
AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: *This paper gives a report of contemporary children's literature in Ghana. It achieves this by tracing the role of traditional storytelling in contemporary literature for children. It showcases the various forms of migration of traditional storytelling by contemporary Ghanaian writers writing for children. The paper also takes a look at writers who are not directly migrating from the repertoire of traditional storytelling, but are looking at contemporary Ghanaian children within the society and weaving stories about them. This discourse is achieved by discussing the challenges writers of children literature face in terms of influences and distribution of final products. Three writers are chosen for this discourse—Aba Brew-Hammond, Meshack Asare and Ruby Y. Goka. However, other writers are mentioned in the paper. Pictographic evidence is also used as part of the work.*

KEYWORDS: Ghanaian Children's Literature, Contemporary Literature

INTRODUCTION

In Africa the art of storytelling is wide spread. Traditional folktales and characters are scattered all over our diverse cultures. Folktale culture forms part of African night entertainment in rural communities. These folktales, depending on where they originated are decorated with interesting characters who feature in almost every tale told. For instance, we have tricksters like the spider called Ananse among the Akans of Ghana, we have the tortoise, the hare and rabbit as well. These folktale characters, or tricksters, are the embodiment of entertainment and education for the indigenous African child.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Lawrence Darmani, in his novel, *First Term Surprises*, depicts the lifestyle of children in second cycle institutions. He writes a series according to the three terms of the Ghanaian educational calendar—first, second and third terms respectively. The novel breaks down the school activities as the writer weaves his story according to the activities within each term. Although it is a work of fiction, it becomes an authentic storehouse of information that depicts the educational and social lifestyle of the Ghanaian teenager in school. Ruby Yayra Goka, in her novel, *The Lost Treasure*, takes her young reader on a journey to a different part of Ghana where the child is not in school but working illegally. Although also a work of fiction authentic information is passed down in-between the lines of artistic creativity.

This is an indication of the existence of literature that caters for the needs of Ghanaian children. However, there is the need to investigate the various types of supplementary materials used to teach the Ghanaian child when it comes to the teaching of Literature. It is also important to draw educators and all stakeholders of education's attention to the need for including relevant Ghanaian

literature in mainstream curriculum by showing the lack of it and the factors that continuously create this lack.

METHODOLOGY

The books of the authors cited in this paper were read in order to judge the material's relevance to children's literature. Two schools were used as case studies in order to judge the extent of use of Ghanaian children's literature. The first school, Adankwame District Assembly School, was chosen because of its rural location and the fact that it is a state run school. Pentecost Preparatory School was chosen because it represents privately run schools situated in urban areas.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

In Ghana the traditional art of storytelling has paved the way for contemporary children's literature. This is because there are writers who are directly and indirectly adapting from the repertoire of traditional tales for retellings that come in print with or without colorful illustrations, depending on the target group. This group of Ghanaian writers is devoted to writing for children of all ages. However, this has not always been the case for Ghanaian children's literature. The phase of Ghanaian children's literature as it is seen today has travelled through time.

Now over the years, as culture evolves by taking in new perspectives, the art of traditional storytelling by the fireside at night by grandmothers, mothers, elders, and among peers has gradually lost its place. This could be due to the fact of urban migration, which is as a result of economic and social challenges. In Ghana more people are migrating to urban areas from rural communities in search of jobs and basic social amenities. The economic challenges that make it more difficult to provide the basic essentials for family is also putting a lot of stress on the average Ghanaian. As such, the time to sit and tell a story is gradually being lost to work, more work and little rest. Regardless of this fact, there is still the pressing need for children to hear stories. After all, these stories serve as entertainment and education.

