed attention by the adult world or is simply handled with a loose hand. Children are often a marginalized and 'voiceless' group. Everything about them is under construction, so to speak (Harter et al. 70). Children's Literature is said to have an impact on children, especially in the area of shared book reading, which can be explained pragmatically through the specific interactive conditions under which picture books and

storybook reading function. Based on cognitively and emotionally activating interaction formats such as sustained shared thinking. Therefore, the pictures in children's books may necessitate participatory dialogic group readings to stabilize them. As a result, by whom books are read and the spaces in which books are read are politically and ideologically defined as well (Muller 15). Children's Literature in Africa, whether oral or written as used in schools today, no doubt can be traced from preliterate Africa, where performativity was only in dramatic and oral form.

What Children's Literature Entails

What constitutes children's literature is diverse depending on one's perception of it. Root Shelton opines that

children's literature can be viewed as any literature that is enjoyed by children. More specifically, children's literature comprises those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature or who may not possess the reading skills or developmental understandings necessary for its perusal. In addition to books, children's literature also includes magazines intended for pre-adult audiences (1). To Obi Rebecca, children's literature can be viewed as literature exclusively about children. Children's literature refers mainly to stories, poetry, rhymes, folktales, and drama, exclusively created for children, such as infants, toddlers, and young people as the target audience. Children's literature that is exclusively written for children seems to rest on three criteria: the first is whether the heroes are children or teenagers, and the second is whether the theme, that is, the ideas, relationships, and language, are simple or complex. Simplicity of theme is therefore the overriding criterion that determines and defines literature as children's literature. Literature is literature for children if the ideas, relationships, and language are simple. However, literature is not children's literature if the ideas, relationships, and language are found too complex, whether oral or written. For example, classic literature like Gulliver's Travels is admitted into children's literature because of the simplicity of its ideas, relationships, and language. But the Turn of the screw or Lolita, let us say, would not be admitted as children's literature because the ideas, relationships, and language otherwise called the theme are complex. Thirdly, children's literature is often aimed at teaching moral lessons (4). There are many kinds of children's literature; examples are short novels, poetry, drama, folk tales, myths and legends, and real-life situations to mention but a few. Children's literature is literature specifically about children. Two criteria characterize children's literature. The first is whether the heroes are children. The second is whether the themes, that is, the ideas, and relationships as well as language are simple and suitable for children's enjoyment (7). Literature that is written for children should not be junk or mediocre material but should please them, stimulate their imagination, build up their sensitivity to experiences of all kinds, develop their perceptive powers, and help them to grow up in a cultural environment responsive to the African and international world. The themes should revolve around the local life stories which try at the same time to project the African or Nigerian culture, pride, and self-identity (25, 26). Children's literature offers children the promise of inclusion in a literate community; something regarded as culturally valuable, at least nominally (Hunter 113). Youssef Loubna reiterates that many of the characters, places, and ideas that children read about in literary works are cherished and remembered by children as they grow. Literature must be either/both informative or entertaining. Aladdin, Sindbad, Ali Baba, Snow White, Alice in Wonderland, and many more are fun stories that children around the world read and enjoy (6). Literature serves children in four major ways: it helps them to

better understand themselves, others, their world, and the aesthetic values of written language. When children read fiction, narrative poetry, or biography, they often assume the role of one of the characters. Through that character's thoughts, words, and actions, the child develops insight into his or her character and values (Root 5).

Children's Literature in Africa

Heale Jay, in his article, "Africa: English-Africa", argues that the history of African children's literature can best be discussed in three phases: original identity; dominant colonization; and an original oral tradition of story-telling; the arrival of literacy and literature from abroad; and the growth (or not) of new indigenous youth literature. In his comprehensive survey of the history of English-speaking African children's literature, he further explains that British colonialists' quest for empire brought the English language to such West African countries as Nigeria and Ghana, to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania in the east, and Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and South Africa in the south. As a result, schools were British-run, books were printed in Britain, and the benevolent white man knew best. Furthermore, the first indigenous publishing for children was ardently didactic. Literature for African children was confined to moralistic primers with a few safe folktales with a strong (inserted) moral flavor (96). Finnegan Ruth observes that in "most African societies, children do to some extent separate themselves off from adults in at least some play activities and have at least some rhymes and songs of their own..." (786).

