

## LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to examine the roles played by language, literature and culture in enhancing people's knowledge of their environment and that of others. The paper takes a look at some of the definitions of language, literature and culture and concludes that the relationship among the three is interwoven. From a brief history of the evolution of the English language in West Africa, the paper states that the variety of the language used in African creative writing is a domesticated variety of the English language. Literature on its own cannot thrive alone because it is the resources of language that it uses to disseminate information. Literature, therefore, is the aesthetic manifestation of language. Culture shows itself in everything – language, literature, and in the behaviour of people. The paper also uses *The Blinkards*, a play by Sebina Sekyi to bring the point closer, that the three, concepts are concerned with the growth, improvement and development of the society. The paper concludes that language, literature and culture are used as a rich resource to develop and reawaken the consciousness of man to positive societal norms and values.*

**Keywords:** Language, Literature, culture, socio-cultural awakening, Sebina Sekyi.

### **Introduction**

Language is the most eminent means of communication and is an effective tool for social interaction. Humans employ the instrument of language and use it in various ways in their day to day activities. The use of language distinguishes man from the lower animals. Language plays a major role in national development because it is employed by literary artists to get across to their numerous audience. Language is a vehicle for the transmission of the culture- the way of life, the literature, of a people. Hence, it is as a repository of a people's culture, history and exploits. Language is an extremely important aspect of a community, as well as an important index of identity.

The term 'literature' is of two natures :(a) the build-up of all that is written in a particular discipline. In other words, it can refer to what is documented in the field of Physics, Astrology, Marxism or Necromancy as their literatures. (b) The other understanding of literature refers to products of imaginative or creative writing, namely prose, drama and poetry. This is the interest of this work.

Zimmermann (2017, p.1) defines culture as “the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts”. From the foregoing definition, it can be said that culture encompasses food, what we wear, what we believe, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things. One thing is certain about culture, it will change. While change is inevitable, the past should also be respected and preserved – this is where the role of literature comes in. The blend of language, literature and culture is a veritable strategy for molding and shaping people's attitude towards their core group values.

With the above understanding, language is an integral part of literature and it is on language that literature depends. Language is also used to express one's cultural identity through the means of creative writing. Osofisan (2012, p.221) agrees with this position when he affirms that "you cannot write, if you cannot use language effectively. The tool of the writer is language. If you cannot hold the tool properly, how are you going to use it?" Therefore, language, literature and cultural identity are all interwoven.

The aim of the paper is to show the essence of language in relation to literature, the beauty of literature and its ability to add value to our cultural identity, conscientize people on their cultural identity and even suggest solutions to the world's moral problems. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section is the introduction; the second is a brief survey of the evolution of the English language in West Africa to which Nigeria belongs, the third section discusses literature and its importance in asserting one's cultural values and identity. The last part concludes the essay. The paper draws instances from the work of a West African dramatist – Kobina Sekyi entitled, *The Blinkards*. The drama is used to buttress the fact that literature, is a veritable tool that is used to assert cultural values and identity.

### **Evolution of the English Language in West Africa**

The English language has a rich history in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular. It began from the establishment of trading ports in parts of the African continent in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by European merchants. Later on, missionary activities and colonialism came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coupled with the return of African slaves to the various countries of Africa. The early contact between Europe and West Africa involved mainly the Portuguese and West Africa, who by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, established trading posts/forts in West Africa. The years of Portuguese contact made the development of a language of trade imperative. Thus Nigerians had to learn Portuguese to enhance their access to the new European market.

Other Europeans later joined the Atlantic trade. An example is Thomas Windham, an English Sailor who visited Benin in the company of Nicholas Lambert, the son of an English Mayor (Spencer, 1971). As a result, some Africans were trained as interpreters. This brought back the use of English on the Guinea Coast to which Nigeria and other West African Countries belonged. English and Portuguese were used in the early days of contact but English dominated later. The interaction between the West Africans and Europeans brought the English culture and language closer to the people.

