

## **Rethinking Motifs in Selected Children's Literary Texts**

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### **Abstract**

This study evaluates various motifs in selected children's literary texts against the backdrop of exposing negative and anti-social conducts among children and members of the society. It also foregrounds the artistic merit in the use of various literary tropes by authors of children's literature in enhancing their appeal to the audience. The primary texts for this study are James Ene Henshaw's *This is our Chance* and Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River*. They are selected because they best exemplify the critical use of motifs in achieving the required message that this study is geared towards. The sociological approach to literature which concentrates on the extrinsic elements that examine the relationship between literature and society is applied to determine the artistic elements and motifs in the selected texts. The paper shows that the themes treated in children's literatures are often those that children are concerned with at various stages of their life – such as heroism, adventure, risk, mischief, fantasy, love, overcoming restiveness, jealousy and so on. The paper, therefore, concludes that since heroism and adventure constitute the major fulcrum of Nigerian children's literature, authors of children's literature should choose a principal character who is going to be the hero or heroine in their works. Thus, the development of the story is the development of the hero/heroine until the end of the story where he/she overcomes the conflict.

*Keywords:* children's literature, motifs, thematic preoccupations, literary texts

### **Introduction**

Children's literature, which is often illustrated, consists of all literary creations for readers and listeners in their teenage or younger years. It is literature meant and intentionally written for children in elementary/primary schools as well as those in junior secondary schools to read and understand. The children, through their encounter with the texts, get involved with the events, setting, actions, intrigues, characters and ideas in the books. In other words, children literature offers the young ones the opportunity to explore

situations and feelings in literary texts they may have not yet encountered in real life.

Although critics of children's literature believe that the characteristics of children's literature are its short length, limited characters, action, condensation of plot and incident, linear story-line and simple language style, the most important and endearing aspect of children's literature is its photo illustrations. Children's literature is important because it provides pupils with opportunities to respond to literature. It makes them appreciate their own cultural heritage as well as those of others. It helps develop emotional intelligence and creativity. It nurtures growth and development of their personality and social skills; and it transmits important literature and themes from one generation to the next.

Various forms of children's literature abound. They range from biographies, children's poetry, children's stories, fables, fairy tales, fantasy, to science fiction, among others. These various forms are well propagated in books, VCDs and animated film stations. Since one of the functions of children's literature is to promote morality in children, children's books usually feature well-illustrated pictures relevant to the text to broaden the children's knowledge and sensitize them on current socio-political and scientific issues. In this regard, books with themes of greed, dishonesty, injustice, hunger, industry and heroism are well illustrated to portray negative and positive traits that the children should imbibe or discard. The graphic illustrations play a great role in books intended for young readers – texts some critics refer to as “Beginner's Books”, especially when they are written for pre-literate children between ages 0-5. These illustrated pictures remain in the memory of the children for a long time. According to Lesnik-Oberstein (1994, p.6), “even after children attain sufficient levels of literacy to enjoy the story without illustrations, they continue to appreciate the occasional drawings found in chapter books”.

Nigerian children's literature are fictional narratives that treat various themes that revolve around heroism, adventure, bravery as well as others that are meant for the edification of the young ones. However, Acholonu (2012, p.23) raises concern about the overriding exploitation of the themes of crime and violence in some so-called children's books with the portraiture of young children involved in criminal acts. This, to Acholonu, is inappropriate because it makes a child or the reader of these texts, relive the harrowing experiences that the protagonist goes through. In essence, themes of violence and crime in children's literature should be toned down. To this end, Acholonu, in discussing the use of motifs, primarily focuses on language and its appropriateness, while recommending positive themes, such as heroism, the use of images and various literary devices that enhance the message and aesthetic quality of children's books.

Furthermore, while some of the existing scholarship on Nigerian

Children's literature have contributed to the understanding of moral aspects of children's literature, little studies have been done in the area of heroism and the artistry inherent in creative works that constitute Nigerian children's literature, which is what this essay sets out to investigate. In order to achieve this, the paper focuses on James Ene Henshaw's *This is Our Chance* and Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River*. The choice of these texts derives from the fact that they best exemplify the themes of heroism, bravery, adventure, etc. which constitute the pedagogical fulcrum of this paper.