Therefore there is the need to bridge the gap between storytelling and the Ghanaian child. As such, there are writers who have come to the fore with the sole purpose of keeping the art of storytelling for children alive. One of such writers is Aba Brew-Hammond. She is the author of *A Boy Called Wiser-Than-You*, *The Rabbit and His Singing Hoes*, and *Why God Created Everybody*. Aba Brew-Hammond migrates folktales from the North, Upper-West and Upper East Regions of Ghana into paper back for children. Her migration of traditional folktale from its rural hearth, where performance is physical, spontaneous and affective on to paper back; retains two essentials—entertainment and education for the child. For instance, in her story, *A Boy Called Wiser-Than-You*, entertainment is realized through the actions of *Wiser-Than-You* in the story. For instance, when the chief who dislikes the boy sends for his mother and gives her guinea corn in order to brew *pito*, a local drink, within a day. It is *Wiser-Than-You* who saves his mother. He does so by going to the chief's palace to plant some gourd seeds. When the chief confronts him he explains that:

I know you are very wise and everything about you is extraordinary. That is why I have come to plant my gourd seeds here so that they will grow fast, bear fruits for me to cut, prepare and dry, all by the end of today when they are required for use. "Are you crazy?" the chief asked him. "How is that possible? A gourd plant needs at least a year to mature and be made into calabashes. Don't you know that?" ... As the chief insisted that it was not possible, Wiser-Than-You asked, "Sir, why then did you ask my mother to brew pito in one day?" (p.3)

All through the story, the chief tries to outwit Wiser-Than-You but always fails, until the end, when his hatred for the boy causes the death of his son. The Ghanaian child learns a moral at the end of this story—one cannot always have his or her way; as such there should be mutual respect for one another; wisdom is also not a preserve for the elderly. A child can be wise too.

This and many more stories by Aba Brew-Hammond, are keeping alive traditional storytelling for contemporary Ghanaian children and also contributing to the bulk of children's literature.

Another writer who also migrates traditional folktales and myth on to paperback is Meshack Asare. Meshack Asare, a Germany based Ghanaian writer has written lots of stories for children. Some of his works are *Sosu's Call* (1997), *Nana's Son* (2000), *Meliga's Day* (2000), *The Cross Drums* (2008), among many others. In the creation of these stories, the writer migrates traditional storytelling elements into his creative process. For instance, in his story, *The Cross Drums*, Asare introduces his young readers to his creative version of what is a fusion of traditional tales and ethnographic history of Northern Ghana.

The story is coined out of a traditional tale of the history of enmity and later friendship between twin villages. An enmity started by adults is ended by the love between two young boys, Atimbilla and Meliga; both sons of the chiefs of the twin villages. Through the help of a hermit dwelling in the caves, the boys become proud owners of a set of twin drums. It is with the help of these twin drums that the conflict between the twin villages ends. It happens that after a conflict between the two villages that led to the loss of lives, the boys do not see each other for a long time. Atimbilla who misses his friend begins to play his drum and he receives response from his friend, Meliga:

Belem-bebem! Belem-bebem! Belem-Bebem! Like floodwater that carries everything along, it all rushed out of him in the voice of the drum: the fields where they graze their animals and play, the rocks and trees and bushes. It was the voice of the air and winds and storms, of thunder and lightning; of goats and sheep and squirrels... It echoed the happiness that was cast freely into the air like birdsong, for all to share and happiness too that had turned sour from being trapped in the hearts of those who feared one another. It echoed how much he missed Billa, his friend. (p.92-93)

The two boys finally meet in the field separating the two villages. They are followed by children from both villages and they play their drums and dance. Soon they are followed by adults from both villages, and finally, by the chiefs of the twin villages:

The enemy chief took a stride closer, the dagger glinting in his hand. Even children were still and adults held their breaths. Then something happened. The enemy chief sheathed his dagger again, raised it over his head and tossed it far behind him. He did not look where it fell. The smiling chief Abuguri searched under his smock and brought out a dagger. He too threw it far behind him...the two chiefs continued towards each other until they met. Then they stopped and looked straight into each other's eyes. They were like that for a few moments before Billa's father, the enemy chief Akuguri, spoke: "if the elephant cannot dance, they go to the mice and learn from them," he said. "Now you and I must learn to dance," said chief Abuguri, Meliga's father..." (p.102-104)

This story also offers the child, education and entertainment. The story exposes the child to the varying ethnic conflicts that plague the Northern part of Ghana. The reading of the story itself also creates entertainment for the child. In addition, it showcases the purity and innocence of childhood. A child after reading this story and discovering that it is actually an adaptation of the history of a group of people from Northern Ghana feels proud that children like himself or herself were responsible for the peace that finally settles on two communities who have spent years fighting each other. The figure of the child as an important member of society with a role to play is highlighted by Asare.