The missionaries also contributed to the use of the English language. The CMS mission and the RCM provided education in the Western and Eastern parts of Nigeria respectively. The missionaries brought in teachers from England, Germany, Ireland and Scotland, as the case may be. The colonial government provided education mainly in the North. After the amalgamation, down to the independence era, English became the lingua franca. After independence, the teachers from Europe left and the teaching of English was left in the hands of the indigenous teachers. As a result, English changed. Different accents of English developed. These accents reflected the various forms of English spoken in Nigeria.

Today, the language is being used for several purposes which reveal the influences other regions have on it. Regional accents have manifested gradually such as Southern, Northern, Eastern and

Western varieties of Nigerian English. Over the years of its existence, it has been domesticated to meet the people's need for cultural expression and national identity. Ushie and Uduk (2013, p.98) lay credence to this assertion thus, "English functions for wider communication as it bridges the gap between linguistically incomprehensible neighbours". This function of language goes a long way to assist literal writers as they are able to reach a wider audience since the English language becomes a gateway to the world.

Creative writers use the English language as a medium of communication to get to their target audience. The variety of English used by these early African writers especially in Nigeria is the Nigerian brand of English. Some early Nigerian creative writers wrote in their mother tongue. The problem this choice created was that it limited the audience for whom the texts were meant for. Some proponents of this school include Fagunwa who wrote in Yoruba and Obi Wali, who wrote in Igbo (Ajeigbe 2004, p.308). These writers feel that the foreign language is not enough to advance the course of African literature and culture.

However, such writers as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Kobina Sekyi, Tess Onwueme, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie among others adopt the English language and adapt it to suit their cultural situations. Dadzie (2004) supports this view when he asserts that the likes of Soyinka, Clark and Achebe use good English embellished with manifestations of local culture. Some younger artists are also towing the line and they are succeeding in their craftsmanship.

### **Literature and Cultural Affirmation**

In preliterate societies, oral literature was widely shared, it saturated the society and was as much a part of living as food, clothing, shelter or religion. In early societies, the minstrel might be a courtier of the king or chieftain, and the poet who composed liturgies might be a priest. But the oral performance itself was accessible to the whole community. As society evolved its various social classes, an elite literature began to be distinguishable from the folk literature of the people. With the invention of writing, this separation was accelerated until finally literature was being experienced individually by the elite, while folklore and folksong were experienced by the illiterate common people.

There are various definitions of literature proffered by literary scholars. Onuekwusi (1989, p.86) defines literature as "any imaginative and beautiful creation in words whether oral or written which explores man as he struggles to survive in his existential position and which provides entertainment, information, education and excitement to his audience". Altick (in Eko, 2013, p.18) defines literature as "an eloquent artistic document, infinitely varied, of mankind's journey, the autobiography of the races' soul, a powerful tool for creating and maintaining cultural roots, a mirror in which the young in culture first identifies with a group". Rexroth ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)) also describes literature as "the organization of words to give pleasure... literature elevates and transforms experience beyond "mere" pleasure ... it functions more broadly in society as a means of both criticizing and affirming cultural values". From the above definitions of literature, one can deduce that literature is basically about man. It teaches, entertains and adds more value to the cultural values of man. People learn best from stories, whether they are old or young. The stories therefore speak to the heart, drawing from human cultures, idea and feelings.

It is generally believed that in Africa, art is functional; art for art's sake has no place in Africa. This is contrary to the belief of the followers of "The Aesthetic Movement" in Europe, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Abram, 2009, p.4). Eyoh (2018, p.1) also lends credence to the functionality of African literature when he posits that, "Nigerian literature does not contemplate art for the sake of art but art for the service of society". In support of the argument, further, Eyoh believes "in the inseparability of literature from the historical and cultural dynamics that produce it". Since independence and the monumental disappointments that followed its euphoria, African literature till date has not ceased to tell the story in potent words and expressions the evil fruits of neo-colonialism: nepotism, tribalism, resultant massive corruption; the decline of positive social values, the decay of morality and increase in violence. African writers of successive generations have played vital roles in the exposure of these societal evils which have persisted under successive military dictators until the present.

Redeeming one's culture therefore, becomes the duty of the creative artist. It then behoves the artist to create literature that will raise the people's consciousness towards the societal or national values of a group of people. The creative artist using the tool of language promotes the customs, traditions and values of their society or community. The African playwright, Kobina Sekyi from Ghana has used the resources of language to produce a work of art that is at the root of the people's culture and civilization.

