Language and Literature as Instruments of Change: The Nigerian Experience.

Olarewaju Omoniwa
Department of English
Federal College of Education, Zaria

Abstract
This paper presents language and literature as potent instruments of change, which are inextricably tied to the social, cultural and political fortunes of Nigeria. Language is perceived in various dimensions – language use in interpersonal discourse, official functions and language as the vehicle for literary intuition and creativity. Nigerian literary arts effectively mirror the people’s life and serve utilitarian functions. The paper shows that the instruments of language and literature can be effectively deployed to conscientize the populace, restore peace and harmony among them and mobilize them for transformation to achieve all-round national development. Evidence of language use in official communication and literary arts by selected Nigerian writers is provided to underline the unique importance of the said instruments in society.

Introduction
A common axiom states that nothing indeed is permanent in life except change itself: Change is a variegated, all-encompassing term: change in individuals, change in mentality, change in lifestyle, change in value system, change in leadership style, change in social, economic and political policies, change in ideology etc. Some of the questions that arise may include: Is change really desirable? What change is most desirable in the context of the Nigerian nation? What should be the direction of the change? Should the change be partial or total? Who should initiate or advocate for change? How would change be effected? How do we cope with change? What are the expected results or repercussions of change? We shall endeavour to provide answers to these questions in the context of language and literary studies and the Nigerian society in which language users and literary writers operate.

The quest for change, transformation or other corrective and innovative agenda has a long and important history in Nigeria. Indeed, change is the raison d’être for the emergence of successive Nigerian governments since independence. When the military took over the reins of power in the past few decades, they claimed that the state of affairs had become so bad that a change in governance was quite desirable. In the same vein, one civilian regime replaced another based on the claim that the previous regime had derailed from the path of good governance and there was a need to change the existing order and restore true democratic principles and practice. Successive Nigerian governments rode on the horse of change seeking to promote justice, peace, equity, probity, accountability, good neighbourliness and patriotism. Thus, there has always been a need for change in the nation’s social, economic, cultural, educational and political climate.
In this paper, the role of the **English language, Nigerian indigenous languages and Nigerian literary arts** is examined from our understanding of the concept of **change** and within the context of the Nigerian experience. Language, in whatever form, has always been central to the implementation of government policies. Language and literature will be examined for their relevance to national aspirations and efforts to bring about desirable changes in all facets of national life. Reference will be made to other national literatures sparingly. Language and literature are seen as important instruments for enlightenment, conscientization, mobilisation of Nigerians for the total transformation of the society.

**Language and the Change Mantra in Nigeria**

The vital role of language whether English or indigenous languages, is indisputable in Nigeria’s development plans. In this regard, we recognise the functions of language as pertinent to the actualisation of the Federal Government’s vision 20:2020. That is, language is an instrument for education, conscientization and mobilization for the achievement of national objectives.

Fundamentally, modern man can hardly contemplate meaningful communal life without the instrument of language. Language identifies man first as a unique being and defines the ethnic nationalities as important, integral parts of the Nigerian nation. The same instrument also defines Nigerians as a people with common heritage, values and destiny. Language is used to fashion the citizens’ sense of belonging with regard to social interaction, economic ties and political relations.

The current divisive trends, conflicts observable in the Nigerian polity at all levels of governance from independence to date have been carried out mainly **via** the instrument of language. The trends have become so threatening that some opinion leaders, elder statesmen and other patriotic citizens, in the recent past, have had to warn against **hate speech** which could destabilise and divide the nation. Typical of the Nigerian experience, **hate speech** has become a mantra, even a cliché that people love to bandy about without properly defining or specifying what it means to them. Social critics, political affairs analysts, security experts, government spokesmen and agencies, security operatives, political opponents have had a field day using or misusing language, which has set one personality, group or ethnic nation against another. This trend is what some Nigerians would, in local parlance, call ‘overheating the polity’. Thus, the instrument of language can be deployed for negative and destructive ends.

Even when language is misused to create disaffection, division and conflict, Nigerians would have to resort to language as an instrument to build bridges of friendship, foster understanding and resolve conflicts. When a people are battered, disoriented, disillusioned, embittered and set for the worst of conflicts, language is deployed to pacify them, restore their positive thinking and civility, bring them together to reason out and resolve their differences. Language serves to mend the people’s broken link, restore their mutual confidence and trust and persuade them to set aside their personal ego and pride for the general well-being of the society. Only then can the nation be stable enough to sustain her developmental efforts in various sectors of the economy.
Language, literature and other spheres of life are inextricably interwoven. Language is not only the vehicle for literary intuition and creativity but it is the soul of literature. Literature is the body or shell that houses language and without language, literature dies. Indeed, literature is language in a creative or an artistic form in human society. Language invests literature with dynamism, diversity and potency giving it the needed relevance in accordance with the changing times. The artist manipulates the elements of language to conform to the dynamics of the time thereby conveying the potentials, aspirations and needs of the people.

