
SOJI COLE'S *EMBERS* AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND DEVELOPMENT

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v23i1.3>

Abstract

Reading literary texts help us develop critical thinking skills, but this fact is taken for granted in literary education by both teachers and students alike and this is the problem projected by the paper. Critical thinking itself trains our minds toward solving a problem and the ability to solve the problems that life presents is the key to success, according to Robert Harris. The objective of this paper is to show that with literary texts, readers and students can be taught to think critically. To demonstrate this, Bobkina and Stefanova's four-stage model, Situated Practice Stage, The Overt Instruction Stage, The Critical Framing Stage, and Transformed Practice Stage, of using fiction to teach critical thinking were used. It was concluded that the human mind or brain uses the simulation effect as in computers to orientate itself to social realities as reflected in literary texts and that as a result, literary texts are very effective in cultivating critical thinking skills in us.

Keywords: Simulation effect, Situated Practice Stage, Overt Instruction Stage, Critical Framing Stage, Transformed Practice Stage

Introduction

According to Doğanay and Ünal (2006), critical thinking as a concept is derived from “reasoning” and the root of reasoning is “reason”, which means “ratio” in Latin and “ration” in Latin

means “balance”. In other words, critical thinking leads to a balanced decision from experiences, and pieces of information available through a capacity to think. *Embers* as a piece of drama enriches experiences through the pieces of information in it and the possibility of interaction between the reader and the contents of the text. By reading the text, a horizon of expectation is partially established; but it also offers a horizon of knowledge because the ideas inherent in them are in simulative association with ideas the reader has acquired through reading other texts (Ashcroft, 2001). Discourse situations are established through such interactions. It is such discourse situations that make critical thinking possible because there is always a desire to understand the phenomena of the text in relation to the lived experiences. These make practical interventions in solution providing possible because of the progression from the stage of acquiring knowledge inherent in the text and other texts through its intertextuality, to the knowing stage. Once the knowing stage is attained, the reader becomes agitated and lonely because they now know more. The reader carefully evaluates the basic pieces of information in the text. That act itself is observed as one does in empiricism: The reader listens to what the characters say and observes what they do: a simulation effect is triggered because ideas in the text are associated with ideas stored in the mind. The reader compares what transpires in the text with familiar experiences.

The problem in literary scholarship is that most often students and even their teachers take it for granted that the endeavor simply trains their mental muscles to be critical. They barely know, if they know at all, that it is critical thinking that makes the students develop the habit of constantly asking questions and also identifying problems, and conditioning their minds to seek solutions or answers to the questions raised.

Embers as fiction have to be observed as one observes reality because it represents or mirrors reality. This is a major problem because it can be argued that because the text mirrors reality, it cannot be said to be a reality in all certainty. Therefore, the major task here is to show that the text has mirrored reality to a very large extent. All the same, what constitutes reality has been a bone of contention among philosophers over the centuries. Plato believed as Bruder and Moore (1990, p.) put it, that “what is truly real is not the objects we encounter in sensory experience but rather forms, and these can only be grasped intellectually”. As Bruder & Moore (1990), further put it, “the individual things that we perceive by sense are forever changing.”

The work initiates drama from the life of the Internally Displaced People in Northern Nigeria also known as IDPs in their camp. Through the regular stories of Talatu to her campmates, Memunah, Atai, and Idayat, about her life and what she has been through, the writer takes us deep and deeper into the very inside of life. From the life of a woman, whose life has not been fair (2018: 4), to the people who are supposed to take care of Internally Displaced Persons at the camps, but who instead terrorise them, the richness of *Embers* is made manifest in the deep philosophical thoughts of Talatu, who thinks that no one is created to be subjugated by another but that it is a culture that allows subjugation and that her younger friends must paint the world in their colour (3).

