

# Literature in the Contemporary Society, an Indispensable Tool Against the Spread of Coronavirus

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## **Abstract**

The people of the world have in the recent time, demonstrated the belief that the world is dynamic by adopting innovative means of doing things as a result of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Coronavirus has caused the death of many people all over the world. Before now, HIV was the most dreaded virus until in 2020 when coronavirus emerged. Coronavirus is as dreadful as HIV, but coronavirus is curable with some recognized drugs unlike HIV. Though HIV has no cure, when contracted, it can be managed by those living with the virus and they can go about their normal businesses without fear of transmission. Coronavirus brought panic into the world, leading to total lockdown all over the world. The entire world was thrown into confusion and since 2020, efforts have been on top gear to arrest the virus as well as stop the spread. The researcher is of the view that writers can help to sensitize the people about the dangers of the virus as well as educate the people on the best preventive measures. This article thus, chronicled the dangers of the illness and gave suggestions on how the spread of the virus could be tackled.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, literature, language, WHO, environment

## **Introduction**

Although literature is a work of art, literary artist draws his or inspiration from what happens around him. Therefore, literature serves as a means of understanding society as it aptly mirrors the happenings in society. Inspired by realities in the society, the writer shapes the literature in such a way that the literature would have positive effect on the society. According to M.H. Abrams, in its application to imaginative writing, “literature” is made to mirror the happenings in the author’s society. Modern critical movements, aiming to correct what is seen as historical injustices, stress the strong but covert role played by gender, race, and class in establishing what has, in various eras, been accounted as literature, or in distinguishing between “high literature” and the literature addressed to a mass audience (152). By high literature, Abrams is of the view that literature should educate and not solely entertain. Abrams’ belief that literature should also entertain is widely upheld by many critics. Since the Neoclassical era, literature has always been used for sanitizing the society. Uche Nnyagu in *Literature and Literate* observed that John Dryden, a Neoclassical writer in his “MacFlecknoe”, believes that satire is an indispensable tool for correcting impression (194). He goes further to disclose that when satire bites, the targeted feels the pains and thus, correction is made (194). Literature does this by attacking the ills in the society in such a way that the targeted would feel the bite and make amends. Nnyagu in addition,

affirms that literature acts as a gadfly in societies represented by the author. He quotes John Dryden as believing that literature can only achieve the result of attacking the ills only when the targeted feels the bite (198).

In his article “The Novelist as a Teacher” published in Olaniyan, Tejumola and Ato Quayson’s *African Literature: an Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Chinua Achebe enjoined new and aspiring writers to write about the contemporary issues and present good aspects of the African tradition to the world. According to Achebe, “The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front. For he is after all – as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his *African Image* - the sensitive point of his community (105). Achebe prescribes that a writer must reflect and interpret his society, his world; he must also provide inspiration and guidance and challenge. In his *Literature: Structure Sound and Sense*, Laurence Perrine believes that literature, especially literature on the broader sense, is read for the impeccable message that it carries (4). People believe what they read and so, writers put down contemporary ideas and happenings in their literature so that readers read and get exposed. A writer is believed to be a custodian, and he is a teacher teaching the audience what they ought to know about the society. Writers write based on the experiences that they gather in society as the experiences provide inspiration to them. Today, Covid-19 is a novel virus; researchers research and write about it with the aim to get the audience abreast of innovative means of stopping the spread of the virus. It is obvious that literature would not be possible without language as language is a means of communication. According to Wikipedia, language is a structured system of communication used by humans, based on speech and gesture (spoken language), sign, or often writing. It is the principal method of human communication, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture. Language is a natural gift human beings are endowed with so every physiologically and mentally typical person acquires in childhood, the ability to make use, as both sender and receiver, of a system of communication that comprises a circumscribed set of symbols. What this entails is that language is basically acquired and not learned. A child born in a particular environment grows up in the midst of the people and soon, he begins to speak the language of the people without the language being taught to him or her in any formal means.

The very first language the child speaks as the child begins to talk is the language of the immediate environment, known as the child’s mother tongue. As said, this language is acquired and not learnt. The need for a second language arises as one aspires to associate and intermingle with other people outside one’s immediate society. At this point, one learns and not acquires the second language. Human beings all over the world are sociable, glaringly different from the lower animals basically because of man’s unique feature– adaptability. Although in various societies of the world, people have dissimilar ways of life but persons from different societies still travel to places where their language is not spoken. Soon after they had come into the new environment, they intermingle with other people who share different ways of life.

