



## THE POTENTIAL OF NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN BUILDING AN INCORRUPTIBLE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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### **Abstract**

*Nigeria is seen and referred to as one of the most corrupt nations of the world. This rating is a grave concern to many morally disposed and responsible citizens of the country. Hence, the solution to the problem of corruption becomes pertinent. Therefore, literature is a veritable instrument of social change, and because children are the hope and the leaders of any nation, children's literature is identified as a means to address the problem. This study, using some texts of Nigerian children's literature, carefully explored how the texts have vividly addressed the subject of corruption. The primary texts were used as sources of data, and the qualitative method was used to critically analyse the data. It was found that all the texts selected have the potential to address issues of corruption in various forms while condemning bribery and other immoral acts. The texts uphold morals such as dignity of labour, patriotism, obedience to elderly counsel, impartial judgement, sexual purity, and others. It was therefore recommended that Nigerian children's literature should be adopted as a powerful national instrument to build responsible and morally upright children for the future.*

**Keywords:** *Children's Literature, Corruption, Nigeria, Moral.*

## Introduction

Nigeria is a prominent member of the committee of nations. At the level of the United Nations, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Organization of African Union (OAU) and others, Nigeria's membership remains staunch and solid. Nigerian citizens are residents of many nations of the world where they are found prospering in many professions and excelling in diverse human endeavours. Many Nigerians have risen to prominence, acquiring laurels in international competitions. Despite the great feats by Nigerians in different areas of life, Nigeria is rated so high in the circle of corrupt nations of the world. The designation of Nigeria as a corrupt nation has not changed significantly the Corrupt Perception Index (CPI) results released by Transparency International for 2022. Since then, Nigeria has done nothing to change her status as a very corrupt nation (Nmah 120). Notwithstanding, Nmah's position, efforts have been made to tackle this problem of corruption that has threatened the very existence of this great nation. Successive regimes in the country have initiated programmes, legislations and other ways to tackle corruption.

Corruption is a betrayal of trust reposed in persons occupying public positions. The use of the influence of one's position for personal gains is corruption. (Myint 40). Collection of bribes, embezzlement, unexecuted contracts awarded, falsification of documents and accounts records, misappropriation of public funds, and many others are considered acts of corruption in any society (Nmah 123). Liu, Joseph (2) views corruption as the exploitation of public office for personal gain. Nye, Joseph on the other hand, considers it as a behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gain. Contributing an opinion on the concept of corruption, Akindele, Samuel T. (105) defines it as the misuse of public power for private benefit. Nigeria has been grossly enmeshed in corrupt practices from individuals, groups, corporate organizations, public and private, religious and traditional, local

and foreign. They maintain that corruption is an endemic and cancerous ailment in the body of Nigerian systems (Okolo and Akpokighe 35).

The effects of corruption are seriously devastating and unimaginably destructive to any human society. This has been evidently witnessed in the retrogressive and underdeveloped situation of the Nigerian nation. The outcome of a study conducted on corruption in Nigeria revealed that corruption in the public and private systems has led to the deplorable condition of the country's infrastructures and governance which has affected the entire citizenry (Ngwuchukwu 16).

It is noteworthy to state that efforts have been made to tackle this problem of corruption that has threatened the very existence of this great nation. Successive governments in the country have initiated programmes, legislations and other ways to tackle corruption. Starting from the military regime of Muhammadu Buhari between 1983 and 1985, the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) was launched but was truncated after the regime that put it in place due to some reasons such as the corruption inherent in the style of implementation and cases of highhandedness resulting to violation of human rights. Ibrahim Babangida's government modified WAI to (WAIC) War Against Indiscipline and Corruption. The civilian government of Olusegun Obasanjo also tried to confront this menace of corruption through the establishment of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission and other Related Offences (ICPC). These two corruption fighting institutions have existed till date (Olufemi & Taiwo 1). Successive administrations have also been making use of these anti-graft agencies to fight corruption and other related crimes.