Talatu paints a gory sight of life when she recalls her suffering with her mother and how hard it becomes after she dies: “We are all inside a grave, to come out of it, you must tread on corpses” (2018: 7). This statement demonstrates the effect of wise

saying in critical thinking because it makes you pause and ponder; and it is in pausing and pondering that we can make room for understanding and enlightenment, which are the components of critical thinking. Understanding and enlightenment further lead to finding solutions to problems.

Reading the text, the questions that come to mind are: what does the text tell me? What do I stand to gain from reading a work that explores the humanity of terrorists, their victims; camp officers, and the IDPs in the camps? Of what use are they to my society? These questions in themselves trigger critical thinking. Therefore, the paper aims at showing that with literary texts, readers and students can be taught to think critically. With that, students and teachers alike can be made aware or conscious from the onset that training in literary scholarship is to make trainees critical thinkers, who have to exert themselves to find answers to the questions they raise from reading texts and also make them adopt such mental attitude toward real things in the world since the key to success is the ability to identify problems through critical thinking and find solutions to the problems

The theoretical model used to achieve the aim of the paper was Bobkina's and Stefanova's (2016) Critical Literacy Pedagogy model, which has four stages, (1) The situated practice stage, (2) The overt instruction stage, (3) The critical framing stage and (4) The transformed practice stage and which comes in handy in the process of trying to process information from texts to use them to develop critical thinking skills.

(1) Situated Practice Stage

In this stage, the students' mental map of a given text is expected to be activated. Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) expect students to recall relevant experiences and information they have. They also

expect the teacher to initiate activities in this stage by asking relevant questions and the students are expected to share their answers.

(2). The Overt Instruction Stage

During this stage, one tries to know how much of the given text the students have been able to understand by letting them read the given text. The teacher is expected to lead a discussion of some important ideas in the text and even administer the test. If the text has been adapted into a movie, the teacher may let the students see the film to make them even more motivated. Furthermore, the students are encouraged to closely read the text to understand the deeper logic of the text. In finding the deeper logic of a given text, the whys and wherefores of the text should be questioned, interpretations should be initiated, and if necessary mental maps should be created to relate an experience that yields knowledge. Notes are encouraged to be taken while closely reading the given text so that they could be compared to make it possible for different perspectives on the ideas to be known.

(2) The Critical Framing Stage,

In this stage, students are made to focus attention on the writer's use of language and their semiotic implications in given contexts in relation to society.

(3) Transformed Practice Stage

Finally, during this stage, according to Bobkina and Stefanova (2016), students should be encouraged to write something on a

given text or translate a given text or paraphrase it or even readapt it into drama, etc.

Literature Review

Reading fiction trains the mind to think critically. This position is supported by the research by Vessali et al (2015, pp. 105-121), who conducted studies in the field of applied psychology to test whether extended contact through reading the popular best-selling books of *Harry Potter* improved attitudes towards stigmatized groups like immigrants, homosexuals, and refugees among others; and the findings from the studies supported their initial hypothesis that reading fiction helped change perspectives and improved attitudes towards out-groups. Attitudes change because we can think beyond what we know as a result of the various perspectives made available to us by reading fiction. These perspectives arise when we try to penetrate the deeper logic of the text.

Nwosu and Udenta (2015, p.213) argue that critical thinking being deep reasoning and reflection of the thinking process, “helps make decisions, opinions about something you think especially when you consider taking a job or making choice levels in thinking critically and not accepting facts on face value”. In other words from the analysis of the texts as well as the conscious reflection on the analyses, critical issues can be isolated from them and associated in a simulative way with everyday experiences and happenings in given societies. Deeper insight into the nuances of phenomena is gained and possible ways out of the given problems or issues the texts raise are also visualized.

