

Alexander Kure

Literature-in-English and National Development

Abstract

The essay appraises the roles of literature to contextualise how it impacts on national development. By so doing, it directs attention to its social relevance and also shows that, like, and sometimes more than other subjects, literature has continuously played an important role in shaping the consciousness of the Nigerian society towards national development. In specific terms, the essay, among many other issues raised in the conclusion, submits that literature has lived above the assumption that it is a tool used to express the whims and caprices of individual writers. Secondly, it emphasises that literature is not ineffective and dysfunctional. Thirdly, it also shows that the chronicling of a plethora of Nigeria's socio-political and economic conflicts in the past and in the present in the different genres of literature has directly or indirectly played a key role in charting the road-map for national development.

Introduction

The debate surrounding the relevance of certain courses (especially in the humanities) as they relate to the challenges of national development might not have ended after all. This long drawn debate may be lingering because of the continuous changes in the focus of Nigeria's National Policy on Education and other legislations in respect of education at various levels that seek to glorify science and technological education over and above all other fields of academic of study, like those in the humanities. Also, there is the preponderance of a very high level of ignorance in the polity due to the people's cultivated mindsets. No wonder, at any given opportunity, literature has always been put at an uncomfortable defensive as to its essence in the trajectory of human development. In addition to the factors above, this conception may also be accounted for by the remarkable shift in human perceptions based on the various changes that have been brought to bear on the course of human development in the last quarter of the last century and up to the present century. One out of the many of such changes at the international level was the emergence of a new world order following the collapse of the former Union of Soviet Socialist States (USSR).

At the local level, Nigeria has had to grapple with her independence struggle, civil war and the process of rebuilding the nation thereafter; quest for technological development in line with what is obtainable the world over; military interventions; aborted, truncated and ill-defined democracy; neo-colonialism of various shapes and sizes; monumental corruption at all levels of governance; and the imbroglios in the Niger-Delta. Whereas the events that led to those momentous incidents were and are many and interrelated, even literature was, and still is, expected to use the skills of interpretation, power of intuition and capacity to exhaustively explain the trajectory of these events and their consequences on human (in particular) and national (in general) developments.

In addition, there has been the globalisation process, which especially according to Ake (1992) Rochester (1993), Torp (1992) and Okpeh (2002), among many scholars, tend to create a new world that is socially, economically, culturally, and even politically becoming more integrated than ever before. However, the contradictions this process has engendered include raising fundamental questions in respect of the nature and character of the so-called concept of a “globalized world” where the inequality in countries of the world and other social classes do not only deepen but is becoming a coefficient of what they can possibly benefit from the emerging process. Literature, like all other fields, is expected to explain the logic and how to circumvent, in the final analysis, this existing paradox.

Further to the above, Huntington (1996), Mazrui (1990), and Ochefu (2000) also posit that there was the rise of irredentism being a residue of the global democracy project being propagated by the United States of America (USA) and her European allies. Consistent with the globalisation of liberal values, the liberalisation and democratisation project championed by the USA and her allies is perceived to be an act akin to cultural imperialism, thus giving rise to counter-reactions from victim nations, especially in the third-world. Here, again, literature was and is also required to rationalise this development and proffer sound and convincing interpretations.

It is against the backdrop of these many developments that the essay examines the profile of literature as well as its crucial contribution towards national development. In addition, the essay advocates literary consciousness in a globalising and highly competitive world of knowledge economy as the basis for achieving national greatness. The essay concludes by emphasising the place of literature in the overall process and conception of societal existence inasmuch as it contributes to engendering the desired national development.

The nature of Literature

A greater part of the reason for the lingering controversy on the value of literature to national development relates to the very glaring misunderstanding of the type of knowledge literature generates and the value of such in enhancing societal development. In comparison to the knowledge and the value as physically show-cased even by subjects in the humanities other than in the sciences and technologies, because the one by literature looks abstract or does not constitute an objective body of knowledge, the belief therefore is that it is of no value and is suspect on all grounds. Indeed, the values of all

sciences and technologies have come to be accepted to be for progress, tangible, observable and verifiable development; hence they are often spared the need for value justification. Social sciences, partly because they are considered sciences and partly because one can more conveniently point to their areas of direct intervention in society, have their utility value readily accepted. Political science in the new national democratic dispensation, for example, can easily state that it studies politics, significantly, and can therefore prepare more capable politicians for governance. In addition, it is same for economics, sociology, and psychology. They can, in their various ways, hold their utility credentials up for verification even when more often, the reality does not reflect their effectiveness. Further to the above, the liberal arts do not get off the hook that easily, though here too, the odds are not equally distributed. History, for example, does not need to seek to convince that it helps to preserve the past, though today it does not hold that monopoly. Languages, because of their central role in communication, are easily understood for their usefulness, even if some of them are rated much lower than others for this purpose. Invariably, the onus has always rested on literature to prove its mettle!