Corruption has continued unabated despite the above mentioned measures by governments to fight it in Nigeria. The reasons for this have been selective mode of operation as perceived enemies are being pursued, partial handling of cases, unpatriotic and corrupt officers of the anti-graft agencies, and many more. All these have resulted to a damaging culture of corruption, leading to disrespect by other nations on Nigerians. Sadly

enough, the lawmakers who make laws against evil are evil themselves. The brazen disregard for morals and societal values has culminated to a lawless society that Nigeria as a nation has become.

Though, for over sixty years of Nigerian independence, all hope is not lost. There is hope for repositioning, restructuring, transformation, revival and change. The foundation should be revisited. Therefore, this paper is premised on the notion of Nigerian children's literature as a veritable instrument for building a corrupt-free Nigerian society.

### **Children's Literature and Nigerian Society**

Children's literature consists of every literary material that addresses issues relating to the life of children as they interact with the world around them to influence their life aspirations and conduct in order to be useful to themselves and society in general. Ngwuchukwu, et al describes children's literature as all written works about the interest of children, and for children (58). Children's literature is further seen as a body of literature with artistic value that is presented for the intellectual needs of children. Children's literature in Nigeria is part of the original life of Nigerians in the various indigenous cultures and tribes that make up the nation. In various ways and manners, children's literature has been used to mould the character of Nigerians positively. Through oral literature, Nigerian children are educated, enlightened, and entertained to position themselves as humans who are responsible to themselves, family and society. Oral literary forms such as folktales, folklores, stories, poetry in ballads, dirges, lyrics, epics, fairy tales, songs, etc are the forms of literature used to nurture the personality of an indigenous Nigerian child to a responsible adult with sound moral values (Nnyagu & Ngozi 84).

All forms of corrupt practices, anti-social and immoral behaviours are condemned in the indigenous Nigerian society entirely, there are severe consequences that accompany such immoral acts such as banishment, ostracisation, fines and others which are applied on recalcitrant

members of the society. During festivals and other events, such people were satirized with songs that brought ridicule to them. Hence, every individual was mindful of what they did. Any ignoble act of a member of community was vehemently condemned. Those considered to have committed serious crimes such as murder, rape, burglary, theft and others were stigmatized to an extent that other neighbouring communities or villages warned their children from associating with children from such communities and decline marriage proposals from such clans which ran down to families and generations.

### **Background for the Study**

The advent of colonialism and modernism has eroded the sanctity of indigenous practices that literature offers for good citizenry from the reservoir of wisdom. Morality which hinges on indigenous social values and virtues of honesty, loyalty, obedience, love, fear of God, unity, kindness, and more are no longer upheld as foreign cultures of ignominy, selfishness, disregard for communal lifestyle and social order as well as traditional authorities, etc become the order of the day (Festus 528). Modernisation has brought multiple problems that accompany social change in society. The situation becomes complex to handle as individuals have lost their sense of morality which brings dignity and social-cultural values and norms that originally sustain the society (Nmah 128). In order to redeem and transform the already corrupt Nigerian nation, it must be understood that children are hopes for the future of a people. Therefore, building them consciously through the instrumentality of literature would go a long way in salvaging the seemingly hopeless situation. This can be done by reviving the abandoned and neglected indigenous instrument of education and enlightenment that produces and nurtures morally upright and incorruptible citizens and leaders aiming and pursuing a socially, economically, politically stable nation.

In view of the present daunting corrupt situation of the country which defies solutions through all approaches employed so far, this paper

or study analyses the possible way children's literature can be used to eradicate corruption by inculcating morals and virtues for personal dignity, development and responsibility to self, others and society at large.

### **Theoretical Review**

The study uses sociological theory to analyse, interpret and evaluate the primary texts. Sociological literary criticism is associated with a twentieth-century theorist known as Peter Burke. This perspective of criticism seeks to understand literature in its social context. It analyses social reality. Burke sees works of art, including literature, as strategic naming of situations that allow a reader to understand better and gain a sort of control over social happenings through the work of art (542). Literature is a living art, and the best literature never fails to make a profound effect on the society. This study examines the role of children's literature in building an incorruptible Nigerian society. The theory "is useful for the study in analyzing the settings and the characters' behaviour in response to societal expectations. Under the sociological theoretical perspective, children's literature is interpreted from its social function of storing, interpreting and transmitting the values of a given society.

