

LITERARY ART AS A VEHICLE FOR RESTRUCTURING SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD LABOUR / ABUSE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Child labour/abuse phenomena have generated grave concern the world over. This reflects every society's expectations of the child as its future leader. For meaningful progress in both human and material development to occur, the child must be given a proper orientation. This, however, seems to have eluded many Nigerian children, who are often exploited in various ways for the selfish ends of their supposed custodians. This paper illuminates the concepts of child labour/abuse and their perpetration in Nigeria. It also seeks to establish how the literary art can be utilized to sensitive individuals on the implications of such practices for the child's development and that of the society in general. It is hoped that this will enhance the child's future and contribute to the evolution of a better society.

Keywords: Child, Labour, Abuse, Art, Literature.

INTRODUCTION

In every human society adults engage children in one form of work or the other to prepare them for adulthood. This in most cases is based on an apprenticeship system through which a child is inducted into a trade with which to survive later in life as a way of perpetuating the human race.

However, it is not always that children are made to work as a way of learning a trade or acquiring a skill. In many parts of the world children are made to work either in order to fend for themselves or to enhance the living standard of their families. At this point it becomes exploitative child labour and therefore amounts to child abuse. Although this trend is widespread it is gravely under reported. In recent times, however, great outcry has greeted it, thereby arousing world attention. Estimates by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) puts the number of working children between the ages of 5 and 14 years in developing countries at 250 million.

According to a report in *Awake Magazine* of May 22, 1999; 61% of such children are of Asian origin 32% African, and 7% Latin American. Many of these children are usually hired out by their parents or guardians for economic gains and may be taken to other towns; sometimes countries to serve. This results in child trafficking.

According to UNICEF, in Africa Nigeria leads in child trafficking. This is in direct contravention of Article 9, No. 1 of the United Nations Charter on the Right of the child, which stipulated that,

States Parties shall ensure that the child shall not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when competent authority subject to judicial review determine, in accordance with applicable law and procedures, that such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child (p. 16).

In giving out their children, most parents and guardians do not usually consider the child's best interest. The result is that many children pass through traumatic and sometimes hazardous experiences.

(See Appendix A).

The psychological impact of such experiences often leave deep scars in the mind of the child. In spite of such consequences, however, traditionally people do not usually frown at the issue of child abuse; rather seeing it as a way of life. Such adverse conditions, as *Arikpo (1998)* points out expose children to other forms of abuse, including actual sexual abuse. Vulgar verbal sexual insinuations such as "asewo kobo kobo", "useless harlot"; "monkey f- - - k your mama"; are some other assaults on the child's psychological make up.

Childhood, as *Maduabum (1995)* points out, is characterized by prelogical and concrete thinking stages. It follows therefore that children may not think critically and logically about situations to which they are exposed, but would rather accept whatever befalls them as the norm and continue to perpetrate it later as adults. The rationale at this stage would be that since they passed through a particular experience as children, it is only natural that their own children or wards should do the same as part of the growing up process. This situation portends a bleak future for Nigerian children since child abuse seems to be a traditionally entrenched child rearing practice.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES:

For proper focusing it is germane to examine the key concepts in this paper.

1. **Childhood:** In the traditional Nigerian context different ethnic groups have varying perceptions about what childhood entails. There are settings where a child is conceived as an individual yet incapable of contributing to the development of his society. Other people view the child as

one who has not yet attained the age of initiation into an age grade (*Sule, 1998*).

In this paper, however, the views of the child as presented by the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Population Division as those below the age of 18 is adopted. Moreso, as in Nigeria an individual is only viewed as an adult from the age of 18.

2. **Child Abuse:** According to the convention of the right of the child, as adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (1989), respect for human rights begins with the way society treats its children. A caring society will give freedom and dignity to young people creating the conditions in which they can develop their full potential and so look forward to a full and satisfying adult life (p.1).

Any condition contrary to the above constitutes child abuse. Another important principle of the convention is that every child from state parties shall enjoy all their rights without discrimination of any kind. This is irrespective of the child's parent's or guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political inclination or status in the society.

