

NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S FICTION AND PROPAGANDA: A STUDY OF IFEANYI IFOEGBUNA'S *WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH*

Sjewi Funom Shehu

English Department, School of Secondary Education, Languages Programs
Federal College of Education, Yola-Nigeria
Email: Sjeroi2@yahoo.com

Abstract

Children's literature is to an extent a cultural and artistic product created for the child reader (s) to pleasurable digest. Quite a number of Nigerian writers such as Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Olajire Olanlokun to mention a few has delved into the art to further grow and develop it. Some of the children's texts have equally received a considerable amount of critical attention. However, children's texts written by Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna are scarcely investigated. On that note, the paper subjects Ifoegbuna's *Waiting for the Messiah* through the social realist lens to explore the nature and to what extent societal issues are propagated in the text. Although the Animal Republic of Malinger is Ifoegbuna's fictional setting ascribed to his *Waiting for the Messiah*, the story replicates the Nigerian political maneuvering especially one that reveals its campaign processes and life afterwards. By this, the paper broadens the analytical corpus of Nigerian Children's literature and further asserts that beyond the didactic hue of Children's literature, encapsulates political undertone necessarily propagated to disseminate and influence positive behavior. The paper finds out that political corruption, looting of public funds, economic bankruptcy, favoritism, and hardship are some of the issues embedded in the text which Ifoegbuna, through his characters, suggest ways by which those ills should be exterminated.

Introduction

Literature is said to have various but interconnected definitions ascribed to the term. The connectedness discernible in its extrapolations boils down to its imaginative and aesthetic condiments. The art of literature is not reducible to the words on the page; they are there solely because of the craft of writing. As an art, literature might be described as the organization of words to give pleasure. Yet through words literature elevates and transforms experience beyond mere pleasure. Literature also functions more broadly in society as a means of both criticizing and affirming cultural values. It is a generally accepted proposition that between the society and literature exist a symbiotic relationship. This assertion is succinctly propounded by Onwuka (2010 p. 59) as he deliberates that:

Though the subject of literature is infinite, the literary artist often reflects situations in the real world. The themes of literature are derivable from a myriad of sources such as myth, history and contemporary society, or the writer's imagination. However, the fabric of much literature remains largely influenced by experiences in the real world.

This further proves that societal happenings form the bases for literary content/contextual development and fiction which is one of the forms of literature draws largely from the society as well. It is also evident that Nigerian children's fiction such as analysed in this paper encapsulates propagandist thoughts which unconsciously/consciously spread information with the sole aim of effecting change in the minds of its readers.

Nigerian Fiction

Literature has its facets and patterns through which various ideas are carefully painted to evoke its intended motifs. Nigerian writers have with much vigor upheld this quest. Generally, literary fiction describes narratives that are carefully crafted, written, and rewritten by authors intending their products for public consumption. They typically contain episodes that depict relationships between people and among their goals. These episodes often include a conflict and a chain of events that results in rising action toward a climax, which is followed by a denouement (Hodgins, 1993; Stein, 1995). The unique thing about fiction, especially children's fiction which is naturally imbued with aesthetic elements, is in its ability to catapult its readers into the imaginative world. Hallett (2018 p. 1) clarifies that fiction is "any imaginative re-creation of life in prose narrative form". Fiction writers aim at creating "legitimate

untruths,” since they seek to demonstrate meaningful insights into the human condition. In this wise, Hallett adds that fiction is “untrue” in the absolute sense, but true in the universal sense.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the emergence and development of the Nigerian fiction. Speaking on this, Emenyonu (2010 p. 163) posits that:

It is important for any reader of fiction in Nigeria to realise that no matter how much the author denies or disguises it, every Nigerian who writes fiction in English today has his foundation in the oral heritage of his ethnic group... An authentic study of Nigerian literature must, therefore, begin by examining and appreciating the origin and development of literature in Nigerian indigenous languages

Nigerian writing coincides with the emergence of a culture that is broadly Nigerian and it is actively producing this Nigerian culture. Nigerian literary history is traced back to the middle of the eighteenth century, the oldest works being the memoirs of some freed slaves. Amos Tutuola's *the Palmwine Drinkard* (1952) and Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) are considered the earliest write ups published in the 1950s. Nigerian novel in English language started with fantasy that presents some loosely strung episodes of fantastic incidents which draws its materials from the oral tradition especially that of story-telling (Mishra, 2016).

