

Social Realism, Didacticism and Aesthetics in African Children's Prose Fiction

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Abstract

The definition of children's literature appropriate for this study is the one that sees it as any oral or written literary composition designed to appeal to children between the ages of day one to seventeen years. It must be meaningful to the child and meet his/her aesthetic and intellectual needs at every stage of his or her development. Hence, children's fiction is that fictional work written for children and enjoyed by children. It was formerly an uncharted universe among African writers, critics and publishers. However, in recent times, there has been a growing scholarly interest in African children's literature; one can easily detect an autochthonous tradition developing in the most popular literary genres for children, especially in the post-independence period. These genres are the retelling of folktales and narrative fiction. In each region of Africa, there has been a remarkable effort to record and publish collections of prose narratives, folktales, songs, myths, legends, children's rhymes, proverbs and riddles. It is against this background that this essay discusses the relevance and significance of African children's literature by examining its dominant subject matters, thematic preoccupations, utilitarian functions and aesthetic features. The method of research applied in the study is qualitative in that it focuses on textual analyses. It also inheres on a purposive selection of relevant children's prose narratives across the continent. The findings of the study reveal that most pioneer African children's prose narratives were originally oral tales which have been transcribed into writings with the aim of teaching morals and preserving traditions. However, contemporary African children's prose narratives have shifted from these preoccupations to accommodate new emerging socio-political and economic issues, including sexuality, global diseases, globalisation, terrorism and the like. Aesthetically, African prose fiction prioritises children as main characters; the style is light, vivid and interesting. It is aesthetically worded and illustrated. It is concluded that contemporary African children's prose narrative is a dynamic genre which has its unique thematic and stylistic preoccupations. It serves a major role in enculturating and acculturating African children to the African values, traditions, norms, mores and many others. African children should be exposed to reading about their cultures and norms at an early age with a view to intimating them with the authentic stories of their continent.

Introduction and Conceptual Clarifications

United Nations Organisation defines the term children generally as people under the age of 18 years. Following this description, African children's fiction in this study limits its scope to fiction for children of 18 years and below. African children's fiction is also defined as fiction exclusively about children, solely created for children, such as infants, toddlers and the young people as target audience to be read or acted or listened to. In other words, it means fiction written about children and for children; it may also include picture books for young children. The overriding criterion that determines and defines African children's fiction is simplicity (Obi, 2010:4). Children's fiction includes books written from the heart and from at least some memory of and contact with childhood. They are written to meet the needs of children which include children's mental health, security, to love and be loved, to achieve, the need to know and the need for aesthetic satisfaction. Children's literature can reflect and provide insight into the process of growing up. It must be meaningful to the child and meet his/her aesthetic and intellectual needs at every stage of his or her development.

African children's literature was formerly an unexplored universe among writers, critics and publishers. However, in recent times, there has been a growing scholarly interest in it; one can easily detect an autochthonous tradition developing in the most popular literary genres for children, especially in the post-independence period. These genres are the retelling of folktales and narrative fiction. In each region of Africa, there has been a remarkable effort to record and publish collections of prose narratives, folktales, songs, myths, legends, children's rhymes, proverbs and riddles. African children's fiction writers fall into two categories: those who are/were established novelists, but have also written children's fiction, including Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Cyprian Ekwensi and Onuora Nzekwu; and those who write exclusively for children, such as Kola Onadipe, Christie Ade-Ajayi and Kemi Morgan. Their stories are about children's everyday experiences at home and school, put in contexts which they can empathise with. Majority of the stories are folktales from traditional culture with slight modifications or reworked with a modern setting and more contemporary characters. A good example is Nzekwu's *Eze Goes to School*. Some stories, such as Onadipe's *The Magic Land of the Shadows*, are often set in spirit land with the supernatural as prevailing ethos.

