

HARNESSING LITERATURE FOR NATIONAL UNITY, IDENTITY, AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Curriculum represents a structured body of knowledge designed to foster positive behavioral and societal change among learners. It encompasses carefully selected content from various disciplines, organized systematically to equip learners with relevant skills, attitudes, and knowledge for societal transformation. Among these disciplines, literature plays a critical role in shaping learners' intellectual and moral capacities, promoting cultural awareness, and enhancing national cohesion. By integrating literature into the curriculum, learners gain access to socially valuable knowledge that can influence their perspectives, reinforce ethical values, and foster a sense of collective identity. This paper explores the significance of literature within the curriculum, highlighting its potential to contribute to individual growth and the overall development of society. Recognizing literature as a key instrument in nation-building underscores the broader impact of curriculum design on achieving educational and societal goals.

Keywords: Curriculum, Literature, National Cohesion, Educational Development, Societal Transformation

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum refers to a whole body of knowledge, carefully selected and consistently organized for the purpose of bringing about a positive change in the behavior of the learner. Though this concept cannot be narrowed to one definition, but there are certain vital ingredients that must be found in curriculum. It is the offering of socially valuable knowledge in an organized way intended to positively impact the society. The attitudes and skills are made available to learners through a variety of arrangements during their school period. In his words Ogunyemi (2009) admits that curriculum as a field of study has continued to attract interest among educators, scholars, researchers and lay persons due to its centrality to the attainment of educational goals of any nation. Various disciplines considered to be relevant in the attainment of societal goals are carefully selected and systematically organized in such a way as to impart useful and usable knowledge to learners which they would utilize for the positive transformation of the human society. Literature is one of such disciplines.

The word "Literature" could stand for a number of things, depending on what the user intends to address. For Rexroth (2023), it is a body of written works, especially applying to imaginative works of poetry and prose which are usually distinguished by the intentions of the writers. Gottlieb and Thomas (2023) approached it illustratively, distinguishing a literature with a capital letter "L" and a literature with a small letter "l". According to them, whereas a literature with the small letter designates any written text on any area of discipline, the "literature" that begins with the capital letter "L" designates a smaller set of all books that have been written – a much smaller

subset. In the views of Robinson and Davidson (2014), literature constitutes the whole body of written works of a particular country or period in time, the whole body of information published on a particular subject.

Calderwood, Troolin, and Blakeley (2023) add that the definition of literature includes written and unwritten works used for cultural transmission. They could include stories told in the oral tradition and visual literature. The link between literature and writing may not be unexpected when we consider literature from the etymological point of view. Etymonline (2023) maintains that the word had its origin from the Latin *literatura/littera* which means “writing formed with letters”, alphabetic letter, an epistle, writing or lettered document. Other writings add that the word literally means “acquaintance with letters”, and includes reflective essays or belles-lettres. Literature, belles-letters, letters, refer to artistic writings worthy of being remembered.

In research work, when we talk of a review of related literature, we simply refer to all documentations that have been made by different researchers which may have relationship with the research work at hand. In this sense, we can see the relationship of literature with letters or writings. The literature of a people consists of a whole body of written works or oral tradition which has documented the people’s origin and existence over the ages. For instance, through works of literature, we understand that the people of Israel and Egypt have existed for ages. The Holy bible records the genealogy of Israel, and links it to Adam the first creation of God, while also tracing the descendants of Jesus Christ the messiah, through to David, as recorded in Luke’s gospel (3:32-38):

...David, which was the son of Jesse, which was the son of Obed, which was the son of Booz, which was the son of Salmon, which was the son of Na’ason, ...which was the son of Phares, which was the son of Juda, which was the son of Jacob, which was the son of Isaac, which was the son of Abraham, which was the son of Thara, which was the son of Nachor, ...which was the son of Ma-thusa-la, which was the son of Enoch, which was the son of Jared, which was the son of Maleleel, which was the son of Cainan, which was the son of Enos, which was the son of Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God.