In the light of the thematic preoccupation of the pioneers, Ojaide's (1993 p. 318) definition of the concept of Nigerian Fiction suffices. He captures it thus:

...Nigerian Literature would essentially be any Nigerian literary work of imagination which is written by Nigerians for Nigerians; it discusses issues that are Nigerian and shares the same sensibilities, consciousness, world-view and other aspects of the Nigerian cultural experience. In a nut-shell, the writer must share values and experiences of the people of Nigeria for the writing to be classified as being Nigerian”

From the above quote, it is therefore possible to assert that Nigerian fiction is that which expresses Nigerian “sensibilities, consciousness, world-view and other aspects of the Nigerian cultural experience”. It is with this mindset that Nigerian authors write in order to implore its people's consciousness as well as proffer solutions to the sorely ills plaguing the nation. In the same vein, the emergence and assertion of Children's literature is not detachable from the aforementioned.

Children's literature exists as a portion of universal literature which is appropriate for children and constitutes a substantial collection of fictional, factual, and poetic works designed specifically for children, as well as those drawn from adult literature. Literature written for children helps them to better understand themselves and others, their surrounding etc (Myers p. 1). For Minquez (2012 p. 102), the concept of Children's literature is that:

Branch of literature addressed explicitly to children and young people. It is an addressee in a process of training that needs language adaptation and the adaptation of other literary resources to facilitate comprehension. This kind of literature contributes to the literary education of children and young people.

Be as it may, children learn about their environment by engaging with story books especially story books embedded with appealing ornaments. Myers (p. 29) specifically states that:

Realistic stories employ the stuff of everyday living, weaving it into a tale of real adventure that presents to children the excitement, humor, triumphs and failures in everyday life. They mirror the present world of a child and can capture his interest by flashing back to him the details, manners and settings of his own life in story form. Centered around action of characters realistically outlined, books of realism emphasize true-to-life qualities even though the characters and plots are invented. In children's literature, realism encompasses every aspect of life; animal, family, sports and sea stories...

Ifoegbuna's fiction *Waiting for the Messiah* paints a realistic portraiture of the Nigerian political schemes thereby granting the Nigerian (and others) child the pleasure of understanding the system better.

The Concept of Propaganda

The definition of propaganda is as varied as the different human relationships, institutions, organizations and individuals defining the subject. Pratkanis and Aronson (2001 p. 11) reveal that “One historical version of the origin of propaganda informs us that the systematic design of propaganda and counter-propaganda appears to have begun in the Greek city-states about 500BC”. This submission suggests that there are other views regarding the term.

One of such views is perceived in Kotler’s submission. Kotler (1976 p. 323) avers that propaganda in its earliest stage was practised by princes and religious leaders who saw the task of winning converts as one of manipulating words, feelings and experiences. In tandem with Kotler, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences – IESS* - (1968) defines propaganda as “the relatively deliberate manipulation of other people’s thoughts or actions (as in beliefs, values and behaviors) by means of symbols such as words, gestures, flags, images, monuments and even music”. While Reverend Father Kukah (quoted in Ngoa, 2011 p. 250), simply explains propaganda as “the skill employed to persuade, communicate and market or sell an idea or a particular vision...” Lasswell (2001 p. 9) on the other hand, opines that to some people:

propaganda is any technique, be it in writing, speech, music, film or other means; any association, plan, activity etc for the spread of principles and opinions especially to effect change, reform, or that attempts to influence public opinion or encourage mass action as in popular support of a policy or programme.

Explicating more on the concept of Propaganda from a broader perspective, Lasswell (ibid) redefined it as “the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations. These representations may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form.” Based on the foregoing, Ifoegbuna’s *Waiting for the Messiah* locates itself within the written form of propaganda which through the manipulations of words, delve into the reader’s (child) mind to spur effective change, reform, and/or that attempts to influence public opinion or encourage mass action...”

It is uncontested that different people and scholars have varying perspectives on what constitutes the term ‘propaganda’ but a consensus and perhaps commonality in the definition of propaganda is that:

It is a technique or skill for persuading and (or) influencing people. No matter whether it is religious, political, racial or ethnic, propaganda has in this author’s view only one objective; which is to seek, change or alter the minds of people, to get people to see the world or to see a particular issue from a particular point of view. Usually, that point of view tends to be quite simple, the kind of simple idea or point of view that can sink into the heads and minds of people without their having to think too much about it, but quite often that simple idea or point of view could be very economical with the truth (Ngoa, 2006 p. 240).

