

HARNESSING CULTURE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Ifeanyi Jeff Chisunum

***Department of Arts and Humanities,
Delta State Polytechnic,
Ozoro.***

And

Ikem Ebonka

***Department of Arts and Humanities,
Delta State Polytechnic,
Ozoro.***

Abstract

It is a fact that the colonial experience has invested definitions of culture with a special significance. Literature, which is the creative or imaginative writing of a people invariably, embodies the perceptions of their immediate environment. That is to say that literature is a window through which we can watch and document a people's culture. The relevance of cultural awareness cannot be over-emphasized here. Cultural awareness inculcates a sense of cultural identity in people. It is on this premise that, this paper looks at the synthesis between literature, culture and their interrelatedness. The paper also documents the African writer as a recorder of mores and experiences of his society. It further looks at literature both in francophone and Anglophone settings and presents the various ways in which culture was propagated in them. It also looks at cultural norms and modes of perception in African literature, and the place of literature teacher as a cultural propagator. It finally, made recommendations and concluded that the literature student should be directed until his perception of the subject broadens.

Very many students are inclined to think that the study of literature is a kind of deal which involves having to grapple with baffling texts and endless memorization of queer or bizarre language usage. Literature is not that abstract. It embodies people's perceptions of the immediate environment and a people's historical past. It has also been found to have certain kinds of value for human beings. Some of which include the fact that: (a) it entertains (b) educates (c) preserves and promotes language (d) and also it is a repository of culture. Apart from being a repository of culture, it also helps to propagate

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it. Its repository value becomes of utmost importance when we realize that this gives it the potential to facilitate the inculcation of a sense of cultural awareness.

How does a writer inculcate a sense of cultural awareness in the people through literature? Indeed, we may ask, what is culture? What is cultural awareness? What role can a teacher of literature play in making cultural awareness realizable? This paper will provide answers to the questions posed above with a view to stimulating us to cultivate a positive attitude towards literature.

Culture and Cultural Awareness

Culture has been variously defined. Lintin cited in Haralambos (2000:3) says that culture of a society is the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation. In a similar vein, Kluckhohn as cited in Haralambos (2000) saw it as a “design for living” which members of the society share together. As a design, there exist rules and regulations otherwise called guidelines which standardize the behaviour and actions of social actors within a given society. Thus, confusion and disorder are stemmed. Haviland (1978) saw culture as “a set of rules or standards which when acted upon by the members of a society produces behaviour that falls within a range of variance the members consider proper and acceptable”. It embraces our behavioural patterns, the means by which we solve our problems, implements, artifacts, painting, figurines for religious observations and all the integrative forces like religion (Ayisi, 1980).

A definition which is somewhat more encompassing is one given by Taylor (1871). As he posited “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Extrapolating from the above definition, as Horton and Hunt (1980:60) observed “culture is everything which is socially learned and shared by the members of a society. Going through the definitions given above, it is glaring that culture is a property of every social system because it is the creation of man just as literature is the creation of cultural experiences. It is also clear from the definition that the culture of a people is likely to change with time depending on their experiences. Cultural awareness which is our concern here arising from the definition of culture earlier, means having knowledge or being conscious of one’s culture. Been conscious of one’s culture means been aware of every aspect of one’s culture.

What is Literature?

Literature in its broad sense according to the World Book Encyclopedia is everything that has been written. It includes comic books and pamphlets. In a narrower sense, there are various kinds of literature such as the French Literature, English Literature or African Literature. Literature is also the composite twin in prose and verse. It is the writing or study of a whole body of literary composition - drama, fiction, essays, poetry and biography. It is also any imaginative work of art, which uses language, plot, character, setting e.t.c to give us a picture of life. (Chiweikpe, 1991). Since African literature is always cultural experiences, it will also be pertinent to take a quick look at what African literature is. African literature as defined in (National Teachers’ Institute

on Modern African Literature Module 10) is all bodies of works created by African artistes. It further sees African literature as literature written about African life, African societies and by Africans treating African theme as its basic preoccupation.

Literature and Culture

Literature, which is the creative or imaginative writing of a people invariable, embodies their perception of their immediate environment. That is to say literature is a window through which we can watch a people's culture. The relevance of cultural awareness cannot be over emphasized. Cultural awareness inculcates a sense of cultural identity in people. Soyinka as quoted in Jones (1970) says this about culture and the artist.

