



## LITERATURE A PANACEA FOR SOCIAL COHESION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: A PERSPECTIVE ON ACHEBE'S "WHAT HAS LITERATURE GOT TO DO WITH IT?"

By

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### Abstract

*The social cohesion that is elusive in our today's society which threatens the very developmental journey evident in many countries and the trajectory on which the teaching profession has strived over the years has left a magnanimous demand on its continuous survival calls for an urgent solution. It is on this backdrop that this paper "Literature a Panacea for Social Cohesion and National Development: A Perspective on Achebe's What Has Literature Got To Do With It" stands to address, issues that derailed practices in the educational sector and the socio-political landscape. The study finds literature as a potent tool in addressing social and developmental issues, particularly, in an African state. A conscious shift must be borne in mind, to ensure complete overhauling of traditional upheld practices in different sectors, in order to birth a new set of generational inspired breed of students who will at the same time give value to the stability and the development of the country.*

**Keywords:** Literature, Panacea, Social Cohesion, National Development, Perspective on

### Introduction

If literature is anything to go by, teacher and teacher education should embrace dimensional and reflective thinking through imaginational and inspirational leaning. By literature we mean literature that span out across time and borders of man, the literature of great minds that have shifted the course of things. Taking a cursory look at the philosophical mind of Plato (Circa 428 BC – 348 BC) who exerted efforts to understand the world around him covered metaphysics, ethics, politics, aesthetics, perception, and the nature of knowledge itself. Despite having been written more than two-thousand years ago, his work remains eminently readable today. Plato did not deal in dry, tedious treatise. He preferred to bring his work to life, teasing out thoughts and ideas in the form of a dialogue between characters.

This in itself was a remarkably innovative approach. Plato blurred the lines between philosophy and entertainment and challenged the reader to scrutinize their own beliefs.



Secondly, the artistry mind of Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) in an age renowned for producing an abundance of great artists, Da Vinci is regarded as one of the greatest of them all. Yet painting was by no means his only talent, nor perhaps even his greatest talent. He studied geometry, mathematics, anatomy, botany, architecture, sculpture, and designed weapons of war for the kings, princes, and barons who struggled for wealth and power in Italy's warring city states. The literary prowess of William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) who was by no means the only famous playwright of his era, but his work has stood the test of time in a way that others have not. Few people are now familiar with the plays of Ben Johnson or Christopher Marlowe; fewer still have seen them performed. While his rivals are now little more than historical footnotes, Shakespeare is even more famous and celebrated in death than he was in life. With an estimated 4 billion copies of his work having been sold, he ranks as the best-selling fiction author of all time and their likes (James, 2018).

It is not debateable to assert in clear terms the nature of proceedings in the educational sector; teachers nowadays make robots out of their students. A conscious paradigm tilting is borne in mind to adequately equip a today's student into thinking out of the box; a shift where pure fields of sciences will include as part of their courses literatures of these fields. Fictional biographies and autobiographies of many of these scientific geniuses abound and should be ventured [into](#), in order to create in students the need and the imaginative prowess to birth great inventors, scientist etc.

Achebe believes that literature has social and political importance. It is much more than a creative ornament. It provides a necessary critical perspective on everyday experience, educates us on the meaning of our actions and offers us greater control over our social and personal lives. According to Achebe, literature works by "enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within our problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us.

Literature is connected with social, economic and educational growth. Literature is related with the creation of human societies. Because Nigeria wants to grow as an independent nation, it needs the creative energy of national stories to support and sustain the growth of the nation. In fact, even if we look back to classical literature, it is seen that the portrayal of Achilles or Ulysses is indirectly connected to the growth of Greece as a nation. So also is the portraiture of Beowulf connected to the social, historical and national development of the Anglo Saxon society. There is a relationship between the Anglo Saxons sitting around the fire on the hearth rebelling against the cold and charting their own growth and psychoanalysis storytelling. Both have a psychological implication in them. When one tells a story to the psychoanalyst he actually tells a story. The connection between literature and psychoanalysis as Achebe puts it 'Literature can have an important and profound positive effect as well, functioning as a kind of bountiful, nourishing matrix for a healthy, developing psyche.' Literature thus helps to counter psyche in real life helping in a discovery of the self that tables to cope with life. Literature through the symbol of the animal story connects itself with political uprisings, sociological and historical growths as well as psychoanalytic analysis of the self which helps in confronting reality and finding one's own self (Basu, 2011).