Once a child is subjected to a situation disadvantageous to him as a result of any or a combination of the above factors, it amounts to child abuse. Subjecting the child to conditions that are capable of inhibiting his physical, mental, spiritual, moral, psychological and social development is also child abuse. This abuse can be manifested in various ways as highlighted in this paper.

3. **Child Trafficking:** This is the illegal trade of young boys and girls below the ages of 12 and 18 through contacts to do economic home based activities in other locations. This amounts to child slavery and is gory dimension of child abuse.

4. **Child Labour:** This presumes a situation where under aged children are hired out to work for others for material benefits. When such children are subjected to similar conditions by their parents or guardians, it is also child labour.

CAUSES OF CHILD LABOUR/ABUSE:

There are many contributory factors to child abuse in Nigeria viz:

1. **Poverty:** This stems chiefly from unemployment or underpayment of employed parents or guardians. To supplement their earnings such individuals hire out their children or wards for paid employment in other people's homes. Sometimes all they desire for the children is a place where they could be fed, sent to school, or sent to learn a trade for the domestic services they render to their masters or mistresses.
2. **Misplaced Sense of Discipline:** Some parents and guardians abuse their wards out of a warped sense of discipline. Most of the time such parents were themselves given out as children and were physically and mentally maltreated. They mistake this for discipline and thus repeat the pattern with their own wards, often in the belief that they are exercising their parental right to train their children properly. This can thus become a family tradition.
3. **Illiteracy:** Uneducated parents constitute a greater percentage of poor people in the Nigerian society. Consequently, they are equally unable to provide for their children the basic requirements of modern day child upbringing, including sending them to school. Such children are usually seen as a domestic burden by their parents; and since they are not undergoing any skill training, they are often hired out to work for wealthier people so that they can earn their own living and occasionally, augment their parents' income.

What parents do not often consider is that their children are typically over disciplined and deprived of parental love and affection in their infancy, when this love is greatly required for a balanced development. Child abuse therefore has grave and permanent consequences for its victims.

EFFECTS OF CHILD LABOUR/ABUSE ON THE INDIVIDUAL'S TOTAL PERSONALITY

Child labour/abuse can be aptly viewed as cruelty to the child in question for the following reasons:

1. **Cruelty by Custodians:** The people to whom children are hired often willfully and unjustifiably inflict physical and emotional pain and suffering on them. This may take the form of inordinate physical violence like beatings, unjustifiable verbal insults and snide remarks, victimization and other forms of corporal punishment.
2. **Deprivation:** This may consist of failure to provide shelter and nourishment for the child; as was the case of Annelia in Appendix A. All these impinge upon the child's physical growth, which is often delayed. The child may also exhibit evidence of undernourishment such as kwashiorkor. It may also include denial of medical treatment and emotional support. Most of such children are usually poorly clad in tattered clothes and shoes, and may occasionally move about without shoes. All these create psychological problems for the children and often make them worldly wise beyond their ages.
3. **Sexual Molestation or Rape:** This is another unsavoury reality to which children hired out are exposed. Some adults have no inhibitions about sexually assaulting underaged hirelings. Their own offspring could equally initiate the assault, which is usually kept secret. The assaulted child may be threatened into silence and submission. His psychological, emotional and intellectual development are also adversely affected.

According to *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, for such children, their cognitive and language development are often impaired. There are also problems with their personality development, learning and general behaviour.

4. **Occupational Hazards:** While households that employ the labour of children may not expose their own children to hazardous tasks, they may not hesitate to expose poor young children entrusted to their care to hazardous debilitating work (UNICEF, 1999). It will not be surprising that incapacitating accidents and sometimes death result from such exposure.
5. **Poor Socialization:** The conditions to which hired children are exposed also lead to improper socialization, deprivation from playing; which is a vital aspect of a child's developmental needs and other social activities like picnicking, watching television, reading for relaxation attending parties and sharing in family jokes. All these combine to make the child a social misfit later in life, as she would find it difficult to adjust to a newer and friendlier situation.
6. **Poverty:** A vicious cycle of poverty becomes the hallmark of hired children since they are in most cases not encouraged to develop their potentials. They also demonstrate a high rate of school drop out where they are allowed to go to school as a result of too much domestic chores pressure on their study time. Consequently, they are unable to improve their lots and thereby break the shackles of poverty.
7. **Unwanted Pregnancy:** This is a logical consequence of the sexual abuse to which hired children are subjected. They become vulnerable to all forms of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Sometimes they die or do irreparable damage to their reproductive system in a bid to procure illicit abortions.