Critical thinking has shifted away from the traditional method of analysis or problem solving and included, as Walters (1994, p.63) puts it, “the cognitive acts such as imagination, conceptual creativity, intuition, and insight”. In other words,

while it is good to logically dissect structures and analyze components, it is also equally important to reflect on thinking processes and reason, see things in perspective, allow for deep insight, associate ideas in context and out of context, etc. And to be able to think critically in the above-mentioned template, certain core skills relevant to critical thinking such as observation, analysis, explanation, interpretation, inference, evaluation, imagination, perspective, intuition, creativity, and insight are consciously engaged.

Robert Harris (nD) defines critical thinking “as an approach to ideas from the standpoint of deliberate consideration”. What we do according to him is to hold an idea at arm's length and examine it before accepting it into our mental framework. He, furthermore, defines critical thinking “as a habit of cautious evaluation, an analytic mindset aimed at discovering the parts of ideas and philosophies, eager to weigh the merits of arguments and reasons to become a good judge of them”. For him, “analysis is the ability to break arguments or claims down into parts and to discover the relationship between the parts. The arguments can then be evaluated. It follows that sometimes the evaluation and judgment will be positive ... Critical thinking, then, is not a cynical, negative force”.

For Halpern (2010), critical thinking is the use of cognitive strategies to improve the expected ideas. Paul and Elder (2007, p.4) believe that critical thinking is a “four-self-incorporating concept” being that it is “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored and self-correcting thinking.” For Facione (1990, p.2) critical thinking is “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis,

evaluation, and inference, as well as an explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based". Ennis (1993) sees it as reasonable reflective thinking that focuses on the decision of what to believe or do, while Jones et al. (1995) describe it as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, presenting, arguments, reflection, and dispositions during thinking process; furthermore, for Paul and Elder (2007), a critical thinker is someone capable of formulating relevant questions, accumulates appropriate information and evaluates it for drawing sound conclusions. Bloom (1956) argues that the acquisition of critical thinking skills happens in a hierarchical order, whereby evaluation, synthesis, and analysis of ideas belong to the higher-order thinking skills, while application, comprehension, and knowledge belong to the lower order of cognitive process. He believes that these skills need to be integrated into school curricula to cultivate our children's critical thinking skills.

Facione (1990), for his part, acknowledges six critical thinking skills that literature helps to cultivate in us. They are analytic skills, interpretive skills, evaluative skills, inferential skills, explanative skills, and self-regulative skills. He also believes that critical thinking trains us to develop two sets of dispositions: the disposition to have elaborate and specific approaches to issues and questions. Seiter argues that it is literature that helps us develop critical thinking skills. She believes too that literature helps us cultivate empathy. It also helps us to understand our fellow human beings. As Seiter (nD) puts it:

To put yourself in the shoes of others and grow your capacity for empathy, you can hardly do

better than reading fiction. Multiple studies have shown that imagining stories helps activate the regions of your brain responsible for better understanding others and seeing the world from a new perspective. When the psychologist Raymond Mars analyzed 86 fMRI studies, he saw substantial overlap in the brain networks used to understand stories and the networks used to navigate interactions with other individuals.

As she further puts it:

...when we read about a situation or feeling, it's very nearly as if we're feeling it ourselves. As Fast Company reports: Two researchers from Washington University in St. Louis scanned the brains of fiction readers and discovered that their test subjects created intense, graphic mental simulations of the sights, sounds, movements, and tastes they encountered in the narrative. In essence, their brains reacted as if they were actually living the events they were reading about.

For Lazere (1987, p.3) "literature... is the single academic discipline that can come closest to encompassing the full range of mental traits currently considered to comprise critical thinking".

The Pedagogical Template for *Embers* in Critical Thinking Development: A Critical Analysis

To teach *Embers* for critical thinking development, the stages outlined by Bobkina and Stefanova (2016) may be deployed. The first stage, which is the Situated Practice Stage, requires the mapping of the minds of the students or readers. To begin mapping the minds of the students, critical questions about the text under study must be asked. And that is the beginning of the critical thinking process. For example,

- (a) What is the text, *Embers*, about?
- (b) What ideas can be learned from it?
- (c) What can be known about terrorism and Internally Displaced People living in camps in Northern Nigeria?
- (d) It must be found out if the students have read or watched movies about terrorism?

