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# Children's Literature and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River*; Onuekwusi's *Hassan and the Carthieves*, A Son among Daughters and Camilus Uka's *Dying Wishes of a Granny*

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### Abstract

This research underscores the relevance of children's literature in social transformation. The aim is to access the effect of literature on children, how they perceive and react to its messages through the relevance of its themes and the possibility of correcting the ills in our present society through the medium of children's literature. It was discovered that many writers of children's literature jump into the field for money making without taking into consideration the possible impact of their works on children. It was also discovered that most writers of children's literature still dwell on over flogged tables that are not in tandem with issues of present times. Such issues as national unity, political instability, religious hypocrisy to mention but a few. This paper employed the sociological approach. A theory that deals with the theory inter connection between literature and society. The significance of this research is to create an awareness to the general public to see possible means through which positive social transformation can be affected. This paper therefore, recommends that writers of children's literature should begin to take cognizance of the realities of the changing time and flow with the current tide. By focusing on relevant themes that bother the society and bring them down to the level and understanding of children.

**Keywords:** Children, Literature, Story, Transformation, Society

### Introduction

The origin of children's literature and by extension, literature in Nigeria can be traced back to oral tradition, a period of storytelling, a time when literature existed only in performance such as chants, songs, folktales, and so on. According to Legend, Twilight is storytelling, a time when literature

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existed after the sun sets and darkness covers the earth; in those last rays of light, the village children gather at the feet of the storyteller beginning to be told stories. They all want a story before bedtime, and they take their places on mats or on the floor while the storyteller sits on his stool in the middle. The position of the storyteller who is usually an adult finds expression in Cyprian Ekwensi's *An African Night Entertainment*, the introductory page of the novel evokes a traditional African story-telling scene.

Put your money on this sheepskin: said the old man and if by the time I finish my tale, there is one of you awake, that man shall claim everything we have collected (3)

The stories through the artistic prowess of the oral artist helped in the entertainment and education of the audience who are mainly children. The oral artist skillfully modified oral literature to suit the age, intellectual ability and taste of the children. The folksongs, legend, riddles and various kinds of aesthetic verbal performances were enjoyed by children. The aim of oral literature then, was to inform, educate, entertain and instruct children in the ways of norms and values of the society.

From the foregoing we can see that children's literature from its conception is aimed at shaping the child's mind and attitude towards positive behaviour, it shapes the child's perception of an ideal behaviour fit for good social living and can as well bring about change and growth in the moral standards of the society. The Bible implores us to "train a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (The African Bible, Proverbs 22). This saying lends credence to the fact that the success or failure of a society is dependent on the upbringing of the child or children in that society. Man's love for literature is natural and for this reason, literature is regarded as the spice of life as well as the immortality of speech. In fact, any decline of production of literature in a nation indicates the decline of the nation's development. In other words literature is regarded as an instrument for social and other changes. Fundamentally, literature is the imaginative work of art, in written and oral forms which carries the sense and sensibility of life experiences, which entertains, educates and informs. It is distinguished from other disciplines like History, Psychology and Sociology because of its aesthetic and utilitarian relevance. Consequently, children's literature is all the literature designed for children both fiction and non-fiction. Children's literature is a book that is produced largely with a child's interest and needs in

mind, one that deals honestly with children, portrays them candidly and in a medium to which they can respond with imagination and enjoyment (Nana 18).

Change they say is “constant”. It is a continuous and gradual process, a transformation into something new and different. Social change is societal structure and relationship of a society. It is the change in both material and non-material culture (Horton and Hunt 121).

Social change occurs in different ways, it could be revolutionary or evolutionary. Revolutionary change is a sudden change and is always visible for a short period as is seen in Marxist literature. While evolutionary change is a slow and gradual change and it exists permanently. This is the kind of change that children's literature rings.

### **Purpose of the Paper**

The main aim of this paper was to explore and examine the role of children's literature on children and how it helps shape their behaviour towards an ideal social standard. It explored selected children's literature by three remarkable authors, showing how they represent the society and experiences in a child's perception by using children characters, and how the experiences of these characters influence children's perception of the society and help them shape their attitude towards an ideal social standard that will further better the society on the long run.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The decline in moral standards among children is a glowing problem in our society, especially now that the economy requires both parents to work so that they will be able to cater for the family's needs, thus leaving the children to learn a lot by themselves. These children tend to get wrong information through the media which has proved to be a great social malaise as a result of weak Censorship. They also get to learn from peers who over the years exert more influence on children than parents and teachers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper used sociological approach. A theory that deals with the interconnection between literature and society. Sociological criticism is so called because literature cannot be separated from societal experiences, which in the first place inspires the creative writer.