Review of Related Literature

Rose (1984:1) states that children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it must be simple. This fiction represents the children, speaks to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable and exists in the book. She explains further that the 'child' is a construction invented for the needs of the children's literature authors and critics, and not an 'observable', 'objective', 'scientific', entity. Inglis (1981:101) buttresses this opinion by stating that “it is simply ignorant not to admit that children's novelists have developed a set of conventions for their work. Such development is a natural extension of the elaborate and implicit system of rules, orthodoxies, improvisations, customs, forms and adjustments which characterise the way any adult tells stories or simply talks at length to children.” Australian critic Barbara Wall bases her whole analysis of children's books on “the conviction that adults...speak differently in fiction when they are aware that they are addressing children....This is translated, sometimes subtly, sometimes obviously, into the narrator's voice...which defines a children's book.” (Wall, 1991:2-3) However, British critic Nicholas Tucker points out that Inglis and Wall's points of view do not avoid the difficulty that “although most people would agree that there are obvious differences between adult and children's literature, when pressed they may find it quite difficult to establish what exactly such differences amount to” (Tucker, 1981:8).

McDowell (1973:51) highlights what children's fiction should look like when he avers that children's books should be generally short; they should favour an active, rather than a passive treatment, with dialogues and incidents, rather than description and introspections. Child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematism which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of a distinctive order, probability is often disregarded, and one could go on endlessly talking of magic, and fantasy, and simplicity and adventure. According to Obi (2010:3), the three criteria for African children's fiction are the following:

- i. The heroes are either children or teenagers.
- ii. The themes, ideas, relationship and language use are simple, not complex.
- iii. They must teach morals, with a view to entrenching the values of the society in them.

Social Realism and Didacticism in African Children's Fiction

Most pioneer African children's prose narratives were originally oral tales which have been transcribed into writings with the aim of teaching morals and preserving traditions. However, contemporary African children's prose narratives have extended these thematic frontiers to accommodate new emerging issues, such as sexuality, global diseases, globalisation, terrorism and the like. Aesthetically, African prose fiction prioritises children as main characters; the style is light, vivid and interesting. It is aesthetically worded and illustrated. Contemporary African children's prose narrative is a dynamic genre which has its unique thematic and stylistic thrusts. It serves a major role in enculturating and acculturating African children to the African values, traditions, norms, mores and many others.

African children's fiction, and all forms of African literature, is always a reflection of its enabling society. The writer lives in a society and takes his ideas, characters and situations from that society. Besides, he imaginatively writes about the individuals who inhabit the society and about events which happen in that society. No matter how imaginative a writer may be, the society he knows or resides in is invariably the background of his writing. African writers always get a lot of thematic and aesthetic materials from their neocolonial experiences. These writers portray in their works the excesses of the new rulers of Africa and the disenchantment of the masses. The contemporary African children's fiction writers are firmly entrenched in the New Realist Tradition, which Abiola Irele (1990:16) refers to as “New Realism”, “whereby, the African writer has begun to modify his stance and to adjust to angle of perception to take account of those political and social realities that began in the wake of African independence to impress themselves more closely upon the general attention through the entire continent.” The critical climate has thus come to favour literary works that acknowledge and build on social realism or socialist realism. Chidi Amuta (1987:46) rightly highlights the importance of social realism in African literature thus: “The writer is not only influenced by society; he influences it.” Perhaps Amuta's postulation is an inter-critical revision of Ngugi's (1981:xv) earlier submission that “literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society.”

Lewis Nkosi (1981) and Bill Ashcroft, et al (1989) also affirm the acute sense of social realism in postcolonial African literature. Except for some forms of

formalism and structuralism which try to prove that literature has an autonomous existence, independent of historical and social realities, it is widely accepted by literary critics that “each work of art finds an inspiration in the historical-social realities in which the author finds himself.” (Aderemi Bamikunle, 1991:73) African children's fiction thus depends on socio-historical realities for many or all of its constituent elements – from the subject matter to language and the artistic traditions that provide the writer with form and other modes of expression, to the critic and the reading public that literature needs to serve. However, in this peaceful contest of text and context (Adeleke Adeeko, 1992), the African children's fiction writer strives to deal more with imagination than with historical facts. Thus, he is not a historian in that genetic sense in which the average historian will regard novelists and playwrights as historians of sorts because they are also among those who undertake to interpret the past for the present. Despite series of bans and prohibitions meted out to some African writers, they still reject the view of Per Wastberg (1969:11) that “the poet is there to celebrate and not to subvert society.” They keep on influencing their societies positively despite all odds.

