

ART IN IGBO WORLD VIEW: EXPLORING THE IGBO SOCIO-CULTURAL THEMES IN T.U. UBESIE'S *MMIRI OKU E JI EGBU MBE*

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Abstract

Researchers, over the years have tried to limit Igbo literature to mere moonlight stories and folktales. Some of them believed that it is not fit to be regarded as literature because, to them it does not follow certain Lay down rules. Literature generally was formally regarded as any written work, but over the years, there was a need to differentiate between a mere document and literary works; which is then regarded as literature. It is on this note that this study is done. To find out if the Igbo literature is a mere document, thus arts for arts sake or literature in all sense. To do this, various themes from the text, *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe* is discussed. The narrative method of analysis was chosen to analyze the themes and major sociocultural materials drawn from the text. It is discovered that Igbo literature cannot afford the luxury of arts-for-arts sake neither is it a mere document. This study will be beneficial to students of Igbo literature and scholars alike as it will add more contents the study and perception of Igbo literature.

KEYWORDS: Igbo literature, art-for-arts' sake, folktales, moonlight, themes

Introduction

As earlier mentioned, writers of Igbo literature have also argued about what can be regarded as Igbo literature. While writers like Emenanjo believes that whatever literature that is written about the Igbo people and their world view, whether in Igbo language or not, should be regarded as Igbo literature. Others like Emenyonu believe that for any literary work to be regarded as such, it must be written in Igbo language regardless of the ethnicity of the writer. Achebe in one of his Odenigbo lectures frowned at the way Igbo writers step on themselves just to prove the particular Igbo language dialect that should be widely accepted for writing in Igbo language. To him, it was an eyesore that a none native speaker of the language in the person of a young white missionary T.J Dennis, would dictate for the native speakers, the version of Igbo language to write in. He went further to argue that if people should not be restricted to a certain version of Igbo language they wish to write in. This way, there would be more writers and more literature in the language the selected text, *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe*, the writer established a real taste of typical Igbo child in the character Enyi, followed by the not -so -good treatment he got from his uncle's wife which led to his wayward life. The writer's artistic way of using a character to stage typical rites of passage from a normal childhood to a wayward adulthood is really commendable. This brought life to the work and makes the reader to have pity on the poor child and blame his uncle's wife for his wayward life. The desired emotion the author drew from the readers is another fact that adds to the beauty of Igbo art or

literature. This can only be achieved when the author uses the right word at the right time. Majority of Igbo works make use of known facts like Igbo names, animals, places, and things to achieve this. This way, the author brings the work closer to its readers. This is to say that a literary work should be able to draw a certain target emotion from its target audience and this can only happen if the writer chooses the words to be used carefully. The writer did exactly this in the selected text. This study shall therefore discuss the themes in the text and find out if the writer wrote for writing sake or wrote to teach, pass information, guide, train and wrote out of deep thoughts which is the main essence of literature, thus art.

Review of Related Literature

This section of the study shall discuss related articles on the topic. This is important as it will help to guide in putting the study in a direction that has not been discussed or allowed it add to an existed fact.

Arts in Africa

In analyzing Achebe's concept for art-sake in *Arrow of God*, Ene-Orji (2015:1) pointed out thus;

...In Africa, art is for life sake and not for art sake'.
Art is used for example to validate the myth or story of incarnation and contiguity of the land of the living, Ani mmadu and the land of the dead Ani mmoo. This is in the form of the art of masquerading. So art and fiction both written and oral, are like Siamese twins used by man to solidify his grip on reality or to pursue or procure change or his aspirations.

Actually when art is mentioned, different branches of arts come to mind. Branches like visual arts, crafts, theatre arts, painting, body art, literature and so on. However, this study focuses on literary art work. Just as Ene-Orji pointed out '... in Africa Art is for life sake and not for art sake', African writers are writing from their hearts. They draw inspirations from their environment, life experience, nature and every other angle that inspires them. Ene-Orji (2015:2) tries to reconcile the Igbo man and his artistic nature. To this, he said that the Igbos developed their art to suit their society, recognized the talented individuals and accorded them respect. Their profession was passed down to their talented children and apprentices.

This shows that art to the Igbo man is deeper than the Igbo man. To him, art runs in his blood. This singular fact makes it easy for him to practice his artistry. Aniakor (1982:50) affirms that the Igbos recognize creativity as part of divine immanence is well known, since in fact, Ala the earth goddess is the mainspring of creativity.

