

THE JOURNEY AS STRUCTURAL AND INSTRUMENTAL TECHNIQUE IN NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT: *One unique feature of Nigerian children's literature is the exploitation of the framework of journey to establish the relationship between the physical journey and the journey of life. Thus, the major characters in most books for children are always on a journey. This is very significant, as it helps the child brave up for the unpredictability of life, especially at this time when his mind is still impressionistic. Through textual analysis of select Nigerian children's fiction, this paper reveals that the journey as used in these children's books does not only serve structural purposes but also didactic and instructional.*

KEYWORDS: Journey, Children, Fiction, Literature, Relationship, Life, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Carl M. Tomlinson and Carol Lynch-Brown defines children's literature as "a good quality trade books for children from birth to adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interest to children of those ages through prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction" (2).

This definition corroborates Cornelia Meig's when she says

Is it the literate written specially for
the young – the fairing and wonder tales
the nursery rhymes and songs ..., books of
admonition and more persuasion .. the story
of school or playing field or adventure?

She answers:

It is all of these to be sure
but it is far more, it is the
whole vast body of literature that children
have adopted commonly to share
with the elders but sometimes
to monopolize.

Broadly defined the literature refers to "the totality of printed works designed for children". Because this literature is addressed to children of different ages with different levels of linguistic competence and intellectual and emotional maturity, it is extremely diversified not only in style and content but also in its aims and function.

This type of literature differs from adult literature in that the language must be developed in such a way that the children would understand while its audiences imposes the necessity for a certain technique and emphasis

One of the most exploited frameworks in African literary writings is the Journey motif. A clear site of excellence above the journey is exploited in the Nigerian feminist writings. According to Helen Chukwuma, “the journey is appreciated on the symbolic level where it involves a metamorphosis in orientation and goals on the part of the traveler” (84). Hence, the journey is seen both physically and psychologically. In the physical dimension, the journey is seen as a distancing, a far remove from one location to the other. Psychologically, Grace Okereke sees the journey as “Fundamental in the construction of consciousness and a framework to plot woman’s quest for the ideal autonomy” (55). Thus, in Nigerian Feminist novels, the heroines are always making one journey or the other. For instance, Amaka in Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* does not only move away from Onitsha to Lagos, a geographical space of more than six hundred Kilometers, but also move from a stifling environment to limelight, from idealism to realism, where she sheds her idealistic concept of marriage as a union of love and trust between two individuals (Chukwuma 85). Aissatou in *So Long A Letter* leaves her cracked Marriage and move away from a denigrating home culture to far away North America when she is not only fulfilled but also asserts her individuality and autonomy.

In children’s fiction, the journey basically serves structural and instructive roles most especially in stories having both human and animal characters. According to Allwell Onukaogu:

A character either by compulsion,
necessity or election, embarks on
a journey, most of the time perilous,
which is meant to bring about
a significant change either in the
condition of the person, or his society
or his personality (247)

There is usually extreme hardship and hurdles in the journey.

Allwell further believes that:

In making extreme hardship
an integral part of these journeys,
one could argue that the writers
and of course the oral traditions that
produce the stories, want to impress
on the children’s audience the relatedness
of the journey of life to the journeys in
the stories (48)

The moral lessons embedded in these stories are very apt especially now that the children’s minds are still impressionistic, and when they have not actually started the journeys of their lives. Through this motif, children are drawn to the fact that the journey of life is extremely difficult and the time to prepare for life’s unpredictability is now.

At times, the journey that is undertaken by these characters take them from the physical world to the land of the spirits. This aspect of style is exploited to educate the children on what Isidore Okpewho describes as “African’s acceptance of the trinity of the dead, the living

and the yet unborn...“(50). Of course one of the characteristics of Nigerian children’s literature is its heavy reliance on the folk tradition of the Nigerian people which also subscribe to the ethics of magical realism- the suspension of concrete reality and the approximation of the fantasy of the cosmological backgrounds of the African existential equation (Martins 246). Thus, in children stories, there is an interface between the living and spirit world. The gap is usually closed down and the relationship between the living and the dead becomes very cordial. A typical example is Akachi Ezeigbo’s *Sunshine the Miracle Girl*.

The Journey as Structural and Instructional Technique in select Nigerian Children’s Fiction

As stated earlier in this paper, the journey in Nigerian children’s fiction has not only been a framework upon which children are succinctly conveyed. For instance, in one of the stories in Obi Okpara’s *Tales of the Iroko Tree*, Imaden, the prince and first son of Ogielden Nsomo, King of Okadan, runs away from the village for fear of being killed by his brother who suddenly develop hatred for him, because he is to take over from his father as king. They went even arranged a hunting expedition which is actually meant to trap and kill him.

Following this, his mother advised him to leave Okadan.

A living dog is more useful
than a dead lion. She pleaded
with him to run away from his
brothers, and from Okadan to
Where they could not reach him (48)

Imaden quickly runs away. During this journey, He is almost attacked by three cobras and a lion but for the charm worn around his waist. One day, as he is sleeping, a group of warriors from Inosi kingdom, a neighboring village circles him and carry him to the village where he becomes the king.