Unequivocally, the above quote corroborates the objectives imbued in Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna’s *Waiting for the Messiah* being a written form of propaganda which has set out to expose prevailing societal political ills thereby influencing positive human action.

Theoretical Framework: Social Realism

This paper deploys Social Realism as its tool of analysis with particular reference to Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna’s *Waiting for the Messiah*. The term social realism has its roots in the Russian revolution, Soviet communism and international Marxism which beliefs that literature can be used as a medium of social reform and the social revolution. Social Realism is an artistic movement especially in literature and visual art like painting. These movements concentrated on the welfare of the society and fights for the individual rights. In this literary tradition, authors attempt to deal with social, racial and economic injustices (*CHAPTER II*, n.y: 44).

Social Realism is firmly established in Britain well before the Second World War, and also as new realist modes, it emerged in the 1930s. In a bid to clearly assert this:

Social realism is a trend in American art originating in about 1930 and referring in its narrowest sense of paintings dealing with social-protest themes. In a broader sense the term may be taken to include the more general renderings of American life, usually

categorized as American scene painting and regionalism, which may or may not manifest subtle critical comment (*CHAPTER II*, n.d:46).

It can therefore be said that it is in view of this industrial revolution and the rise of middle class society in the beginning of 19th century that triggered the interest in the depiction of the social reality in literature.

Social realist proponents include the nineteenth century artists such as the Belgian sculptor Constantin Meunier (1831–1905), the French sculptor Aimé-Jules Dalou (1838– 1902) and painter-sculptor Honoré Daumier (1808–1879). According to Forrest (2013:16), social realism is defined by its comment to framing the lives of the ‘real’ within their ‘real environment’ and that “meaning is communicated by highlighting the hitherto unheard voices of the marginalized, against the previously unseen backdrop of their habitat. Forrest’s definition of the term concurs with the social realist concern which is the dynamic interpretations of life with the purpose of changing the existing reality. Furthermore, Sutherland (2011:104) describes the sole aim of the Social Realist thus “The social realists insist on describing impoverished life in all its miserable and offensive detail; they reduce art to a prurient and deliberately scandalous anatomy of the poor.”

For Sutherland (2011: 83), the fact that authors can create life with reality, omitting nothing that is ugly or painful and idealizing nothing is what social realism entails. Social realism means the depiction in literature of social reality as it is; there should be a point one to one correspondence between the society depicted in literature and the real actual society. Speaking more specifically of the guiding principle engraved in the minds of the social realists of the second-generation writers, Olu Obafemi (2009: 168) cited in Affiah (2012: 286) states that “Their unanimity lies in their preference for social change through the collective will of the masses. This is a way of stating their preference for popular revolt, which is a hallmark of their ideological commitment.”

In view of the aforesaid, Ifoegbuna’s *Waiting for the Messiah* is an exercise in the basic political objective of this conscientious new generation which has set out to propagate social realities particularly within the Nigerian political jamboree. Social Realist approach is therefore used in exploring how these have been propagated.

Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna’s *Waiting for the Messiah*: A Social Realist Propaganda

Although Ifoegbuna’s *Waiting for the Messiah* is a children text, its contextual representations replicate Olu Obafemi’s *Naira Has no Gender*. *Waiting for the Messiah* as social realist propaganda carefully recreates the intricacies identifiable in the Nigerian political space. In the preceding pages of this paper, Sutherland (2011: 83) avers that “the fact that authors can create life with reality, omitting nothing that is ugly or painful and idealizing nothing is what social realism entails. Social realism means the depiction in literature of social reality as it is.” In the narrative, the Republic of Malinger is the fictional name of the country in which the political jamboree prevails. However, the democratic kind of politics that they operate, the incessant corrupt and nonchalant practices locates Nigeria as the realistic setting. The novel starts off on a political note revealing all the political aspirants, their goals and intentions, and how the people chant funny songs to register their supports. Lines such as “behold, the father of democracy, our president in the making!”...”Mr Lion is a born-again democrat,”...”what we are witnessing is the new improved Mr Lion,” (chapter One p. 4) buttress this fact.