### **Diverse Themes in Achebe's *Chike and the River* and Henshaw's *This is our Chance***

Multiple themes are explored in the two texts selected for investigation in this essay. They include the themes of heroism/bravery, love, and adventure. Other favoured themes are jealousy and hatred. These themes are significant because they express the general experience of children in relation to the environment and human society. Children's literature, therefore, comments on both the positive and negative aspects of society, with the aim of orientating the children to learn from the experiences of persons portrayed in the stories.

The theme of heroism is a favoured one in the genre of children's literature in Africa. According to Dandatti Abdulkadir (1981, p.31), the term 'hero' in Africa is used to describe "courage and endurance man exhibits in his struggle for survival, or in his pursuit of honour". He states further that "these actions involve great risk and are considered heroic by the conventions and values of his community". With specific reference to children's literature which thrives on the children's quest for adventure, the thematic orientation foregrounds elements of valour and bravery. The children in their quest to achieve certain goals encounter various ordeals (physical, supernatural and metaphysical) which are also reflected in the texts. These themes are utilized by writers of children's literature in ways that make their books interesting.

Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River*, for instance, explores the themes of heroism/bravery. In the text, Chike, as an 11-year old child, had never left his village, Umuofia. Then, one day, his mother told him that he would be going to Onitsha to live with his uncle. This gives him a sense of joy as he had earlier received from his uncle's servant, Michael, highlights of the good things that he is sure to encounter in Onitsha. "He was tired of living in a bush village and wanted to see a big city" (p.1). With this mindset, Chike is poised for adventure in this new city. At the point of departure, we find the young Chike hesitant to leave home. However, Chike embarks on his adventure into the city, where he soon finds out that the city may indeed glitter, but it is not all gold. Firstly, the child-hero is exposed to the values of the village before embracing the city and all its challenges. But Chike soon

makes friends and is forced to mature quickly in an intimidating metropolis where all manner of dangers lurks.

Rather than destroy his innocent disposition, the events help in propelling him towards an intriguing adventure that is set ahead of him. For instance, his first challenge which eventually constitutes the conflict in the story revolves around his quest to cross the River Niger through ferry to Asaba. This ambition made him to pass through various ordeals especially his curiosity to survive among his new classmates and friends in Onitsha. His brave quest to cross the River Niger to Asaba is to show to his friends that he has achieved a feat which in the estimation of his friends is the hallmark of a city boy. As the writer puts it, “Anyhow, Chike was happy about one thing. He could now talk like the rest of his companions” (p.56). It should be well stated here that Chike’s adventure to cross the River Niger constitutes an act of heroism, a feat he must achieve in order to be accepted into the fold of his companions.

During the journey Chike felt as proud as Mungo Park when he finally reached the Niger. Here at last was the great River Niger. Chike stuck out his chest as though he owned the river, and drew a deep breath. The air smelt clean and fresh (p.54).

As a proud hero, he added this feat to his name as part of his achievement as a young boy. The writer says –

It was all like a dream. Chike wondered whether it was actually happening. ‘So this is me’, he thought. ‘Chike Anene, alias Chiks the Boy, of Umuofia, Mbaino District, Onitsha Province, Eastern Nigeria, Nigeria, West Africa, Africa, World, Universe.’ This was how he wrote his name (p.53).

Chike’s bravery is also manifested when he exposes the night-watchman and the thieves who stole from a shop in the market. Chike is brave despite the man’s aggression towards him. He refuses to be cowed in the face of intimidation by the night watchman who threatened to harm him should he expose him. As a little boy, he is alone in a strange land. His safety is at stake. Should anything happen to him, he will be alone at the mercy of fate. But as a brave boy, he needs to show that he has fully imbibed all the morals he received from his mother – especially the one that says, truth is golden and falsehood leads to disgrace. At the end, he becomes a hero in the process of the recovery of the stolen goods. This is why Bowra (1952) tells us that heroic literature “may be concerned with any action in which a man stakes his life on his ideal of what he ought to be” (p.48). Chike stands his ground and is able to convince the people that the night-watchman was part of the people that stole from the shop. The narrator explains it thus:

As Chike told his story the night-watchman began to shake. He

covered his face with his hands to hide his tears. Chike became a hero. One big man in the crowd lifted him up and placed him on his shoulders. The others applauded. They said they had never seen such bravery from such a little boy... Everywhere people spoke of Chike's adventure. His photograph appeared in the local newspapers and his name was mentioned on the radio. Then after the three thieves and the night-watchman had been tried and imprisoned Chike got a letter from the manager of the shop. He announced that the company which owned the shop had decided to award a scholarship to Chike which would take him right through secondary school (p.66).