Without the knowledge of the basic language skills, a new entrant into the society will certainly not be able to adapt. The ability to think and reason well is another major thing that distinguishes man from the lower animal. Literature differentiates human beings from animals as it affords one the opportunity to understand and master a language.

As already said, literature helps one to understand and master the tradition and culture of any society. Literature uses language as a means of communication. With language, the writer reveals the tenets of a particular society to foreigners so that one coming newly to the society and who has read a work of art authored by a person from the society must have understood a bit about the new society.

One of the writers of this research served Nigeria during his National Youths Service Corp (NYSC) in Ondo state. During his stay in the Ondo, a Yoruba land, a Yoruba man who admitted that he had not been to any Igbo society claims he understood much about the Igbo society because he had read Chinua Achebe's early novels especially *Things Fall Apart* which he said, revealed a lot about the traditional Igbo. From his argument, it is possible that one understands a place one has not been to if the person studies literatures by the people of the alien society about them. When one travels to an alien society, all he does is to first, learn the language of the new environment so as to be able to be assimilated in the society. Without language, no literature would be possible. Literature, no doubts, uses language to inform.

## **Coronavirus**

Coronavirus, also known as Covid-19 is a global pandemic. Literature writers are tasked with the responsibility of using their works to x-ray the ravaging dangers of the pandemic so that the aim could be achieved. This article is centred on contemporary issue – the epidemic ravaging the entire world. Creative writers use apt language in their literatures to pass across information with the aim to salvage the society. With apt language, it is believed that creative writers can use their works to educate the masses on the inherent dangers of coronavirus as well as proffer solutions on the means to get it arrested.

## **Historical overview of the Virus**

As had noted somewhere in this research, Coronavirus is a family of viruses that ranges from the common cold to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Many health experts believe that the new strain of coronavirus likely originated in bats or pangolins. The first transmission to human beings was in Wuhan, China. On the outbreak of the dreaded Covid-19 illness caused by SARS-CoV-2, every citizen of every country was enveloped in fear as a result of the enormous dangers of the novel global threat. Since the first transmissions, the virus has mostly spread through person-to-person contact. Covid-19 is an acronym coined by the World Health Organization derived from “coronavirus disease 2019”. Covid-19 is thus defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formally called 2019-nCoV). Covid-19 was initially reported to the World Health Organization

(WHO) on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a global health emergency. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. In recent years, Covid-19 is the most dreaded disease which has enthroned panic and fear in the whole world. Coronavirus is dreaded more than the deadly HIV basically because it kills the victim soon after being infected. Unlike HIV, however, coronavirus cannot easily be managed and its mode of transmission is not only via one means. Many countries of the world are trying various methods of containment in order to prevent the spread of the virus. With these worries, schools and universities closed and many resorted to online platforms and remote education. It was a mystery to many how information about Covid-19 spread to all parts of the world resulting in blockages of borders. The reason for border blockages was to prevent immigration and emigration with the aim to stop the spread of the virus. Since its first case in China, Covid-19 has spread to almost every country worldwide. According to World Health Organization, 167515, global cases were reported, including 6606 deaths by March 16, 2020 (Wikipedia).

Since the virus is believed to be highly contagious, and it passes easily from one person to another, public health and government officials around the world are working hard to contain the spread of the virus. The question is how did people get information about the dangers of the disease? And how is the information pertaining to Covid-19 disseminated? According to Laurence Perrine, literature uses emotive language to make hidden facts known globally(3). He believes that every good literature should not only entertain, such literature should also educate the audience. According to him, when literature only entertains without educating, such literature is likened to a miniature golf or ping pong (3).

Today, many works of literature have been written and published on the deadly ailment. Elizabeth U Nwonwu, Edmund N. Ossai, Chukwuma D. Umeokonkwo *et al*, published “Use of Face Mask as a Covid-19 Preventive Measures among Household Heads in Enugu” in *Journal of Medicine* Vol.33, No 3, 2021. Also, Chikasirimobi Goodhope *et al* published “Covid-19 in Sub-Saharan African Countries: Association between Compliance and Public Opinion” in *Global Journal of Health Sciences*. Vol. 14, Issue7, 2022. Some of the novels merely reveal the mystery behind the spread of the virus, others are written to show how terrible the virus is. In all, the essence of the literature, according to Laurence Perrine, is to educate the masses on the best way to avoid the spread of the virus in the interest of the society. Literature writers use literature to educate the masses on the means of coronavirus spread and proffer solutions as well. To do so, the writers write probably about the fictional characters whose carelessness and stubbornness to abide by the rules, led to them being infected with the virus.

