

## IMPORT OF FAMILY AND PEERS IN A WRITER'S LIFE

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### Abstract

*A writer anywhere must have roots and familial relationships. In a general sense, it is the energy derived from friends, family or society that drives the human spirit. A major role the family has in the life of a writer is giving him or her space. What this means is that a literary-friendly family will not come between the writer and his/her writing. When he/she is engaged with writing, the writer's family excuses him/her from domestic and other duties. It is also beneficial when the writer is surrounded by a wife/husband and children who are wonderful readers. It is the relevance of the family that inspired this research. The paper investigates how culture, society and the family are significant in the life of every man or woman. It focuses on the experiences of writers in their home countries and overseas. The author discovered that writers in 17th century Europe worked closely together. The practice has hardly caught on among Nigerian writers. The writer could hardly find instances to prove otherwise. It is intended in this work, therefore, to highlight this shortcoming and to show how it contributes to the attainment of desired goals in the writer's literary endeavours. The bulk of the data for this study was collected through listening to stories of writers and also reading various comments in newspapers and other publications.*

**Keywords:** Language and culture, Family and peers, Pedagogy, Spousal problems, Writers' life

### Introduction

It is important for the writer to compose his or her work in the midst of love. This was the case with the American writer Larry Brown. He and his wife Mary Anne amused each other deep into their marriage. The affair was sustained because of the way they stuck to each other. They were disinclined to confrontation, spending more time worrying about how to make the relationship work than allowing any infringement to ruin it. Brown himself attributed his success as a writer to Mary

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Anne, without who he would have been handicapped. He remarked simply that she "was the love of his life." On her part, Mary Anne proclaimed that she "worshipped that man." She would also say, I didn't marry Larry the writer. That came later" (Cash 51-52). She was generally responsible for the focus he had in life. Besides, without her around, he was disoriented. Therefore, leaving her behind on his trips was just out of the question. He confided in Clyde Edgerton in December 1989, saying, "I know I look at too many women. It's best to keep Mary Anne with me at all times, and that's what I've been trying to do lately" (31). He counted on her for her "organizational, secretarial, and accounting skills" (36). For them, there was a pleasant atmosphere at home.

When so much love that is given to a writer is taken away, life can be stressful. Definitely, the writer draws his or her strength from his/her love for his/her children. A sorrowful Brown revealed thus, when our baby died in 1977, I didn't think I would survive. It was a very rocky time ...tough... you never get over it" (Cash 37). What the children heard as they slept late at night were sounds from their father's typewriter as he typed away. His son Billy Ray remembered that Brown:

Wrote all over the house. He might write at the bar, or he might go to the dining room and write. He might write at the kitchen table, he might write in his room in the bedroom and he might write out there across the carport, what he called the cool pad. He wrote at any hour, anywhere. You could just hear it. (Cash 38)

It was something that had to do with the demands of writing. Billy Ray added, [C]onstant work, constant work, especially in the early, early years ... When he got time, we would go hunting or fishing" (Cash 38). In Brown's family, writing can be a point of dispute as well as being distressful. Brown's wife and the children were relegated as far as any activity was concerned. "I raised the children, and he wrote, and that's just the way it was" (Cash 39), she recalled.

Likewise, the closeness between William Wordsworth and his sister, his family and his friends has been a reference point in literary discussions. Those people and Samuel Coleridge shaped Wordsworth's writing. Features about Wordsworth and Coleridge's relationship were the petty quarrels and differences they had. It is pointed out as an indication of how close they were. Much is said about Wordsworth's relationship with his sister Dorothy. Dorothy was constantly very sick. Thoughts they shared spilled into Wordsworth's poems. Not left out in Wordsworth's poetry is the loss of a daughter

and a son; and how death took them away from him. There was a disconnection between Wordsworth and his wife Annette. Wordsworth takes consolation in poetry. Indeed, family crises can take a toll on a writer, negatively or positively (Barker 313-441). Being involved in his daughter's upbringing and his wife Annette's daily routine would have been fundamental in his life. We are reminded of a question Dorothy put to Wordsworth, thus, "[D]o you long for that day as ardently as your Annette... when you will be surrounded by your sister, your wife, your daughter who will live only for you" (Barker 87).

