



Achieving functional education through teaching morality in short stories in Nigeria: A case of Eddie Iroh's *Without a Silver Spoon* and Ufondu's *The Fruit of Honesty*

Mohammed Bello Umar¹, Aminu Baba Udubo²

¹ Department of English, School of Languages, College of Education, Azare, Bauchi State, Nigeria

² Department of General Studies Education (GSE), School of Education, College of Education, Azare, Bauchi State, Nigeria

Abstract

Children Literature is highly demanding in our school system because of its philosophy of portraying, repositioning and sensitizing the community on its norms and values. The paper examines the trends in the Nigerian novels, and by extension African novels. This is in line with the assertion that Africa is a culturally homogenous zone. Such trends include use of proverbs, legends, institutions, mythology, mixture of Pidgin English, rich and poor class disposition and sometimes they are crime bent and reflection of societal dynamism. In both books, there is portrayal of honesty in the disposition of the principal characters and the corresponding success in their educational pursuit. The paper recommends for teaching of Children literature as one of the core subjects at Basic school levels in Nigeria.

Keywords: short stories, morality, basic education, functional education

Introduction

Literary artists are known for their reflection on the dynamic nature of their societies which is visualized by their focus, observation and composition of literary works. This is the essence of generational uniqueness and the basis for the writers to choose themes from local, regional or universal phenomenon and expose them in writing.

This paper explores the Iroh's (2000) and Ufondu's (1997) reflection on the perspective of morality, particularly disposition of honesty as severally portrayed by the principal characters respectively: young honest school boys and a symbol of a morally well-groomed typical African countryside families. Inspiration to write on this has been triggered by the recent Boko Haram insurgency that ravaged the north eastern part of Nigeria and by extension, the nation as a whole, which has claimed large number of lives and properties; perpetrated by unruly or misguided youths in the society. This was also accompanied by the simultaneous social vices of high-scale corrupt practices by government functionaries. It is the authors' belief that with appropriate guidance and sound mentorship, fashioned against the principle of virtue embedded in the school system, a lot of such unfortunate situations could be avoided. The paper therefore discusses the exhibition of moral uprightness in the books as a worthwhile contribution to repositioning our society for better education, peace and prosperity.

Trends in the Nigerian Novel

As a sort of general reflection to the contemporary literarily topical issues particularly in Nigeria, Nnolim (2010) asserts that "I try to define the Nigerian novel by what I dare to call its 'tradition', or the sum total of literary conventions and narrative habits... that wear a peculiar Nigerian face in the corpus of African novel." According to him:

"Nigerian tradition respects, copies and makes use of folk literature, and creatively makes use of our local proverbs, legends, customs rituals, institutions and mythology in giving imaginative expression to our national culture. The Nigerian novel is dynamic rather than static and blends the new with the old; therefore, the new urban ethos is very much there, with its mixture of pidgin English and plain speech styles, its crime bent, prostitution prone, convention-break characters; its traffic hold-ups; its venal police officers and their crime-busting tactics; its politics and the law courts; its elites and slum dwellers; its rich and poor."

The aforementioned, as Nnolim further maintains, provide essential line for the development of the Nigerian novel and that one should not expect any procrustean straight jacket along whose mould the Nigerian novel developed.

On a larger scope, Nkem (2008) observes that we need to underline an important fact, which scholars working in different parts have constantly acknowledged that Africa is by no means a culturally homogenous zone of the world. While some cultural aspects are in general terms (say the form and style of the proverb), it is necessary for scholars to engage in application, underlining relationships and differences that obtain (thematic, structural, social and literary) in various African traditions. Thus, we can harmonize the above discourse by saying that what obtains in the Nigerian novel could be a replica of what is obtainable in Africa, though with some peculiarities or divergences.

The books are going to be discussed on the basis of the following sub-units.

The Setting

The setting of Iroh's text reflects typical, barely-populated

African rural community with little commercial activities and traces of poverty and low level of education. While the Ufondu's text also begins in the same setting, it later advanced to an urban setting to accommodate further education and employment at higher order.

The Form, Style and Technique

Having aimed at exposing the young learners with rightful attitude to endure and adjust to hardships in pursuit of education, the form, style and the general technique have been the use of simple diction and relatively a short story form.