This means that art is a gift from nature to mankind. Aniakor went further to add thus...talents are thus engraved on the artist's palms as akala aka. That the artist could rise in creative accomplishment is well known among the Igbo. Hence the highly accomplished ones are known as dinka which means husband of artistry or more appropriately the master artist

These all point to the fact that art, whether literature or any other form of art, to an Igbo man is mostly dependent on talent which makes it impossible for the Igbo writer to write just for the sake of writing rather he writes out of the outpour of his heart.

The Igbo Written Literature.

The Igbo written literature is literature written in Igbo language about the Igbo people and their life style and in Igbo setting. It is a continuation of the oral form because the Igbo written literature is laced with Igbo language, traditions, customs, proverbs and lifestyle which are handed down to the new generation orally. One may ask if works like *Things Fall apart* should be regarded as an Igbo literary work since it is a work by an Igbo person and about the Igbo world view. At this point the language of the literary work becomes important because it is the language that will determine the ethnic group the work is meant for even though there are some non Igbo indigenes that can speak and read Igbo language very well. This, notwithstanding, such works cannot be regarded as Igbo literary work because they cannot be recommended for students in Igbo department for their academic work. Therefore, language is a strong factor in literature. However, the selected text is written in Igbo language , about the Igbo people and by an Igbo author. These make the work a good Igbo literary work. Achebe in Emenanjo (1995) holds thus;

We must free our writers to write in whatever dialect they speak. We need poets, dramatists and novelists from the strait jacket of WEAC Igbo let them write in Agbaja, Qhaihu, Ngwa, Asaba and whatever they choose. If what they write is significant and interesting. The rest of us should be open minded enough to welcome it.

This is a wake up call for Igbo writers to get to work. However, not minding how encouraging it sounded, it may also hinder the growth of Igbo literature because a standard language had been set. Yet, its motivational undertone cannot be overlooked. Although Achebe's argument is on language, yet, it is one of the factors that makes Igbo literature is art in all sense thereby alienating it from being a mere document.

The Igbo literary writers make use of the values which the Igbo people are known for, in fact it is important that any Igbo literary work portrays one or two Igbo values and promotes the Igbo world view. Values and beliefs like respect for elders, folktale, traditions of the Igbo people, apprenticeship system and others. All these make the literary work more of Igbo literature, also not forgetting that it must be written in Igbo language. Just as there has been controversies about what language the Igbo literature should be written in before it could be called Igbo literature, there is also a misconception that the Igbo literature is for art's sake but because the Igbo writers write from the depth of their hearts. pouring out their thoughts to pass moral and share ideas, it is out of place to say that such works are for art's sake.

The concept of Arts – for- arts sake

This topic has been an object of discussion in so many literally circles. The whole idea is to point out that art and to be a literary artist is not only about being a good orator or knowing how to construct a good meaningful string of sentences rather art transcends beyond that. It was originally a French expression; thus 'art pour art' which was initially credited to Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) even though he may not have been the first person to mention and use the expression, his own expression

stood out probably because others like Benjamin Constant (1804) and Victor Cousin's expressions were rather longer sentences. Art-for-art's sake means that the artist, the poet or the novelist write just for writing sake. For instance in poems, one needs to put him or herself in certain frame of mind to understand the poet because the poet does not have the luxury of word so he or she tries to use the minimal words at his disposal to make the clearest meaning. In this situation, the poet goes beyond the human level down in the deepest part of his or her soul in search of the best word to use. Art-for-arts sake forbids the poet or writer to write as stated above because he or she writes for writing sake and not for any other reason, therefore such deep thoughts are not needed. A very ancient believer of this concept Edger Poe strongly believed that art, especially poems, should just serve the purpose of just being a poem and nothing more, a free rendition of words. Poe (1850) argues thus;

We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake ...but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should immediately there, discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake

To Poe, art serves no other purpose than being art. He further added that Poetry has no goal other than itself; it can have no other, and no poem will be so great, so noble, so truly worth of the name of poem than one written uniquely for the pleasure of writing poem. If Poe's assertions are anything to go by, then poetry should not be regarded as literature. This is because if poems are written just for the pleasure of writing poems then it does not serve any other purpose literature serves. Literature as art entertains, educates, exchanges ideas, motivates and even acts as a source of income. Literature/art is not empty rather it embodies a lot of branches that add meaning to life. So, if Poe believes that no poem is as noble as 'the poem written uniquely for the pleasure of writing poems' then poems/poetry should not be regarded as literature. However, since poetry is a branch of literature and is believed to serve almost the same purpose literature serves, then Poe is misguided.