### **Writer Companion in the Family**

It is even more wholesome when a writer has at least a writer companion in the family. For England's first family of writers, it made the atmosphere friendlier. In that case, the literary exercise obviously was certain to lead to success. William Godwin and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft's writing careers led to their daughter Mary Shelley becoming one of England's greatest writers. Some aspects of her parents' natures are recreated in her works. Expectedly, the themes are not limited to her parents, as her husband was the prominent writer Percy Bysshe Shelley. One can recognize how isolation in Williams' writing occurs in Mary Shelley's. There are, for instance, strong hints of the alienation of Godwin's male characters running in Shelley's. This is true of the characters Caleb, Falkland, St. Leon, Fleetwood, Mandeville, Cloudesley, and Deloraine. Family relations found in her stories can be traced to the life and works of her parents. The state of affairs of their families was disappointing; (Carlson 2-15). England's first family of writers developed their stories from one another's experiences. What is apparent in the lives of the Godwins remains the emotional affinity shared. Among Mary's preferred reading places was her mother's grave, which was a more agreeable place for her engagement with Percy Shelley, preparatory to their elopement (Carlson 22). Prior to his marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft, Godwin was skeptical about marriage. He was curiously made a widower, with the death of his wife. But he would go on to enjoy the unshakable care and love that comes from family, stating in a letter,

I forget now what I said in my last letter about the poor little girls, but in this letter, I will begin with them. Their talking about me, as you say they do, makes me wish to be with them, and will probably shorten my visit. It is the first time I have been seriously separated from them since they lost their mother, and I feel it was very naughty in me to have come

away so far though, as you know, I had very strong reasons for coming. (Carlson 22-24)

This begins to look like Larry Brown's experience. Simply, it was not different how friendship mattered to him. One Joseph Fawcett, a friend of Godwin, for instance, told Godwin that at the point he was, writing could hold some promise for him. Godwin gave it a careful consideration and succeeded beyond his expectations. He would garner a lot of goodwill as he was mentioned in various quarters. Further, he was held in high esteem in the circles of "printers and publishers in London" (Powers 20). It was in such fortunate circumstances that he got married to Mary Wollstonecraft and at a time when his daughter was born. At a critical time, a man of high standing, his friends Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke, and Thomas Holcroft benefited from his explanations in an article, as their treason trial went in their favor. Those writers appreciated the presence of their fellow writers, thus boosting their creativity (Powers 23).

### **Literary Peers**

Like Godwin and his contemporaries, Tanure Ojaide believes he has found another family among African writers in America. He lists kindred spirits such as Anthonia Kalu, N'Allah Sefi Attah and Cheney Coker. He presents his manuscripts to them for criticism, making the trip to the agent and the publisher easier. If this support were lacking, the writer would encounter problems, and the effort would possibly have been in vain (Interviews with writers, Jan. 19-29, 2006). German writers who found themselves in America in the 1940s provide evidence of how having compatriots around can be a wonderful adventure. Describing a sea voyage involving some of them, Helmut Pfanner recounts that:

[M]ost of the passage was spent resting and learning English. At times the refugees renewed old acquaintances. The passengers on the Greek liner *Nea Hellas*, which arrived in New York on 13 October 1940, included well-known figures in the world of letters: Franz Werfel and his wife, Anna Mahler-Werfel, Mr. and Mrs. Heinrich Mann, Golo Mann (the son of Thomas Mann), Lion Feuchtwanger, Konrad Heiden, Walther Victor, Friedrich Stampfer, Alfred Polgar, Hermann Budzislowski, Friderike Wintemitz-Zweig (the wife of Stefan Zweig), and Hilde Walter. Some of them had known

each other in Germany and Austria, and they could reminisce about their past experiences. (36)

In an essay entitled "In the Aftermath of Colonization: Black African Immigrants in France," Jacques Barou discusses how remarkable the contribution of a wife in uplifting the social life of an African male can be. He explains that the prestige of one Babacar flourishes in the African community with the presence of the man's wife who comes over from Africa. Babacar is excited as, assisted by his wife, he lays out a table for his equals who otherwise would probably not have visited him. Conversely, life is a lot more painful when the writer is unmarried and has no romantic relationship. For the African writer, this means that he has been driven into solitude. Such a writer is assailed with loneliness and regret (89). The German writers referred to earlier were also full of anger. They were at a complete loss when they discovered that their laughter originated from a heart that bore such anger. In trying to filter it of that sadness, they subsequently misled others as well as themselves. Realizing that they had used up their initial goodwill and excitement, they felt diminished by the new reality they faced (Pfanner 68). This factor shattered most of them. For the Africans, there is no one to ease the impact of exile or to nurse them from the constant bruises they get every day. They miss their social entitlements, things that add value to life. There is no lover whose presence will take the writer's mind away from this dismal life (Barou 89).