In the work, [What Has Literature Got To Do With It](#) Chinua Achebe emphasizes his belief that literature is much more than just a creative form of expression, arguing that it is a necessary and vital contribution to everyday life. Achebe explains how "Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print; gives us a second handle on reality". It does so by providing the essential building blocks toward development, or as he calls it, "modernization."

In other words, Achebe argues that, in order for African nations to prosper and become successful, their first "goal" should be to understand literature.



After identifying modernization as the “comprehensive goal” of every developing country, Achebe is able to indicate “what items should make up the traveler’s rather limited baggage allowance”. Furthermore, to explain these statements he then goes into great detail about the way in which literature has helped shape other countries by allowing them to become more technologically and scientifically advanced. To support this argument, Achebe states that, “the modern developed world owes much of its success to scientific education and development”. Here it becomes clear that Achebe believes that science is what drives modernization, however, without literature science would not be able to be taught. By going in-depth and describing America’s educational system as “well-developed and viable” he is able to further emphasize his initial argument over the importance of literature and the association it has with modernization of undeveloped countries. Achebe then invites the reader to make the eye-opening realization of the lack of importance that Africa has placed on its educational system by rhetorically stating, “what kind of science can a child learn in the absence, for example, of basic language competence?” From his point of view, it is difficult for Africa to prosper because, although African children understand their spoken language, literature goes beyond what one can speak and if one does not know how to read and write literature, then one is not able to become modernized because you need those basics of literature in order to learn other subjects, such as science.

In an effort to explain the overall correlation that literature has with development, Achebe mentions two animal stories which he describes as “short...but complex enough to warrant...them as literature,”. At first glance these two stories may seem to have no meaning and serve as stories to “put a smile on your face,” however, when thoroughly analyzed they can be said to have interesting implications. The story about the snake, in particular, addresses the idea that literature can have a major impact on social status and class division. In the story, the snake emphasizes the idea behind, “knowing is good, but having is better”. Although the toad knows how to ride a horse better than the snake does, the snake has the advantage of being born into wealth that the toad does not. With this in mind it can be concluded that the snake symbolizes nations that have been able to become developed due to their ability to use literature, and the toad symbolizes common people in undeveloped countries who have not yet been able to put their understanding of literature into practice. To further support this argument, when the snake asked the toad, “What good does fine horsemanship do to a fellow without a horse?”, it could be said that even if Africans were to gain a better understanding of literature, their simplistic underdeveloped way of life would not allow them to reach modernization. Therefore, if Africa does not change its way of life by allowing literature to help shape its countries, then development will be limited and Africa will not be able to prosper like other countries of the world.

After having reviewed Achebe’s vast array of arguments, which connect literature with social, economic, and educational growth, it can be concluded that literature is associated with the establishment of human societies. Because Nigeria wants to prosper as an independent nation, it needs the fundamental building blocks of literature to aid and sustain the entire development of the nation. He went on to point the fact that, indeed, a country out rightly is judged by what it honours, stating that a nation’s reflection and leaning are seen by what it celebrates, that is to say, if a nation honours or celebrates corruption and others, its systems vibrate same energy, Achebe explains how, “for of all the ways a nation may be judged, none bears more on its spiritual tone or general viability than what it honours and how. Indeed, we might say that a nation becomes what it honours”.

The clause ‘Man is a goal setting animal’ is a mouth-watering realization of the ideal nature of man. In every society, ‘goals’ are set, planned, executed and achieved and it is primarily a sole responsibility of the specie ‘man’. In the words of Pablo Picasso, quoted in an article, reveal that “our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of plan, in which we must fervently believe, and upon which we must vigorously act. There is no other route to success”.