In like manner, the nation Egypt, can readily trace their roots and ancestry through the Holy book, the bible. Egypt shares boundary with Israel, and from the records of the Holy bible, Egypt was a cradle of civilization, a centre for agriculture, technology and ancient science. When there was famine in Canaan land, Israel got sustenance from Egypt. The progenitors of the Israeli nation later migrated to Egypt and was sustained by Egypt for over four centuries. Moses, the great prophet of God that championed the exodus was born in Egypt. There is no doubt that Moses became a product of Egyptian education. The veracity of this statement is captured by the Holy bible in Acts

(7: 22), “And Moses was learned in the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deed”.

The holy bible therefore, can aptly be said to extensively contain the literatures of Israel and Egypt, among other nations. Benko and Parnas (2023) aver that Canaanites of all sorts would routinely migrate to Northern Egypt during times of drought. This was to afford them the agricultural advantages of the Nile delta which provided secure food sustenance. The sudden exit of Israel from Egypt robbed the Israeli hosts of the cheap labour which they exploited in the Israelites and so adversely affected their economy.

The School and the Study of Literature: Literature is a course of study that is justifiably included in the school curriculum. The study of literature in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions is a necessity for balanced learning. Currently, literature study is not emphasized in the primary schools in Nigeria. This is not good, as it robs pupils of the knowledge that facilitates their effective comprehension of literature in higher schools. The following reasons will be some of the reasons literature should be taught in schools:

Literature, A Mirror of Society: Literature is often a reflection of its society. Literature is so much connected to the environment. The literature of the people captures the people's life style, their food habit, their marriage customs, their style of education, legal system, religious life, dress code, commerce and general life style. Apparent historical periods are reflected in their literature. National and ethnic relationships, in politics, economy and wars are often reflected in literary accounts. Most literary works, whether they are oral or written fictions, often capture life as it is lived in its society.

In the words of Kermode, Hollander, Bloom, Price, Trapp, and Trilling (1973), *Beowulf* is the finest surviving long poem in old English, now written in a single manuscript. According to them, there is no knowledge of the author of this long epic, neither was it given the title until 1805. Before it was put into print in 1815, it had remained an oral tradition. The epic of Sundjata composed in medieval Mali is, according to Senanu and Vincent (1988), a historical account of Susu Sumanguru Baamangana, also called Sosso Soumaoro Kanté, a sorcerer who ruled the Sosso kingdom. Senanu and Vincent (1988) say he had conquered Mali, defeating Dankaran Touman, a half-brother of Sundjata, who had usurped the throne of Mali against the will of Nare Maghan their late father. *The vulture* by Birago Diop, in Senanu and Vincent (1988), x-rays the imperialistic savagery of the colonial masters on African natives. The colonization of Africa is a historical fact which is captured also by literature. On the other hand, the society benefits by literary works, as they expose the people's life style to the world for global appreciation. Works of literature therefore have symbiotic relationship with the society. It is the content of the society that the literary artist utilizes as raw materials to produce his work. In the classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe utilizes the people and their rich cultural heritage to produce his masterpiece. The setting is Igbo land in Southern Nigeria. Names such as Okonkwo, Unoka, Ikemefuna, Nwoye among others, show that Achebe is writing on events that take place in the Igbo society. The people observe the yearly seasons such as new moon, new yam festival, and the rituals of the planting season, among others. In like manner, most Shakespearean works such as *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, among others, were set in Italy, Rome; Scotland, Britain, among others. The names of the characters, their style of speaking and addressing of situations, their food and the climate of their environment all portray foreign, non-African society. Culturally, the works of the above texts reflect the society they are set.

1. X-ray of Societal Values: When we are studying the society, we are unconsciously studying its values. The values of different societies are reflected in the novels we read, the drama texts and their settings and also the poems. Other writings of literature equally reveal how a people marry, conduct their naming ceremony, their

cherished lifestyle, their taboos, how they bring up their young ones and how they give respect to elders, among other lifestyles.

2. Benefit from the insight of others: The study of literature enables us to share in the benefit of others' insights. Writers do not divorce themselves from personal experiences when they write. These personal experiences teach great lessons to readers when such readers intermittently stop to ponder over what they read.