"A concern with culture strengthens society. The artist has always functioned in African society as the recorder of mores and experiences of his society and the voice of vision in his own time".

This statement sums up the importance of cultural awareness as well as pointing out who is responsible for preserving culture. Jones (1970) elaborated more on the role of a literary artist as preserver of culture when he writes:

"Much more than the mere reproduction of syntax is the conveying of an experience in a way that reflects its environment without precluding it from general applicability. In looking at the African Author's work, we may be able to recognize its African-ness, we must be able to see its universality". A work which succeeds in recreating its environment fully achieves universality more readily. Although these two literary giants are concerned with African authors we can say that the duty of any author to his society is the same the world over".

Literature helps to transmit the culture of the people. It also documents such cultures by ensuring that it is transmitted from one generation to another. It serves as the eye of the people. Literature in all its ramification is concerned with the documentation of culture. It has been said for example, that reading Wole Soyinka's works is like learning or reading socio-cultural and political history of Nigeria. This trend also pervades Chinua Achebe's works as his writings are depiction of the cultural life of the Ibos before and after the colonial era. In the same vein too, we were informed that Soyinka wrote from the Idanre Tradition which is also cultural experience. If we go up Northern Nigeria Zainab Alkali's works show to a large extent, the Hausa cultural heritage as it concerns marriage and their daily life experiences. Though there exist several media through subject areas in which culture could be learnt as in history, government, social studies, sociology and anthropology, but literature remains the most prominent vehicle of cultural transmission. In the light of this, literature through the use of language has poetry, drama and prose works which propagate cultural heritage in its clearest form.

A further example of this form of cultural propagation is found in *Ola Rotimi's Ovoranwen Nogbaisi* which portrays the cultural heritage of the Bini's as it concerns festivals and receiving of visitors during such festivals. David Diop's poem "Africa"

was a glorification of African culture in affective superlative even when he has not been to Africa but depended only on the stories that were told to him by his grand mother.

Literature and the Past of a People

It is always said that writers have their writing in group experiences as in colonialism and other past and contemporary problems. This suggests that a people's literature expresses their reaction to past experiences, making their literature inevitably literary echos of cultural reality. Gardner (1959) notes that: "The writer's personal history, like the pressure of the age in which he lived, is a context which helps us to focus the work as it is. We shall look at how African literature, for instance has been influenced by the African's past experiences. When the colonialists came to Africa and introduced their culture, the African found himself been severed from his native culture and way of life. This contact with the colonialists set in motion a systematic process of the denigration of his culture, his identity and his africanity. Early African writers were not surprisingly saddled with the problem of rebuilding their discoloured past and culture. This took two forms thus: writers from francophone countries took the form of repudiation of assimilation encouraged by the colonialists while writers from Anglophone countries directed their efforts towards self-clarification. Let us look at these experiences in relation to literature.

Literature in the Francophone African Countries

One of the unfortunate consequences of colonialism in Africa was the assertion of cultural superiority by the colonialists, and a devaluation of the culture of the colonized leading to a loss of cultural confidence. Africans became uncritical imitators of western cultural behaviour, abandoning their original cultural manifestation. This became the similar situation in colonized countries, especially in the French colonies where the system of assimilation was encouraged. But through a literature known as Negritude writing, the African was encouraged to love and admire his Africanness and indeed, be proud of it. Writers like Camara Laye, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Birago Diop, and David Diop were among the forerunners of Negritude writing.

Literature in Anglophone African Countries

Literary artistes in English-speaking countries concerned themselves with self clarification. This, the writer believed will free the Africans of cultural independent on western values and culture. It is also his belief that we will see a lot depends on the teacher in helping the child to relate literature to life.

Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in African Literature

As Fanon, quoted in Brown (1980) in *Critical Perspectives* on Chinua Achebe reminded us, that the colonial experience has invested definitions of culture with a special significance. Generally, the exploitation of language "means above all to assume a culture to support the weight of civilization". And whenever any colonized people face the language of the colonialist's nation, it is confronted with the "culture of the mother

country, 'the colonized man is "elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.