Here, Chike's bravery is recreated as an example for the young reader to emulate. Achebe re-imagines this role for the child-hero in a manner that Chike's success will necessarily encourage other young children to stand for the truth at all time and emulate him under similar circumstances. The letter of commendation and award of scholarship from the manager of the shop is a pointer to societal acceptance of his bravery and good deeds. By this, Chike becomes a source of inspiration to all young children who aspire to become great in life.

The theme of adventure in Achebe's *Chike and the River* provides excitement for young readers because they can share in the experiences of Chike who is also young. Chike's journey from his village Umuofia and his ambition to cross the River Niger give the text an exhilarating appeal that excites the young reader; this is because of the accidental adventure that follows after Chike missed the return boat. In his desperation, Chike strays by accident into a gang of armed robbers and then he is caught up in the rapidly unfolding events. The passage goes thus:

When the lorry stopped the man at the back climbed out. Chike opened his eyes but it was pitch dark. The three men were now talking in whispers. Then the driver reversed the lorry. For a while there was silence. Chike prayed that the men would move away for even one minute so that he could get down and hide. But they did not move. Instead, a fourth man came and joined them. From what they said Chike understood that this fourth person was the night-watchman. ... Then he told the driver, whose name was Ignatius, to move out the benches from the back of the lorry. Chike was half-dead. He heard the man let down the tail-board. But he did not come in. instead he returned to the front of the lorry to get a flash light. In the twinkling of an eye Chike slipped out and began to walk away. He had no idea where he was going. It was too dark to see. But he continued walking as quietly as a cat. Unfortunately, his foot kicked against a tin and made a noise. The driver shouted: 'Who dat?' Chike turned sharply to his left and ran. His eyes were now used to the darkness and he could see vaguely. He saw something like a door and walked in (p. 61-62)

The above episode underscores the scary nature of the accidental adventure that the child-hero goes through in his quest to survive in a strange land. The use of suspense and introduction of actions that make the curious reader to pray on behalf of Chike that he should not be caught adumbrates the artistic significance of the text. However, the child-hero survives the scary incidents through a dint of luck and the strength of his character and when the situation affords itself for him to display his bravery, he seizes it and becomes the hero that exposes the armed gang. This episode of Chike's adventure thus provides the opportunity for revealing his inner strengths and weaknesses. Chike therefore comes up at the end of the story wiser than before.

What endears Achebe's *Chike and the River* to the young reader is that it serves as a mirror of life for young children. Chike, the child-hero for instance, moves from naïveté and ignorance to self-knowledge and self-discovery. Life for the young child is like a series of well-planned events all geared towards his personal development and growth. But he succeeds through determination and constant hard work – in spite of temptations to go astray. Chike stuck to the lessons he learnt from home and from his mother. He is honest, truthful, courageous, and polite and these are qualities that earn him the success at the end of the story. It is significant to note that although Chike is attracted by good life, wealth, and material acquisitions, the ultimate success that Achebe allows him to achieve is the prize that gives him great self-confidence and pride which is the scholarship he wins to go to school to receive a good education, the reward for exposing and turning in the criminals. This is thus the new imagination that the story encapsulates.

Like in Achebe's *Chike and the River*, the theme of heroism and bravery are also explored in James Ene Henshaw's *This is our Chance*. At the beginning of the story, we encounter Princess Kudaro at crossroads with the customs and traditions of Koloro kingdom. As the plot develops, it becomes clear that she is poised to change the rigid system of things placed on the people of Koloro by their now anachronistic customs and traditions. The only way opened to her is to defiantly elope with the Prince of Udura (an enemy kingdom) whom she had met in her school in the city. The Princess is conscious of the consequences of her action, but as it is typical with all heroic literature where the hero cares less for his/her safety, she runs out of the palace to unite with her lover. Her action pits her kingdom against Udura. War alarms are sounded and both kingdoms square up for a showdown.