At this juncture, it may well be pertinent to briefly highlight very few things about literature and to eventually link them up to how literature then impacts on national development. This suggests that this paper considers this issue from the very generic point of view. This means that focus is on the nature and function of literature in general terms, and the paper treats literature as a system responsible for a definite signifying role. By this conception, however, the paper avoids discussing particular and specific instances of the literature of individual or group of writers, regions or nationalities, old or modern, but literature simply as a signifying system and as it impacts on national development in Nigeria.

In the context of the above, literature can simply be defined as a verbal art. It can manifest in either oral or written forms. As an art, this essay posits that it is a creation of the individual(s), and that being a product of the individual in and of the society; it expresses the human condition even if it is from the perspective of the individual's encounter with forces of life. Therefore, literature treats themes that are also the concern of sociology, psychology, economics, archaeology, astronomy, physics, and metaphysics, but it dwells on some of the themes not as specialists from such professions would normally do. Modern literature reflects more of this human condition perspective. From Dostoyevsky to Kierkegaard, one understands that even God in His infinite grace has to be searched for afresh with the compass of the human condition. The forces of good and evil are no longer rooted in some mythology but in understandable human conditions and actions in which human beings, for instance, fight against each other on daily basis to enable society gain or lose paradise. The need to express the human condition explains why literary works are rooted in identifiable cultures and societies. This enables literature to address the real problems of man as experienced by the author and also proffer solutions on same. By this, literature keeps moving from an attempt to address universal issues to specific socio-politically confined societal issues that may end up being universalised when interpreted.

Understandably, literature is very conscious of itself as an art where the artist considers art as an operation of form and language. Therefore, literature becomes an art of communication paying keen attention to formal structures to ensure that its language is more marked and more deserving of attention than the languages of other communications. In literature, therefore, the poetic function of language is encapsulated in what Jakobson (1960) refers to as “a focusing on the message”. The insistence for the artist to become more focused on the formal structures of creativity and on language as the most vital tools should not be misconstrued to mean that literature has abandoned its social responsibility to become self-contemplating. Literature is simply re-asserting its pure nature as the ultimate art of language where language is made to grow, flourish and affirm itself. Literature is ever conscious of the need to open up new vista of significance with language to create new possibilities of verbal and written expressions. This also means pushing language further and further to create newer modes of feelings, awareness and communication. Literature uses language in such a way that is continuously new to amaze consumers. Language then ends up being fed back into common usage as metaphor, neologism, simile, personification and the like to facilitate the expression of sensibilities and experiences. In this context, literature ensures the preservation and development of language to the corporate well-being of the society.

As an art, and more than other arts, because it is language in action, literature necessarily fulfils many other functions. More than any other, literature satisfies individuals in all endeavours by giving pleasure through the beauty of form and style; it edifies through moral and social commentary; it relieves tension by permitting the application of imagination and to try out other obsessions that may not be achievable in real life. Further, it entertains, educates and informs. Therefore, as an art, literature is not just an art for its sake. It discusses human beings in their conditions and environments. Though literature may be conceived as the expression of an individual’s experience(s) in his society, however because the creator is of that society, such experience(s) become(s) the expression of the individual’s view-point that is in tandem with those of the society in general.