All this entails making the students recall relevant experiences and information within their experiences with regard to the text and properly contextualizing them. One of the experiences that could be recalled to them for authentication is the destruction unleashed on Nigeria by the Boko Haram terrorist group and other terrorist groups that have joined them since they began to terrorize Nigeria. They should be made to also know that Boko Haram terrorists have metamorphosed into bandits, kidnappers, etc. the consequences of terrorism should also be made known to them in the process of mapping their minds and stimulating the association of ideas in the text and society. They will immediately know that one of the consequences of terrorism in Nigeria, especially Northern Nigeria, is the displacement of

ordinary citizens, especially the vulnerable, children, women, and old people. The consequences of the displacement are the death of many, the destruction of homes and livelihoods, and then the eventual coming into being of IDP camps, that is, camps for the Internally Displaced People. By initiating that question and taking the minds of the students to their experiences through reading other texts, watching movies about terrorism, and direct experiences, they will automatically become aware that those are what the text is about.

In considering the second question about what ideas can be learned from the text, specific details about what can be learned from the text could be outlined; for example, it could learn that

- Talatu, a character in the text, is a victim of sexual exploitation by both Boko Haram terrorists and IDP camp officials, and besides that, she was also raped as a child by her uncle and cousin. This knowledge makes the students aware of what might be happening in IDP camps.
- That Memunah, another character in the text, is one of the girls abducted by Boko Haram insurgents and who suffers rape and exploitation in the camp with other girls. She is eventually discovered to be working for Boko Haram and she is raped to death by soldiers.
- That Idayat, yet another character in the text, is also a victim of abduction by Boko Haram insurgents. She was

raped as a child by her teacher, who was later killed by Idayat's first love. Like Memunah, they see the camp officers, soldiers, and politicians, who exploit; rape, and kill them, as the terrorists. They compare their experiences in captivity under Boko Haram and in freedom, which is captivity too under the camp officers and soldiers, and feel they fared better in captivity under Boko Haram. She works for Boko Haram too. All this can stretch the minds of the students to the contradiction experienced by the character and they will immediately begin to imagine that these are also the contradictions most IDPs are living with. This is very important because it heightens their emotional intelligence, which is also very critical in the cultivation of critical thinking skills.

- That Atai, another character in the text, is also a victim of rape and exploitation like every other girl, and so she works as an informant for the camp officers and the soldiers. The desire to stay alive makes her try to survive by any means, even if it means informing her friends. The students will know that these were possibilities in the camps
- That the soldiers are all disgruntled and despondent and feel also exploited by the politicians.

All these pieces of information are necessary for the students to be able to associate the discursive formations in the

text with the equivalent realities in society. And to stimulate more ideas, the students have to grapple with the third question, which is about what they know about terrorism not only in Nigeria but all over the world as well as what they know about Internally Displaced Persons, who are victims of terrorism. The students' minds should be stretched as far as the September 2011 terrorist attack on the twin tower in New York. Their minds should be taken to the onslaught of the Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan and the havoc they wreaked on the society as well as the displacement suffered by their victims, who are ordinary citizens. Their minds should also be taken to the activities of the Boko Haram terrorists operating in Northeastern and Northwestern Nigeria that have killed and maimed thousands of civilians, both male and female, and even children. Their minds must be stimulated by the graphic pictures because their terrorist attacks are no longer news in Nigeria. Recently, the Fulani Herdsmen menace has exacerbated the matter. Most people do not see them differently from the Boko Haram terrorists. They have been accused of being part of the grand plan to Islamize Nigeria. This is believable judging from the way they attack communities in the Northeast, Northwest, and North central. They kill, rape, maim and burn down everything in sight. Above all, they occupy villages once they attack them.