Predicaments of this sort are what necessitated the production of German theatre like the efforts of Ernst Lothar's Austrian Theatre. "They were not discouraged, and lingered on, even though the productions lacked vitality, were less competitive and were likely to fail due to the lack of audience interest. For self-sustenance, the German art community did not relent in trying to produce plays that had their origins in Europe. There was a range of performances; among them were models of popular German and Viennese plays, but also associative plays developed for American tastes. This movement also accounts for the remarkable achievements of Erica Mann, who, through a group called The Peppermill, ensured that New Yorkers would go out to see distinctly European cabaret (Pfanner 63).

### **Upholding Marital Values**

The journey is a more hazardous one where the usual survival skills are not enough. The atmosphere in which the writer operates must be a socially favourable one. Certain unforeseen realities have the power to destroy relationships or family cohesion. For, not surprisingly,

relationships established in Africa and judged by Western standards, for instance, generally face too many challenges. Western customs are the arbiter here (Barou 90). Buchi Emecheta, in Britain, bears an enormous cost as a result of her divorce of her husband (Emecheta, Water 97). One of the reasons for this unfortunate development is that the African writer, as a result of his/her unstable nature, hardly capable of upholding those worthy marital virtues which make it possible for such unions to be functional (Covasjee 58). It is not uncommon for some Africans to seek foster care for their children (Barou 90). Even some of those who are still in relationships, and who do not turn their children over to foster homes, are in danger of losing their children to the host countries.

The success of the family depends both on the individual and on circumstances. One may have one nature now and another later, depending on the individual. Divorce, for instance, can affect writing, especially if the family is the only thing the writer has outside his/her creativity. In fact, when the best condition in which writing thrives is tied to family, harmony, if the family is taken away, so is the creativity. But if the family is the writer's mainstay, and the writer is divorced, it is possible that it is going to take an emotional toll on them and therefore impact the productive course. If a divorce will not mean an undesired separation from the children, then the writer may be able to carry on. But the writing process takes place in solitude. Family does not help anyone to write. People single out for consideration the individual who has not stepped into marital life as one who can spend his time on much more personal issues. In other words, a bachelor, like Obi in *A Squatter's Tale*, definitely writes without the constraints of family. He is free from all the problems, which may slow down writing. The demand for his time is less. His morning does not begin with taking a child to school; he might have the entire night to himself to write. Family is challenging but rewarding. If a single writer loses anything at all, it will be the immediate community, the immediate family that will say to him, when the writing process is difficult, that he can pull through that difficult part (Interviews with writers, Jan. 19-29, 2006, Oguine 177).

What happens when a parent reacts to undesirable behavior by his children? By the culture of the host society certain measures an African may take as discipline might be deemed inappropriate. This is because Western injunctions contradict the African idea of enforcing discipline. In Nigeria, there may be some degree of state interference when the exercise of parental duty falls below standard. The West, by contrast, exerts its authority in a manner that continuously tortures the immigrant. The African parent or writer would consider what Rhonda Lenton posits as distasteful, yet would not practice what the commentator suggests. He would want to be guided by what would

help him achieve these results. How he manages his domestic affairs may offend the average person in the host society. One gets this hint from Lenton, who writes, "Some parents and academics may not agree with the basic premise that slapping, threatening, yelling etc., are necessarily bad for children [...]. Second, it seems unjustifiable to allow parents control children with acts that we do not condone even among people of approximately the same size and strength" (15-16). It follows that the African writer may not be able to exercise that desirable parental discipline, adhering to foreign practices in the host community. His methods may have the appearance of being high handed.

The African writer's experience is unlike that of Larry Brown and his family who are operating in their natural environment. The African writer could not have transferred any alien ways of enforcement of discipline to his/her family; else the family would have more hurdles placed on its way. This would have really weakened the writer. The likelihood of this African writer being socially and economically constrained as a result of his/her social status becomes very likely. Definitely, he/she cannot be identified with any of these groups that are most likely to abuse their children. Lenton speaks about "cultural approval of violence," but this is in relation to the host society (15-16). These opinions are unpopular among Africans in the West.

Just as they are cast in the true images of their parents, children's behaviour has to be modelled after their parents. It explains why, in Ojaide's household, a year is not complete without a visit to the homeland. Apparently, the writer is concerned about the side his own child will choose when the child grows up. Even though the child has been drawn slightly into mainstream society, the parent desires to win the child over for Africa. The parent sees anything to the contrary as a threat to himself. In the curriculum of special studies or home studies, at any given opportunity, the parent carefully tries to reconstruct Africa in the child's consciousness. It is more than a service to their roots to imprint the child's true identity upon him, in order to save the child from eventual identity crisis. The essence of this attitude is for the child not to buckle under presumed contempt from his peers. The job of parenthood is fulfilled when there is no less of Africa in the child than the host country (Emecheta, *Water* 88).