Functional Education

Functional Education is an off shoot and an advancement of quality education. While quality education provides learners with the requisite competence in all the parameters of knowledge, skills, attitude, norms and values, functional education is task-oriented. It bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired by an individual to optimally satisfactory performance in the work place. It also involves competent disposition of entrepreneurial skills.

Moral instances in the Texts as means to Quality and Functional Education

It is evidently clear right from the title that while Eddie Iroh's *Without a Silver Spoon* is directly centred on the theme of poverty, Ufondu's *The Fruit of Honesty*, though also indirectly centred on poverty, is more tied to the attitude of a poor boy, which is invariably a pointer to poverty. Taking a little step into the texts, one can observe a miserable life typically portraying an abject poverty which is characterized by barely having food to eat, absence of nutritious food, clothing difficulty and above all, inability to sustain the few children's education in Iroh's text. A bit more pathetic situation is contained in the Ufondu's text where Nkem, the all round character, lives as an orphan without a single, substantive guardian to cushion his difficulties. This is captured under the theme of rich and poor in the Nnolim's (2010) Nigerian tradition in novel writing.

However, despite the poor living condition of the Ure Chokwe's family, as composed by Iroh; Dede, the father of the three children as well as Mama the mother, try to inculcate moral virtue in their children for proper upbringing. The father, being the most influential person in a typical African male chauvinistic family, always scolds at the children to avoid bothering on other person's belongings let alone to talk of laying hands on any for theft. For instance:

'Stealing is unheard of in this family. It is true that we have not produced a single doctor, lawyer or engineer, but it is true that we have not produced a single rogue'. I don't want to start it'.

While Ure Chokwe receives parental mentoring, Nkem suffered alienation from his siblings and the vast majority of people at different stages, simply because he sticks to his father's will during his terminal illness that they should hold honesty as the doctrine in life, adding that, "The fruit of honesty is God's blessing".

The above has also been justified by the New West African

Literature edited by Ogunbesan (1979) where he observes that "If a man loses the courage to proclaim the truth, he may as well die".

Use of Proverbs

Nkem (2008), postulates that proverbs occupy a commanding position in the rhetorical arsenal of African cultures. In virtually every African society, proverbs constitute a dominant device, whether in everyday conversations or more serious formal talk. In the same token, some scholars like Seite (1976), Egbewagbe (1980), Webster (1982), and Mieder (1985) cited in a material edited by Ogunsiyi, Kehinde & Odebunmi A (2013) define proverbs as "short philosophical sentences or phrases which contain general truths about life. This truth may be local or universal".

Because proverbs are usually uttered or applied to appropriate contexts by elderly persons, due to vicarious life experiences they must have gathered, the paper draws some of them from Iroh's text, where the young hero lives with his parents. In the novel therefore, the children, especially our central character, Ure Chokwe always try to be reflective on their parents counselling in order to live a virtuous life to the satisfaction of the parents. The father uses reasonable proverbial language to caution the children to be mindful in life and not to be misguided by their miserable socio/economic condition, or negatively influenced by some unscrupulous peer group. Example:

- "A person who does not know where the rain catches him usually gets drenched before he finds shelter." Pg 14
- "A person who asks questions never misses his way". Pg 20
- "You do not ask a toad to give you chair when you can see he is squatting". pg 11
- "What the eyes do not see, the mouth does not water for". Pg16
- "The chicken does not forget the road to its hut". Pg 56
- "The hen does not lay eggs when there are obstacles in front of it". Pg 81
- "Because all lizards lie on their stomach, we don't know which one has stomach ache". Pg 105

Also cited by Ogunsiyi, Kehinde & Odebunmi (2013), Falola (2003) was quoted stipulating that culture shapes people's perception of themselves and their environment, their values, norms and their general way of life. Dede's inculcation of good character is thus an advocacy of cultural norms and values, which are part of the philosophy of education as always advocated in the popular statements at points of graduation or convocation that, "the students/learners are found worthy both in learning and character training".

Unfortunately, both Ure Chokwe and Nkem undergo life challenges which prompted them into serious state of confusion, disappointment and uncertainty about their education. But fortunately for them, their innocence exonerated them in all the hard times they undergo and emerge victorious at the end.