In the case of Nigeria, the present government often relies, among other instruments, methods and strategies, on language use in the media, among the leaders and citizenry, in government circles, civil service, education, political circles to restore sanity, dignity and peaceful co-existence in the nation’s body-politic. Language is a potent weapon that mends broken relationships, corrects misconceptions and misgivings, mobilises the populace and concretises the ideals and goals of the nation. Language is thus an imperative to Nigerian stability and development. Fundamental change and social transformation cannot be realised without properly deploying the instrument of language in day-to-day governance.

Politically, language is central to the conscientization and mobilisation of the people in the exercise of their human and civic rights. Multilingual education is relevant and the multiplicity of Nigerian languages is a blessing in disguise. English is needed to meet the nation’s communicative needs with the larger, English-speaking world while the indigenous languages serve to maintain the cultural identity and cohesion of the nation’s diverse ethnic groups without compromising national identity and unity. Olaoye (2013:748) argues:

Multilingual education is capable of eradicating illiteracy. It provides political awareness and sociopolitical stability. …National unity depends largely on mutual understanding of each other’s language and culture. Unity means strength or power, and it is language that empowers and unifies people.

According to Ngugi (1981), Language is the single most powerful instrument for change in the world. It is more powerful and effective than the most sophisticated arms, even the atomic and nuclear bombs. The bullet and bomb have the power of physical coercion and subjugation but language has the power to unite, refine, persuade and re-orient individuals, ethnic nations and the world. In this regard, while weapons of warfare instil fear, terror, arms-twist a people making the entire environment a dreadful place to live in, an effective use of language instils confidence and fosters cooperation, unity, cultured freedom and accelerates progress in the society. We may imagine how many conflicts, civil unrests and wars could have torn Nigeria and other polities apart beyond redemption if the parties in conflict had not resolved their differences through the instrument of language. Imagine how many intra-family crises and intra-ethnic divisions would have degenerated to large-scale conflicts and wars if the instrument of language had not been deployed to reconcile the parties concerned.
Another dimension of our discussion is: Which language medium is most suitable for national transformation – English, Nigeria’s colonial heritage or her indigenous languages? In a speech entitled “The African writer and the English language” (1975), Achebe states:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the English language and I intend to use it…

Nigerians need no longer brood over the use of a ‘foreign’ language where there are abundant indigenous languages nor do Nigerians need to be apologetic about it. Amidst their seeming language dilemma, they should make the best use of English alongside the indigenous languages knowing full well that the nation stands to gain much from this policy economically, socially, educationally, and politically. They need not cage themselves by false ‘nationalistic’ feelings, nor do they need to limit their communicative, linguistic and artistic horizons by writing and publishing only in their respective indigenous languages. If Achebe had published his prose works only in Igbo, would he have won so many international prizes and merit awards for his literary ingenuity? If Soyinka had published his works only in Yoruba, would he have won a string of international prizes and capped his achievements with the Nobel prize for literature? One may argue that their works could have been written first in their mother tongues and later translated into English and other well-known European languages. The truth is that the translations (from whatever language) would have watered down the texture and quality of the ‘original’ work. A translated version however good can only be a second best. Reading translated versions of literary works does not have as much effect as reading the works in their original versions.

Nigeria’s plural nature with her multiplicity of languages can and should be well exploited for the all-round advancement of the nation. A proper harnessing and use of English along with the nation’s indigenous languages should serve to effect meaningful change. Once language policies in respect of education, parliament, law court, commerce, politics, media, public service, etc are faithfully implemented, the desirable changes in all facets of national life will be realised.

A good number of languages are widely spoken across states in Nigeria and the citizens in each state tend to be bilingual or multilingual. This promotes both language and cultural integration among the people. Though English remains the official language in the states, there is room for the organs of government (e.g. public service, parliament and the law court) to promote and use the dominant indigenous languages in the respective states. Some languages which are widely used across the thirty-six states of the federation have been serving a very useful purpose in the media, for political sensitisation and mobilisation. The table below gives us a fair picture of language use in the states of the federation. States should intensify the use of the languages for cultural, economic, political and educational purposes alongside English.