*The Blinkards* (1974) by Kobina Sekyi is a satirical comedy that captures the author's reaction to the colonial experience and its effects in Africa. The play demonstrates the negative attitudes of a society towards her own socio-cultural values and prefers that of the colonial master. The playwright's educational pursuit in England around 1910 afforded him the opportunity to experience first-hand the inhuman nature of colonialism. Sekyi believes in the supremacy of African traditions and supports Africans returning to their past and being proud of their heritage. Sekyi creates characters to suit his message. For instance, Sekyi uses Mrs Brofusen as an example of the sort of African woman colonial education would produce; Mr Onyimdzi represents Sekyi's idea of an African who can intelligently combine Western values with those of Africa (Akan) without any conflict at all. Such a combination of traditional wisdom with modern ways should make for a better society rather than to abandon one's ways of life for another people's customs.

To many Africans who have been to England or who have adopted the Western way of doing things, they now consider themselves superior to those who have not. They alienate themselves from the customs and values of their people which they consider as only good enough for the bushmen. Mrs Brofusen cuts a figure of such an African. Her mode of dressing depicts her new found creed (p.45). She exhibits her strange fashion combination that mixes English dressing with indigenous ones. Her claims to proficiency in the English language often end up with embarrassing grammatical errors or faulty pronunciation – "Mrs Gush, she always kiss her husband when he extra nice" (p.23); "I mean to say that I have forget myself" (p.25); "my mouth is not smell" (p.27); "you have eat native chop all the time I am away" (p.29); "to kill one bird with two stones" (p.38); "to be marriage, of course" (p.67) etc. She also insists that her husband speaks to her in English rather than in Fante, their own language.

*The Blinkards* Portrays that it is through clothing that the vital picture of a person's identity and cultural link are determined. Wearing 'native dress' or 'cloth' stigmatizes a person as a 'savage' and 'uncivilized'. No matter how highly placed or educated a person is, he will be considered a 'savage' if he does not dress in Western Fashion. MrOnyimdzi, the lawyer, is attacked for coming to a party in native attire. They tell him, "you don't behave yourself. Look at your cloth. It is savage" (p.57). They also accuse him of dressing in a "savage" manner incompatible with his level of education (p.58).

Other relevant examples in the play include a situation where African names are abandoned for European names for no good reason (p.30); the use of fork and knife for local dishes (p.62); the belief in white surgeons more than black ones (p.76). The respected institution of marriage is subjected to ridicule when Mr. Okadu decides to marry Miss Tsiba in the Western fashion. The real vital traditional considerations in marriage are shelved for irrelevances, such as knowledge of the English culture as a qualification for marital engagement (pp. 37-38). Here, parental consent is not needed, the engagement is all that matters. Many examples of cultural clash and identity crisis abound in the play but the above examples will suffice. At the end of the play, the entire crisis is resolved. MrsBrofusen and her group realize their blind imitation of the Western culture and they all agree to blend the African culture with the Western culture for a healthier, wiser, more respectable and dignified African society.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has examined the relationship between language, literature and culture. The function of the three overlap and are inter-related. The non-native users of English as a second language, to which Africa belongs, are proficient in it to the extent that they make it their own, possess it, bend it to their will, assert themselves through it rather than submit to the dictates of the native variety. They take possession of the language and turn it to their advantage. Achebe (1975, p.67) concurs with this position when he says that, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience... But it has to be new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings". So, the English language has been domesticated into different varieties to suit local needs.

Literature, thrives on the resources of language. Words are used in creative writing to help liberate the people politically from any form of domination, mentally from ignorance and superstition, and culturally by upholding the values of the people. This is what KobinaSekyi does in his work, *The Blinkards*. The educated characters see clearly the danger of adopting another man's culture which would mean the death of self and identity. As such, they choose to promote their own language and culture. The educated characters mix the Fante and English languages in their speech.

The relationship between language, literature and culture is deep rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Literature, on the other hand, takes place in a cultural setting and no meaningful literature is possible without the existence of a community value shared by the writer and the audience.

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