Problem of Poverty in the Pursuit of Education

Boulton (1980) opines that in a world in which the majority are underfed, various obscurantisms are enforced by

sophisticated techniques of power and multitude remain debarred from bare literacy, it is an extraordinary privilege to have some years guided of advanced study, with a modicum of comfort and privacy where free enquiry is taken for granted. Few things can be better for a society than a thick layer of people who have enjoyed a training at least aimed at inculcating intellectual honesty, exactness, mature sensibility, and some awareness of the multiplicity, elusiveness and importance of truth. But such training should have a severity to match its luxury. He further added that most students have at some time in the course, problems that cost more pain and anxiety than mere study difficulties.

To further justify the above assertion, Iroh's prose started with Ure Chokwe thinking of the best time to table his request for school fees, for which he is beaten in school for some days, yet he is very skeptical to channel the issue to his father because he knows clearly that the father could not afford it. Ure Chokwe experiences his most critical period in life when he is allegedly accused of theft by Teacher Steve and later his classmates. While the teacher suspends him from his house pending the time when truth manifests itself, the classmates play trick, proving him the thief and shouted at him. Coincidentally, the teachers' fiancée discovered it wedged in the drawer. And the classmate's missing school fees is found with Erugo when buying some wares in the school's mini market.

From the Nkem's angle, the situation is more alarming and devastating. To recap some of his misfortunes, Nkem has been sent out from his father's house by his siblings; He receives two weeks suspension from school because he disclosed that he broke their class's water pot, though nobody witnessed it; He is sent away from the Headmaster's house on his honesty ground; Nkem is asked to be sleeping in the Chike's market store; A plan has also been made to kill Nkem, which forced him to leave his home town, simply for revealing a case of theft and nobody could give him cover; He also lost his job for not conniving with his superior officer to dupe their employers.

Reaping the Dividends of Good Moral Character: Prosperity in Education

In several occasions, the child exhibits moral behaviour reflecting on his father's teaching of good manners: the warm reception to visitors by serving them with kolanut despite parents' absence; negotiation of Ure and his elder brother Enyibe each claiming to leave school paving way for the other; Nnena the youngest daughter's worry over non-punishment of the wicked tortoise for cheating Okicha the Lizard in the mother's folk; Mama's polite statement, "I am sorry", when Dede felt offended; Ure's courage to go to Church in Uniform for lack of fashionable cloth to wear, all these are instances of good manner.

Another interesting episode in the story is the Ure's determination not only to ignore and see it an abomination, but tries to distance himself from Erugo challenging him on the money he (Erugo) steals from his father. This goes along way with the Nwachukwu, Kwani & Ogunsiji's (2010) assertion when talking about theme of Integrity and Self pride that, "... what does it profit a man to gain the whole world but to lose his own roof?" pg.29

Ure also logically convinces his father to go and work as Teacher Steve's house servant so as to afford successful completion of his education. At the teacher Steve's house, Ure demonstrates his honesty, hardworking and sincerity. That earned him more reward from the teacher.

On visiting home, Ure shows his humbleness by not only admitting and insisting to eat the very type of food he is brought upon, he equally attempts to help his mother prepare the food. Moreover, he doesn't care with the classmates laughing at him as the teacher's servant. He has a mission to achieve: He successfully finished his school.

In the same vein, Nkem enjoys at different points the fruit of his honesty. These can be seen in such incidences where he serves as monitor in his class; He also stays for some times at his Headmasters house, due to his clean records of honesty; He stays at Chike's store to sanitize the corrupt practices belittling his business; Nkem enjoys scholarship from different persons such as the Headmaster, Chike and at Ulonaba city. At Ulonaba city, Nkem reaches his fortunate to have furthered his education and secured appointment, rising to the position of a bank manager, chairman of the bank and simultaneously the king of his home town. He awards scholarship to his wards owing to his exalted position.

Conclusion

In essence, Iroh and Ufondu have demonstrated by the character of Ure Chokwe and Nkem that primacy is vested in virtuous life style and not in wealth. This is more pronounced because while both the children get free from all allegations, hardships, and embarrassment, and they finally enjoy people's sympathy, recognition and admiration. This testifies Ure Chokwe's comment about Dede that:

'He believes that kindness and good manners could save the life of a person about to be condemned to death'.
Pg.6

To this end, Ure Chokwe and Nkem scale Boulton's (1980) caution that when one fails to find some adjustment to life difficulties, the subject proves to be much bigger than it once seemed.

Recommendations

The paper recommends that Children Literature or Literature in general should be made a compulsory subject to learners at basic school level. This will not only ensure moral uprightness in the learners but also inculcate in them the lost virtue of reading culture and attainment of functional education.

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