It will also not be out of place to add that this study is evaluative with the survey of the contents of children's literary texts to gather data. It does a qualitative data analysis. Some texts for children's literature have been selected and analysed, bringing out salient points from their themes which are quite relevant to the subject of the focus of the study. These children's literature texts selected in order to justify the purpose of the study are: *The Drummer Boy* by Cyprian Ekwensi, *The Incorruptible Judge* by Olu Olagoke and *The Punishment* by Kayode Adeyemo.

### **Summary of the Texts**

#### ***The Drummer Boy***

The storybook written by Cyprian Ekwensi succinctly reflects the reality of a typical setting of society through the life and fate of the protagonist,

Akin who is a blind boy. The author uses him to disabuse the minds of people and society that being handicapped is not a curse or sentence to dependence to beggarly life. Akin is a drummer who does not beg for a living. In spite of his blindness, he becomes a source of joy to his community. The story also teaches love and compassion through the character of Madam Bisi who introduces Akin to the Boys' Forest Home where Akin could become self-sufficient rather than on charity through drumming. Criminality is also condemned in the story as a gang of boys who deceive Akin to be friends later rob him of his earnings but are later arrested and hanged when they attempt to steal tires from an army vehicle.

#### ***The Incorruptible Judge***

*The Incorruptible Judge* by Olu Olagoke centres around a young school-leaver, Aja who seeks for a job with a pathetic physical appearance with his worn-out shoes due to the long distances he treks to get a job. He is determined to get a job to pay the debt or loan he took to sponsor himself in school. When eventually the hope of getting a clerical job becomes imminent, he is faced with the demand of a bribe of N5 by Mr. James Ade Agbalowomeri who heads the Government Development Department. With the encouragement of Femi, Ajala's schoolmate who already is a staff of the establishment through the influence of his father, Ajala decides not to succumb to giving the bribe. Instead, he involves the Police and Mr. Agbalowomeri becomes ensnared in his bribery game. Akin is given marked notes by the Police to offer as bribe to get his letter of appointment. Mr. Agbalowomeri is arrested in the process and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Justice Faderin whose father-in-law is detailed to prevail on him to tamper justice with mercy and upturn justice has no sympathy for any element of criminality, and uncompromisingly dispenses judgement to serve as a deterrent to people of shady minds and character.

#### ***The Punishment***

*The Punishment* by Kayode Adeyemo features Bode, the main character as a spoilt child who is



his mummy's pet and later becomes a defiant, truant, thief and a bad boy at school. The consequences of his immoral behaviour is five years confinement through a court order on the case of Dayo's death as a result of an abortion. Dayo is Bode's girlfriend whom he forces to abort a pregnancy by the influence of Richard, his ill-behaved friend. The two are known for flouting the principal's instructions and perpetrating bad behaviour in school. Dr. Ladi, a greedy medical professional who aids and abets the abortion of Dayo's pregnancy bags seven years imprisonment as a consequence for the heinous crime.

### Critical Analysis of the Three Texts

The primary texts summarized above are very useful in building morality in the lives of Nigerian children. In *The Drummer Boy*, though Akin is stone blind, yet, he makes a living by using the skills of drumming that are inherent in him to eke a living. This can disabuse or is capable of disabusing Nigerian children's minds from the social degradation of begging. He does not constitute himself as a social miscreant, stealing and constituting a nuisance around as some helpless and neglected children do all around the country. The eventual execution of the bad boys who deceived and joined him as a music band after they were identified as thieves teach a lesson to Nigerian children that criminality leads to destruction. The text also teaches that though there is a limitation in being handicapped physically, yet, there is the opportunity for transformation and improvement through training and rehabilitation as it is in the Boys Forest Home to which Madam Bisi introduces Akin.

Therefore, *The Drummer Boy* is capable of building morals in the minds of Nigerian children as a good foundation for their later life. From the text, children can learn self-reliance, love for even people with disability, consequences for criminality, empowering of the disabled through training and rehabilitation, and cautiousness in relating with people for friendship and partnership.