These writers, Aba Brew-Hammond and Meshack Asare create the consolation that although the popularity of the performance of traditional folktales has reduced, they are migrating and adapting its elements and repertoires for print and easy access to children. Aba Brew-Hammond does a direct migration of traditional folktales. Asare's approach is rather indirect, because as seen in the story, *The Cross Drums*, he recreates his own version of the story by fusing more than one traditional myth from the North.

However, this does not mean that all writers of children's literature in Ghana are migrating or adapting from traditional folktales. There are others educating and entertaining children by creating stories on the contemporary Ghanaian child. One of such is Ruby Yayra Goka. Some of her works for children includes: *The Mystery of the Haunted House* (2011), *The Lost Royal Treasure* (2012), *When the Shackles Fall*, (2013), and *A Gift for Fafa* (2013). Ruby uses the Ghanaian topography, coupled with her observation of the contemporary child to create her stories. She also uses serial characters who appear in every story she creates. By doing this she is creating for the Ghanaian child, child heroes and heroines who represent their expectations as children. For instance, in the story, *The Lost Treasure*, we meet serial characters, Koku, Kakra and Payin. In this story they are out on an adventure with an uncle, Prof. Kumah, who is an archeologist out on an archeological expedition in the Bepoase area.

The Bepoase area is found in the Western Region of Ghana. This region is blessed with the natural mineral resource, gold. The region is home to big mining companies such as AngloGold, Gold Fields and Newmont. In the story Ruby uses Bepoase accurately, and presents it as a mining town rich in gold. In the presentation of the town as one rich in gold, the real social issues affecting mining towns is portrayed in the story. One of such social issues is the use of child labor by illegal miners, locally referred to as *galamsey operators*. *Galamsey operators* use children to help in the

sifting of debris containing gold. This is also a lucrative business for the children and their parents. As such, children living in these areas prefer going to the pits than school. Ruby clearly represents this in her story through the young boy, Yaw.

A typical example is the little town of Tontonkrom, located in the Bekwai district of the Asante Region of Ghana. This is a mining town filled with small scale miners mostly comprising Chinese and illegal miners made up of indigenes of the area. A visit to the town revealed that children as young as seven are out of the school rooms in search of gold. During a discussion with one of the indigenes of the town, Juliet, the young wife of one of the town's chiefs; I asked her why children were allowed to mine:

Why waste time in school when you are going to school because of money? Once you search one pit, you can make a thousand cedis by the close of day. Is that not the reason why we are going to school? For money? (Tontonkrom, Feb, 14th, 2014)

It is obvious that with this mind set it is challenging to convince children to remain in school. In fact, Juliet gives an example of a teacher posted to the town to teach. But he abandons the classroom in pursuit of gold, "he is now into galamsey and making it big time!" She explained. (Tontonkrom, Feb, 14th, 2014) Below is a photograph from Tontonkrom taken at a mining (*galamsey*) sight. The picture shows teenagers who are supposed to be in school busy in mining. This is because it is more lucrative and attractive. But it is also very dangerous, because mining is not done using sophisticated machines but the crude method of digging.