Scholars like Sand as early as (1872) believed that artists had a duty to find an adequate expression and convey to as many people as possible and further ensure that their works were accessible enough to be appreciated. To her art-for-arts sake was an empty phrase and an idle sentence. Achebe (1975:92) described art-for-arts sake as 'just another piece of deodorized dog shit'. To him, art-for-art sake is typical of giving a dog a bad name to hang it. It is an intelligent way of discrediting African literature parts when it is obvious African literature, which Igbo literature is part of, goes beyond mere aesthetics. Achebe has been a strict campaigner of Africans writing the best way that suits them. Senghor (n.d.) believes 'art is functional and in black Africa, art-for-art's sake does not exist'. He also believes that African art is deeper than the way it is perceived to be.

On the other hand Whistler (n.d) believes thus 'Art should be independent of all claptrap, should stand alone... and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confirming this with emotions entirely foreign to it as devotion, pity, love and patriotism and the likes.

Generally, the aim of literature is to entertain, inspire, teach, pass information, exchange ideas, expose, educate and for teaching purpose. Except it is a literature in a specific professional field like Geography literature, science literature and so on, it must fulfill the purposes listed above and more.

This very fact makes it difficult for Igbo literature writers to write just for writing sake rather they must write based on the values and morals of the Igbo nation. An Igbo written literature must be able to teach the reader, who may be Igbo or not, some parts of Igbo culture, proverbs and lessons. The Igbo written literature is also not expected to be written literary. That is to say that Igbo literature, is not expected to be an ordinary piece of writing rather it is expected to be written with figurative languages which make up the aesthetic features of Igbo literature.. If it is not written with meaningful figurative expression, then it is no longer literature but rather an ordinary text or document.

Themes in T.U. Ubesie's *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe*

In other to treat the concept of arts-for-art's sake properly, Ubesie explores so many themes in the text to pass the message of the dangers of juvenile delinquency, wickedness and deaths among other lessons in the text. Some writers of fiction or non-fiction work write to entertain and pass information at the same time. Though making money might be part of the reason for writing but it is secondary because if the readers do not find the work entertaining, then the work has not succeeded and the idea of making money is marred. Ubesie's zeal to teach and his thoughtfulness made him to create a story which will capture the minds of the readers as well as entertain them at the same time. Of course if he were to just write down his advice on a piece of paper, it may just be a two-page write-up, but because he decided to put flesh to it thereby turning it into a whole story, he was able to get a 67-page novel with twenty-four (24) chapters. The novel centered around a boy, Enyi, who was orphaned at the age of four. He then lived with his uncle Ebuzo and his wife Nneka who had four daughters. Nneka maltreated Enyi so badly that he ran away from the house and began to live on the street. He slept in abandoned cars, garages, uncompleted buildings, anywhere he found himself at night. That was how he mingled with the wrong crowd and later became a notorious armed robber. He did this for a long time before he was caught and jailed. When he regained his freedom, he repented. Thereafter,, he ventured into farming and realized he has been wasting his time all along. Ubesie brought in so many Igbo traditions and proverbs in the text to buttress his points. The traditions in the text to be discussed are fishing, swimming, farming, climbing and disgracing thieves.

Fishing

This was treated in chapter six (6) where Enyi and his friend, Nwokeabia, went to a Bature riverto fish. Ubesie used it to show the culture of fishing in Igbo land. Fishing is one of the sources of income in some parts of the Igbo Land and some children, especially those in the rural areas do it as a recreational activity while unconsciously mastering the art.

Farming

Ubesie also introduced farming as a viable means of livelihood in Igbo Land. In chapter twenty-four, paragraph seven (pages 66 and 67), the chief character Enyi,

after serving his term in prison, went back to his town Ndjabia, and engaged in farming as a source of income. Thus the author wrote;

‘... ka Enyi ruru oru ugbo afọ ise, lee Enyi
ka o ghokwaara ogaranya ndi obodo ha ji na-etu
onu ...o wee doo ya anya na izu ohi abughi oru
mmadu ji na-etu onu ...’

‘...After Enyi had engaged in farming for
five years, he became a wealthy man
whom his kinsmen are proud of... and it
became clear to him that robbery is not a
profession to be proud of...’

The author used this concept to pass a very important message of the importance of farming. These days, youths do not see any reason to farm or engage in farming. The writer then made it clear that it can still sustain anybody who indulges in it.

