

Language and Literature as Tools for Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

No nation of the world attains any form of development when its people are not properly developed: Nations are built or developed through knowledge; and all forms of knowledge are transmitted through language. In other words, language mediates mental access to phenomena and, therefore, what we perceive is phenomena in the form in which language mediated our perception.¹ The fact of the mediations of mental access to phenomena by language makes knowledge communicable. While language mediates between object and perception, literature is an embodiment of object, language and perception. Therefore, when Nigerian literary works represent Nigerian reality, it is actually the object-Nigeria as an observable reality, which is mediated by language expressed through the perception of the writer, the Nigerian writer. Will reading the literature, therefore, make one a better person? If it does, then, can that state of being a better person be made concrete and practical, according to Terry Eagleton for there to be any meaningful national development? This paper will show how the individual psyche of Nigerians could be reformed, to make them conscious of the state of things in the polity and, thereby, awaken in them the need to change their situation and contribute to a sustainable national development.

Keywords: Nation, Phenomena, Knowledge, Mediation, Perception, Language, Literature, Development and observable Reality

¹ Uzoma Esonwanne, *Reading for the Referent*: a conference paper, 3.

Introduction

Nigerian literature is, according to Chidi Amuta, “a product of people in society, a social institution, a super-structural manifestation of a fundamentally material process, the process of creation of ideas and values within limits prescribed by the social essence of language.”² In other words, language and literature are not mutually exclusive as far as being tools for sustainable national development is concerned; for Nigerian Literature may reflect eternal beauty, but, empirically, it is the reflection of public taste, a social product expressed through the medium of language.

Whether or not a Nigerian writer chooses to write in his or her native language or English is entirely his or her business; the fact is, providence, however brutally, has made Nigeria a multilingual society, with English, which has certainly become a global language, playing a very important role. It is therefore important that if a writer chooses to write in English, the language should have the capacity to carry his or her experience and this experience, if it is intended for public consumption, must reveal things in the culture to the audience to make them locate their experience in it. Moreover bilingualism or even multilingualism is not a vice, but a virtue. Professor Chinua Achebe had settled that issue long ago in Makerere.

Language can thrive as language in the real sense of uttering speech sounds, no doubt; but since it is not possible to completely interact without some art to it, language is then inseparable from literature, for language, as in uttering audible speech sounds, is different from language rendered

² See also Chidi Amuta, *The Theory of African Literature: Implications of Practical Criticism* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1989), 9

with artistry: it is that artistry in the rendering of language that is literature. How boring life would be if human beings only uttered understandable speech sounds to their neighbours in conversation, for example, '*go and bring me something to eat or come in and sit down*'. But if in conversations among people, especially in the gatherings of elderly men and women proverbs, ironies, metaphors and symbols are employed in the art of conversation, then language becomes literature. If then a writer uses the same skills employed in the art of speaking to create a beautiful story, which again mirrors experience, he produces also literature, which in itself is not different from the same thing rendered orally, but creatively.

Language is both the egg and the Chicken as Professor Afejuku had implied in his keynote speech at the International Conference of Students of English and Literary Studies, but no, literature is not because language is: literature is language used creatively and imaginatively; and we are dead, including language once we cease to be creative and imaginative; and dead people do not speak! Nothing is creatively and imaginatively put on paper that has not been thoughtfully spoken within or even spoken to an audience like his keynote speech. Therefore, language is because literature makes it be! And since language itself is, according to Albert Gerard "a set of symbols which embody, beyond their plain literal meaning, all the customs, feelings, beliefs of the group [people];"³ naturally, then, all

³ Albert Gerard, *Literature and Society* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972), 4. I prefer people, because, in this instance, it is about the people of Nigeria particularly.

forms of development will revolve around the values, beliefs, customs/culture and orientation of the people.

By studying Nigerian literature, one sees that it exposes the potentials of a sustainable national development inherent in the realities, which it reflects. For example, if the literature exposes the nature and causes of ethnic conflict in the Nigerian society, it invariably offers its conscious reader the opportunity of resolving the conflicts, which are also the realities of the Nigerian condition.

In various Nigerian literary works, honesty, justice, truth, hard-work, love, spirituality and uprightness are all positive values which the writers consider very important, not only to themselves but also to the entirety of the Nigerian nation; dishonesty, injustice, laziness, corruption, prejudice, ethnicity and hate are equally values, which they also consider negative. Their society is such where negative values prevail to the extent that the values are viewed, most often, in a positive light.