The poet Chimalum Nwankwo, a lecturer in the US, is someone whose life occasionally follows this pattern. Ojaide does not have information about what Nwankwo does while the man is in Nigeria. Niyi Osundare, another poet and lecturer based in the US, could be considered lucky to have raised in America children who still converse with him in Yoruba. Ojaide finds these two developments important because the children are, as a result, connected to their parents' roots.



Ojaide's elder son looked inward to the Urhobo nation for a wife. The young man has his attention directly fixed upon Nigeria, where he plans to build a house. His attitude is informed by the fact that one's identity in a foreign land endures, in spite of the level of acculturation. One is continually aware of being someone who came from a place other than one's country of residence. African children in Africa have a dishearteningly narrow scope of knowledge of their own cultures. If anything, Ojaide points out; in the African diaspora it is generally uncommon to identify strict knowledge in African culture at that developmental stage. Like his elder brother who has, in his married life, set out from his Urhobo roots, Koko, Ojaide's younger son, has stepped up work on his first novel. It is a development that would be good news if Koko delivers the goods eventually. What the novel has in common with Urhobo culture can be seen in the name of the main character, Eno. Therefore Ojaide's relationship with his children is marked by a strong bond that motivates one of the children to have a pleasant attitude to what the father does (Interview with writer, Jan. 19-20, 2006).

### **Language and Culture**

The parent provides the platform for the acquisition of culture by his or her child. He learns that the relative pressure and sensibility of what language a child learns may be higher in one country than in another. Peers also intensify the veiled intolerance of what is thought unusual. One reason for this, Ojaide tries to explain, is that the problem could be more pronounced in a society in which the culture is homogenous. What he observes is that the children concerned may deem unacceptable a language that may threaten their cherished inclusion in peer groups. This is especially true of a language that the children consider detrimental to their self-esteem. Children are usually wary of where they stand among their friends. In contrast with diasporan African children, Ojaide's children make Nigerian fashion their fashion. They view their parents' language as theirs and cherish their foods. There is a balance in their relationship with Africa and the United States. Both sides of them are active, which paves the way for self-consciousness, and so they have less difficulty with life in American society. This peculiarity may have been derived from Nigeria, where they were born and partly raised (Interview with writer, Jan. 19-20, 2006).

African writers assume that the best tool in the circumstances is to give African names to their children. A good example is the Igbo name, Chiedu or Chinedu, which Buchi Emecheta gives to her daughter. The name means 'the greater God is my guardian



(Emecheta, *Water* 88). Emecheta is aware that Britain is either the wrong place to do it, or she is badly positioned as a mother to achieve much. This is her account, as she, now Adah, *In the Ditch*, tries to influence her children by making little inputs in their consciousness in favor of Africa: "She had tried to paint rosy pictures of Nigeria to her kids, the graceful palm trees, coconut-lemonade and all that, yet they were only curious, not really moved. They made Adah feel so old, as if she was talking of another world rather than a place, which she left only a few years before" (669). Don't tell them at school [...] you are not proud of your country;" Adah said. When I grow up, I'll choose my country, but not now" (66) was the snap answer of Titi, one of Adah's children, to her mother.

The home away from home, in its small way, should afford the child the chance to have at least partial contact with Africa. Adah fails to fix these pictorial images and sounds on the children's minds or secure them for the continent. The home as a pedagogic studio, a place of fellowship with Africa, is surrounded by more tangible objects. Once the children emerge from this studio, everything falls away. The children may even feel that these constant incantations about Africa affect the rhythm of their lives, and thereby disown the continent entirely. The name Chiedu may not help after all. African writers are in silent contention for child custody with their host Western society. They try to raise children for their homeland in a foreign country, regrettably, with foreign implements.

How can the children of these Africans ever see Africa's remarkable qualities? How can they ever know why Ego, the female character in Ike Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale*, in her review of her life in Africa reaches a point where she is inconsolable? They obtain their information from a society that hardly knows their parents' cultural ways. This society may act out of ignorance; but the American hosts of the Germans had certainly reflected on these issues and the future of the children of their guests, in order to come up with the remedies they did. Organizations like the United States Committee for the Care of European Children recognized that child welfare is important, and so designed some community-supported programs to teach the children of refugees their own languages and literary traditions. These aid packages came as good news for the refugees, and were seen as central to their stay in the US (Pfanner 52).

### **Spousal Problems**

Larry Brown and his wife withstand the strains of spousal challenges. All this happens at the expense of Mary Annette. She recognizes in time that she has to make certain sacrifices to motivate her husband.