Swimming

Another significant thing with children living in the rural areas in Igbo Land is swimming. This is one of the recreational activities they do at their tender age. Some parts of the Igbo Land especially those living near the water or river like the Otuocha people, once a child is about eight months to one year old, he or she will constantly be thrown into the river and observed. This process may continue up to a certain age until the child is able to survive on his or her own in water. This they do to teach the child the custom of swimming and train him or her in the art of swimming. They believe that by the time gets to the age of four or so, the child should be able to swim well. Most communities that practice this act start the training as soon as the child is born while some start at a certain age. The author brought in this concept to show that the Igbos are not left out in the art of swimming. Although the chief character, Enyi, is not a good swimmer but the author presented him as a typical Igbo village child who is eager to learn and enjoy the beauty of the village. In the text, when he went with his friend, Nwokeabia, to Bature river to swim, Enyi nearly got drowned because he saw somebody at the deeper part of the river who he thought was kneeling down in the water not knowing that the person was actually standing. So, because he was zealous and eager to swim above his limits, he tried to swim in the deeper part and he almost got drowned (chapter six, page 11).

Climbing

Another peculiar activity amongst the rural Igbo children is their expertise in climbing trees. They do it for fun and to keep themselves busy. The author brought in this concept in his work mainly to show that children who do not have a good upbringing and a guardian to guide are the ones who climb trees in the village. No parent would like to see his or her child climb trees because some children are disfigured for life by climbing trees. So the less privileged children find climbing of trees as a means of survival especially the ones who are deprived of daily meals. In Enyi's case, he was denied food by his uncle's wife, Nneka, so he sought to climbing

trees mostly in the white people's quarters. From there, he plucks fruits and eats. Thus the writer wrote in page 19;

'... o bidoro kpaghariwa n'ogbe ndi ocha. Ebe o
huru
osisi mango, o rja elu, ghota ndi chara acha. Otu ahụ
ka
o si na-eme ma o hu "gova"...'
'... he started roaming the whiteman's street.
Wherever he saw a mango tree, he climbed it and
plucked the riped ones. He does the same when
he sees guava

This goes to show the type of life Enyi was exposed to. The author also used this concept to explain that climbing trees in the village is a rite of passage every child in the village must pass through before the child's childhood process will be said to be complete. To prove this, he wrote;

...umụaka a mụrụ n'Enugu na-aga ogbe ndi ocha
maka
igho mango na gova. O bughị na aguu agugbuola ha
ka
ha ji aga. Q bu otu uzo nwata ofula a mụrụ n'Enugu
ga-agafeka uto ya wee zuo oke...

... children born in Enugu go to the white
man's street to pluck mango and guava.. they
do not go because they are too hungry. It is
one of the rites of passage any child born in
Enugu must pass through to have a complete
childhood...

Any child who grew up in the village is prone to this type of lifestyle. This is because the child is free to explore his or her environment. Enyi is not an exception. He represents a typical village boy who experiences all the facets of village life. In page 23, paragraph 2, the writer wrote;

'...ihe gbasara iri elu doro Enyi anya.
I nweta ya n'elu, o na-ari ka enwe'.
'... Enyi knows everything about
climbing. When climbing, he climbs
like a monkey'.

This shows that he mastered the skill of climbing.

Disgracing ThievesIn the Igbo culture, anybody caught stealing or who stole will be publicly disgraced. In most cases, if the culprit is a child, his age mates would strip him naked, decorate him with strings of empty cans and other dirty things together with the things he stole and make him to dance around in the village or market This is called 'Ogbanaajirija' in some parts of the Igbo Land. The name varies from town to town. This is seen in the text in pages 12 and 13 where Enyi was accused of stealing fish from his uncle's wife's pot of soup because she saw him chewing fish (the fish he got while fishing with his friend). She painted one side of his face with charcoal

and the other with white chalk, then stringed snail shells and fresh fish and hung it around his neck. She made the children sing for him a song meant for thieves. They sang thus;

‘... Enyi, onye ohi azu.
Enyi onye ohi azu...’
‘...Enyi, one who steals fish.
Enyi, one who steals fish...’

This shows that the writer is a typical Igbo indigene and must have passed through the process of Igbo village life. This also brings the text closer to the Igbo reader.

The novel is laced with Igbo proverbs from chapter one to the end, although the author did not provide immediate explanations to the proverbs rather the meanings of these proverbs are embedded in the sentence,. Although, this cannot be seen as wrong, rather it is seen as the author’s style of writing as style generally is a deviation from the norm peculiar to writing. Some of these proverbs are;

Chapter 7 page 16 paragraph 6;

Akwa okuko bu oku, nke ogazi bu oriri

Spare the rod, and spoil the child

Chapter 9 page 22 paragraph 6;

Onye jeware gboo, maara uzọ o si eje, na-alakwa.