1.1 Photo. Tontokrom, Galamsey Sight.

This picture is a factual proof of Ruby's fiction. In fact, these are pertinent issues that we grapple with daily as a nation. And the writer, Ruby identifies the role of children in this issue and uses it beautifully in her story. In the story we meet the young boy, Yaw, who is an indigene of Bepoase. Yaw is in search of his brother who he believes has gone to Accra. When he meets the boys, Koku and Kakra for the first time and tells them of his missing brother, Koku suggests he seeks the help of his teacher to report his brother as missing. But:

Yaw sneered, "I don't go to school." Koku and Kakra look at each other in surprise. He looked about a year older than they. Why was he not in school? Kakra asked what they were both thinking, "why not?" The boy removed his wallet from his back pocket. It was stuffed full of fifty cedis notes. "Why would I want to go and waste my time in school when I can be working?" (p.74-75)

Koku and Kakra are curious as to what kind of job the young Yaw is doing. And Yaw takes them to his work place:

Koku was not sure if this was the same river they'd encountered in the mountains. But there were fewer rocks and lots of pebbles and sand. Uprooted palm trees, bushes, and heaps of red earth were scattered along the bank. Many pits and trenches had been dug. The water here was dirty and brown. Groups of men, women and children were spread all over its banks... some of the children were carrying the sand and pebbles from mounds to the shallower end of the river where the water was clearer... some of the children, were naked with others clad only in shorts or singlets. (p.76)

Now, as the child reads this story, he identifies himself or herself in it. For instance, Koku and his friends living outside Accra are a representation of Ghanaian children living in the new springing up communities bordering the capital's metropolis and other urban areas. The simplicity of life such as hunting for fruits, riding bicycles along dusty roads and playing football in the local community pitch is brought into the story by the writer. The young reader in Accra, and other metropolitan areas around Ghana recognize the similarity of the characters to themselves. Education and entertainment takes place just as though it is a traditional folktale being retold. There is education in the information the writer presents to the child about the geographical location of Bepoase and its richness in gold. There is entertainment in the enjoyment of reading the book and the suspense it creates. The book also provides relevant educational information for the child.

So far, we have seen evidence of writers writing for children. However, it is not just about writing the stories. After writing, the target audience or market must receive the work. This creates some challenges in Ghana.

The distribution of books in Ghana is increasingly becoming challenging. One effective means of distribution was through schools. Writers and publishers get their books in the hands of children through school authorities. The process is to approach the school authority, preferably, head of the school with samples of the books, marketing them as supplementary readers. The head takes his time to go through the books, assisted by some of his teaching staff. Once they vet the contents of the book and deem it fit for the pupils, or students, they inform the writer or publisher that they are ready to do business. The books are not sold for more than 6 cedis. This is the standard price for schools. However, some schools decide to add a little to it for profits. So they can decide to sell to the children for between 8 and 10 cedis. Aside this, the distributor or publisher, pays the school 12% of the proceeds made. This practice has helped to get more books into the hands of pupils and second cycle students. For instance, school children now know of authors such as

Maamle Wolo, Irene Matie-Bates, Lawrence Darmani, among many others who are writing for children.

However due to the present government's political campaign to increase educational quality and access, there has been lots of government interference in the educational sector. Government has set up a monitoring team whose duty is to go around schools to investigate the fee break-down. As such, schools that have a lengthy billing list are penalized. The heads are either asked to withdraw their services voluntarily or involuntarily. In order to save their jobs, they have also began cutting down on their billing lists. And one major item on the list that suffers the most are supplementary readers because they come at an extra cost. This is affecting the distribution of literature to pupils and second cycle students.

Another challenge faced is the book purchasing culture of parents and guardians in Ghana. For instance, in government schools, text books and supplementary readers are provided by government. From kindergarten right down to junior high school, government provides books. As such, the habit of parents and guardians buying books for their wards has not been cultivated in them. Parents and guardians see purchasing books as government's responsibility. However, when government provides the books, it is the duty of parents to come and sign for the collection of the books by their wards. This is done to carter for any financial obligation that might arise if the books given to the child are destroyed. This is because the agreement is that the child must read and then return the books at the end of each term. Parents see this as a huge responsibility that they are not prepared to shoulder. They do not come forward to guarantee for their wards, as such, the children do not receive the books. The books are also not properly kept by the school because they do not have a library.