The connectivity that exists in a society, boils down to the role a man plays in nation building. And since man is saddled with such responsibility, Achebe suggests that man is required to pursue that with both intelligence and judgement. As he puts it, “man most rational strategy is to stay as cool as possible in the face of the confusion and attack the problems singly or in small manageable groups, one at a time.”

Marcus and Wesley in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, opine that “modernization theory casts development as a uniform evolutionary route that all societies follow, from agriculture, rural, and traditional societies to post-industrial, urban, and modern form.” Achebe did not mince words when he said that the overall goal of a nation is modernization at its best, as he simply puts it, “The comprehensive goal of a nation like Nigeria is, of course, development or its somewhat better variant, modernization.”. He was equally mindful of the fact that even though goals are crucial, there must be a careful dealing, to avoid putting more strains on the people. Achebe calls the economy of Japan a ‘miracle’, when he says, “we the late comers (as Mario J. Levy calls us) have every reason to pay special attention to Japan’s success story as we take our faltering steps to modernization”. In other words, Nigeria as a nation must make conscious efforts in becoming a self-actualized nation.

only the story...can continue beyond the war and the warrior.

It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters.

It is the story...that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars

into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.

Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) in (Cora, 1998).

This further proves that stories are integral part of a people, it renders a common front to their culture and tradition, in other words, literature gives people an identity. “stories have been told since even before humans learned to read and write... these stories have passed on through generation: some of them fill up history books, some are integral to culture, and some are embedded in family values.” Achebe stresses the importance of stories to mankind, he states that “... stories served the purpose of consolidating whatever gains a people or their leaders have made or imagined in their existential journey through the world.” (Sultana, 2020) argues that:

more than any other discipline, literature is too often criticised as a minor field of study.

Dismissed as the outcast, whimsical child of the discipline, overshadowed by its illustrious scientific and technological siblings, the need and significance of literature is discarded.

However, despite its criticisms literature endures as a substantial study that continues to elucidate our understanding of the human experience.

The crux of the matter has been and will always be, *What Has Literature Got To Do With It?* This has begged for answers and has continued to do so, with many lending their voices to such a pertinent question.

Furthermore, Achebe in his rendering, gives a clear submission to the question and argues that ‘it’ can literary stands for concrete aspirations like economic growth, health for all, education which actually educates, etc. To also chip in, one may add to the stock to simply say that ‘It’ represents issues like social cohesion and national development. He maintains that, having lots and lots of money does not translate to modernization but rather having the will and the mind to birth development. In the same vein, Sultana submits, so ‘what has literature got to do with it?’ whilst science and technology may build the foundations and structure of a modern nation, literature is what breathes life into it.



To put it simply, literature has everything to do with it. Achebe conclusively avers thus: the matter is quite simple, literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life; and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imparts. What better preparation can a people desire as they begin their journey into the strange, revolutionary world of modernization?

It contributes to the formation of imaginative thinking, enrichment of speech, fostering love for the native land, understanding of one's own belonging to the people, fostering a respectful attitude to national traditions (Atayeve, 2021). The relatedness of the subject to the contemporary issues in Nigerian society is in way succinctly presented. Paradoxically, the home is the mother of the society, it is a fact because the home breeds the people who form the macrocosm (the world) and whatever form of literature presented to a child at an early stage, moulds him/her in becoming what he/she is and that equally translates to the role he plays in a wider society. It can also be viewed to mean that, whatever ingredients needed to shape a better individual stems from the ideal issues, characters and imaginations displayed in these literatures a child first came in contact with.

## Conclusion

Our society today in its jittering phase needs an anchor to hold on to in order to ensure its stability and all round development. As Hannah puts it 'literature, as part of a larger cultural body, is both instructive and entertaining, and has the power to facilitate personal understanding and encourage social cohesion (Hannah, 2012).' If that is a statement of fact, then our collective will-power must be harness for the greater good of all.

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