Children's fiction in Africa generally has a socio-historical function. It is highly attuned to the requirements of contemporary African society. According to Akachi Ezeigbo (2013), African children's literature concerns pre-adolescent children between seven and twelve years, and this genre of children's literature includes folktales, fiction, drama, poetry, picture books, fantasy and fairy tales. Children's literature is a literary genre which caters for the interest of children, though many books in the category are enjoyed by adults. The question of an authentic voice in post-independence African children's fiction has emerged as a central concern for those who care about books for African children and young adults. How does post-independence African children's fiction articulate the idea of nation and nationalism for its target reader/audience? To what extent are children's books used towards nationalistic goals? Are they purely aesthetic? It is also pertinent to examine children and young adults' books published in Africa to determine what adults believe is important for the younger generation to know, what cherished values the books pass on and how they equip children to lead the nation in the future.

The trend of didacticism/social realism in children's fiction cuts across African regions. The emphasis is always on privileging virtues over vices. Page McBrier and Lori Lohstoeter's *Beatrice's Goat* is a story of a young girl

from a Ugandan village who longs to go to school. When Beatrice's family gets a goat, she starts caring for it and begins earning money. She eventually earns enough to pay her school fees. The resilience exuded by this little girl is a rare virtue, just like Ure in Eddie Iroh's *Without a Silver Spoon* and Kadogo in Amos Isoka's *The Girl who Became Chief*. The essence of this, according to the writer, is to build in our children the courage to face difficult situations which are the plight of the masses in most postcolonial African nations.

In North Africa, the emphasis on gratitude is explored. Elizabeth Alalou, Ali Alalou and Julie Esakalli, in their work *The Butter Man*, tell the story of a young girl, Nora, who is having fun with Grandpa, while they await dinner. Nora is entertained by a story from her grandpa, who tells her a story of a certain year when they witness drought in Morocco, their native land. Every family has very little food. Each day, he would sit and wait for the butter man to come, hoping for a little butter to dip his bread into. He tells her of the great disappointment he feels at the end of the day when he has to eat his dry bread at the end. When Grandpa's story and dinner are finished, Nora sits down to a delicious Moroccan meal with a new sense of gratitude. Children are, therefore, through this story, induced to be more appreciative of the good things they get in life.

Satomi Ichikwa, a Moroccan children's novel writer, in his humorous piece *My Father's Shop* tells the story of a young boy, Mustafa, whose father is training to help sell beautiful Moroccan carpet over his head and goes to the market to show it to his friends. On his excursion through the marketplace, Mustafa unexpectedly attracts customers to his father's shop. Here, the writer emphasises children's obligation to their parents. This entails helping them in their works and being obedient to them. The ingenuity of children is also explored by the writer. Mustafa, being aware that there are many tourists in town, uses the opportunity to showcase his father's product to them which yields profits for the father as he makes a lot of sales through that.

In the urban and rural areas of 21st century Africa, social evils like rape and tribal clashes, due to the changing moral stance and outlook in life, have precedence. Therefore, it is a motif in contemporary African children's literature to educate our children. One of such fictional works is Makotsi's *Shida the Street Boy* (2003). It is the story of a boy named Shida, and it addresses the urban obsessions and fears of the modern city of Nairobi (Kurtz, 1998), including drunkenness, prostitution, homosexuality, street