## **Overview**

Over the years, many misconceptions have arisen with regards to the value and importance of children's literature. It has been very much misunderstood by many including some of the Writers of children's books. People tend to see it as amateur works that deal only on childish issues and which do not require critical evaluation by serious readers. More of these misconceptions come from Africans. That explains the past lackadaistical attitude towards children's literature in Africa. As a result of this, African children have over years been exposed to the realities of the Western world both in the media and in literature which "Were meant for audience in their home countries who relished the thrill of reading about primitive, half-naked black people and the terrible things that went on in the 'Dark Continent' such as Cannibalism and human sacrifice (Segun 26).

In fact, it is because of this representation of Africa and the psychological confusion it develops in the mind of young African readers that Achebe in 1967 thought it wise to warn Africans about the beautiful poison the white man wraps and sends to the African child. (52) However, since the development of the children's literature Association of Nigeria (CLAN) in 1977, there has been an ongoing campaign on the writing of children's literature in Nigeria. Many writers have risen in response to this and have voiced opinions on the near absence of a reading culture in Nigeria, and the need to inculcate good reading habit on our young generation, as it is important in paving way for positive social transformation in the near future.

Owing to this problem, many critics have lamented in a bid to shun the activities of those who wrongly troop into the field for money making of such critics include Catherine Achelonu who laments thus:

"It appears that some books that find themselves into the primary literature list are books that were not originally planned for that level and that even when books are intended for the primary level, they do not appear to have received professional handlings" (Achelonu 243).

Onuekwusi in similar vein also asserts that:

A Written story for children is not necessarily a thin volume of few pages which many writers often for economic expediency. Writing stories for children is not a practice session for any who has learnt to tell a story in English or Igbo or any other language. It is a serious work that tasks the significant writer even more than writing for adults. (76)

Writing for children has not been a great attraction for Nigerian writers.

There is the erroneous belief that children's writing is kid stuff and the mistaken notion that what they read is unimportant. The few who come to terms with writing for children often times lack the slightest vestige of professionalism and are unaware of the fact that writing for children is as tasking as writing for adults. In fact, writing for children is more tasking because it requires a great deal of condescension. The writer must be able to condescend to the level of the child by knowing and understanding his psychology and interest in order to be able to create an enjoyable and plausible work for children.

Children's books include: Picture books for young children. They are books written from the heart and from at least some memory of and contacts with childhood. They appeal directly to the imagination of the child reader. They create a unique world into which the child will go willingly and actively. They contain necessarily some portions of adult comment delivered from one intelligent individual to another without condescension (Khigbonoareme 52).

From the foregoing, it is clear that writing for children is not something that can be dabbled into, it requires a great deal of experience and its importance cannot be overemphasized.

### **Comparative Analysis of Chinua Achebe's "Chike and the River"; Onuekwusi's "Hassan and the Car Thieves", "A Son Among Daughters and Camilus Ukah's "Dying Wishes of a Granny"**

In comparing the four studied texts, we will look at the peculiarities and similarities of the author, how they present their works to their young readers through their themes, subject matter, style, diction, etc. and their differences.

The hallmark of children's literature is didacticism, repetition (for clearer understanding) optimistic (the child reading the story will expect a happy ending and as well innocence. These are features of children's literature. These features should be identified in any text or story for children.

In "Chike and the River" Achebe sorts for ways to drive home his point to the mind of his young readers by presenting a character, environment and situation they can identify with. He educates his young readers by creating a brave and ambitious character in Chike. In the story Achebe pointed on peer influence as seen in the case of Chike and Samuel who is popularly known as SMOG, as it is through him that Chike became ambitious to cross the river to Asaba. Achebe

portrays Samuel and Ezekiel as seeds of corruption in the society and bravery in Chike. From this, Achebe through this literary Piece condemns evil and promotes good and make the young readers to dislike Ezekiel and emulate Chike. The same thing is applicable to Onuekwusi Jasper's Hassan and the Car thieves where Jasper showcases the bravery of the young boy Hassan and ones among his friends; Jasper uses simple language and picture to narrate the events in the story of his young readers. He tries to cut the culture barrier and brings characters from the three ethnic groups of Nigeria, in a particular area who live in harmony and peace. The three friends Hassan, Emeka and Yemi serve as example to those who read the story, "Hassan and the Car Thieves", just like 'Chike and the River', has lots of positive impacts on the readers. The story has the subject matter of bravery, friendship, commitment, cooperation and as well as togetherness.