The above situation has brought about massive displacement and dislocation of people from their homes, hence the creation of IDP. If possible show them newspaper news about these things or even clips from social media to properly stimulate their minds and make the class lively. They should also be made to see how they had taken all these for granted until literature defamiliarizes their familiar experiences and awakens a keen

interest in the matter and triggers thinking, especially critical thinking. Furthermore, sample their opinions on books or movies on terrorism they have either read or watched. Possibly draw their attention to a particular text on religious extremism by Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015). Stimulate their minds on ideas in the text, and how the text can help them understand the making of an extremist, who may eventually become a terrorist. They should be made to understand that the text can help them understand the psychology of terrorists and even how the politicians help in grooming them, how unsuspecting Muslims get incited in the Mosques, etc. by making them read such texts, they will certainly appreciate *Embers* better because it is about the consequences of terrorism, and as Keith Oatley (2016, p. 618-628) puts it, "fiction is a particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky, requiring us to weigh up myriad interacting instances of cause and effect. Just as computer simulations can help us get to grips with complex problems such as flying a plane or forecasting the weather, so novels, stories, and dramas can help us understand the complexities of social life". In other words, the things that might have initially been seen in the news or read in the paper become dramatized in a novel or drama piece so that some of the intricacies of the condition can get clearer through critical engagement with them.

In the second stage, which is The Overt Instruction Stage, which might start in the week following the treatment of The Situated Practice Stage, the teacher may want to know how much of the given text the students have been able to understand. In this stage, the teacher is expected to lead a discussion of some important ideas in the text and even administer a test. If the text has been adapted into a movie, the teacher may let the students

see the film to make them even more motivated. Furthermore, the students are encouraged to closely read the text to understand the deeper logic of the text. In finding the deeper logic of a given text, the whys and wherefores of the text should be questioned, interpretations should be initiated, and if necessary mental maps should be created to relate an experience that yields knowledge. Notes are encouraged to be taken while closely reading the given text so that they could be compared to make it possible for different perspectives on the ideas to be known.

(3) The Critical Framing Stage

In this stage, one focuses attention on the writer's use of language and its semiotic implications in given contexts in relation to society; for example, Talatu thinks that no one is created to be subjugated by another but that it is a culture that allows subjugation and that her younger friends must paint the world in their colour (3). To paint the world in its colour is a metaphor of encouragement for them to live in the world on their terms. Culture allowing subjugation can be understood within the context of religion as part and parcel of culture, especially in Northern Nigeria, where Boko Haram is very active. The idea that an infidel is worth nothing is already an example of culture allowing subjugation. All this must be brought up in the course of teaching the text.

The teacher must point out salient statements in the text; for example, it is stated in the text that in Nigeria, democracy is "government of the cunning minority for the foolish majority" (2018: 26). The students must be allowed to air their views on that so that the deep abyss of decay, wickedness, callousness, and

man's inhumanity in society can be appreciated. Even Idayat doubts if there is God; for "if there is God then he wouldn't allow the rustling eruptions of evil thoughts that come from the hearts of men!" (2018: 22). The teacher must find out what the students think about that and ensure that there is a balanced perspective.

Memunah herself agrees that there is a divinity that shapes our existence; but that this divinity shapes our lives in ways that raise questions; for it makes some rich and others poor; it makes some healthy and some sick; it makes some happy and brings others into the doom of sorrow right from birth (2018: 21); this was also demonstrated in Obioma Chigozie's *The Fishermen*, where tragedy dogged a family from the beginning till the end, demonstrating the tragedy life is to some, who are also part of God's creation. The teacher must expand the horizon of the students after he or she listens to their perspectives. He or she must make them know that, perhaps, Memunah's views can be anchored on some theoretical concept as existentialism. Arthur Schopenhauer considers what Memunah sees as divinity, *das-Ding-an-sich*, the thing-in-itself, "as a blind and purposeless impelling force that is manifested in humans as a will to live; it is this drive, this will, that determines human behavior, not reason. Thus the human being is not fundamentally rational but willful ... The conflict between individual will is the cause of endless strife and suffering (Bruder and Moore, 1990: 98). Therefore, if, probably, a man dares to be rational and not willful, pain and suffering may reduce greatly or be eradicated in the view of Schopenhauer.