life/homelessness, crime, murder, orphans and orphanages and life in the slums. Shida's mother, Byuti, is sent away from home by her father after getting pregnant from a rape by her head teacher. Byuti's dilemma leads her to the city where she is delivered of her son whom she calls Shida Kazuri. Afterwards, Byuti takes to prostitution to sustain herself and her son in the city. *Shida the Street Boy* also explores contemporary issues of crime and diseases like HIV/AIDS that kills Shida's mother, brought about by her indiscriminate sexual encounters with her clients. It is, however, clear that people are forced into prostitution by desperate circumstances because Shida's mother says: “[s]he hated her kind of work...but would do everything to take care of her son” (2), whom she needs to feed and clothe. The narratives show that poverty in the Kenyan urban space breeds other crimes like prostitution, and the results are rather fatal, for instance, HIV/AIDS. When Byuti dies, Shida goes to Lavington, an affluent suburb in Nairobi, to look for his father who denies and chases him away. The fact that Shida's father is a school head teacher, now turned rich/powerful politician, and living in the richer suburbs demonstrates how power is used to intimidate the less fortunate. As a head teacher, he takes advantage of his position by scaring Byuti and raping her, and at this latter instance, he instructs his security guard to “GUARD HIM (Shida) OUT OF HERE IMMEDIATELY” (36) when Shida goes knocking at his gate. Subsequently, the only home that Shida is left with is the streets of Nairobi, which in Kenya could be seen as the 'home for the homeless.' Often, one finds cripples, sick people, mothers and their babies seated in the streets, begging. Street boys are the energetic lots in this 'home of the homeless', and they are often involved in minor crimes like pick-pocketing before graduating into serious crimes often forming criminal gangs.

The activities of Shida and his friend Daku help readers in noticing the dangers of living in the streets where sometimes the more experienced street boys would force the younger boys “to sleep with men for money, which they would surrender to the big boys” (47). These incidents could be read as a critique of homosexuality which seems to be on the rise in contemporary societies. The desperate manner in which the lives of thieves and street boys in the city end is also explored. Daku and his father (Onyango) who is a watchman in a bank in the city are killed in a failed bank robbery, as Shida watches from the safety of a telephone booth. The story represents the scary and dangerous life the street boys live through. Like the narrator's name implies, street boys have many problems (Shida in Swahili). Through this

text, young readers visualise the problems that are facing neocolonial African nations presently, and this probably becomes an enlightenment as well as caution for them. The story contains relevant emergent issues in postcolonial Africa which are important for young readers. In her discussion of the dominant themes in African children's prose fiction, Khorana (2006) avers that literature for children attempts to fill the void created by rootlessness or non-belonging that is a legacy of colonialism. She adds that the dominant thematic preoccupations of many children's literary works are protest, alienation, corruption and harsh realities of urban life.

In Makotsi's *Monkey Bought a Bus*, there is a heavy reliance on animal characters from traditional oral narratives, which are fitted into the contemporary technological age to produce a narrative that makes a commentary on modern human tendencies. When monkey buys a bus, the other animals are excited that they would get a lift to the river, which is far from their abode. Monkey is the bus conductor, while buffalo is the driver. On the way to the river, monkey demands that the animals pay for the ride. However, to the shock of the sheep, chameleon and tortoise do not have money. While some animals like warthog, cow, ostrich, dog and zebra pay, chameleon camouflages by changing his colour and sneaks out of the bus unnoticed as other animals are pushing a log off the road. At this point, the goat also runs away. The dog pays his fare, but monkey does not give him the balance. The bus in this story is a modern innovation which blends with actions of animal characters that are personified to make the story meaningful.

