



## CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION

**Umar Saje (Ph.D)**

Department of English  
Northwest University, Kano  
[sajeumar@yahoo.com](mailto:sajeumar@yahoo.com)

and

**Ibrahim ShuaibuTukuntawa**

Department of English  
GSC Garko, Kano  
[Ibrahimshuaibu969@yahoo.com](mailto:Ibrahimshuaibu969@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to discuss the role of children's literature in integrating culture and promoting unity among Nigerian children across the primary and secondary levels of education. This is because the long standing and integrated cultures that were once engrained in the minds of children are fast declining as a result of the neglect children's literature suffers nowadays in both our private as well as public institutions of learning. It is therefore observed that through literature, children can be made to appreciate national values and norms such as unity in diversity, respect for one another, the development of individual's talents cum potentialities and then integrate the cultures of one another for peace, progress and prosperity to be revamped as it were in the country. The paper then concludes by giving some crucial suggestions on how children's literature can be used as a vehicle for such cultural integrations.*

**Key Words:** History of Children's Literature, Concern of Children's Literature, Literature as Vehicle of Cultural Integration.

### **Introduction**

It is generally agreed that literature serves as a tool, vehicle or mirror through which the society sees itself, assesses its past and present in order to transform into a better place for the benefit of its citizenry. Literature reforms and transforms individuals and changes them into a fine-grained, responsible members of the society. Such literature should be able to skilfully integrate different individual's cultures so that people could accommodate one

another's background and be able to appreciate their cultural values and norms. Through the study of literature, students tend to appreciate the values of ethics and morality since literature is said to be didactic in the sense that it inculcates morality in addition to its numerous contributions to national growth and development. Therefore, literature as an all-embracing discipline can be used to systematically integrate various cultures in the minds of the children for cultural co-existence and national development and progress.

Many scholars opine that literature is inseparable from culture. This means that literature and culture are twin sisters that aim to consider the happenings in the society and infuse norms and values in use for us to be upright in our behaviours and dealings. For instance, Mahdi(1996), posits that literature teaches cultural values. And culture, as this scholar further submits, is conceived to be the product of ideas, attitudes and thoughts springing up from sound and original minds. It also grows out of the environment of the society and entrenched by interaction between various societies through different forms of exchanges; political, economic and so forth. It is against this background that we say, children's literature as an integral part of the general literature can be used in cultural integration in the minds of the younger generations (children).

### **Children's Literature: Its Definition**

Children's literature is concerned with the overall development of the child through exposure to books and other reading materials that have to do with children generally. Saje(2009) sees children's literature as a literature mainly written for children with subtle thematic preoccupations and characters that animate the children's world.

A lot of definitions were given by eminent scholars as to what children's literature mean and what it is generally all about. For example, writers like Commanger (1961) and Bawden (1967), Brockman (1982), Fayose (1995) and Hernadi (2003), have pointed out crystally that children's literature, as the name suggests, has to do with age (pre-adolescents) or the young, the theme of which include among others, the fairy and wonder tales, the nursery rhymes and songs, books of moral persuasions, the stories of school playing-fields or far flung adventures and general imaginative literature marketed to children and designed for their amusements as well as edification.

In particular, Hernadi (2003) said that:

*Children's literature are writings designed to appeal to children – either to be read to them or by them – including fiction, poetry, biography and history. Children's literature also includes riddles, fables, legends, myths and folk poems and folktales based on spoken tradition (P.59).*

Synthesizing the above views, one can safely say that children's literature is basically something supposedly created for children to read, get entertained and also serve as cultural accommodators.

To buttress this argument further, BelloKano (2011), in a paper entitled “Division of Literatures: A Child in Retrospect”, opines that children's literature is that which genuinely focuses on issues intricately connected to children and for children alone. He further submits that:

*Any literature which fails to acknowledge the child as its pivot of discussion is then not considered as one of the compendiums of children's literature. (P.6)*

Akim and Akim (2005: P.90) see children's literature as:

*Stories that amuse children and rekindle their interests into a quest of wanting to know about the issues and happenings around that story.*

This means that the stories should revolve around the world of fairy and fantasies so that child's mental faculty would be put to work and make him alert as to the happenings of the story.