Osazee Fayose is particular in her definition of children's literature because she focuses on African children's literature as that piece of literary creation that draws its subject from the African worldview and which is written in a language and style the African child can comprehend. It must be seen as promoting African culture and enabling the child or young adult to understand and appreciate his or her environment better, and it must give him or her some pleasure, (74). Osazee defends herself by saying that this definition does not mean that literature from other places will be meaningless for the African child. This is because children might find such works entertaining and educative. However, the works cannot be regarded as African children's literature because they do not seek to promote African culture (95).

Content of Children's Literature in Africa

Traditional Africa is an oral society. Children's literature in Africa as a microcosm of African literature cannot be treated in isolation, and this is because discourse on Children's literature in Africa must of necessity be founded on African literature itself. Commenting on the content of children's literature in Africa, Mbure Sam observes that with its multi-faceted genres, children learned the societal virtues

of patience, honesty, obedience, hard work, and generosity, among others. They also learned about such vices as greed, disobedience, and lies, and their consequences. Children learned what society considered good and evil, and how to relate to and care for the environment (4). Children's Literature in Africa has been shaped by eras or phases of the history of the content. Children's literature in Africa has had to accommodate three value systems. Taking Kenya as a case study, Odaga Asenath describes the three phases of the development of Children's Literature in Kenya: the pre-colonial or traditional, the colonial, and the emergent or the post-colonial value system. These three value systems have affected the nature of Children's Literature in Kenya in Kiswahili in various ways (85). Like Odaga, Loubna holds a related view on the stages and content of African literature concerning Children's Literature in Africa. Despite cultural differences, content or stories among various people on the continent are sometimes shared, and developmental stages are similar. He opines that:

Another important similarity is that in Africa at large, addressing children through literature occurs in three stages: one in which literature was based on the oral tradition; a second stage in which literature of the colonial powers prevailed; and a third post-colonial stage. Because there are cultural differences between the different countries in Africa. The content of the stories that belong to each stage is quite different. Whereas stories from Ancient Egypt and the Arabian Nights constitute the legacy of the Egyptians, trickster and animal stories like Anansi spider stories were integral to African folklore. So, the stages seem similar, but the cultural and historical differences are many (5).

Loubna further states that, to follow Robert Jones, my model Arabic story is about Amm Abdelazim's "The Water Pump" by the late Abdel-Tawab Youssef, the prominent and prolific Egyptian writer for children. On the morals gained from the content, Loubna says, the story of "The Water Pump" was read on Cairo Radio by Abla Fadila, the well-known announcer of a popular children's program that aired for more than four decades (as of the beginning of the 1970s). As a child, this story taught me what matters in life: neither money nor strength or power. The idea that "the heart must be clean" is one I have lived with all my life. (4). On the blossoming of children's literature in the Arabian world, taking Egypt for instance, Abdel-Tawab Youssef's story entitled: Al Haytham meets Newton, which is one of eight stories in a volume called Arab Pioneers and Western Scientists in a Strange Encounter (translated in 1984) and the second is "I am a Buraq" which is one of twenty stories entitled "A Life of the Prophet Muhammad in Twenty Tales" (2003). This first series won one of the first Egyptian state prizes for children's literature when it was first published in Arabic in the late 1970s, which implies that at this time the Egyptian government started acknowledging that literature

for children deserves state recognition (11). Colonial literature had a distorting effect on the psyche of the African child because it ignored the experience of the African child and his world. Colonialists promoted their values by making stories about Europe available to African children. Alembe Ezekiel refers to this period as a period of constricting and suffocating African oral literature. The suffocation also happened at the language level. That all the books were in English means the children were conditioned to see English as a superior language. Conversely, they were made to see their languages as inferior- and speaking in them was a mark of inferiority (15).