As the intrigues continue, Bambula, her private teacher, who is another youth, is fingered as the one who radicalised her into taking such a step. Bambula is taken to prison, awaiting his death. Also, the Prince of Udura is

arrested and imprisoned in Koloro kingdom. However, the conflict is amicably resolved when news comes from the kingdom of Udura that the princess had performed a heroic act by saving the life of one of the sons of Chief Mboli, the king of Udura. Of great significance is the act of bravery and heroism displayed by the young lovers in the play. Both Princess Kudaro and Prince Ndamu defy the age-long animosity between their kingdoms to get married in order to unite the kingdoms.

When the young Prince Ndamu is brought before Chief Damba, he displays critical features of a hero – fearlessness, composure and wits as revealed thus:

Damba: (*walking around him, and examining him disdainfully.*)  
Young man, you interest me, I have two questions for you.  
Firstly, are you the young man called Vitamins? Secondly,  
where is my daughter?

Ndamu: (*with princely dignity.*) My name is Ndamu, Prince of the village of Udura. It is true that your daughter and I tried to get away. Search parties were after us, one from this village and another from my own. I, therefore, tried to hide her under a bush, but before I could find a suitable hiding-place for myself, I was caught by your men. Oh I wish I knew what had happened to her: sweet, kind, gentle, obedient Kudaro. Oh... (p.23).

From the above conversation, the reader is exposed to the fact that King Damba's knowledge is at variance with contemporary realities. He is hooked on the past, hence he mistakes Prince Ndamu with the notion of vitamin which his daughter's home teacher had espoused in his several discussions with him. However, further interrogation opens a cultural dimension to the discourse - elopement is alien to African culture. But in the play, Henshaw uses position as tool towards solving identified problems in the society. These problems are from all indications still the problems of our time. That is, cultural enmity which according to the author must be changed, even if it means total disregard for the old and obsolete cultural principles.

Of significant import is the cultural perspective that the playwright tries to advocate with the boldness of Prince Ndamu in defending his attempt to elope with the king's daughter. Herein lies new imagination in the text – multiculturalism can make people of diverse cultures to live together as one as well as intermarry without any hindrance. This concept is given voice in the manner in which the playwright articulates the intrigues in the play where the Princess's life is necessarily hanging in the balance should the king continue to defend traditional values against the new imagination which is

constitutive of cultural change and assimilation.

Similar display of bravery and heroism is shown in the action of Ayi, Kudaro's young maid who defies the status of the king and questions the place of tradition over humanity. She tells the king bluntly that:

Ayi: But, Sir, where would principles be without men to observe them? And where would men be without human heart beating within them? (p.30)

When it becomes obvious that the elders of Koloro kingdom will not yield to the voice of reason, as exemplified by the children, Ayi confesses to the king thus:

Ayi: (*interrupting*). Damba, Sir, I have lived here with you to learn. But all I knew was from your good wife. I beg you, permit me to leave this village. Where I will go I do not know. No matter what happens I shall always treasure the memory of your wife and her last words – “tell Damba, for the children's sake, for the women's sake, let there be no war...” (p.32).

The young maid, Ayi, is brave in telling the truth to the leaders of Koloro kingdom. To the children, therefore, time has changed and it has come to the point when their education has exposed them to the reality of things. They can no longer cope with primitive customs and traditions that reduce their humanity. In the restoration of the Koloro kingdom from the path of self-destruction, it is the actions of the children that represent the voice of reason and triumph over those of the elders who are brash, divisive and insensitive to reality. The elders dwell in the past and make custom and tradition a fortress that retards their progress. This is why Betiang believes that Henshaw's plays, written somehow in the Shavian tradition of the problem play, were and are an 'invitation to action' towards solving these identified problems in the society. (p.123). According to Fanon, a writer from a colonized culture who writes for his people “ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope” (p.187). The children become the basis of hope in the society.