Below is a photograph taken at Adankwame District Assembly School. The books are kept in the backroom of the Headmistress's office because there is no library and the parents also refuse to come and guarantee for their children.



1.2 Photo, Adankwame D/A Primary School, Bookstore.

I asked the head of Adankwame District Assembly Primary School why the books, comprising text books and story books or novels written by Africans and Ghanaians were piled in the backroom of her office:

The parents do not want to guarantee for their children. They say the children will either tear the books or not read them at all. So why bother. (Adankwame, Feb, 18th, 2014)

I asked what measures they have taken to see that the books get to the children:

We talk to the parents during PTA meetings, but very few step forward to guarantee for their children. The fear that the kids will destroy the books and they will have to pay for the damages makes them scared. This whole thing bores down to poverty. You are thinking of what to eat, why waste money on story books? (Adankwame, Feb, 18th, 2014)

I asked three parents with wards at the school why they were reluctant in guaranteeing for their wards. The first parent, a farmer by profession replied:

My children are very stubborn. In the evenings they do not stay at home. They are always going to watch movies. If I guarantee for them, they will not even read the books! (Adankwame, Feb, 18th, 2014)

The second parent, a single mother replied:

If I take the books for my children, and they destroy them, where am I going to get the money to pay for the damage? (Adankwame, Feb, 18th, 2014)

The third parent, a trader, replied:

My children will not read the books. They will end up destroyed and I will have to pay for the damage, so why bother? (Adankwame, Feb, 18th, 2014)

All the responses I received showed an economic reason why the parents refuse to stand in for their children to borrow the books—the financial implication if the books are damaged.

In order to create some balance, I also visited Pentecost Preparatory School. This school falls under the category of privately owned international schools. I chose this school because it also falls under the category of second grade international schools where the mass of children from working class families attend school instead of government schools. The school did not have a collection of supplementary readers provided by government. But they had a library that was scantily stocked with story books and text books from Europe and the Americas. There was not a single African writer on the shelves. The library itself was in a very bad state. In fact it was not regular in use. Some of the children I spoke to who had the privilege of reading story books were more familiar with “The Famous Five” than with Ruby Goka’s adventure series for teenagers or Meshack Asare’s Books for children. And they came by such books just by chance.

Below is a photograph of the school’s library. The room was in a state of disarray and it was obvious that the place was also not regularly used. The books on the shelves were very old editions and all foreign.



1.3 Photo. Pentecost International Preparatory School. Library.

The reason for this is also a social reason because the education of children in private schools is skewed towards a Western formal educational ideology. After all, it is the only way that they ensure to increase population and make money. So they advertise their schools using the Froebel and Montessori ideologies which go with reading more of Western materials than Ghanaian or African materials.

My interaction with the two groups revealed government's role in the final decision of what books get into the hands of our children. Firstly, government needs to clamp down on the high purchasing of books by public schools in order not to look politically bad. The adverse effect of this is that the supply of Ghanaian and Africa children's literature is cut off. Secondly, children in rural public schools do not get the books because of the conditions attached to borrowing the books, so the child is cut off from reading about himself and his world. Thirdly, public basic schools in urban centers have the opportunity to read, but they read more of Western literature than Ghanaian or African literature. In addition, as they climb up the educational ladder to public second cycle institutions the opportunities for accessing children's literature from Ghanaian and African writers begin to reduce due to government's interference.

DISCUSSION

Regardless of these challenges, the books need to get to the hands of children. This is because they need to be educated, entertained and represented. With regard to education, for instance, Asare's story depicts typical life in the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions of Ghana. In these areas children take care of livestock such as goats and sheep. Public school hours, in some areas run the shift system—some children go to school in the morning from 6-11am while others go from 11:30am-5:30pm. This means that some children will tend to the livestock in the morning while others are in school and then vice-versa. As such, for the little boy or girl living in the urban

areas he or she is made aware of another kind of Ghanaian child with a life different from his or her own. And for the boy or girl up north, upper east or upper west, reading this story, he sees himself and is proud of his achievement in the story.