Achebe is a case in point here. His interest in the relationship between norms and perceptual values is comparable also to yet another ex-colonial novelist-Ferdinand Oyono of the French Cameroon's. In *Houseboy*, for example, Oyono's hero, Toundi Onduoa, embodies a fundamental irony. He grows into self-awareness and human self-identification in direct proportion to his initiation into the colonial language, into cultural norms which do not recognize his humanity, and which are geared to stifle his consciousness. Thus, the literacy which he acquired from the French missionaries provides Toundi with the literary and morphological key to the white colonial's mode of perception and behaviours.

It is not truly difficult to trace the link between Achebe and Oyono's literary archetype. Like Toundi, the Nigerian novelist consciously expropriates the European literary techniques and related perceptual values, in order to postulate an African, or even anti-European, point of view, hence he consistently borrows European historiography in order to explode the notorious western myth that Africans have no history. The title of the first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, announces Achebe's fairly obvious debt to Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming" (1921). In his second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe establishes an equally ironic relationship with T.S. Eliot's "*The Journey of the Magi*" The poem is among several in which Eliot bases his themes and structure on what he called the "Historical Sense" The sense of timeless as well as the temporal. It should be noted that in exploiting Eliot's archetypes and philosophy, Achebe subjects these European models to the same kind of ironic manipulation which marks the relationship with Yeats's work in *Things Fall Apart*, for he uses the perceptual implications of Eliot's "historical sense" "in order to invest paganism with sympathetic identity. Whereas Eliot, the orthodox Christian sees the conflict between the old paganism and the new Christianity in clear moral terms. Achebe the African insists that the "old dispensation" as well as Christianity had its own beauty and human dignity.

To sum up, Achebe accepts the historiography principle which allows Eliot to telescope multiple cycles of history into one moment, to compress repetitive conflicts between Christendom and paganism of hostile culture, into a single event or personal experience. But Achebe exploits this material in order to assert the validity of pagan values which the Christian feels to minimize or deny. On an ethnological level, the operation in the historical sense *in No Longer At Ease* is invested with the same irony that influences the handling of Yeats's "Second Coming" in *Things Fall Apart*. Once again, European historiography has been used to articulate the sense of tradition and history which, according to western myth is alien to Africa.

In this second novel, particularly, the irony with which Achebe manipulates the westerner historical perception is intensified by the dynamics of African society itself.

When we cleared the cobwebs with which western experts have observed the very existence of African history, it is clear that the kind of historical sense which Eliot applies to western culture and literature has a special appeal to the African as it was to Chinua Achebe and others who saw this western cultural norms as a means of further transmitting African culture through their literacy works.

Conclusion

Relating literature to cultural life experiences is a rewarding approach for several reasons. Linguistically, literature can aid the mastery of vocabulary and grammar as well as the four language skills. Aesthetically, it provides the students with an ample opportunity to develop a perceptive insight into man's existence.

Literature also serves as a window to culture because reading literary works vicariously immerses the child/student into the world it depicts. Noble as these benefits are, the child cannot attain them on his own. He needs to be directed until his perception of the subject broadens.

Recommendations

The discussion so far made have practical teaching implications for the teacher, students and the society, it is therefore recommended that:

- 1) Literature texts should have their base in children's background. When children begin the study of literature with familiar background they will appreciate better the value of literature. When the children's interests have been aroused sufficiently by the teacher, texts which have their base in other parts of the world could be introduced.
- 2) When literature is taught, efforts should be made to ensure that the *thematic* treatment is related and linked to the children's cultural background. Although works of early Africa writers have been used to show how cultural awareness form the themes treated, contemporary writings should not be left out. Efforts should be made to direct the children to the cultural themes raised.
- 3) Through literature, individuals and the society can gain knowledge of their culture and the culture of others. The knowledge will stimulate better understanding between individuals and people from different background.
- 4) The teacher of literature can use the discussion method to gain further knowledge of the culture of other societies through the students. For instance, after reading the traditional marriage ceremony of the Igbo society, the teacher could further ask them questions on how marriages are contracted in their various tribes or localities.
- 5) When literature is taught, we should seize the opportunity of literature lessons to introduce students to short studies of some cultural activities. Students could be grouped into their various ethnic backgrounds. They could be asked to find out the traditional rites in their areas. The significance of such rituals could also be asked. And are these rituals still in practice? What, why, when e.t.c questions could be asked to stimulate investigations.
- 6) Ministries of Education, WAEC and NECO Examination bodies should make sure that literature texts with cultural themes and backgrounds are recommended for the students at the junior and senior secondary levels of education. This should also be the tradition in tertiary institutions.

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