What the author has done with the theme of love in this play is to capture the invasion of love bred in the comfort of Western education against the African traditional love arrangement. He exposes the battle facing every dare-to-break conventional rule in the pursuit of a new culture that encourages humanity and freedom of choice. As he puts it himself in the preface to the play, there is “the need to preserve good traditions, and at the same time to graft upon them, where appropriate, the best from other countries” (p.5). At the end of the play, education and modernity win against tradition and ethnocentrism.



For instance, Chief Damba submits to the caprices of the children and accepts the fact that modernity has triumphed over mundane sentiments. He says: “But is this the price of education that our children should dislike what their fathers love, and place high values on what we loathe. Perhaps it is the will of our Fathers’ spirits that it must be (p.31). Peter P. Ekeh (1989, p.8-12) articulates this phenomenon as a conflict between the demand of the ‘primordial culture’ and that of the ‘civic culture’. The primordial culture, according to him, is kin-group specific and built around the ‘notional’ and ‘substantive’ concepts of ethnic groups. This type of culture is pre-colonial and based on tribe and carries the tribal ethos and controls. The civic culture, on the other hand, is a colonial contact culture which contains social formations, ideas, values and institutions that arise from the Nigerian nation state. Civic culture is, therefore, Western, modern and urban based.

### **The Use of Various Literary Motifs in Achebe’s *Chike and the River* and Henshaw’s *This is our Chance***

In the articulation of the themes of heroism/bravery in Henshaw’s *This is our Chance* and Achebe’s *Chike and the River*, the writers adopt various motifs and styles with which they address contemporary issues which constitute thematic fulcrum of this essay. These motifs are examined to bring out the salient indices of bravery, fantasy, mischief, love, and others in the works. As has been noted above, the themes prevalent in many of the children’s literature relate to events in the cultural, political and economic milieu of the children. The formation of the right characters, narrative techniques, and appropriate themes in children’s literature is thus the primary concern of the writers of children’s works.

In *Chike and the River*, for instance, Achebe exhibits the same simple style that is famous in his adult novels. He shows through the adventures of Chike that despite the use of a single character around whom the activities revolve he could still deepen our insight and illustrate deeper levels of human nature. For example, at the beginning of the novel, the writer presents a vivid and graphic description of Chike’s mood when he hears the news of his going to Onitsha to stay with his uncle; the author also contrasts the village setting with that of Onitsha. The story goes thus:

Chike was now eleven years old, and he had never left his village. Then one day his mother told him that he would be going to Onitsha in the new year to live with his uncle who was a clerk in one of the firms there. At first Chike was full of joy. He was tired of living in a bush village and wanted to see a big city. He had heard many wonderful stories about Onitsha. His uncle’s servant, Michael, had told him that there was a water tap in the very compound where they lived. Chike said this was impossible but Michael had sworn to its

truth by wetting his first finger on his tongue and pointing it to the sky. Chike was too thrilled for words. So he would no longer wake up early in the morning to go to the stream. The trouble with their village stream was that the way to it was very rough and stony, and sometimes children fell and broke their water-pots. In Onitsha Chike would be free from all these worries. Also he would live in a house with an iron roof instead of his mother's poor hut of mud and thatch. It all sounded so wonderful. (p. 1-2).

The narrative above appeals to boys and girls because the author manages to localize the story in an identifiable environment through the use of familiar activities. This narrative motif endears the story to the young children. Besides, the young reader can see the contrasting pictures of the rural and urban environments. The former lacks modern amenities, good water supply, electricity, and modern infrastructure, but it is safe and serene and had the human touch and human face. The urban centre, on the other hand, has physical structures and amenities, but life in them is relatively unsafe. There are frequent drug abuse and fraud. But the beauty of the work is that Achebe is careful to show through the experiences and actions of the child-hero in the text that if a child holds on to his or her good upbringing he can survive in any environment.

*Chike and the River* is an adventure story. However, the plot revolves around Chike's ambition to cross the River Niger in a boat. It is this desire that nearly makes him deviate from his good upbringing as he tries to get money through a magician known as Prof. Chardus who swindles him thereby depriving him of his three kobo. Chike is so desperate to sail across the river that he begs his uncle for some money but the man looked so stern that he had to run from him. Nevertheless, his wish is fulfilled when he goes to the riverside to wash cars for people and is rewarded with one naira.