In Africa, proverbs and riddles were also used to teach those listening about the good and bad qualities of human beings and how to judge good character. A West African proverb goes like this: "A large eye does not mean keen vision", which cautions a person not to be too trusting of another and not to take things at face value. Another says: "If you run after two hares you will catch neither". This teaches the listener not to be greedy and to be content with what you have no matter how little (Verenigafrica 2). African Children's Literature discusses stories, according to Finnegan, based mainly on animal characters, human characters, historical and supernatural beings of one kind or another 'myths', animal tales, and tales about people (334). There are also a few other favorite trickster characters who occur often enough in stories but without any clear-cut geographical domain: the little antelope, often portrayed as innocently ingenious; the squirrel (for example, in many Limba, Kikuyu, and Luba stories); the wren ((in Luba tales (335)). The tortoise predominates in the easterly regions of the west coast, in an area extending at least from the Yoruba of Nigeria across to the Fang and others of West Equatorial Africa. However, the sly effectiveness of the hare is what we notice in most Bantu tales. Besides the leading animal figures, many others come into the tales in secondary roles: the lion, strong and powerful but not particularly bright; the elephant, heavy, ponderous, and rather slow; the hyena, the type of brute force and stupidity, constantly duped by the little quick animals; the leopard, untrustworthy and vicious, often tricked despite his cunning; the little antelope, harmless and often clever; the larger deer, stupid and slow—and so on... other animals—the zebra, buck, or crocodile—seldom occur, or, if they do, tend to come in just as animals and not as the personified characters presented by those already mentioned (336). ...more animal stories have been published than those about other characters, and the impression has often been given that animal tales are from the main type of prose narrative in Africa or even of oral literature altogether (344). Doke in Finnegan observes that songs are characteristic of African tales all over the continent. They do not occur in every story, and in some cases, there are local distinctions between 'prose' and 'choric' stories (358).

For instance, we have the Yoruba iton (or itan), which refers mainly to historical narratives and seems to include both creation stories (which are sometimes classed as 'myths') and conquest legends about how Oduduwa, the legendary ancestor of the Yoruba, and his descendants spread out through the various contemporary kingdoms, towns, and lineages of the Yoruba (359).

Girls are also portrayed in a positive light in African stories. Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by Steptoe (1987) is a story that blends an African folktale and the Cinderella story to shed light on the culture, history, and geography of Zimbabwe. In this story, the King holds a party to choose a wife and Mufaro takes his two daughters, the kind Nyasha and the selfish Manyara. The question is: who will the King choose to become the Queen? Weaving fairytales, African folk stories, and oral literature with contemporary stories is an enriching combination; speaking on some of the content of Swahili Children's Literature (Loubna 8). Reading Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter above, individual interpretation of the story is created in an interpretive community of minds consisting of participants' specific shared reading and interpretation strategy or interpretive community (Swahili); here, children are predisposed to a particular form of interpretation as a consequence of strategies used at the time of reading: their culture, history or geography affect the textual interpretation or performance as the case may be--- Social Reader-response. TraoreFlavia observes that ...oral themes in contemporary children's books are heterogeneous. Animal stories are very frequent; often in the form of etiological narratives, or showing a clear moral message, such as the condemnation of vanity and egotism like "MajivunoYamuuaSamaki" (The Vanity which Killed the Fish) by Peter Dominic, "Malkiamroho" (The greedy queen), by R. Mahmoud, the appreciation of cooperative behaviour "Nyukinavipepeo" (The bees and the butterflies) by Senator E. L. Matem, "Mfalmechura" (The king frog) by A.K. Shaali, respect for adults "Chui wadogo" (The young leopards) by D. P. Mganga (6,7). The content of Children's Literature in Africa is diverse depending on which part of Africa they emanate from, yet, they achieve the same cohesive goal in shaping and building the African child into the person they are supposed to be in the light of avalanche lessons or salient messages they carry.

Narrative Form of Children's Literature in Africa

Narrative of content presupposes delivery or how content is articulated or passed across in writing or an audible manner; the same applies to children's literature in Africa. How it is said or sung constitutes its narrative form. Before independence, in most African countries, children read books that were designed and written by European writers for European children. Towards the dawn of independence,

African writers realized the importance of writing and publishing in Africa for the African child. They made use of traditional African folklore, legends, and ancient myths (Zafar 50). Children's literature, before the era of printing, was in the oral form, manifested in folktales, fairy tales, poetry, advice, proverbs, fables, adventure, and school stories (Hunt 5). In the uncentralised societies of Africa, even if historical narratives are less conspicuous, they certainly exist. Strong historical traditions that are expressed in the narrative form are also of marked importance among many of the inter-lacustrine Bantu kingdoms of East Africa. Again, this tradition has flowered recently with many versions of such historical chronicles now appearing in vernacular written forms. Even in egalitarian communities, it is common for various families and villages to have stories about their origins and ancestors, and sometimes these are expressed in narrative form. Comparatively, the two forms, oral and written, are not as mutually exclusive as is sometimes imagined (Finnegan, 22, 358 & 361).