### **Literature in Contemporary Society**

Literature performs a great role in the modern society; it acts as a check refraining individuals from going to the extreme in whatever they do. This is why it is said that literature writers are gadflies and they use their writings to correct impressions in the society. Why literature informs,

it equally entertains. In his *Literature and Society*, David Ker quotes Jean Paul Sartre as believing that literature is useful in modern society(3). According to Sartre in Ker, like morality, literature needs to be universal so the writer must put himself on the side of the majority to be able to speak to all and be read by all(3). To be able to pass the information and educate the masses, literature is written in a language understood by the target audience. According to literary theorist, Victor Shklovsky, the purpose of literature (art, more broadly) is to defamiliarize, or make the familiar strange. It causes the reader to regard reality from a different perspective. This can be unsettling for the reader, who is attached to familiar ways of knowing the world. But by provoking the reader to see the world as strange, literature allows the reader to see the world anew. Defamiliarization, thus, leads to new insights. (Wikipedia)

Uche Nnyagu in *Literature and the Literate*, observes that literature creates empathy and understanding. He believes that literature writers use imaginary persons to represent real persons in real society (12). Like in real life, the imaginary characters struggle to come out of imposed conflicts and the audience reads to decode the real society and understand how to tackle similar problems through the struggles of fictional characters. This is why many critics believe that literature improves the human mind so that when someone reads, he or she literally reads the mind of others. This is because through the character's internal thoughts which the reader seeks to access, the mind of individuals in real life is understood and an individual in real life understands a lot about himself or herself, others and the society at large.

To Kennedy, X.J, Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein in their *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory, Fiction* (literature)helps to improve society as it imparts a world spun out of the author's imagination (64). They believe that although fiction (literature) could be based on imagination, it thrives on reality and the author fictionalizes reality in a way that improvement is made. In the same vein, literature demystifies the author's society in such a way that one who has not been to a particular society can understand the society via literature. This is why the Yoruba who had not been to the Igbo society but had read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* disclosed to his friends that he would like to marry two Igbo women. Amazed, one of his friends cared to know why he preferred Igbo women as his wives, the Yoruba man responded that Igbo women are submissive to their husbands, hence his reason for the choice. Still incoherent to the friends, they asked him how he managed to know so much about Igbo women when he had not been to the Igbo society and he had not known Igbo people well, the Yoruba man responded that he does not need to live in Igbo society to understand the way of life of the Igbo when one could read a good novel authored by an Igbo. According to him, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* married three wives and the three wives of Okonkwo remained submissive to him. The Yoruba man is right to an extent but definitely, he fails to realise that society is dynamic and that Achebe in the novel, represented life as it was lived in the early nineteenth century. It is incongruous to align *Things Fall Apart* with the contemporary Igbo society. The entire world is dynamic and Igbo society like other societies of the world has greatly changed. Today, Igbo ladies abhor polygamy and no Igbo woman would accept to share the love of her

man with any other woman. Today, polygamy is almost seen as a taboo in Igbo land and some other African societies, because the white man, after colonization, made some Africans believe that their tradition, including polygamy was evil. Many Igbo people today who were ignorant of the way of life of the Igbo in the past would read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and see life as it was lived by the traditional Igbo people in Igbo society then. That is the function of literature – to enable us understand life. Today, to understand any part of the contemporary society, works by contemporary authors from the society are read and dissected for easier understanding of the society. Literature therefore, allows a person to step back in time and learn about life. We can gather a better understanding of culture and have a greater appreciation of them through literature. We learn through the ways history is recorded, in forms of manuscripts and through speech itself.

Scholars are of the opinion that the level of civilization a society attains is dependent on the literacy level of the members of the society. Literature is an art, written to include works in various non-fiction genres, used to pass across messages to the expected audience. This is literature in the broader sense which further includes non-fictional books, articles or other printed information. This being the case, literature concerns everyone who is able to read and understand that which is written. Some societies remain undeveloped because of the illiteracy level of their citizens. Literature is simply an eye opener and as Matthew Arnold observed, it helps to disillusion a folk who had been living in illusion (in Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 124). A deep study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reveals that the Igbos in the nineteenth century were mainly polygamists and that the women were not jealous sharing the love of their husbands. Okonkwo is used by Achebe to symbolize the Igbo who never believed that polygamy was a bad thing. He married three wives and the three wives were submissive to him. We understand a lot about the traditional Igbo people in traditional Igbo society through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Ernest Emenyonu in his *The Rise of the Igbo Novel* writes that Achebe's novels, including *Things Fall Apart*, are set in historical perspective and they reflect the process of change in Igbo society from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s (104). According to him, "*Things Fall Apart* (1958), is set at a time when the early Europeans were first coming to Igbo land" (104). Okonkwo in the novel married three wives and he is held in high esteem unlike his monogamous father Unoka who is rather derided for being monogamous as a result that he is lazy. Unoka's laziness made him to be looked down by the people. He married only one wife and could not even maintain his lone hut. Unoka not being praised for having only one wife is a clear indication that in a typical Igbo society during the era, it was almost not a good thing to have only one wife. Comparing *Things Fall Apart* to Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*, we observe that a great change exists between the Igbo society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the same Igbo society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Okoye's era, as a result of colonial influence, men are expected to have only one wife each in line with Timothy Aluko's *One Man, One Wife*.