**Table:** Distribution of languages with wider spread in Nigeria
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>States widely spoken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>Bauchi, Bornu, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Taraba, Yobe, Zamfara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoruba</td>
<td>Ekiti, Lagos, Kwara, Kogi, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Igbo</td>
<td>Abia, Anambra, Delta, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Rivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfude</td>
<td>Bauchi, Bornu, Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kwara, Sokoto, Zamfara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwari</td>
<td>Kaduna, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nupe</td>
<td>Kaduna, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiv</td>
<td>Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ijo/Izon</td>
<td>Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Rivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanuri</td>
<td>Bornu, Plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efik</td>
<td>Akwa Ibom, Cross River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibibio</td>
<td>Akwa Ibom, Cross River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebira</td>
<td>Benue, Kogi, Nasarawa, Plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edo</td>
<td>Edo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Sociolinguistic Studies* Vol. 2 No. 2, 2008 Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Jibir-Daura (2014:11) argues that Nigeria should exploit the advantages derivable from the multilingual nature of Nigeria. By promoting the use of indigenous languages, she affirms, the development of Nigeria in all spheres of life would be accelerated. The nation’s indigenous languages are seen as a tool with which to facilitate her [positive] transformation and advancement. She re-iterates the significance of language:

Language is central to the sustenance of a group of people for it is the vehicle through which other constituents of cultures are communicated. It is the primary vehicle through which human culture is acquired, shared and transmitted. Without language, there is bound to be problem in society for thoughts, ideas, information, and the society become incommunicado.

An example of how an indigenous language, besides English, can be deployed for the development of their State is Lagos where Yoruba is being used partly as the language of the parliament i.e. State Assembly. It is possible because the State is relatively homogenous.
Lagosians, whether from Badagry or from other parts of the nation, are largely proficient in spoken Yoruba even if they are struggling with its written form. The same applies to law courts, especially Customary and Sharia courts, where the indigenous languages serve as the language of communication and legal records. In religious and political gatherings, the language of the community is used for effective religious teaching, political sensitization and mobilisation of the citizenry. The mass media in English and indigenous languages have always been effectively deployed for cultural and political education to propagate government policies and programmes in order to make people key into them for national stability and progress. An effective use of the media makes the people more enlightened thereby facilitating their participation in government programmes that are designed to promote good health, sound education and democratic norms for nation building.

**Nigerian Orature and Change**

Traditionally, Nigerian literature, like much of world literature, is utilitarian. It is a product of the cultures of the ethnic nations that make up Nigeria and it serves to propagate their belief systems, aspirations and needs – economic, political etc. While Nigerian literature, given its aesthetic merit, informs and entertains, it is also a potent tool for transforming the society in accordance with the needs of the people. Nigerian orature, when performed, has got massive entertainment values which have given it a unique position in world literature. In addition, it is a vehicle for enriching the life of the community and pointing the way forward through incisive satirical performances.

As Aboh (2012:2) puts it, “the literature that emerges from any culture can hardly be separated from its historical, political and socio-economic antecedents”. In modern times, Nigerian literature has always been used to mirror the society and advocate change in consonance with the maxim that change is the only constant factor in life. Man always yearns for change in an attempt to better his lot, his family and community. Sometimes, change is indicative of man’s inquisitive nature, his sense of adventure and exploration of options that are hitherto unknown but which could be of immense benefit to him. Man’s quest for change often points to his unending desire to rid his society of filth and rot and to improve his lot by providing quality services in various areas of endeavour.

But we may also ask: to what extent are the elements of change manifested in Nigerian oral art? What kind of change does the artist conceive? What advantages are the people to derive from such change?

The Nigerian oral art in the pre-literate era was championed by unsung heroes of her literary past: royal boards, warrior-chanters, story tellers, oral poets, chanters of diverse sorts in their praise chants, epic poetry, oral narratives, dramatic performances, folktales, riddles, proverbs, magical incantations, spells and axioms of elders, the wise and the experienced. They produced a variety of captivating orature that focused on people, events, traditions and, above all, the compelling need for change and development. The performance of traditional art included
allegorical and fantastic adventure tales, folkloric poetic chants, songs and traditional theatrical performances. Orature reveals that man in traditional and contemporary societies has always pursued change to improve his lot and transform his society.