All the unsavoury consequences of child labour/abuse arise from the fact that the children need the jobs for their survival and are therefore helpless in the hands of their abusers. They thus become disoriented and unbalanced individuals who may not be able to take meaningful decisions about themselves and their society since the role

they played at the most critical stage of their lives and development was a subservient one. On the other hand, they may become overtly aggressive in a bid to inflict on the world the pains they got from it.

In a few cases such children may grow up to become psychotics and sociopaths as a result of having lived lonely and unloved lives. They may also grow up to be depressed or angry adults. All of these could prove hazardous to national well being, because as the saying goes *the child of today is the leader of tomorrow*. If a child is to become a future leader, then his physical, mental psychological, emotional, moral and educational development must be balanced.

Child abuse is obviously an impediment to all these.

COMBATING CHILD LABOUR/ABUSE:

To break the cycle of child labour/abuse approaches to be adopted must be people oriented since it is human beings who perpetrate the act. With proper social and psychotherapeutic intervention, most adults engaged in this practice can be sensitized against it.

In Great Britain, as early as 1884 one of the earliest national laws to protect children from cruel treatment was adopted. At that time the national society for prevention of cruelty to children was organized. Subsequently, other countries organized such societies. In the United States, New York was the first state to legislate protection for children in 1875. This law served as a model for other states, all of which now have statutes designating child abuse as a criminal offence. In 1974, a National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect was established by an act of the U.S. Congress.

In 1989, the convention on the Rights of the Child became unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. (Human Rights, Fact Sheet No. 10). Accordingly, Nigeria has also adopted the protection of the child in her welfare policy.

All these efforts are in recognition of the fact that the child is a human being, who has a

right to exist and develop his full potentials in his society. In highly developed industrial societies like U.S., France, Britain and a host of others social services which are potentially beneficial to the child's welfare are set up to help to minimize the incidence of child abuse.

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

These are concerned with the well-being of children and with child rearing problems. In countries like U.S.A. Social Insurance Programmes such as Old Age Survivors and Disability Insurance (OASDI) are obtainable (Encyclopedia Americana). Financial assistance is also provided to families with dependent children through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in the Soviet Union and Australia. In these places, nearly all families are covered by one form of social insurance or family allowance provision or the other.

The family allowance system is based on the idea that there should not be undue inequalities in family levels as a result of the existence of dependent children in some families. This is predicated on the principle, that family needs are based on family size and may require more funds than a particular family can afford.

This system provides a regular allowance to every family for the support of each child as a normal supplement to family incomes. The rationale is that families with children carry greater economic burdens than childless ones. The ultimate aim is to maintain or increase the families. Standard of living through equalization of costs of maintaining dependents. The allowance provides benefits for adopted, foster and natural children. This kind of provision will invariably help parents to cater for their children without necessarily resorting to child labour/abuse. In spite of these moves in developed countries child labour/abuse still flourishes in Nigeria. It therefore becomes necessary to explore ways of sensitizing individuals in the society against this social malady. In Nigeria since no provisions are made at the government level for the welfare of the child, this paper examines how the literary art could be exploited in sensitizing Nigerians against child labour/ abuse from the grassroots.