### **Early History of Children's Literature**

Literature specifically written and designed for children is a fairly recent development. It is said to have commenced in Europe, for instance, only in the closing years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Smith, 1967); and must have been inaugurated in Africa one or two centuries later, partly as a result of the Euro-African cultural contacts. Therefore, the large body of children's literature or story books, observes Adedokun (2008), covers the three genres of literature, that is, poetry, prose and drama. However, there still exists scanty works on poetry and drama for children in the literary world. Children's literature, for centuries, remained purely oral as stories being passed to them by their parents from one generation to the other. This was typically the nature of children's literature in many communities of the world for centuries as further stressed by Adedokun (2008).

In Microsoft Encarta (2003) a dense discussion is carried out on the England's experience of the earliest forms of children's literature as oral literature. Owing to the invention of printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1447, the first English Printer, William Caxton, published a collection of rhymes titled: *'The book of courtesy'* (1447) and *Le Morted'Arthur* (1469 – 1470). It was not until 18<sup>th</sup> century that John Newbery printed the first attractive and inexpensive books of stories, verses, puzzles, riddles, maxims and lessons for children's consumption in small paper covered editions. From then on, different writers have awakened to the challenges of producing story books for children on a wide range of themes and interests in Europe and America. But what can be described as the real revival of interests and works on children's literature across Europe and America began in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In Africa, the situation was nothing different but rather much more unfavourable to writing for children. For example, Fayose (1995) wrote that writing for children in Nigeria was relatively a recent phenomenon. According to her, as at our independence in October, 1960, only four books were published for children. For this reason, the Nigerian child was only exposed to the British myths and Arabic tales in the colonial era schools.

Although more African writers, over the years, are gradually showing keen interest in children's literature with over 600 books produced for children by 1993 in Nigeria, Fayose (1995), the bulk of these writers still concentrate on prose fiction that revolves around realism, fantasy and folktales. On the other hand, the Western and European children's literature has traversed almost every sphere of life with authors turning out works for

children on fiction, poetry, biography, history, riddles, fables, legends, fantasy, realism, myths, maxims, science and folk poems and folktales based on oral or spoken tradition.

### **The Concerns of Children's Literature**

Children's literature, as we have earlier stated, tilts its attention to the development and design of children's work with a view to educating them and exposing them to the challenges ahead for nation-building. The early children's literary books presumably were mainly concerned with religious sermons in addition to the acquisition of knowledge and literary skills. The religious aspect of such books is meant to prepare children spiritually to carry out responsibilities with a sense of decency as well as prepare them for death and life hereafter. Books like John Bunyan's *Pilgrims progress* (1684) deals with an allegory of conflict between good and evil, while Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) showcases the individual's ability or self-reliance and courage, elements that are acquired to face the challenges of life. Even though these books are classics which are originally written for adults, they also appeal to children or have been adapted for them in view of their thematic preoccupation.

The expansion of literacy following the invention of printing as earlier stated increased the range of children's literature to include national history as fresh subject matter for the young ones. The concern of children's literature with national history is to introduce children to such national historical developments of their nation-states with a view to making them appreciate the role of great men and women in nation-building though without disregard for other thematic and aesthetic functions of the literature itself. In this regard, texts like *The Magic Land of the Shadows* by Kola Onadipe and Aneze Okoro's *The Village School* (1966) readily come to mind. These books, though based on fantasies, portray societal values and at the same time satisfy deep human needs especially those for security, cultural accommodation and competence in assigned roles.

It is against this backdrop that we can safely say that children's literature is tied to the child's development as it tries to teach them some moral value and etiquettes of other people thus, integrating them into other people's cultures and morals for peace, unity and national development.

There are texts which have been written for children that have to do with inter-ethnic interests. These are aimed at strengthening tribal cohesion for understanding among the various tribes of the nation for unity and progress. It is important to note that since the ancient Greek period to the present day, writers in every part of the world have contributed to the education of children by publishing books suitable for promoting moral values, cultural integration, socialisation and knowledge acquisition; all geared towards preparing children to the challenges of life.