Oral narratives are a type of story that is told orally, often using gestures and facial expressions to convey the story. The most common types of oral narratives are tales, legends, songs, and myths. A tale is a traditional story that may or may not contain supernatural elements; fairy tales are examples of tales. A legend is a story that may contain some truth and is set in the past. An example of a legend is the story about King Arthur and his knights, who were known for their chivalry and bravery (like Bayajidda of Daura, King Jaja of Opobo, Queen Moremi of Ife, Queen Amina of Zazzau, all from Nigeria, West Africa and so on). Songs are also considered a type of oral narrative, as they often tell stories about everyday life or historical events such as famous battles. Finally, myths are orally transmitted narratives in which gods or supernatural beings perform miracles (Jenkins 22). In the same vein, Ngwuchukwu, Margaret, et al. opine that children's literature has roots in the African context; it has roots in oral tradition. The oral tradition includes fairy tales, fantasy, ballads, games, chants, oral literature, customs, beliefs, and arts, including songs, dances, games, chants, and rituals. Other kinds of children's literature include poetry, folk literature, fiction, biography, folktales, myths, epics, ballads, etc. (5). Similarly, Sharkey in Aissa Amina sees the oral tradition of folktales has always been part of the Algerian heritage, which remotes to pre-French colonization. Written children's literature, however, is a relatively modern invention. The main determining factor in the late introduction of children's literature to Algeria was the astounding illiteracy rate of the overall population (199).

According to WaThiong'o, storytelling is retelling a tale or narrative to one or more listeners through voice and gestures. It is not the same as reading a story aloud or reciting a piece from memory. The storyteller creates and generates a series of mental metaphors and images associated with words

(86). Reacting to this, Uteley Octavia observes that this means storytelling can be packaged in forms such as songs, music, dances, plays, dramas, and poetry (8). Stories may be sung, along with musical accompaniment on a certain instrument. In many parts of Africa, after dinner, at the sound of a tantalising drum, villagers would congregate around a central fire and settle down to hear and listen to stories (Achebe 58). In her submission, Finnegan opines that a story might seem in outward form, style, or content to present a superficial resemblance to a written work of fiction (18).

The storytellers told many interesting and captivating stories. Storytelling has been a ritual for the people of Africa in the evening after a hard day's work. The psychological intent of exposing the children to storytelling justifies the reason for telling folktales in Africa (WaThiong'o 64). The calm nights and sitting around the fire set the tone for storytelling. The attention and enthusiastic response of the audience made the stories interesting and captivating (Vambe 1). The folktales did not follow any sequential order. The stories are told subjectively once the theme of the story is decided. The narration of the stories is accompanied by singing, drumming, percussion instruments, clapping, and dancing (Achebe 1958). Proverbial songs are utilized to highlight the expression of the characters (WaThiong'o 1982). In some cases at least it is clear that certain categories of stories are designed primarily for children and are told to them either by other children or by the old women... (Finnegan 364). These stories were about the many gods and goddesses worshiped by their ancestors and some were about their heroes and heroines; leaders and kings who fought and won great wars and battles (WaThiong'o 64). There was no written language, stories kept their history alive (WaThiong'o, 82).

According to Finnegan, strong historical traditions that are expressed in the narrative form are also of marked importance among many of the inter-lacustrine Bantu kingdoms of East Africa. Again, this tradition has flowered recently with many versions of such historical chronicles now appearing in vernacular written forms (359). It has been observed that 'children's verse' in a given society depends on the local classification of 'children', and one cannot necessarily assume that the 'children's songs' of another society are directly comparable with those of one's own (295).