One can, however, either be guided well or misled by one's experiences. The African writer may turn to the West for answers to some difficulties. There is no doubt, for instance, on whose side Buchi Emecheta is, when she argues the African woman's cause. In her writing, there is the assumption that the African male will demonstrate his masculinity at will. Emecheta attributes her husband Francis' attitudes to this tendency. Her readers share her feelings as she attempts to make him a responsible husband, though the effort, sadly, fails. Through Emecheta's personal efforts, she is liberated from the cultural conditions that still influence Francis' behaviour. She explains in her comments that [m]y Igbo friends and relatives would not be able to see beyond their rough language and obvious poverty. But I could. I lived with them and had seen the warmth of their hearts" (Emecheta, Head 39). Curiously, in Emecheta's representations of Francis, the average African male is not considered to be a separate entity from Francis himself; the maltreatment and wrongs of which she accuses Francis, her ex-husband, would have been addressed by a section of the Igbo law and customs.

A clear understanding of this assertion is the outcome of a domestic problem in a village court in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, once it is revealed that the complainant Uzowulu has acted wrongly in a domestic problem, the judge Ekwugwu declines to grant his plea either to be re-united with his family or to get a refund of the bride price he had paid earlier. Uzowulu's brothers-in-law had beaten him up when, according to them, their counsel did not induce him to change his attitude. Also, given their desire to keep the abusive Uzowulu away from their sister, Ngbafo, and the couple's two little children, they keep custody of their sister and the children. Uzowulu's neighbours' occasional intervention in the domestic quarrels, and their subsequent testimony, provide evidence of abuse. Uzowulu disputes the claim that he has not shown himself deserving of being a father or a husband. The continuous physical abuse also is related to a recent miscarriage by his wife. Uzowulu denies it, explaining instead that the miscarriage occurred as a result of a love adventure between his wife and her boyfriend. The claim raises Ekwugwu's curiosity, who asks him, "What kind of lover sleeps with a pregnant woman?" (Achebe, *Apart* 93). Uzowulu is instructed eventually to [g]o to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you" (Achebe, *Apart* 93). Ekwugwu informs him that [i]t is not bravery when a man fights with a woman."The fairness and wisdom the judges display, and how much authority they exercise in such situations, are hinted at in a subsequent dialogue, with one of two observers saying, Don't you know what kind of man Uzowulu is? He will not listen to any other decision" (Achebe,

Apart 94). In assessing Buchi Emecheta's experience and the nature of the African male, one should note that laws are not immutable, yet feminist writings about Africans generally do not deem it necessary to highlight this fact. Still, one should not underestimate the disadvantaged position of women in most world cultures (Achebe, Apart 87-94).

In the portrayal of the African male, we come face to face with the individual who is not eligible for marriage. In that regard, Ojaide seems to be aware of female writers who wear two hats. He adds quickly that, generally, female African writing is not the place to look for positive depictions of the African male. It is not unusual for people to raise their voice after sustained oppression. When a set of people who had been oppressed for a long time finally have some kind of freedom and can discuss issues and the participants in their ordeal, they sometimes become obsessed with the subject they treat. Obviously, their hurt feelings trigger exaggerations. If a young woman is constrained by a marriage into which she is forced, while her male siblings enjoy the benefits of formal education, she will definitely want to say how she feels. exaggerate in telling her story to attract sympathy. It is true that African society condones and does have its own share of female tyrants. The African woman is at the early stage of her writing, Ojaide points out. She has not yet embraced that form of discourse later in her writing, which will surely come: eventually, she will turn her attention to other issues. Statistical analysis has established that some of these allegations are unfounded. Yet writing in this polemical way, in some quarters, allows writers' dreams to come true. But a good writer, Ojaide remarks, can spring up from anywhere and through any form of writing (Interview with writer, Jan 19-20, 2006). Yet, these are modest domestic problems by which African writers can wisely assert themselves. The writer is yet to confront the larger problems, where the rules are quite complex.

### **Conclusion**

The writer needs family and friends. He or she does not need a family that is indifferent to his/her creativity. Without this help or the first audience, writing will be even more cumbersome. African writers have to groom family members as writers. It is hoped that somewhere in Africa, people will point to their own family writers such as the Godwins. Generally, it is paramount that there should be harmony in the close and extended family of writers. Writers should endeavour to work together to help one another. They have responded to the need to interact with one another by setting up the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Interestingly, ANA merely indicates the presence of

people who identify as writers. The body must steer members into forging real kinship among them. A measure of how beneficial this approach can be can be seen in the successes recorded by English writers as indicated in this article. Africans resident overseas suffer more. Therefore, a link can be built between those at home and those in the diaspora. It should constitute one of the major topics at conferences and in literary discussions.

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