This story serves two purposes: first, to explain to children why certain animals behave in specific ways when they see a moving car, and second, to critique some features of the public transport industry in Kenya, otherwise known as the Matatu industry, and the behaviour of Kenyans involved in the industry. In the 1990s and early 2000s, this industry was becoming a booming business, and its growth brought various problems and uncertainties. The river in this story represents a destination in the city or any of the towns in Kenya, which were becoming modern commercial centres, and many people needed to travel to and from these centres. The reactions of the animals aboard the bus reveal specific characteristics of both the Matatu operators and the passengers. On the one hand, we are told that the reason why monkey often climbs up high on trees is to watch over the goat to demand his money, and that is why goat runs away every time she sees a

bus/vehicle because she thinks it is monkey's bus. On the other hand, dog always runs after vehicles to ask for his balance which monkey does not give, while the cow is not moved by the sight of vehicles since she pays. At another level, however, these characters signify different kinds of people in the Matatu business as mentioned above. First, there are those who faithfully pay their fares when they get into a public vehicle like the cow and zebra, and second, those naughty people who take advantage of crowded Matatu in Kenya and fail to pay, as represented by chameleon and goat that sneak out of monkey's bus. Conductors and drivers in the Kenyan public transport system also collude and con the passengers by refusing to give them back their balances either knowingly, or by sometimes waiting until the passengers forget to ask for the balance like what monkey does to the dog.

Unfaithfulness and recklessness are common characteristics of the Matatu industry in Kenya, which the author demonstrates through the animals. The presence of the log on the road to the river is symbolic of the bad situation of Kenyan roads. Like the animals in monkey's bus, passengers in public transport in Kenya are often asked to get off and push vehicles when they get stuck in muddy stretches on the road. The bad roads could be read as a critique of the failure of neocolonial rulers to provide good infrastructure which is needed for economic growth. It could also be a reflection of corruption by contractors who are probably doing shoddy jobs after being paid to repair the roads. Capitalism comes out clear in this story because like the entrepreneurs who invest in public transport to take advantage of the booming business of people travelling to urban centres, monkey buys a bus to take advantage of the fact that it has become rather hot, and many of the animals need to walk to the river to drink water. This merging of animal characters and modern situations is important because readers may notice the relationship between what happens in monkey's bus and what they witness daily in the Kenyan public transport industry which can also be extended to all African neo-colonies in general.

Obinna and the Smugglers by Kehinde Adepogba is about a naughty brilliant boy, Obinna, who offends his mother by breaking a window at home. In a bid to escape punishment, he runs away from home. While on the run, he gets into the den of some smugglers. His father, a custom officer, is on a mission to arrest these smugglers. The smugglers, being aware that the boy in their custody is the son of the custom officer handling their case, decide to change the situation into kidnapping and extorting from Obinna's father by asking for

a ransom of two million naira in exchange for his son without informing the police about the issue. The father gives them the money, but they outsmart him, take the money and refuse to release Obinna. Through Obinna's father's boss, the police are informed and they trace the smugglers to their den, thereby killing all of them and helping in the release of Obinna. Obinna, knowing their other hideouts, takes the police there; and this leads to the arrest of others. The courageous revelation of Obinna on the smugglers' hideout makes him a hero, and through the suffering he encounters in their den, he learns to always behave well and to avoid punishment again. This also leads to his father's promotion at work for the success of the smugglers' arrest, while the evil deeds of the smugglers are rewarded with arrest and death.

In *My Mother's Voice* (2008) by H. Kamundi, Kanana, the narrator, is raped when their village is attacked by a neighbouring clan. She not only contracts HIV from the rape, but also gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy. This story educates young readers on HIV/AIDS pandemic and the dangers of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which Kanana escapes after joining the Watoto Wetu (Our Children) Children's Home which cares for children infected with HIV. In the story, the girl-child is portrayed to be in danger in the modern African society. Societal morals are declining, and men seem to have lost their decency, often using force to satisfy their sexual appetite/lust with young girls. Rape has become a rampant issue all over the world, and more dangerous especially with the advent of HIV/AIDS. Kamundi, therefore, uses children's literature to sensitise readers, particularly children, on the possible dangers that they may face, within the environment they live, therefore, projecting children's fiction as having come of age, and thematically adapting to the changing occurrences in African societies. The friendship and care that Kanana gets from Watoto Wetu Children's Home demonstrate the author's suggestion that people living with HIV/AIDS should be given a positive atmosphere for them to live positively.