Like children elsewhere, African children seem to have a familiar range of games and verses for their play—nonsense songs, singing games, catch rhymes, and so on. They also engage in riddle-asking and in other games and dances (295). For instance, nonsense songs, tongue-twisting rhymes, and trick verses are all documented. Ibo girls, for example, sing a nonsense rhyme which could be translated as 'Oh, oh, oh, oh, / girls agree / tall girl, Iruka / Koko yams, / sour, sour koko yams, / he goat sour', and tongue-twisters are recorded among the Mbete of West Central Africa and others

(297). She further cites the Moru of Southern Sudan where the children divide into two sides, one of which asks the questions. The answer depends on remembering the right sequence of words quickly enough, and those who get it wrong are ridiculed:

A'dirudoromaroniya? Who has taken my bowl?

Kumu au.Kumu has... (297)

In some other instances, children use rhymes at playtimes, Gbadamosi and Beier in Finnegan submit that other types of rhymes and songs are also recorded. There is the kind of catch rhyme exemplified by the Yoruba:

Chorus Call	Response
Who has blood?	Blood, blood.
Has goat blood?	Blood, blood.
Has sheep blood?	Blood, blood.
Has horse blood?	Blood, blood.
Has stone blood?	— —

In which the point of the game is to try to get some child to say 'blood' after an inanimate object. A mistake results in laughter and sometimes a friendly beating (299). Children sing of animals at playtimes, Tucker in Finnegan recounts that there are imitations of animals. Some of these occur in chasing games like the Shilluk 'Lion and sheep', but in others, the imitations seem to be taken more seriously. In one a boy doubles himself up to represent a frog and tries to jump backward in a circle without falling over, in time to his companions' song:

Jump up and down,
Up and down.
Jump up and down,
Up and down.
I shall jump again,
Up and down.
I shall jump again,
Up and down? (303).

Most often, songs are not sung without corresponding action. The children whose round games were studied were mostly boys from various Southern Sudanese peoples (Nuer, Shilluk, Dinka, Bari, and Lotuko). The games are played on a moonlit night in the dry season and the singing, mostly in strophe and antistrophe, is led by one of the boys and accompanied by hand-clapping, foot-thumping, or the action of the game (301). Learning goes with play. Children love songs with demonstration, it arouses and sustains their interest, and aside from the fun they derive from it, it gives them more bonding as peers, building their psychomotor, cognitive, and affective personalities and cultural transmission. The role of literature in the life of the African child cannot be overemphasized on all fronts and for their overall development.

Conclusion

The continuity of a nation and, indeed its uniqueness and cherished cultural identity depends largely on whether its young ones are properly immersed or integrated into mainstream society linguistically. A language is a powerful tool that ensures people's cultural heritage is preserved; doing otherwise results in linguisticicide. Wa Thiongo in Modi Aayushi opines that "Language is the carrier of culture. It is the repository of our dreams, our myths, our history, our identity, and our worldview". In other words, language is not just a means of communication, but it is also a reflection of a community's history, values, and culture (1). Subsumably, from various scholarly points of view, though, Children's Literature in Africa does not necessarily imply literature written in an African language, but about Africa and of interest to the African child, the promotion of African language in the content and narrative form of Children's Literature in Africa, should not be undermined; as no language can tell the African story better but Africa's. The importance of this is found in Nigerian education policy which states the importance of instruction in the mother tongue at the primary school level. It is pertinent to state that Africa has rich oral narratives from the preliterate era, long before the advent of colonialism, which forms the corpus of African literature and, by extension, children's literature in Africa_ handed over from generation to generation till what we have as written literature today. Promoting the teaching of children's literature in Africa and keeping its content and narrative intact, in schools, is invariably, promoting Africa. As Finnegan puts it, the growing numbers of school children in contemporary Africa are more and more likely to develop their own distinct and conventional songs and games— increasingly, it is in the schools that these can most easily and fruitfully be studied (304). Suffice it to say that in innovative ways, children read or respond to literary content socially, they can spice up or interpret literature in their "interpretative community"-, giving their similar experiences and social identities: this is, dynamic as they can create, hence, they have developed new ways of doing things over the years. With the increased activity of the media, and information and communication technology, children's literature in Africa is sure to experience better days.

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