### **Children's Literature as a Vehicle of Cultural Integration**

Many educationists and historians have tried to offer succinct definitions of culture in its own right. For example, Akim and Akim (2005) see culture as:

*The customs and costumes, the philosophy and ideology,  
the modes and robes of a people living in a particular,  
isolated area. (P.80)*

Culture is the ideal and mannerisms, the values and ethical conducts of a given society or people. This means that the term is 'fluid' in nature. For instance, what is obtainable in a

given society as morally upright would be different in another society as acceptable and morally binded. In the light of this, children's literature as a discipline could be used to integrate various cultures, ideals and moralities of our indigenous cultures to children particularly at the lower levels of our educational systems.

And by cultural integration, we mean bringing together variety of cultures through children's literature for them to be able to acquaint themselves with, make use of and learn to tolerate as well as accommodate the differences that exist among the different ethnic groups of the country. In this regard, children's literature takes a prime position in the making and upbringing of the African Child to become a good citizen and a responsible member of his immediate community. It also helps in promoting intellectual development and human relationships. Right from the formative stage, the child is taught through stories not only how to relate and respect other people in the society but also nurture him for adulthood in all areas of life.

Equally important is the fact that the teaching of children's literature in our schools would not only integrate various cultural milieus in the minds of our children but also develop and mould their characters thus, making them appreciate other people outside of their environs and learn to live with them without disenchantment or abhorrence. This means that through presentation of sweet stories to children, they would be able to easily pick-up and emulate some good virtues displayed by some characters in the stories like respect, humility, courage, winning spirit, love and obedience as well as shunning vices such as greed, trenches, envy, enmity and so on. Therefore, the inclusion of children's literature in our schools' curriculum would obviously make the majority of children to eschew hooliganism, corruption, murder, theft, dishonesty, deceit and other vices that are fast eating deep into the roots of our present day society. It would also cushion the problem of acculturating the 'alien', borrowed foreign cultures our children are being exposed to through violent, corrupt and immoral movies, films, television programmes and the internet that seem to pollute and bastardise our long, rich cultures and ways of life.

As Adedokun (2008:9) aptly observes, 'the rich means of transmitting the cultural values and heritage of a people to their successive generations is literature and children's literature is the best avenue through which morality could be passed down to such young generations yet unborn'. Not only would children's literature serve as a vehicle for cultural integration but it will also serve as a means of gaining access to enriching the children's languages. This is because literature, in general serves as language in action. And through children's literature, children would be able to develop mega vocabularies, idioms, proverbs and figurative expressions that have been documented in some texts, thus expanding their knowledge and horizons of other languages which are different from theirs. This will also help in developing their linguistic ability.

Therefore, the aim of children's literature is not only to entertain, it also aims at unifying people by integrating one another's culture despite their heterogeneous nature for peace, harmony and tranquillity to exist. This will bring about the nation's progress and development in all spheres of life. In addition, there are children's literary texts that were basically written with the sole motif of inculcating cultural values in the minds of our young ones. Such texts should, as a matter of fact, be prescribed for children in our schools in order to revive our cultures and make them do away with the western idiosyncrasies they so much cherish and hold onto as their 'culture'. It is against this background that children's literature

needs to be highly considered and included at the various levels of our educational institutions.

### **Way Forward**

Having discussed the roles children's literature plays in integrating cultures in the minds of the young ones, here are some few suggestions on how to adopt children's literature as a means or a vehicle through which cultural integration can be achieved.

1. That children's literature should be included in our primary and secondary school syllabuses.
2. That the texts to be used should be indigenous and reflecting the culture of the host community.
3. That teacher should give priority to teaching the ethical values and morality rather than concentrating on developing the child's language alone.
4. That teacher should take into cognizance the child's psychology before choosing a text in order to avoid complexity in the understanding of what the text in question entails. The child's cultural background and age are important factors to be considered when choosing text for children.
5. Literature should promote cultural integration within the country.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, this paper tries to highlight the essential roles played by children's literature in the integration of culture in the minds of our young ones. It also discusses the importance of literature in shaping children's attitudes and characters thus, making them responsible and united citizens of this great country.

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