THESIS

Nigerian literary works attempt to reform the individual psyche of Nigerians, to make them conscious of the state of things in the polity and, thereby, awaken in them the need to change their situation and contribute to a sustainable national development. They conceptualise or extend actuality beyond the purely narrative and reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, according to Soyinka⁴; they, also, upset conventions in an effort to liberate society

⁴ See Wole Soyinka, *Myth, literature and the African World* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72.

from historical and other superstitions.⁵ For example, in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, the ambivalent situation of Obi Okonkwo as regards his inability to marry Clara, a girl he loves, because she is *osu or outcast* is exposed. Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) sought, therefore, to upset the convention of the *osu* caste system and liberate the Igbo society thereby of the historical superstitious belief that somebody could be dedicated to the gods and be seen as an outcast and social pariah. By exposing the past history of his society, Achebe identified his society's propulsive force in its movement from one landmark of development to another, by understanding and predicting his society's immediate circumstances with a view to changing them.⁶ This is possible because the work of the writer, which is the text, embodies both objective and subjective realities. It is the platform for the phenomena of the mind during the process of the logical interaction of the various components of the text, which includes the conscious reader.

It is only when one of those components, the conscious reader, understands those morbid conditions, having experienced them in the texts, that it becomes absolutely possible, in the opinion of Soyinka, to impose a resolution on them⁷ or better still, to change the morbid situations. This is true because the conscious reader would see, as Abiola Irele suggests, how much the literature he or she reads responds to the deepest facts of human existence

⁵ Soyinka, 1995, 72.

⁶ See Arthur A. Nwankwo, *Before I Die: Obasanjo-Arthur Nwankwo Correspondence on One-Party State* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1989), 177, on the role of the writer in society.

⁷ Soyinka, 1995, 72.

in Nigeria and how much they intervene in areas of experience to make the conscious reader assume consciousness of his or her situation with regard to others and the world⁸; and if in being conscious of their situation they find it oppressive, change becomes inevitable; but if it is positive, it calls for celebration. It is this conscious need to want to change one's situation or to want to celebrate it, that practical functions in sustainable national development could be ascribed to Nigerian literature, a part of world literature, which Terry Eagleton wants to be transformative, by using the social context as raw material, so that their ability to make one a better person would no longer be judged from the perspective of the liberal humanist, whose concept of the ability of literature to make one a better person is rather abstract⁹: therefore, a conscious reader, who is likely to be a scholar of literature and who has become conscious and energised by the information he or she obtains by studying the literature, may naturally aspire to transform his or her state of being a better person into something concrete and practical. He or she may become, therefore, concerned with people's political situations as a whole – these political situations are represented in Nigerian literature – rather than being narrowly concerned with immediate interpersonal relations which can be abstracted from the concrete whole.¹⁰

Just as Nigerian literature does not preoccupy itself only with political questions, and moral arguments, its

⁸Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1981), 23-4.

⁹ See Eagleton, 208.

¹⁰ *Eagleton*.

scholarship should equip its students with the ability also of a genuine moral and political argument, with the depth of insight and critical thinking to see the relations between individual qualities, values and the whole material conditions of existence in Nigeria with regard to a sustainable national development. He or she should be able to interpret and evaluate information in Nigerian literary works from a variety of sources, making complex intellectual connections across disciplines, Nigerian cultures, and institutions. And since the information in the literary works is a carrier of knowledge, he or she should also be able to appropriate the information in them and transform them into knowledge – knowledge of the Nigerian condition, the corruption, injustice and ethnic conflicts –and then transform that knowledge into action; for example, the resolution of the ethnic conflicts. Trying to resolve the Nigerian ethnic conflicts is an effort to make a change, an effort to contribute to national development. In studying Nigerian literature, he or she acquires a deep understanding of himself or herself and respect for the complex identities of others, including the histories and cultures of Nigeria. Thereafter, he or she may want to participate actively as a citizen not only in the complex democracy of the globalised world, but also in the politics of Nigeria, being able to discern the ethical consequences of decisions and actions of Nigerian leaders. He or she may likely begin to see Nigerian Literature as existing generally within Nigeria's various cultures. He or she would even see that the literature ennobles and validates the cultures. Therefore, the version of high culture it imparts should not be marginal

to the serious political concerns of the Nigerian society. That was possibly the reason the former Nigerian head of state, Ibrahim Babangida, who delivered a lecture at the occasion of the prestigious Nigerian literature and science award, sponsored by the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas, had admonished policy makers in Nigeria that Nigeria's pursuit of scientific knowledge must not be at the expense of the humanities, especially literature, since, according to him:

[L]iterature, more than any other discipline in humanities and I dare say, even science, provides us with the best prism through which we could take a holistic view of ourselves, our social environment and even our comparative location in our material world made possible by science, in order to ensure that we protect our humanity, and even raise it to a higher level of honour and integrity.¹¹

Therefore, for a genuine sustainable national development, the study of language and literature must be encouraged, for it is only when one understands oneself, others and one's environment that the application of knowledge for development becomes inevitable.

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¹¹ See Ibrahim Babangida, "Human Capital and National Development" *Sun news*, October 14, (2007).

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