This episode in a subtle encouragement to the children that temporary setback cannot stop any dream from being fulfilled. In this story, Imaden is prevented from becoming a king by his brothers but he journeys away and as fate would have it he still become a king. This echoes the Biblical Joseph who was sold into slavery in order to stifle his dream but at the end they still bowed to him.

In Akachi Ezeigbo’s *Fire from the Holy mountain*, Nwakannaya, the prince of Goshe who has lived in the skies almost all his life, is required to get a bowl of fire from the holy mountain in order to prove himself the son of the king and heir to the throne. Ugeli, a benevolent spirit in the sky, who has been helping him every time, this time abandons him to go on the journey alone.

Ugele left him and he continued
the journey alone. He started
to climb the mountain. He climbed
for many days. It seemed as if
he was not making any progress.
it was difficult but he persisted
it was steep and he thought he

would fall (31)

This scenario is subtly reminds every child that a time will come when he or she will be left alone to take life decisions and take responsibility for the aftermath of such decisions. Some children become failed adults because they were always pampered and not given an opportunity to take decisions concerning their lives. Ezeigbo uses Nwakannaya's lonely journey to the holy mountain to underscore the point that life is full of challenges and at one point or the other, children will be left alone to face these challenges.

Also in Ezeigbo's *Snake Child and Star Baby*, Ufu and Afa are worried when their two daughters disappear mysteriously from their cot soon after their birth. Ufu then embarks on a long journey in search of a man, Mazuo, who will help them solve the mystery. Unknown to everybody, it is Ufu and Afa's first son, Udude, that turns into snake to devour his baby sister. Ufu eventually comes back with a solution to the problem. He is admonished by mazuo not to live a selfish life, that the reason why he has been allowed to embark on the journey is to give him the opportunity to help as many people as possible.

Look at it this way. You
were content to hunt and take
care of yourself and your family.
You didn't help anyone or show
concern for other people ... It is
necessary to make others happy
when it is in your power to do so. (32)

In this story, there is the moral that nothing good comes easy. It is a reminder to the children that life is full of ups and downs and that through hard work and dedication every challenge could be overcome. There is also the moral that one could help one's self by helping others. In this story, Ufu is admonished to help others and this is where the solution to his problem lies.

In Olajire Olanlokun's *Mother Horse*, the philanthropic mother horse pretends to other greedy animals that she is dead and embarks on a journey. She does this to find out and expose those animals that will not work but wait for hardworking and wealthy ones to die so that they share and inherit their riches. As she comes back, she advises them

If you want to be wealthy,
work hard. Don't use dirty tricks
to acquire wealth. All my wealth
belong to me and my children-
children who work hard, and not
the lazy and fraudulent ones. If my
children chose to be lazy, I will just
give my wealth to charity (40)

Olajire uses this episode to admonish the children that there is dignity in labour. It is widely believed that most children whose parents are rich are usually lazy believing that what belongs to the parents belong to them, but when the parents are no more, they become frustrated and wretched. The story simply admonished children to be hardworking and always strive to be independent instead of eternally depending on other people's wealth.

In Ezeigbo's *Asa and the Little Stream*, princess Akudu, daughter of chief Igunu, embarks on a journey to the beautiful river in an unknown location. A magician in her father's palace just told her that there is a beautiful river which can cure all ailments. Before now, the princess has been living with chronic headache which defies all medications. On hearing this, she tells her father of her intension to visit this river, but Chief Igunu advises against the decision.

Chief Igunu refused to give his consent to her request. He said it was dangerous for her to undertake such an adventure. Princess Akudu wept and wept. she refused to eat or drink until her request was granted. She would rather die than not look for the beautiful river (21)

Chief Igunu finally grants her the permission to visit the river. Although the journey is perilous as there are cases of snake bites and swollen legs, Akudu, in company of the palace guards finally locates this beautiful river and bath in it. Immediately, her headache is cured just as the magician said.

The story admonishes the children not to always give up on whatever they desire to be or do. It teaches persistency, commitment and steadfastness. At the initial stage in the story, chief Igunu tries to stop Akudu from the journey but she persists and had his way. She almost retreated during the journey as the stream is not still on sight after three months of trekking, but for her determination. This means everything is achievable when there is determination.

In Chinua Achebe's *Chike and the River*, the plot revolves around Chike's ambition to journey across the River Niger in a boat. Out of desperation to raise money for transportation Chike is swindled of his three pence by a magician, Professor Chandus. He is so desperate to make this journey that he begs his uncle for some money but the latter looks at him sternly that he runs away. This does not deter him. He goes to the riverside to wash cars for people and get rewarded with a shilling. Chike finally fulfills this ambition and is so fascinated by Asaba that he forgets to return to the riverside to catch the last boat back to Onitsha.

Achebe makes a forceful message here to children, that every ambition could be fulfilled when there is commitment. In other words, one can make one's dream come true if one is committed. For instance, Chike is swindled by a magician. He is also rebuked by his uncle when he asks him for money. But he devices another means of raising this money by washing cars for people at the riverside. The message here is that one should not give up when it is not over.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted through ample textual analysis to show how the journey is used not only as structural but instructional technique in Nigerian children fiction. The study demonstrates that each major character in the stories is created realistically and always placed on a journey in order to convey the morals poignantly. Also through this journey motif, the authors have successfully established the relatedness between the physical journey and the journey of life.

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