Children's literature in general and children's story in particular is known for its simplicity, knowledge impacting just a position of good and bad as we punished, the car was later recovered. Indeed good will triumph over evil. This is the impression these writers are trying to create in the minds of their young readers. The peculiarity of the above mentioned stories is seen in the setting. The both writers ignore the primitive setting, like we have in fable and folktale and presented their works in a modernized setting, one that the children can identify with. Another similarity is seen in their themes, the above studied stories have a happy ending. It placed side by side good and evil, Chike was given a scholarship for his bravery while Hassan and his friends help to discover the car. On the other hand, the notorious one was brought to book and was given severe punishment. Their themes have a great influence on their young readers as children rather will strive to emulate Chike and Hassan and his friends.

The authors write in bold fonts and use pictures to drive home their points to their young readers. The above books just like children's book are small in volume and they use characters, setting and plot that the children can understand.

However, there is no much distinguishing difference in the stories except the two writers use different plots ie storyline to drive home their points and the fact that the characters have different names and live in different cities. Apart from these, the author's intention points towards being obedience, brave and smart as seen in the character of Chike, Hassan and his friends. Unlike Achebe, Jasper in his story in primitive country that is blessed with soil, weather and good fortune but unknown to its citizens because of their ignorance, until the coming of set of strange. "The

dying wishes of a granny” expose the mind of the young readers to the history of Nigeria and its resultant colonization that marks the beginning of the changes in our today’s society. The story therefore, becomes a road map to the child reading it on the journey to our past, showing how beautiful and natural environment was transformed into a raucous city of bedlam activities. With this, the writer is trying to open the minds of the children who read the book on the changes in the society from time immemorial in the story. Uka takes his readers back to the period of storytelling when children gather around an elder and request for stories told by moonlight.

“Sons among Daughters” is another story with rural setting. It is one of the most didactic children’s literature in the sense that it exposes the danger of disobedience and also encourages the act of praying, the virtue of kindness and also, it made comment on feminism and false divination.

Uka and Onuekwusi employ the use of play within play to drive home their messages to their young readers.

Having looked at these four texts, comparatively speaking, one can categorize Chinua Achebe’s “Chike and the River” and Onuekwusi’s “Hassan and the Car Thieves” side by side as they share the same ideas.

While Uka’s Dying wishes of a Granny and Onuekwusi’s sons among Daughters are categorized together notwithstanding their slight differences, they all suit in the class of children’s literature because of the didactic nature, simple value of innocence, easy accessibility, less voluminous and the themes, setting and characters are ones children can identify with.

## **Conclusion**

The authors of children’s literature take the child to the background of the society, other than what the child already knows, this therefore broadens the child’s knowledge of the world. The above assertion is traceable to the heart and deep rooted themes of the works used in this paper.

The literature children read enables them to escape into a fictional world other than the real world of living. Children’s literature helps audience in the discovery of ethical values which are common to different creeds and which form the foundation of good character in the modern world. It also develops love of country and democratic ideas (Russel 283).

A notable style in the works is their style of narration. Each made use of the omniscient narrator. This is to help the children come to terms with the narrations in the stories. A child narrator would not have been a good idea based on the fact that as children, it is generally assumed that they lack the descriptive power and language of expression. The stories are for children, so they will be better narrated by an omniscient narrator, this is in line with the folktale line of thought where a narrator is suitably an all knowing adult be it male or female.

In *Chike and the River*, we see the importance of hard work and honesty in a fast developing society filled with corruption. Onuekwusi in *Hassan and the Car thieves* emphasizes the need for unity, love, friendship and good neighbourness in a society of diverse ethnicity. He advocates peace in a society that is almost always at war with itself through the medium of children's literature.

Also in 'A Son among Daughters' he stresses the importance of kindness and good neighbourliness as a way of enhancing peaceful coexistence. In *Dying Wishes of a Granny*, a discerning reader will easily identify Hayibo as a fictitious name for Nigeria. This is because its temporal setting is the realistic portrait of the past of Nigeria which is the colonial period in Nigeria.

Finally, illustration is the visual soul of every children's literature. Naturally children are like butterflies and are attracted to colours and drawings. Ashimole, agrees that: *Illustrations are the soul of books especially those for younger readers...*(74)

Thus, pictures, illustrations and glossaries combined enhance the imaginative stimulation, understanding and enjoyment of children in the three stories in use. Most outstanding is Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River*. Also, the titles of the books are straightforward and appealing, and the covers of the books are colourful and attractive.

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