Though a work of art, literature (on a narrower sense), mirrors society and allows us to better understand the world we live in. Literature acts as a form of expression for each individual

author. An author is inspired by what happens around him, hence his work mirrors what happens in his or her society. Writers of literature, according to Chinua Achebe in his “Novelist as a Teacher”, act as teachers and educators who use their literature to expose certain occurrences in their societies (103). As well, literature writers use their invented characters to educate the audience on the impending dangers in the society.

Literature is a source of entertainment. Readers of novels get entertained when they read, we are equally entertained when we watch movies or listen to performers of poetry. Even before the coming of the Europeans to Africa, in many parts of Africa, raconteurs were paid to entertain the audience with interesting stories. But then, entertainment is not the top priority of literature. Critics believe that literature, above other functions, should educate. Bernard Shaw, for instance, is quoted in Patrick Murray’s *Literary Criticism* as saying “but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening” (30). Good literature is that whose major priority is to educate. Critics such as Shaw and Perrine admit that literature should, in addition to education it offers, also entertain. Perrine adds that when the sole function of literature becomes entertainment, such literature does not worth any attention. In his words, if drama (literature) offers only entertainment without enlightenment, it seems to me as though it is a mere waste of time (3). By enlightenment, Perrine believes that literature should educate the audience about the happenings and occurrences in a society and then proffer a solution to any envisaged ill.

### **Literature as an Indispensable Tool for Curbing the Spread of Coronavirus**

It is a fact undisputed that literature is a means for societal reformation. As authors are inspired by what happens in their societies, their works profusely reflect on their societies. Literature is interested in societal ills and it criticizes the ills in such a way that there would be reformation. Today, coronavirus is a cankerworm ravaging the entire world. People’s lives are endangered and every society is in perpetual fear because of the outbreak of the virus. Borders were closed to stop movement of people from a place to another as to ensure the stoppage of the spread of the virus. Continued closure of borders would rather cause more hardship to the people as continued lockdown would not do the people of the world any good. With language, measures on how to curb the spread of corona virus are relayed to those who understand the language. Part of the measures of curbing the spread of the virus includes:

- i. Wearing of the facemask
- ii. Constant hand washing in running water
- iii. Sanitization of the hand
- iv. Maintaining social distancing

- v. Avoiding handshake and hugging
- vi. Avoiding crowded areas

The above measures are to be strictly adhered to ensure that society is rid of the pandemic. To be able to disseminate the information, literature writers must use language that easily captures the intended message. They must understand that the essence of literature is to communicate and not basically to impress. With spoken language only, the information could not be effectively disseminated with effective result. Literature writers use language effectively in their literature to achieve good results. The onus therefore, is on the writers to write about the dangers of the virus, the spread of the virus and the possible means of putting a stop to the spread. To pass the information well, the writer of a novel, for instance, invents characters who are recalcitrant and who refuse to observe the precautionary measures of COVID-19 and so, they end up contracting the virus.

Literature writers, when in their works of art, hype the sufferings of those who out of their deliberate acts of recalcitrance, contracted the virus, and they also hype the pains the victims pass through, it will go a long way achieving the goal as the audience reads the literature and gets educated. This is why it is believed that literature reforms. Anybody who reads such didactic works of art and sees the hyped sufferings of the careless characters and of course, how they ended as fantastically presented by the writer would certainly be educated and corrections be made. Critics believe that literature writers have as their responsibility, to use their works to educate.