3. Opening of our minds to ambiguities of life. Life is full of challenges which often influence people positively or negatively. Some life experiences may predispose the concerned to a double standard living which may leave people bewildered about them. Study of different characters and situations in literary works open our minds into appreciating the realities about people's lives. Some actions exhibited by characters in a literary work may be ambiguous, lending it to different interpretations. Such ambiguities that give rise to different interpretations awaken the mind into divergent thinking. Poetry uses word economy and so, says so much in so few words. Symbols used in literary works are subject to endless interpretations. The four lobed kolanut has a symbolic interpretation in Igbo land. While it is interpreted to represent the four market days of Nkwo, Eke, Ori and Afor, the three lobed kolanut may be said to be dumb, or at other occasions it is said to represent the three major Nigerian tribes of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The four lobed kolanut would at some national occasion be taken to represent the three major ethnic nationalities and the minority. In Denis Brutus' "The Sun on this Rubble", the sun is a symbol of hope arising after the turbulent and dark periods of the heavy downpour. All of these stretch our brains to an elastic thinking point and make literature very important in the school curriculum.

4. Exploration of other People's Culture and Beliefs. Study of literature exposes learners to the cultures of other people and their beliefs. When we understand others, we appreciate the angle from where they are coming and respect their views. This will make for cordial relationships. We are best only in our own worlds, but when we mix with others, we find very thrilling things that make others equally good and unique. Literature and literary works bring out the appreciable aspects of other people. It does not however mean that we will accept all that are found in others, but even when we reject their life style or belief system, we yet see ourselves close to understanding them.

5. Development of Critical thinking. Study of literature develops critical thinking in learners. Critical thinking exercises and develops the brain. Great literary works have often have hidden meanings that would motivate deep critical thinking for proper analysis. Classical works of literature are not often easily comprehended by everybody. This will task the brain for resolutions.

Language of Literature: Literary works are characterized by a special language which bequeath to it colour, that makes it different from other works such as research report, history, minutes of a meeting or reports of a proceeding. According to [quora.com](https://www.quora.com/), literature in general refers to works that are considered artistic, or of intellectual merit. Such artistic works are usually replete with literary or figurative expressions such as similes, metaphors, imagery, oxymoron, and litotes among others, which are usually not the case with other non-literary genres of writing. In "The Sun on This Rubble" by Denis Brutus, he paints a vivid image with the sun beaming its radiance on the debris, caused by the violent rainstorm after a destructive rainfall. In that predictive poem, he

uses the sun as a symbol of hope which would come after the destructive apartheid regime that wreaked havoc on South Africa. Achebe (2012:1), figuratively describes the political, economic, religious, and social enslavement and subsequent dominion of the West against Africa, following the Berlin conference of 1885, as a “rain that beat Africa”. The unfortunate aspect of Africa’s total subservience to the West is that Africa was oblivious of the time the West plotted their enslavement, and so are right now quite unable to ascertain how to free themselves. According to him; “The rain that beat Africa began four to five hundred years ago, from the ‘discovery’ of Africa by Europe, through the transatlantic slave trade, to the Berlin conference of 1885.” In the poem *Breath*, Soyinka (1985), figuratively describes the African belief in life after death. He shows that the dead and the living still have communication and it is only one that listens discreetly that will hear the communicative language:

Listen more to things

Than to words that are said

The water’s voice sings And the flame cries

And the wind that brings

The woods to sighs

Is the breathing of the dead.

Those who are dead have never gone away.

They are in the shadows darkening around, They are in the shadows fading into day, The dead are not under the ground.

They are in the trees that quiver,

They are in the woods that weep,

They are in the waters of the rivers, They are in the waters that sleep.

They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.

The dead are never dead...