This reminds me of Christopher Myer's article on the Sunday Review of the New York Times online, posted March 15, 2014. He entitles his article, *The Apartheid of Children's Literature*. He says: "of the 3,200 children's book published in 2013, just 93 were about black people, according to a study by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin." Myers goes on to narrate his interview with a young boy who he describes as being "at that age when the edges of the man he will become are just starting to press against his baby-round face." In Myer's conversation with the boy and other boys his age he informs them that they are not featured in the books produced in the year 2013:

"Yep, it's a few thousand."

"And in all of those thousands of books, I'm just not in them?"

"Well...um...yes."

"Are there books about talking animals?"

"Oh, sure."

"And crazy magical futures?"

"Absolutely."

"And superpowers? And the olden days when people dressed funny? And all the combinations of those things? Like talking animals with superpowers in magical futures ... but no me?"

"No you."

"Why?"

"Because you're brown." (New York Times, March 15th, 2014)

Myers goes on to explain that although publishers outline great mission statements that stipulates how they intend to promote children's literature, the reality is different. In reality the literature depicting children of "color" is on the low side. This is what he calls apartheid of children's literature. And he explains that the effect of this is that:

We adults — parents, authors, illustrators and publishers — give them in each book a world of supposedly boundless imagination that can delineate the most ornate geographies, and yet too often today's books remain blind to the everyday reality of thousands of children. Children of color remain outside the boundaries of imagination. The cartography we create with this literature is flawed. (New York Times, March 15th, 2014)

IMPLICATION OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The implication of this research is that it exposes the strides Ghana has made as far as Ghanaian Children's literature is concerned. There are writing for all age groups of children in Ghana. This means that Ghana does not face a challenge of creativity that satisfies all age groups among children. However, what Ghana suffers from is the culture of reading and the acceptance of its own literature among parents, children, educational curriculum developers and all other stakeholders involved with the matter. The practice of government providing literature of

Ghanaian origin to basic schools is a good thing. However, government needs to begin looking into extending this practice to second cycle schools. Government also needs to monitor the literature consumed by children in privately run schools. This will go a long way to ensure that the efforts being made by Ghanaian writers of children's literature would be appreciated in order to encourage them to do more.

CONCLUSION

Although Myer's essay talks about the American society, the issue of representation and identity that he raises is relevant to every society. Children's literature should be a means of identification in such a way that the child builds self esteem and confidence. On the other hand it should be a map revealing the child's society and also the world beyond his boundaries. It should be the window, the airplane, the train, the bus, by which the child travels into his own world and the world outside his world. It should be the key to self actualization and realization for the child.

So in a country like Ghana where writers are doing all they can to represent the Ghanaian child in literature created for them, Myer's "apartheid" seems to be creeping in due to the challenges that face the distribution of children's literature after production. There is the challenge created by governmental policies, the challenge created by parents and guardians who are unwilling to stand in for their children so they can have access to literature materials. Then there is the worse—children with access to literature reading children's literature that do not identify or represent them. All of these and more is the kind of "apartheid of children's literature" that Myers describe of his American society.

However, all is not lost. Writers in Ghana are determined to keep writing for children. For instance, writers like Ruby Goka, with the support of the Ghana Writers Association organize book readings at senior high schools. And in 2013, the Ghana Association of Writers launched the outreach program for schools. This program organizes book reading by authors in schools.

I am not saying that we have done it all as far as children's literature in Ghana is concerned. But I believe that the path has been torched by a new light of writers. And maybe, in the next decade we will see more of children's literature, so that we will not say, like Myers does, that there is an alarming apartheid of children's literature in Ghana.

FUTURE RESEARCH

A future research will consider the impact of Ghanaian children's literature in the intellectual, social and academic development. It would also consider if the scope has been widened as far as the use of Ghanaian children's literature in schools is concerned.

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