Nowhere to Hide by Ifeoma Okoye is an African children's prose fiction work written for children between the ages of 15 to 17 years, who are at the puberty stage and have the tendency to engage in some anti-social activities. Specifically, the story is a sensitisation fiction to create an awareness of the dangers of drug abuse. The protagonist, Ral, is a seventeen year old boy. His depression starts when he loses his two twin brothers (Adiri and Izike) in an accident that burns them beyond recognition. He is in his first year in the university and lots need to be done in his academics to be able to crossover to

Medicine which is his preferred and chosen course of study. This happens as a result of his inability to initially meet up with the cut-off mark, making him not to be admitted to study Medicine then. A friend of his parents, Professor Obedu, promises to help with his transfer to Medicine only if he performs excellently well in his first year examination.

The fact that he is now shouldered with so many responsibilities as the only child makes him feel “some heaviness on his head as if someone had put a heavy load on him” (11), coupled with his loss. The only escape route he could think of is by smoking and drinking, which he learns during his secondary school days. He often smokes and drinks to wade off depression. He becomes friend with Jas and Chukky, despite constant warnings from his (Ral's) girlfriend. Through these friends of his, he is introduced to drugs, and he gets addicted to them, to the extent of borrowing money to purchase drugs, and later graduates to selling cocaine and marijuana. He does not stop even when Jas and Chukky die on different occasions as a result of drug addiction. This leads to his arrest, but he is bailed by his girlfriend (Ada), his roommate (Bassey) and his pastors. After this incident, he becomes wild and uncontrollable to the point of beating his father after which he leaves the house with most of his parents' money and valuables. He proceeds to a party where he takes too much drug than ever in order to forget his sorrow and agonies. On his way home, he has an accident, and he realises that he is only lucky to have survived the accident. Through the help of a doctor, the support of Ada and the love, care and understanding of his parents, Ral determines to gradually fight his addiction, and all of them believe “he would make it.” (97)

The Enduring Aesthetics of African Children's Fiction

The following are some of the major aesthetic thrusts of African children's fiction:

Title

Title is the distinguishing name given to any work of art. This appears on the cover page and sometimes the page after the cover. Title and subject matter are interrelated. In most cases, the title reflects the subject matter. For example, Okoye's *Nowhere to Hide* indicates that the only solution to a problem is to face it without seeking solace in any temporary hideout. Also, from the title of Ekene's story, *Ola and Samuel*, we know that the discussion is about these two characters and that is what we see from the comparison of both characters. In the main, the title of an African children's fictional work

should be captivating and relevant to the subject matter and themes of the work. The topic must suit the taste of children, and it should be about things around them.

Setting

Setting is the physical, temporal, cultural, social and, sometimes spiritual, background against which the action of a narrative takes place. There are different pointers which indicate the setting, such as the characters, issues being depicted and the events and actions taking place in the work. For example, in Ogunsanya's *Success and Miracle*, the names of the characters, such as Ayo, Kemi, Chief Adejo, Chuba, Okah and the like, are pointers to the setting because these are Yoruba and Igbo names. Characters' names, such as Kimakia and Muthoni in Dahal's *The Orange Thieves* point to the Kenyan setting. The setting of an African children's story should be realistic and familiar to the child.

Characters

Characters are the representations of human beings in any work of fiction. They could be humans, animals or abstract qualities. A character is a participant in the story and is usually a human being, sometimes an animal or an entity whose existence originates from the fictional work. The major characters in African children's fiction range from toddlers to teenagers, while the minor characters may involve adults playing the roles of teachers, guardians or parents. Characters in children's fiction should be realistic, and child readers should be able to relate with them easily. In Makotsi's *Monkey Bought a Bus*, for example, the author uses animal characters for effective depiction of contemporary issues. Efforts should be made to maintain clever, credible and realistic character/characterisation.