LITERARY ART AS A SENSITIZING ELEMENT

Literature as Oden (1997) asserts reflects critically contemporary life and provides tremendous insights into various aspects of human existence. It has the primary role of entertaining those who attend to it. Since it explores trivial and insignificant issues as well those that are philosophical and profound, it could serve as a veritable tool for projecting an ideology. Literature provides a forum for relaxation and enjoyment through novels, drama and poetry; it therefore caters for diverse interest groups. The different genres could be exploited to highlight the devastating effects of child labour /abuse. This could be by literary artists, as they focus on themes that border on the practices. In literature, language is usually employed in a very remarkable way. Since in every society language helps to structure social behaviour, the language employed by literary artists can help to penetrate people's conscience and awaken them to prevailing realities. If a literary artist portrays child abuse in very vivid and pathetic language, this would provoke the mental faculties of the reader and help to achieve desirable outcomes. Nwamuo (1990) successfully encapsulates the issue of child labour / abuse in one of his plays as he takes the readers on an imaginary excursion into the world of a child that was grossly abused by her mother, father and step-mother because her father and mother did not marry. The child's dilemma was eventually resolved in court. He also demonstrated the various hazards to which young female hawkers were exposed, especially sexual abuse. This approach tends to sharpen the individual's understanding and perception by affording him a vicarious experience of the situation. Because those who attend to the reading are not being directly referred to, their critical capacity may be activated and they may be imbued with the desire to institute a change so that they may not be categorized among those who indulge in child abuse. Literature is concerned with social order. Literary artists therefore more often than not portray contemporary social issues in their writing. Various dimensions of child abuse could be

dramatized and presented on stage in order to portray the sentiments an individual wishes to convey.

Such drama programmes could be taken to rural villages in order to mobilize grassroots consciousness. Most of the people who engage in the trend are rural dwellers; they will therefore have a thing or two to learn from such a dramatic event. Village festivals could be exploited for such a presentation in order to have a commendable audience. For instance if the story of Amelia (Appendix A) is dramatized for public consumption, many parents will be filled with revulsion as they view what their own children, whom they might have given out could be going through. As the reality dawns on them, many parents may decide to suffer with their children rather than expose them to that type of experience. Poetry is another art through which child abuse could be lucidly portrayed. This could either be by individuals or be read out to an audience. It could also be rendered in songs for far reaching impact. Since home videos have made such a successful incursion into the Nigerian film industry, literary artists could be commissioned to translate their writing into films, which could then be put into the market for public consumption. Viewing a situation makes it more real than merely reading about it. The impact will therefore be more long lasting than that of a novel.

Government and child protection agencies can accelerate awareness by supporting writers to write more on child abuse. Many people will end up reading the books and learning from them.

Drama programmes on child abuse should be sponsored on radio and television.

Stories on child abuse could also be serialized in newspapers and magazines in order to reach a wider audience.

Comics and other publications on child abuse could also be introduced and made available to readers. Film shows on child abuse should also be organized for the public at all levels.

Plays can be staged on child abuse, both in regular schools and adult literacy classes. This is to ensure that the enlightenment campaign permeates all facets of the Nigerian society. It is

only when individuals start to reject the idea of child abuse as subhuman that any meaningful impact on its control can be made.

If Nigeria is serious about combating the problem, then she should be ready to mobilize all possible resources at her disposal. The literary art appears to be a potential resource that can help to arouse social consciousness in order to project the ideology of child protection. It should therefore be maximally exploited to attain this goal.

CONCLUSION

As aptly noted in *Awake* (4), although theoretically, society looks up to the child and proclaims him the leader of tomorrow, in reality many children have become economic goods rather than being prepared for the purported role of future leaders. This orientation must change in the overall interest of the child if he is to be accorded the dignity that is due to every human being, as well as be given a healthy orientation towards leadership.

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APPENDIX A

Hello, my name is *Amelia*, and I live on an island the Caribbean. I am seven years old. Some time ago my poor parents handed me over to a rich family living in the city. Today, like every day, I got up at five o'clock in the morning. I fetched water from a nearby well. It was very difficult to balance the heavy jug on my head, but I made it – otherwise, I would have been beaten badly. Then I prepared breakfast and served it to the family. I was a little late in serving breakfast, so the master beat me with a leather strap.

Afterward, I walked the family's five-year-old son to school. Next, I helped prepare and serve the family's lunch between meal times, I had to buy food in the market, run errands, tend the charcoal fire, sweep the yard, wash clothes and dishes, and clean the kitchen. I also washed my lady's feet. Today she was very upset about something, and she slapped me in anger. I hope that tomorrow she feels better. I was given left overs to eat – at least they were better than the cornmeal I ate yesterday. My clothes are ragged, and I have no shoes. My owners have never allowed me to bathe in the water I bring to the family. Last night I slept outside; sometimes they let me sleep inside on the floor. Too bad I could not write this myself. I am not allowed to go to school.

Have a nice day. *Amelia*.