The animal trickster tale is a common feature of society to raise children to be morally and ethically sound and to remind adolescents and adults alike about their responsibilities in building a solid and progressive society. The tortoise, hare, elephant, the spider are often graphically cast as characters that would make the society imbibe morals such as honesty, generosity, kindness, hard work and commitment, characters that would bring about desirable changes in society. Conversely, people are taught to shun retrogressive tendencies such as stealing, robbery, hate, deceit, pride, selfishness, falsehood, violence and murder. The Yoruba stories of tortoise-trickster in which the tortoise’s smartness ensnares and defeats the trickster himself typically exemplify traditional wisdom and the dire need for society to make sound morals its foundation if the society is to progress. Some of the stories prove that no one has the monopoly of wisdom while others teach that those who are selfish, wicked or envious are doomed. If stability, peace and progress are to be realised, the society should extol such virtues and punish deviants.

Nigerian Literature in Indigenous Languages

There has been a tradition of writing in Hausa language in Arabic (Ajami) since the early 19th century and the Roman alphabet since the early 20th century. The Fulani reformer, Sheik Usman Danfodiyo, produced both religious and secular poetry. Hausa literature’s richness lies in its integration of both oral and written traditions. Of primary concern here is that Hausa literature often makes a telling statement on the religious, social and political life of the people. It seeks to expose the ills of the society – the inept, corrupt and oppressive leadership of rulers in Hausaland in order to effect desirable transformation of the system. Change as advocated by Hausa poetry at that time was fostered by the media – the radio, the press and television. Religious poetry was dominant but poetry at this time also assumed social, cultural and political significance.

Secular Hausa poetry featured prominently after World War II though it was still deeply influenced by Islam. A number of well-known poems were composed by the political leader, Sa’adu Zungur in his poems, Wakar maraba da soja (1957) and Hamsa Yadudu Funtuwa who championed the change in the people’s social behaviour in poems such as Wakan uwar mugu [Song of the Mother of Evil] (1957). He satirized social evils such as taking of alcohol, prostitution, deceit and hypocrisy in social and political affairs (Mudi Sipikin). Novel writing in Hausa is more recent than the tradition of written poetry but the former nonetheless captures social and political misadventure of leadership and sometimes the followership in the community. Sulaiman Ibrahim, Katsina Turmin Danja made a trenchant commentary on political corruption in their era.

Modern Nigerian Literature and Change

In the 20th century, Chinua Achebe, who belongs to the first generation of the nation’s writers, stands out as the most significant Nigerian prose stylist in English. His classic, Things Fall Apart (1958), epitomizes the change from traditional Igbo life – social, cultural, economic and
political – to Western values. When the wind of change blows, those affected must bend under the pressure or be blown away. Okonkwo, the novel’s tragic hero, sacrifices his life in the course of resisting the looming change. Achebe explores the corruption of societal values and lust for power in *A Man of the People* (1966). *Anthills of Savannah* (1987) is a frustrating narrative of unhealthy political rivalry, political violence, intimidation and corruption in independent Nigeria. The novels project brazen, political rascality with its attendant evils in post-independent Nigeria. Through an ironic twist of events, the characters underline the obnoxious trend to resort to primordial instincts – political violence, manipulation, bribery and embezzlement of public funds in the affairs of the nation. The novelist, as the conscience of the nation, reveals why Nigeria has been wallowing in corruption, stagnation and underdevelopment for decades. His indictment of the actors on Nigeria’s political stage is blunt and revealing. Yakubu (2015:78) explains succinctly why Nigerian writers need to tackle bad governance and pave way for positive change.

Many Nigerian leaders have failed in their administrative responsibility; thus every change of government is welcomed with euphoria which dies shortly due to the vicious cycle experienced. All these ugly experiences generate the theme of disillusionment in contemporary African literature ... The African writer has a social responsibility to carry out for his society.

Symbolic of Nigerian political violence and corruption, Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* (1966) bestrides the nation’s political terrain, exploiting and oppressing the people, executing bogus national projects and keeping the nation in a perpetual state of underdevelopment. Political corruption proves to be an overwhelming force that the naive and immature citizenry cannot withstand. Change for a saner society, unfortunately, remains a mirage as Achebe clearly suggests. Similarly, filth, rot and despondency are pervasive in other African nations and the developing world in general. Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and his subsequent novels paints corruption and its allied evils in lavishly raw and repulsive language to demonstrate his deep-rooted objection to these evils. If Ghana and indeed other African nations are to experience genuine re-birth and assume their rightful place in the comity of nations, they must learn to reject greed and graft. They must pave way for the creation of a new social order in which justice, equity, fairness and freedom thrive.