Plot

Plot is one of the essential aesthetic elements of fiction. It is the organisation of the events and actions of a story following the principle of cause and effect. Most of the time, it has a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning depicts the introduction of the characters and interpersonal relationships with other characters in the story. The middle portrays the conflict with other characters, and it ends with a climax which results to solution and lessons learnt. The plot of African children's fiction should be simple and chronological. The events and actions should be presented in a simple straightforward manner in a linear sequence. The plot should be exciting,

pleasing and interesting.

Language and Style

Language is the medium of communication. In African children's fiction, since the audience are children, the language used in presenting the ideas is supposed to be very simple such that children will be able to understand what is being presented. There should be simple diction of everyday communication which is in line with the mental, psychological and intellectual levels of the targeted audience. Through language use in African children's fiction, children are introduced to new vocabularies with their meanings most often explained in glossaries. This is done with the addition of limited lexicons in a text so as to add to their lexical repertoire. For example, in Ekene's *Ola and Samuel*, the word 'paediatrician' is used and is followed by its meaning: 'a paediatrician is a medical doctor that specialises in the treatment of children and also performs surgery on them.' In essence, the style should be light, vivid, interesting and accessible. Priority should be given to stock of words and expressions that are direct, simple and realistic. In fact, children's stories should be aesthetically worded and illustrated. The text should be aesthetically satisfying right from its front cover to the title, diction, overall quality and other intrinsic qualities.

Theme

Theme is the central dominating idea of a literary work. Morell (2006:263) defines theme as "a conceptual distillation of the story. It is the central idea or insight serving as a unifying element, creating cohesion and is an answer to the question, 'what did you learn from the piece of fiction?'" In African children's fiction, most of the themes are based on morals, and emphasis is given to good deeds (virtues) over evils (vices), as in the case of Ekene's *Ola and Samuel*. Also, in Ogunsanya's *Success and Miracle*, the themes of examination malpractices, bribery and corruption and the consequences of these vices are depicted with emphasis on virtues being rewarded. In the main, the theme should be appealing to the children. Such themes include perseverance, honesty, selflessness, sympathy and other contemporary issues.

Oral Aesthetics

Many contemporary African children's stories are adopted directly from oral narratives; others are fictionalised societal experiences, while others look back at the experience of colonialism and its consequences. They adopt and

adapt to the changes of time; therefore, reconstructing the changes in society and giving alternative to the official historian's version. These writers are committed to a cause rather than art for art's sake, thereby presenting both creativity and social facts (Dipio, 2011). The oral elements in African children's stories include proverbs, songs, myths and legends and fairy tales. For instance, in *The Drum*, Achebe relies heavily on folklore. The story starts thus:

Long, long ago, when the world was young, all the animals lived in their families in one country. In those days, there were not many tortoises as there are today, but only one tortoise, Ibe (1).

According to Sunday Anozie (1992:7), “exploring the richness and the resources of African folklore as basic material for children's literature is a highly commendable and culturally desirable thing to do.” Specifically, African writers of children's fiction should “recreate, modify and expand folktales to communicate contemporary and immediate ideas, lasting thoughts and urgent concerns” (Ernest Emenyonu, 2000:24).

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is apparent from the foregoing discussion that children's fiction should evince the following qualities, based on the advice of Nana Wilson-Tagoe (1992):

- It should consider the mind, psychology and understanding of the child.
- It should consider the linguistic ability of the child.
- The story should please the child.
- It should stimulate their imagination.
- It should be able to build up children's sensitivity to experiences of all kinds.
- The type of the story should be considered.
- The art of narration should be considered.
- The nature of characterisation should be considered.
- The quality of dialogue should be taken into consideration.
- The general language of narration should be noted.
- Imagery (sensory, taste, gustatory, kinetic, etc.) should be effectively utilised in the story.
- It should be well illustrated.
- It should dwell on relevant events.
- It should present interesting scenes.
- It should make use of familiar objects.

In a nutshell, the quintessential African children's story should “interest, entertain, impress, influence and finally satisfy the needs” of children (N.R. Okafor, 1992:53).

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