The language of literature gives it an edge over grammar when it comes to communication. Whereas grammar can only walk, literature can run, jump and fly. Whereas in grammar, one cannot eat a stone, nor swallow a camel without violating semantic rules, one may not only eat a stone in literary language, but can equally squeeze out water from the rocks, swallow a camel, and even develop the serpent’s tongue, if only to beautify the creative work of art. The heavens can cry, shed tears, groan in pain and vomit vapour and stone. The language of literature is therefore a special one that colourates speech and writings, making it fascinatingly rich. While literature as a body of study, enjoys that special language privilege, poetry as a literary genre enjoys more. With poetic license, a literary artiste can turn a negative statement into positive orientation. Imagine the late African pop music star, Sunny Okosun (Ozzidi) telling us in his *No More War* track, “We don’t want to fight war no more”, yet he tells us *No more war*. The poet enjoys a poetic license that makes him use words off the normal grammatical context and yet enjoys acceptance.

Building a Virile Nation. In building a virile and formidable nation, the role of literature in the curriculum cannot be under-played. A nation is her school products. Whatever a nation wants to be is determined by the type of school curriculum it approves for her populace. Since the strength of the curriculum determines the strength of the nation, it then follows that proper care should be taken in selecting the type of learning experiences her youthful population should be brought up with. Literature when properly taught, raises a population of national intellectuals who bring out the image of the nation. There can be no hopeful future without a useful past, captured in the present. Works of literature are very instructive in trying to construct a goal-oriented generation in any nation. From definition, we see literature as a creative work of art through which emotion is poured out for the reader to benefit from the feeling of another. Literature does not only capture emotionally laden situations, but also captures the historical past of a people – their origin, ancestry and cultural past. Such pasts are necessary to reposition today and reconstruct the future. No nation can develop evenly and harmoniously coexist without the past. How the past is presented is important for the stability or otherwise of the nation. If the past is presented with negative orientation, where their different constituent ethnic nationalities never agreed, were never ever one, never wanting to be one, often at wars and each aspiring to undo the other, it will not be unlikely that the succeeding generations would never like to see eye to eye with others from other ethnic groups. If on the other hand, the literary artistes build a bonding past by their literary creations, the succeeding generations will always see one another as people of a common destiny, bound to pursue a common goal. In such environment, the national goals and aspirations of that nation would seamlessly be pursued and achieved. According to Donaldson (2023), to have a country of national cohesion, every person has to be pulling in the same direction. According to him, if in his country England, one or several groups feel very differently about what it means to be British, then social cohesion would be very much difficult to attain. Works of literature can be used to awaken government's consciousness on the need for comprehensive human capital development for a nation's progress.

Literature for Science and Technology. For a nation to build viable technology, there must be a proper literature of her past technologies. Such study which will be basically a review will seek to determine the strengths and weaknesses of previous works of technology. Result of such study will enable them formulate better technology. The curriculum that produced the former technology will be reviewed to add strengths and remove weaknesses. Such literature review will equally study technologies of other nations and come up with ways of improvement. Review of related literature in sciences and science-related works will lead to improved curriculum that will produce science and technology experts that will grow the nation. We know that no nation can successfully exist without good technology. Advanced countries like America, China, Japan, Israel, among others, have been able to top the world due to advancement in science and technology. A literature study of such countries' science and technologies will help Nigeria to make some advancements in her curriculum planning with a view to improving in her science and technology instruction.

Literature for International Relations. International relations among countries is very vital for mutual coexistence among them. Having considered the essence of literary studies in the school curriculum to include exploration of other people's culture and beliefs, it behooves us to say that the study of literature in our schools will produce men and women for international relations who will help

the nation to sustain bilateral and multilateral relationship with other countries. A virile nation is a strong nation. A strong nation is an economically self-sustaining one; a nation militarily independent, whose youth population have strong moral character; who respect the human dignity, upholding the rule of law. It is equally a nation that can guarantee the safety of the life of her citizens, and who can guarantee quality and affordable education for her growing populace. Adequate knowledge of one another in the society built by adequate literary instruction engineered by a literature favoured curriculum will enhance good international relations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we maintain that literature is an embracing discipline which if properly harnessed, is capable of making a nation great. For instance, the knowledge of literature will enhance interpersonal, interethnic and international relationship through study of interrelationships. To derive a maximum advantage that literature offers, it must have to be captured in the curriculum which is an anthology of well selected and organized knowledge geared towards achieving a positive change in the behavior of the learner.

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