At this stage, the students can appreciate better what happens in the Internally Displaced Persons' Camps in Northern Nigeria. They become aware experientially how the lives of citizens rarely matter to the politicians, the lies the government

tells the world every day about what they provide for the displaced people, and the fact that camp officials take most of the things made for the IDPs' camps as well as how the camps have become places of captivity in the supposed freedom they offer. They become aware that the country needs urgent change, maybe even a revolution, because these pains and suffering are a result of leadership failure in Nigeria as Chinua Achebe had once insisted in his small pamphlet, *The Trouble with Nigeria*. However, this failure of leadership derives from ignorance, which itself derives from a lack of critical education. As Idayat puts it,

...How do we define a life of freedom when it bears all signs of captivity? The real Boko Haram is here, not in the forest of Sambisa. The Boko Harams are those government people who brought ten bags of rice to the camp and announced in the news that they came with a hundred. The Boko Harams are those Camp Officers who steal seven out of those ten bags of rice and leave us with three to share for food. The Boko Harams are those in uniforms whose job is to keep us safe here but drag out the girls every night to have a fill of their lusty ... (Cole 2018: 19-20).

Such sublime moments, which are edifying, abound in the drama piece and this is made possible by the writer's use of language; all the same, one encounters degrading moments such as the rape incidents by camp officials and soldiers under whose care the displaced persons are. For example, Atai, who manages to escape

from Boko Haram captivity, where she is a sex object, falls into the hands of camp officials who are mainly soldiers and who take turns abusing her sexually (2018: 56-59). Or even Memunah, who is caught working with Boko Haram. The punishment the soldiers mete out to her is to rape her till she dies and they hide their hideous act and get it published in the newspapers that she died of cholera (2018: 88).

(4)Transformed Practice Stage

Finally, in the Transformed Practice Stage, it is expected that learning becomes more practical. As Bobkina and Stefanova (2016), put it: students should be encouraged, after they have read *Embers*, to write about the text so that the depth of their insight could be appreciated as well as their capacity to see the ideas in the text from different perspectives. Even the reader can do the same. The students should be encouraged to ask relevant questions and share their views with their mates. The reader is also expected to ask relevant questions and seize every opportunity that presents itself to discuss such questions with anyone who has read the text so they can share their ideas.

Conclusion

Embers dramatized the human condition in the IDP camps. It revealed to us the inhumanity of camp officials and soldiers who embezzle provisions meant for them and take sexual advantage of the women and young persons among them. The study looked at the role of critical and strategic thinking and development in studying the text as well as the consequences of that for society. It showed that critical analysis of texts is indeed critical thinking which has to be made conscious to students in the course of studying texts and which society must also understand to place

commensurate value in literary and critical education. There is no doubt that the human mind or brain uses the simulation effect as in computers to orientate itself to social realities as reflected in literary texts and that as a result, literary texts are very effective in cultivating critical thinking skills in us. Lastly, it is recommended that literature should be a critical component of development discourses. This is important because of the discursive formations of texts or their various units of signification. There is no doubt that meaning can no longer be the exclusive preserve of the writer: the reader participates in determining the meaning of the text; however, it is important to also hear the writer's perspective if the writer is still alive. To insist that the author is dead is to lose a perspective or perspective because in critical thinking, perspectives matter. It is indubitable that critics raise issues in given texts despite the writer. Those issues they raise ought to be the focus of discourse. If this happens, policymakers are sure to be enriched to be able to make policy decisions and give expert advice to the government based on the knowledge they have gained.

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