However, the aftermath of the election livid the animals in the Animal Republic of Malinger with untold hardships that threaten their survival and this hardship are caused by bad leadership. Unequivocally, the nature of campaign within the political arena in the Animal Republic of Malinger (Nigeria) is trickily chaotic and selfish especially one that relates to the political aspirants. Ifoegbuna deftly name some of the promises often disseminated to the populace during campaigns which is identifiable with Nigerian political antics. This is exemplified in Mr. Lion’s promises during his campaign prior to the election thus; “If you are kind enough to vote for me, I promise you the following: freedom of speech, freedom to criticize my government, freedom to any form of reasonable protest against my government, employment for all with good wages...” (p. 1)

The typical Nigerian populace would rather accept political candidates whose deceptive promises droops jaw as against that one true aspirant who does not butter his interest with fake promises as in the case of Mr. Ram of the Animal Republic of Malinger. Mr. Ram cautions that “anybody can make promises. But how many will keep them?” Mr. Ram tries to show the extent of his genuineness by asserting that he makes his money in a clean way and beckons on the populace to investigate his background (p. 3). The narrative records that the moment Mr. Lion became president elect, frivolity and corruption became the order of the day. Even though Dr. Tortoise sternly kicks against the three month celebration declared by the president elect, Mr. Lion however, called for it. This is captured thus:

After Mr. Lion was elected, there was celebration for three months. Free food, clothes and some other gifts were distributed to everyone. Everyone participated in the jamboree which was contracted out to some politicians who made a fortune out of it. Because they were beneficiaries of this wasteful spending, they did not try to oppose these excesses which they knew would adversely affect their campaign promises (p. 5).

The aftermath of this celebration introduces nothing but calamitous hardship on the people. The economy became enmeshed in shambles and at the instance where Mr. Lion dared to start blame games, Dr. Tortoise cautions; “Don’t blame men, Your Excellency. Our problem can be traced back to the jamboree that followed your election as President”...(p. 13).

As though a good leader, Mr. Lion had to sit back watching people suffering and not do anything to dolce the tension until two years into his regime and on the third year that he began soliciting for help on how to overcome the hardship that has been taunting them. This clearly propagates our leader’s way of leadership and the nature of hardship it bestows on the populace. Mr. Dog complains that:

Since the beginning of this democratic rule, things have been going from bad to worse. My children’s school fees have not been paid. My grandmother is in the hospital on detention because I cannot pay her medical bill to get her discharged. The roof of my house is leaky... (p. 23)

Similarly, Mr. Wolf says:

My own case is even worse. My two graduate sons are day and night battling with unemployment. They cannot feed properly and they have been going about in tattered dresses, looking miserable. Of what use then is their education for which I paid so much? (p. 23)

As the discussion takes turns, it streams further to reveal how demeaning graduates could be reduced to due to lack of Job opportunities. Mr. Tiger avers that “what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander” (p. 24) which means that even graduates could make a living from selling oranges just like his wife does. By implication, Mr. Wolf should desist from complaining. This is a typical Nigerian situation and by the use of simple language, Ifoegbuna reveals this persistent plague eating up the fabrics of our nation states as young graduates roams the streets of our nation with rumple clothes and hungry stomach. The wanton hardship as depicted in the narrative warranted the need to borrow from the AMF (Animal Monetary Fund) and this very act privileges other corrupt meandering such as favoritism, embezzlement, looting and siphoning of public funds etc. This is exemplified in the following excerpts:

For the first twelve months after the AMF loan of five billion Zico was granted, the economy started to pick up, and things dramatically became more organized. But unknown to the animals, only four billion zico was spent on the projects the loan was meant for, and the remaining one billion disappeared into thin air (p. 19)...this treasury looting continued until the economy was in shambles, and the country could no longer service its AMF debts. The government began to retrench workers, while those fortunate enough to retain their jobs were owed arrears of salary (p. 21)

The decision to take loan from the AMF could be likened to Nigeria’s historic difficult times when Nigeria in the 1970s benefited loan relief from the IMF (the International Monetary Fund) organization especially during the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN, 1976) scheme. Ifoegbuna’s use of the AMF is necessarily symbolic in his portrayal of the realities of the time.