The adventure takes a different turn when Chike fulfills his ambition and he is enamoured by Asaba that he forgets to return to the riverside to catch the last boat to Onitsha. The author contrives the story interestingly to include a patriotic act by Chike who sleeps in a lorry that is used for robbery. Chike helps the police in tracking down the three thieves thereby exposing a thief known as Peter Nwana the miserly trader. This final act is the crux of the didactic message in the novel. The author uses the message as a motif to teach the simple lesson that all good acts are rewarded. By making Chike famous through his brave act, the author is encouraging other boys and girls to emulate him. This is the didactic aspect of the novel that is invaluable.

However, within the story, Achebe also discusses issues relating to the moral consciousness of children. He indicates this motif in the novel through Chike's abhorrence to filthy environment. In the house in which Chike lives there are two latrines for about fifty people, one for adults and the other for children. Both are filthy but the children's own is worse. It swarms with flies

bigger than any Chike had ever seen at Umuofia. They revolt him, and so he learns that a big town is not always better than a village. The juxtaposition of Onitsha, the town and Umuofia, a village is used to inform the reader that a village has certain virtues that can be absent in a town. Achebe is thus changing the erroneous concept that a town is filled with only the good things of life.

In the same manner, the novelist tells the story of Ezekiel, the spoilt child, in order to illustrate a different behaviour from that of Chike which must be condemned by all good children. This juxtaposition of the two characters is important. Ezekiel is an only son but due to over-pampering he “was developing into a lawless imp.” (p.15). Ezekiel formulates a plan in school through which he writes to some pen-friend boys in England asking for money and promising to send them leopard skins. Ezekiel has no plan to send them the leopard’s skin because he simply wants their money. His act encourages other boys to send similar letters too. The bad boys are punished when the headmaster discovers their criminal acts.

Most of the activities in this novel are structured to reflect the importance of good behaviours. The manner in which Chike fords a river when he travels with his mates to convey the luggage of a missionary to Okikpe gives him confidence. Achebe uses that incident to stress that most obstacles that seem insurmountable could yield to brave confident children. This incident is juxtaposed with the incident of some boys who take brain pills to enable them pass examinations. These boys lack confidence in themselves and they break down before the day of examinations thereby losing even the little knowledge they would have been able to produce on the examination day.

The most important aspect of Achebe’s didacticism in *Chike and the River* is the illustration that a town possesses several influences that could turn a child from his or her good upbringing. He therefore points out some of these problem areas thereby aiding the children in understanding what is good and also helping parents in ensuring that their children are not influenced by bad boys and girls.

Furthermore, the various literary motifs used by Achebe in the novel make it rewarding for children. There are familiar folksongs, idioms and code mixing, humourous anecdotes, games that children play for entertainment and amusement, children’s pranks and slangs, children’s fantasies and day-dreaming, children’s nicknames for each other, and children’s perceptions of the adult world, which they discuss among themselves in their peculiar types of dialogue. For example, Chike’s classmate, Samuel, who is a good footballer gives himself a nick name, S.M.O.G in place of his full name. The novelist puts it thus:

S.M.O.G. was Samuel’s nickname which he gave himself. His full name was Samuel Maduka Obi: so his initials were S.M.O. Then one

day he saw that if he added a ‘G’ to his initials he would become S.M.O.G, He immediately did so. In Onitsha the letters S.M.O.G. were said to bring good luck because they stood for Save Me O God (p. 4).

Similarly, Chike is called ‘ChiksThe Boy’ by his peers. When he eventually crosses the River Niger, in excitement Chike rills out his full name and includes his nickname thus:

It was all like a dream. Chike wondered whether it was actually happening. ‘So this is me,’ he thought. ‘ChikeAnene, alias Chiks the Boy, of Umuofia, Mbaino District, Onitsha Province, Eastern Nigeria, Nigeria, West Africa, Africa, World, Universe.’ This was how he wrote his name (p. 53).