The above takes this discourse to the other value of literature which has to do with its social commitment. One notes that from its oral origins, literature has always had social commitment. This is because since the individual that produces the work of art is a product of the society, it is expected that such art will reflect the artist’s-being-in-society. However, the extent of such reflections will rely on the extent to which these mutations have impinged on the consciousness of the said artist. Once the link between the writer and his art are established and understood, it becomes clearer that the literary work could not just have been ordered into existence. Genuine literature is not just published. Artists cannot produce works that please the society when it does not reflect their proclivities. The failure of many bourgeois writers, in spite of all their good intentions, has been predicated on their lack of the understanding, inability to understand, the society they write about. Conversely, why some revolutionary artists succeed is basically because they have been in the struggle, experienced what they are writing about as participant observers, hence they are able to suggest solutions. Simply expressed, it may be difficult for artists to produce what may be termed “society’s laudable work of art”, that is, a work of art that is accepted by society, except for reasons other than pure social commitment.

Further to the above, as an art form based on language, literature occupies a central and enviable position as a cultural code. In the humanities, literature prides itself for being the key to the appreciation of all cultural practices. Furthermore, in the present Nigerian society where the reading culture is just too poor and not well developed, where education is polarised and compartmentalised perhaps with the unforeseen intention that may well become the creation of disharmony in the professions, it is a challenge to literature, the one field that captures what other fields of study grapple with, to harmonise such differences and to particularly ensure the creation of a reading class of Nigerians both in and out of school.

In specific terms, part of the controversy that surrounds the relevance of literature has to do with the not-too-clear understanding of the type of knowledge literature generates and the value of that knowledge to the society it is produced in. For a long time, the knowledge literature produces has existed in the domain of entertainment or like the historian, but unlike the historian, recording either a dead past or a living present that amounts to nothing. Literature was therefore seen as either a compendium of dead stories or entertainment, pure and simple! Today, if the information supplied by literature fails to present either past or present stories with great analytical and clinical perspectives devoid of personal impressions, it is deemed to be useless to the society in spite of the much talk on literature and social commitment. As a chronicle of past events, therefore, literature is expected to arrange the stories about the past in time perspective without any judgement of their causes, affects, nature and character. This suggests that literature simply reconstructs past events as they happened. Seen in this context, literature becomes the chronicle of past events. Therefore, the writer is one endowed with the impressive narrative dexterity and is also knowledgeable about past and in addition, present events. The writer in this perspective is involved only in just one straightforward methodology: coupling of these events in a simple narrative in the order of their occurrence and devoid of any form of analytical interpretation. Consequently, questions such as why, how, when and so on in relation to the occurrence of events are not to be asked.

Based on the above misconception of literature, it is understandable why it has remained an object of intense prejudice, stereotype and most times 'persecution' in time past and even today. As stated earlier, the accusations levelled on literature border on questioning its values to society. Rene Descartes (1596-1660), quoted in Alagoa (1981:4), states this succinctly when he writes off the historian and history and the writer and literature in the following words:

To live with men of an earlier age is like travelling in foreign lands. It is useful to know something of the manners of other peoples in order to judge more impartially of our own, and not despise and ridicule whatever that differs from them, like men who have never been outside their native country. But those who travel too long end by being strangers in their own homes, and who study too curiously the actions of antiquity are ignorant of what is done among ourselves today. Moreover, these narratives tell us of things which cannot have happened as if they had really taken place, and thus invite us to attempt what is beyond our power or to hope for what

is beyond our fate. An even histories, true though may be, and neither exaggerating nor altering the value of things, omit circumstances of a meaner and less dignified kind in order to become more worthy of a reader's attention- hence the things which they describe never happened exactly as they describe them, and men who try to model their own acts upon them are prone to the madness of the romantic paladins and mediate hyperbolic deeds.

Further to the above, during the last century in Europe, consequent upon the remarkable achievements recorded in science and technology, literature and all other subjects in the liberal arts and humanities have been challenged to demonstrate their usefulness to humanity by anchoring with the changes of the time. As a result, literature was also requested to present facts with clinical objectivity. This amounts to demonstrating what one may call the need for 'scientificity' or stand the risk of being declared irrelevant. Literature started acquiring the traits that were more consistent with scientific methods of the natural sciences in the vain attempt to be more scientific and less art. So pervasive has been this effort, hence the many ever-increasing literary theories. Therefore, the era of positivism has seen literature like all other subjects in liberal arts and humanities fighting for survival.