Even though the paper deploys social realism in investigating the happenings in the society, Ifoegbuna's *Waiting for the Messiah* tries as much as possible to desist from instigating war-like revolt, he however, through the character of Mr. Lion, succinctly proffers intellectual solutions to the prevailing problems weighing on their society. Mr. Lion says "You see, sentiments. Fair play should be your watchword if you want to build a strong, vibrant nation. Tribalism is a sentiment of the worst type. It is a primitive prejudice that militates against social progress" (p. 33)

He further emphasizes that every corrupt practice shall be uprooted (p.33)...very soon, I will be choosing a new cabinet and those who have served in the jamboree years will not be given a second chance (p. 38)...I now agree with you that the key to our revival is qualitative education and massive investment in research (p.38) as against "no libraries, no laboratories, no textbooks, no chalks, no blackboards" (p. 44)

Ifoegbuna's *Waiting for the Messiah* is indeed a propaganda text used not just for the traditional purpose of imparting morals and entertainment, but also to inform the child reader (adult as well) about the realities of the world in which they are living. Within this context, children (readers) are dissuaded from inculcating anything negative. From the narrative explored, the president elect alongside his congruity of followers started enjoying peace and fulfillment the moment they decided to accentuate only the positive. Following all the bustles the animal of the Animal Republic of Malinger have had to bear, Ifoegbuna propagates through the indefatigable zeal of Mr. Tortoise the importance of education as reiterated time and time again by Mr. Lion:

I am now a Doctor of Philosophy you know. So you shouldn't be surprised. Education is a wonderful thing. I started taking correspondence courses on the recommendation of AMF and I will eternally be grateful to them because I can now see the virtue in doing one's best for one's country (p. 35-36)

Furthermore, Mr. Tiger postulates that "Education is the true key to wealth, and we are grateful to professor Tortoise for our rising prosperity (p. 49). In the end, teachers are given their rightful honor and everything gets even better.

Based on the foregoing, Ifoegbuna's *Waiting for the Messiah* overtly propagates the political immoralities that permeates the Animal Republic of Malinger (figuratively, Nigeria) and succinctly posits that it is through an ardent recourse to functional educational system, will the country be resuscitated again.

Conclusion

The paper has surveyed the concept of propaganda in Nigerian Children's fiction with particular attention to Ifeanyi Ifoegbuna's *Waiting for the Messiah*. Through the Social Realist lens, the persistent reign of hardships that threaten the survival of the animals in the Animal Republic of Malinger was explored and issues such as unguided quest for power, deceitful campaign promises, mismanagement of public funds, favoritism and corruption explains the wanton sufferings meted out on the lives of the populace. As a social realist text, the paper found out that the realities of the society is of endemic political corruption which permeates every aspect of their endeavors and further scrutinizes how the novelist has been able to accentuate these societal retardant impulses which have posed a threat towards the growth and development of the society. Hence, Ifoegbuna advocates change in the political and moral happenings of the society. Thus, Ifoegbuna's *Waiting for the Messiah*, as a propaganda literature, endorses, in part, any action that can make the people (political moguls) ponder on the effects of their activities.

References

- Affiah, O.U. (2012). "Protest, Resistance and Activism in the Drama of Osonye Tess". *American Journal of Social Issues and Humanities*. 2(284-293).
- Agber, T., Iortima, P.I., Imbur, E.N. (2013). "Lesson from the Implementation of Nigeria's Past Emenyonu, E. (1999). *Tales of Our Motherland*. Ibadan : Heinemann. P.163

- Hallett, W. (2018) *Elements of Fiction-Narrator/Narrative Voice: Fundamental Literary Terms that Identify Components of Narratives*.
<https://www.cdspatriots.org/uploaded/documents/Elementsof>
- Hodgins, J. (1993). *A Passion for Narrative: A Guide for writing Fiction*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: McClelland & Stewart
- Ifoegbuna, I. (2001) *Waiting for the Messiah*. Ibadan: Lantern Books
- International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968). 11 & 12 – NADE TO PSYC. Collier & Macmillan.
- Mishra, S. K. (2016) “Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature.” *BRICS Journal of Educational Research*. 6:4 (169)
- Myers, S.L. (N.Y) *Children’s Literature*. Adaa State College of Colorado, Alaaosa. Washington D.C.
- Ngoa, S. A. (2011). “A Review and Analytical Narrative of Propaganda Activities: A Nigerian Perspective.” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1:16
- Obafemi, O. (1993). *Naira Has No Gender*. Ibadan : Kraft Books
- Ojaide, T. (1993). *Literature in Africa and the Caribbean Africana Studies: A Survey of Diaspora*. In Mario, Azevedo. (Eds.). Durhan: Carolina Academic Press, 318
- Oluga, C.S. (n.d). *Literature as an Instrument of Political, Economic and Socio-cultural Development*.
- Onwuka, E.C. (2010). “A Critical Review of the Impact of Literature and History on Society”. *Journal of Languages and Literary Studies*, vol. 1(1): 59-65
- Pratkanis, A. & Aronson, E. (2001) *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*. (Revised Ed.). New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.