The use of idioms, slangs and humourous anecdotes are evident in the headmaster’s statement in front of the assembly when he scolded Ezekiel and his friends who sent letters to other children in England requesting gifts from them. Such idioms and slangs like *scallywag* and *nincompoops* were strange to the children and they laughed. The event is well captured thus:

‘That is what these *nincompoops* here have done to you.’ There was laughter again at *nincompoops*, another strange word (p. 15).

Folksongs in the novel are used to express happiness and excitement in the children. Chike becomes excited when he makes the money to take the ferry boat to Asaba, however, he becomes impatient when the boat seems to take long time in coming. He resorts to singing to keep himself happy. This interesting scenario is captured by the narrator, thus:

Chike’s dream had come true; at last he could go to Asaba. He jumped up and down several times and sang ‘One more river to cross’. It was one of the songs he had learnt at the C.M.S. Central School, Umuofia (p. 51).

All these literary motifs and aesthetic devices are used to reinforce the authenticity of the story and the reality of the children’s world created in the text.

In *This is Our Chance*, Henshaw uses the medium of dramatic literature to foreground the role of children as a stabilising feature in any society. Here the author juxtaposes the modern vision and ideas of the children about the ever-changing society against archaic traditional disposition of the adults. The children represent modern civilization which they have acquired through western education while the adults foreground the tenets of retardation dictated by customs and traditions and abhor good neighbourliness. The morals that the author passes across to the society is that exposure through

education will open society to freedom and progress.

Through the characters of the young children: Princess Kudaro, Prince Ndamu and Ayi, the reader is brought into the world of the powerful versus the weak. With clear and simple words, Henshaw takes the reader through children's travail in the hands of the adults who take pleasure in upholding the ancient customs and traditions which are unknown to the children. Here, the author pits Ayi who represents those ideals of the children against Damba and Ajugo who oppose them. This idea is aesthetically recreated:

Ayi: How would you like your daughter killed and your dead?

Damba: Don't trifle with my wife.

Ayi: I trifle not, but I must speak my mind. For long I have seen her serve and love you as never a woman has. I have seen her organise the women of this village in their farms and in their homes. I have seen her trying to do everything to make you, and the village, worthy of her. And yet as she lies dying, tortured by all that your stubbornness has brought to her, you sit here and talk of principles, of Customs and Traditions, and listen to the advice of a man who has no feelings at all. (*looking at AJUGO*). (p.30)

Through clarity of expression, Henshaw projects the nuances of the characters in the text. Through the use of language, the text lends itself to the theme of oppression. From the beginning of the text to almost the end, the language use expresses the tension between the forces of retardation typified by the adults and progress represented by the children. The simple but emphatic statement by Kudaro that she plans to run away and get married to Ndamu already gives the reader and the story a sense of wonder as to what comes next. It brings some presence to the text itself. The statement raises many other questions and makes the reader interested in paying more attention to the text. As the plot develops, the thematic preoccupation continues to be unraveled. Throughout this period, the tone of the language is high.

The play, therefore, creates a frame to express the oppression of children characters. Kudaro, Ayi and other children in Koloro Kingdom who are victimized by the insensitivity of adults yearn for freedom. Kudaro expresses her inner feelings to Ayi thus:

Kudaro: (*lowering her voice*). Ayi, my girl, I have a secret for you, it is not that I do not like my home, but I have a handsome young man in the town where I used to go to school (*Then she smiles as she speaks.*) He promised to marry me. But how can he marry me when I am locked up in this village? (*She almost weeps.*) (p. 12)

The children are pictured constantly in one form of discomfort. The children are not given the carefree and naïve characteristics usually associated with

children. Rather, the children are portrayed as emotionally and physically strong, though disturbed. Through various literary motifs, the text lends itself to an aesthetic ideal.

### Conclusion

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that the aesthetic goal of the creators of children's literature is to compose stories that appeal to young adults through the themes treated and literary motifs used. The analysis establishes the fact that children's literature thematises issues of heroism, bravery, adventure, jealousy and triumphs whose appeal derives essentially from the alluring use of various motifs. Thus, the peculiar use of language in the selected texts and other literary motifs are artistic tropes used by writers to make children's literature in Nigeria aesthetically appealing to the reader.

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