This essay argues that literature, and indeed literary knowledge, in part, is not about a dead past. The past that literature chronicles is fundamentally related to the living present. Literature turns to the past in the belief that it is the father of the present. Like in history, the present is the child of the past. Though it is true that in generating knowledge, literature studies the past, the point being made is that literary knowledge does not end in the past only. Literature turns to the past because both the past and present are intricately tied to each other. Literature, therefore, feels the need to ensure that humanity needs to have a firm grasp of both the past and the present for a secured prognosis into the future. Literature consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems. By so doing, the main work of literature is not to record but to evaluate to ensure that which it records has lasting meaning.

Related to the above conception of literature and the knowledge it dispenses is the perception that it documents all the changes humanity has undergone. Though one may argue that it is difficult to conceptualise the amount of change engendered by literature, this conception still places enormous responsibility on the shoulders of literature since it sees literature as a tool to engender change all the same. Literature, especially socially committed literature, advocates change. This ordinarily means that literature, more than anything, deals with change; it studies change; it is about change, and it is change itself. No wonder the implication of the sum total of the meaning of Section 1 of Nigeria's *National Policy on Education* (2010) sees it as the most veritable affective tool. In this connection, literature is first and foremost a defender of change; it studies the changes the society is going through by analysing the variables that are responsible in the first instance. This requires very close interaction with, and an understanding of the processes of the changes taking place in the society and the consequences of such to human relations in general.

Literature is also a consciousness-raising activity in the sense that it informs and impacts on the action of humans in the course of their development, either individually or collectively. This leads to at least two other crucial philosophical issues arising from literature as a discipline and the methodology that foregrounds its study. The first relates to the type of consciousness literature impacts when it studies the past. Every literature has an objective that is erected on specific interest(s); first of literature as a subject and secondly, on those of readers both of which are part of the larger society. The second issue relates to the utility, relevance and purpose of the awareness that literature generates. In other words, what type of consciousness is literature capable of generating and how can this affect action in the society?

Consequently, it is pertinent to note at this juncture that the debate over the question of what type of literary consciousness literature can generate is far from being settled in literature by writers. In broad terms, the dividing line is still basically between bourgeois writers and their Marxist opponents. For the former, the type of literary consciousness literature is capable of producing, its significance and value, are determined by the degree to which literature is objective in its reconstruction. Here, objectivity requires that the subject must necessarily view its object with some kind of moral neutrality. Arising from the foregoing, therefore, it is pertinent to posit here that the quality of awareness which literature is capable of generating is, first and foremost, determined by the extent to which literature can accurately and empirically present the facts about that which is being reconstructed. For bourgeois literature, therefore, the psychomotor of literature is ideas which are always untainted, unblemished and, in fact, sacred. For Marxist literature, on the other hand, the quality of literary consciousness it creates and its relevance are anchored on the degree of its participation in class struggle and the ultimate search for social justice. Human beings must survive first before they can think. It is only one that is alive that has emotions and sentiments. Furthermore, the facts of literature are essentially facts about individuals and the society in general and not about the motives, real or imaginary, from which they are expected to have acted upon. Indeed, they are facts about the relations of individuals or communities to one another and the contending social forces producing these relations. For Marxist literature, therefore, the crux of literature is matter and its scientific interpretation of the mutational process of human existence. Swai and Temu (1982:11) support this assertion when they say:

History, and indeed the other branches of the humanities and the social science, is more than empirics...The study of history has to enable people to understand themselves better in a given historical situation, by analysing reality and making it transparent and, in doing so, contributing to the formation of the situational consciousness of the contemporaries.

In line with the above, literature's ultimate goal (like that of other branches of humanities) is the liberation of man in general! The point being pursued is that adequate knowledge of literature is paramount to the understanding of the forces that determine the nature and character of the development process of a people and their understanding of that process of development. Indeed, their capacity to rise above the challenges both inherent and prevalent in their development process depends largely on the depth of their

understanding and the extent to which they are involved in the entire process of development.