*The Incorruptible Judge* emphasizes that

life's challenges are instrumental to resilience and determination to aspire for dignity. Ajala struggles to be educated through loans due to his parents' poverty. His refusal to give bribes for the desperately needed job is a great lesson for Nigerian children that poverty and lack of material needs are not justifiable reasons to commit crimes, indulge in criminal acts or succumb to social vices. It also stresses the benefits of practicing the knowledge and teachings acquired in school. Femi is able to remind Ajala about the teaching of their principal at school that they should not be involved in bribery. It builds confidence in Nigerian children to face and resist evil in society everywhere they find themselves. Ajala is emboldened by Femi's encouragement and involves the Police whom Sergeant Okoro represents. The arrest and eventual imprisonment of Mr. Agbalowomeri is a great lesson that no matter anybody's position or influence in society, the law is above them if caught in evil act. Also, the refusal of Justice Faderin to collect bribes through his father-in-law further strengthens the courage and resolve of Nigerian children to do the right thing and condemn what is criminal, immoral and evil in society.

*The Incorruptible Judge* is a fictional play that displays young Ajala and Femi's loyalty to the nation, obedience and loyalty. They are portrayed as dividends of true education by reminding themselves of the virtues and morals instilled in them while in school. The collaboration and cooperation of Ajala, Femi and Sergeant Okoro to arrest the corrupt Mr. Agbalowomeri, a government employee is an encouragement to Nigerian children to learn contentment and shun any act of immorality and corrupt practices. Impartiality and truthfulness as displayed by Justice Faderin is another great lesson for Nigerian children to imbibe.

*The Punishment* portrays and teaches that indulgence in pampering of children by parents does not end in joy when the consequences manifest. The case of Bode is a good moral lesson to Nigerian children. His pampered life encourages him to defy the instruction of the

principal. Dayo becomes pregnant and undergoes an abortion which results to death. This teaches Nigerian children that they should keep away from fornication which is perversion and immorality. In pre-literate traditional society, it attracted disgrace and condemnation. Dayo gets unwanted pregnancy and dies prematurely. This could happen to any disobedient female child who indulges in it. So, female Nigerian children should learn to run away from the immoral acts. Dr. Ladi's imprisonment also is another lesson that such acts can lead to disagree and severe punishment by the law, and that nobody is above the law. So in *The Punishment*, Nigerian children learn obedience and good conduct, abstinence from sexual immorality, avoidance of unnecessary indulgence in pampering of children by parents, and greediness.

### Conclusion

It can be seen and understood from the analysis and discussion of the texts that Nigerian children's literature is capable of building a Nigerian nation whose citizens are morally upright. It is possible to sanitise the government establishments of corrupt practices and dispense justice without fear or favour in the judiciary. It is possible to refuse to be influenced by criminals and corrupt people. It is possible to expose corrupt and bad people in society. Every antisocial and immoral act is punishable. It is then hoped that if virtues and morals are imbibed by every citizen from the cradle, at home, school, and the entire society, they will not be corruptible as it will become the principle and philosophy of their life. Therefore, as rightly captured by (Ogbu 1), the themes of children's literature decry vices such as graft, greed, avarice and so many others that aim at positively influencing the youth towards acquiring morals.

### Recommendations

In view of the above analysis which points to the fact that the issues of Nigerian children's literature should be taken as a serious business of building the mind and character of Nigerian children, the following recommendations are

hereby put forward.

- ✓ Nigerian children's literature materials should be made available in homes, schools, and other relevant public places such as libraries and clubs for easy access at all times.
- ✓ Themes of Nigerian children's literature to be produced should deliberately address social problems leading to corruption and other immoral acts in Nigeria.
- ✓ Nigerian children's literature content should be made in print, electronic and information and communication variants.
- ✓ For the benefit of all citizens, and to allow inclusion at all levels, Nigerian children's literature materials should be produced in different ethnic languages for maximum realization of this goal.
- ✓ Relevant faculties and departments in Nigerian tertiary institutions should encourage lecturers, graduates and students to produce literary materials for this purpose.
- ✓ In Nigerian schools, proper monitoring of the effects of Nigerian children's literature on Nigerian children should be encouraged while the general society must be conscious of this responsibility as the children belong to them.

The progressive effects of these decisions will be seen by the Nigerian nation if wisely adopted and aggressively implemented.

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