As Chinua Achebe in “Novelist as Teacher,” enjoined African writers to mirror their societies in their literature and ensure that they use their literature to reform their societies (104), this article has thus, concentrated on how Covid-19 has affected different societies in the world as well as suggesting ways of salvaging the societies and ensuring that the virus ceases to spread. According to David Ker in his *Literature and Society in Africa*, “Achebe’s conception of the role of the artist in Africa is not different from that of most of his fellow writers. The modern African writer is the product of his species. This is best exemplified in Wole Soyinka (7).

The African critics underscore the indispensability of literature as a means of reformation and education. Ker echoed Achebe that the writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done. According to Ker, the writer should march right in front. By marching right in front, Ker suggests that writers should write about what happens in their societies in such a way that through the writing, the members of the audience are educated (7-8).

In early 2020, after a December 2019 outbreak in China, the World Health Organization identified SARS-CoV-2 as a new type of corona virus. The outbreak immediately spread round the entire world. The spread was rapid, mainly through person-to-person contact, with the virus ranging from mild to deadly. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19, many writers have in their various works of art, mirrored the dangers of the virus as well as its mode of spread with the



intent to curb the spread. Chris Bohjalian, a writer and a newspaper contributor, affirming that literature is the best weapon for fighting the spread of corona virus, says:

Someday soon, we are going to be turning the pages of this newspaper and will spot a review for a book about the pandemic spring of 2020. Already, the nonfiction accounts are on their way, with their chronicles of the virus's spread across the globe and the missed opportunities to contain it. As the *New York Times* recently reported, Fang Fang's "Wuhan Diary" arrived this month, with Debora MacKenzie's "Covid-19: the Pandemic that Never Should Have Happened" not far behind.

The novels will come next.

I say this because we novelists depend upon journalists and historians to help us understand what really happened. Inside the fictional structures I build are framing, wiring and plumbing that make a house a home, and a lot of what resides behind the fictional wallpaper and Sheetrock is what actually happened. Or could happen (28)

Bohjalian, by the above statement, is of the opinion that a literature writer does not work in isolation, he depends on the journalists and historians as well as on his physical experience. The partnership can only be possible when language is involved. Christopher Bollen in an article about Chris Bohjalian's thriller novel, *The Red Lotus*, writes that Bohjalian possesses one of the best-tuned antennas in contemporary fiction for absorbing the troubles.... (87). *The Red Lotus*, is described as a novel packed with deadly pathogens and paranoiac animal-to-human transmissions, was released right as New York City was shutting down over the spread of Covid-19. The author chronicled the dangers of the virus as well as educated the audience on the precautionary measures. Bohjalian's and other literary works have contributed a lot in fighting against the spread of the pandemic. Without literature writers in a society, the society keeps wallowing in perpetual darkness.

Ker says that the old questions about the efficacy of literature in solving our contemporary problems have reappeared also in the form of questions about the relevance of our literature written in English to contribute materially to the development of our culture (33). In this era of coronavirus, writers all over the world have the responsibility of incorporating the theme of coronavirus pandemic in their works of literature. According to Robin Brooks, an Assistant Professor in the Department of African Studies, after Covid-19 changed the world, Brooks decided the edition could cover works from the past in ways that they examine what is happening today, particularly issues surrounding Black lives. Speaking on the responsibility of writers in the face of Covid-19, Brooks said that some people can see it in the sad sense, that some of the very issues that they have been tackling in their work for decades are still here. They are still major issues within the lives of Black people, of course in the United States, but around the world. According to Brooks, this Covid-19 moment has outlined them but their work is still very much relevant to what we are facing in our lives right now (Wikipedia).

In conclusion, Covid-19 has brought a lot of hardship to the entire world. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating. Millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty. The year 2020 thus has remained a history in the annals of the whole world. It was a year of total lockdown occasioned by the outbreak of the novel virus, Covid-19. The Covid-19 pandemic hogged the headlines through much of 2020, and we still have not seen the end. Covid-19 enthroned fear in every society of the world. Intra and inter country migration was banned and hardship became prominent in different societies of the world. Writers of literature are tasked with the responsibility to write literatures whose themes would gear towards ensuring that the pandemic is laid to rest. As gadflies, literary artists are interested in misdeeds and abnormalities in society with the intent to remedy such through their writings. Now that Covid-19 is ravaging the entire world, it is recommended that literary artists should integrate the theme of the threats of covid-19 and the mode of spread in their writings. The way the writers hype the dangers of covid-19 will make the entire society understand the need to follow the precautionary measures so as not to fall victim.

Literature writers must always remember that the essence of writing is to communicate. When literature fails to communicate, it becomes effort in futility. To be able to communicate, writers of literature should use appropriate language that would enhance understanding. Literature should be made to inform and not to impress.

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