Literature and national development

There is a very strong relationship between literature and national development. That cannot be contested especially in the context of Nigeria. However, in general terms, what is the subject of worry is the depth of ignorance and the pervasiveness of the lack of knowledge about the role literature has played and is still playing in pre- and post-colonial Nigeria. This attitude is unfortunately exhibited in both high and low circles and may just be the reason for the myriad of problems that have continuously bedevilled Nigeria, hence making it impossible to achieve concrete development. For example, in the fast-changing twenty-first century world where nations are integrating to improve their bargaining power, from the spades of crisis that predominate the Nigerian landscape, one can safely say Nigeria is still wallowing in its desirability not to stay as a cohesive country. It is evident in the histories of the many developed countries of the world that deliberate efforts were made to create prevailing circumstances in order to achieve development which in turn brought greatness; but for very unpatriotic habits, these do not seem to be working for Nigeria. Copious examples of those concerted efforts abound in the United States of America, Japan, China, and many parts of the world. In all those places, there was conscious effort to ensure that they forged ahead in terms of unity to achieve social, economic, political and all other forms of national development. These countries did not get to the enviable places they occupy today by throwing away their socially committed literatures, nor did they undermine them. There have always been collective goals and aspirations and how each facet of study could be harnessed to ensure the achievement of national development. This gave the people the hope and reason to think and act in their respective capacities to overcome observable obstacles to achieve the expected national goals. They first and foremost understood who they were at the backdrop of the challenges confronting them as a people. Secondly, they tackled the contradictions arising from their being on the basis of a collective resolve which also factored their experiential identity. Finally, the solidarity expressed at each stage of this development was informed by their collective memories and knowledge of themselves expressed by even their literatures.

Integration in the context of a plural society such as Nigeria is, by and large, the process from where development emerges. This is so because people from different socio-political, cultural, religious, economic and gender backgrounds coalesce on the basis of a desire for a sustained awareness of each other and within the context of shared values to which interacting groups subscribe as they struggle to reproduce their material existence to aid address their development needs. Therefore, Nigerian literature has consistently advocated unity as an attribute that has to be deliberately cultivated. It has also consistently believed that once achieved, it has to be deliberately nurtured; the nurturing is manifested in the developmental and other programmes undertaken to take each component part of the country along. This is more so when all through the fifty years after independence, successive Nigerian governments have not been able to work

out an embracing policy or strategy to win the instinctive loyalty of the generality of Nigerian citizens. It becomes the sacred duty of literature to always point that out.

Nigerian Literature is able to help re-direct Nigeria's efforts to achieve development by first going back in time past to chronicle pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria. It uses this to analyse patterns of group and inter-group relationships which include migration, economy, culture, religion, politics and all other facets of human existence. This effort has continued into the colonial and post-colonial stories of Nigeria where the growth of industries, activities of multinational companies, corruption, marriage, education, politics, culture, gender and environmental issues have also taken centre stage. Through this, literature has helped Nigeria to continue to assess why it has failed after colonisation to find its bearing. It behoves literature to explain the story of the problem with Nigeria even when such a problem is situated within a literary context.

Socially committed literature assumes that adequate knowledge of the various peoples of Nigeria would go a long way to educate, hence removing the veil of ignorance that characterises inter-ethnic stereotypes and other inherent prejudices in the relationships that exist between one group and another. Nigerian literature shows in context that until the many ethnic groups learn to live with one another peacefully, in unity, as one people pursuing one destiny, the hope for all forms of development will continue to be a mirage. Literature has the capacity to play a positive role towards achieving this because, by its very nature, it could easily generate literary consciousness using its different genres to impact on Nigeria's development processes. For example, from knowing each component ethnic group, it is possible to be in a position to appreciate the idiosyncrasies that exist and on that basis be more receptive in understanding the many differences that have to be eliminated if Nigeria has to develop as a nation.

Conclusion

This essay was predicated on the quest to expose, discuss, challenge, and educate proponents of the inherent misconceptions of the value of literature in Nigeria. Therefore, it generally discusses Nigerian literature at the backdrop of its relationship to national development. It argues that as against all suppositions in respect of the lack of value, literature has actually been playing and still plays important roles that impact on national development. The crucial role played by literature is identified to be an agent of change. It has been shown that literature seeks and realises that type of relevance from the type of literary consciousness and knowledge it generates and its place in the trajectories of the developmental efforts of Nigeria. Drawing experiences of the pressure put on Literature from other developed countries; Nigerian literature has also been challenged to show its usefulness by producing knowledge that is imbued with the capacity to deliver Nigeria from its negative state of existence, especially in periods of crises. Therefore, Nigerian literature has been involved in the struggle to liberate Nigeria's toiling populace. The essay concludes that, indeed, literature has been and is still an agent of national development.

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