A stitch in time, saves nine.

Chapter 9 page 24 paragraph 18;

Onye nuru ebe okuko na-asị na ya ga-alaba ura o di ka o chi ute.

Some situations sre not meant to be given too much attention.

Chapter 12 page 30 paragraph 5;

A na-ekwu na oria ezughi oke, a si onye dara ibi, ya too afo

There is no need escalating an already ugly situationChapter 17 page 42 paragraph 8;

O bu dibia na-agwo, o bukwa dibia na-emeru

Every problem has a solution

Chapter 18 page 46 paragraph 9;

O bu aghugho ka agadi ji ejide onye ara.

Desperate situations, demand desperate measures

Chapter 19 page 47 paragraph 11;

Nkiri nkiri ka a na-ekiri ododo; e jighi ya eli ozu.

It is useless fighting a higher force

Chapter 20 page 50 paragraph 1 and 4;

Enyi bu ajo nwa a na-eku n'ikpere.

Enyi is a troublesome child that should be handled carefully.

Onyesi be Enyi puo ata, be ya ga-epu ero.

Whoever wishes Enyi bad, shall get worse.

Chapter 21 page 53 paragraph 2;

Mbe na mbe zuko ahia, uru anaghi adi ya.

A crafty man dies, a crafty man will buries him

Chapter 24 page 67 paragraph 10;

Mmadu buru mbe, a chowara ya onye didewere ya ka o ghoro ya mmiri oku ndi ozo ga-eji wugbuo ya.

There is a solution for every situation

The writer carefully x-rayed the typical life of an Igbo child, especially the male child. While doing that, he also lay bare the contributions of women in child training. This he did in the character, Nneka, the woman who was instrumental in destroying Enyi's life because she failed to bring him up as if she were his mother. This is also the plight of most juvenile delinquents in the contemporary society. If everyone, especially women, can train every child within their reach as if they were theirs, the rate of delinquency in the society will drastically reduce.

The author's message is to state clearly that one person can not train a child. It is a communal effort. This is because if the child turns out good, the community benefits. If he turns out bad, the community suffers. In the case of Enyi, the writer wrote;

‘...obodo Ndjabia niile na-azụ azụ. Onye ị juru
ọ bụ gini na-eme, ọ si gi na Enyi lotara...’ (chapter 7 page 42)
‘... the whole village was in disarray.
Whoever is asked what the problem
was, he would say that Enyi was
back...’

Here, the writer explains the level of fear Enyi brings to the entire community. In fact, the novel is an embodiment of lessons. He intended to teach the readers moral and at the same time entertain them

The Igbo written literature adopts its materials from the oral literature.. For instance, Igbo proverbs are products of the ancestors passed down from generation to generation orally, so are oral poems, folktales, chants, recitations, songs, dance and short stories.

If the writer was just writing for writing sake, he would not have bothered to furnish his book with the right figures of speech and style. The text also is educative and entertaining. It teaches moral which is one of the qualities of a good literature. It teaches that children should be adequately taken care of at their tender age irrespective of who his or her parents are. If Nneka, Enyi's uncle's wife, had taken care of Enyi as if he were hers, he would have turned out a better person and be useful to the society. If he had been given the right orientation, he would not have joined a bad gang.

The author also brought in the Igbo culture of disgracing anybody who stole. This means that Ubesie did not write just for writing sake. The text sells first, the Igbo Language, its culture, traditions, lessons of hard work, consequences of bad lifestyle, effects of hanging out with bad peers or crowd, importance of training a child well and the beauty of growing up in Life as an Igbo child.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Igbo literature is always out to portray one or more facts about the Igbos. Thematically, it could be based on love, war, life experience, marriage, health or other things happening everyday life. The text used in this analysis was written forty-six years ago yet it still reflects what happens in everyday life today. Societal activities like, swimming, fishing, climbing (as is still evident in some rural areas), farming (Hugely being indulged in these days), peer groups, the police, tax collectors etc. as pointed out in the text are all obtainable in the society today. This is because the writer wanted to bring out points that could change lives and bad behaviors. The writer's ability to bring in these lifestyles of the Igbos especially a typical village life

in the novel while teaching morals and entertaining the readers at the same time makes it impossible to regard the text as a mere document. Therefore, Igbo literature cannot afford the luxury of arts-for-art's sake because writers of Igbo literature write carefully and thoughtfully which helps to bring the work closer to the readers.

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