The collection, *War against Indiscipline and Other Poems* (1986) by Solomon Unoh is a vitriolic attack on the common, persistent vices that have plagued Nigeria since independence. The title poem, “War against Indiscipline” draws on images of filth, rot, chaos, evil, disease and death emphasising how degenerate Nigeria is. The poet effectively uses paradox, contrast, parallelism and penetrating axioms to satirise the absurdities of the system. The results of maladministration are sizzling violence and bloody conflict for personal enrichment, dreadful violation of the nation’s moral and ethical values, persistent, official corruption, starvation, disease ignorance and misery for the general populace. In other poems, “Naira Power and Politics”, “Danger Threatens”, “Clean and be Cleansed”, the poet not only re-echoes the sordid manifestation of corruption in government, he also desperately longs for meaningful change in Nigeria’s social, economic and
political order. He uncompromisingly condemns corruption, in all its multifaceted forms through his deft use of figurative language and symbolism reminiscent of Armah’s images and symbols of filth, rot and scatology in The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born. Indiscipline is condemned in lucid, even raw symbols, metaphors, similes and paradox; the poet captures it as a “monstrous beast with human flesh and blood”, “murderer of conscience”, “deadly cancer of the lungs”, “devil’s purpose”, “filthy havens”, “instalment death” with “ugly and terrible” face, “ferocious fury” and “claw-like teeth”. Unmitigated change is central to Unoh’s message to Nigeria in view of the sordid, degenerate condition in which the nation has been wallowing for ages.

Expectedly, the conservative, retrogressive forces are expected to stoutly resist change as we can see in the poet’s use of paradoxical expressions: “discipline and indiscipline can combatants become”, “order and chaos are but poles apart” “good and evil forces in silent conflict wait” and “man must fight the war to win the peace”. In poems like “Danger Threatens”, Unoh’s tone becomes more radical and his language more vigorous as he strongly desires that Nigeria be purged of all evils plaguing her such as “vulgarism” and “indecency”, “falsehood” and “duplicity”, “hatred” and “malice”, cruelty and “wickedness”.

The poet is a staunch advocate of unity, cooperation and patriotism among the diverse ethnic nationalities to produce a regenerated Nigeria as he emphasises in “I Speak of Unity”. His poetic voice is resonant with appeals to Nigerians as “worthy members/of one family” who should shun “senseless mutual mistrust”. Generally, Unoh’s language not only captures Nigeria’s unhealthy political terrain most effectively, it is also lucid and prosaic with natural and familiar images. The figures are uncomplicated, free-flowing and accessible to the ordinary reader and, perhaps, lover of poetry.

Soyinka, the foremost Nigerian dramatic, is an ideologue at the vanguard of national re-orientation and change of traditional moral, social, economic and political order. In contrast to Unoh’s lyrical, down-to-earth composition, Soyinka’s language in his poetic and dramatic works is complex and variegated drawing images, figures and symbols from Yoruba and Western cultures. Soyinka is no less committed to change from the ugly past and present to a new social order but most of his works are far less accessible to the average reader. In his dramatic works, The Trials of Brother Jero (1964), Kongi’s Harvest (1967) and A Play of Giants (1984), Soyinka maintains an ambivalent point of view. Nigerian society is in dire need of change for social transformation as the playwright exposes the evils that characterise leadership in Nigeria and Africa: deceit, hypocrisy, charlatanism, corruption, brutal repression, terror, inhumanity and cannibalism.

In the same vein, change for Soyinka is somewhat a mirage, a remote possibility that most societies may never realise. Soyinka, in the comic satire, The Trials of Brother Jero ridicules Jero’s hypocrisy, deceit, charlatanism, evil manipulation and exploitation of members of his sect. The playwright x-rays his society for condemnation. In Kongi’s Harvest and A Play of Giants, man
especially when he is in authority, is portrayed as a self-serving cannibal, oppressing and feeding on fellow men to strengthen and advance his political and financial empire.

Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Tanure Ojaide and Odia Ofeimun are literary giants that belong to the second generation of Nigerian creative artists with a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to the social and political well-being of Nigeria and Africa. Osundare’s poetry stands for radical change and he has distinguished himself as a poetic revolutionary voice just as Osofisan’s dramaturgy finds expression in a Marxist (radical) framework. Ojaide and Ofeimun are committed to the social and political well-being of Nigeria through a scintillating presentation and critique of the affairs of government. The creative works of these writers underline the dire need for genuine change to a new and fruitful order. The oppressed masses are expected to rise up to the challenge and sack their oppressors. Through characterisation and motifs, the artist affirms that only a revolutionary force can effect the needed change. This literary tradition is in consonance with that of Ngugi and Micere’s *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and Hussein’s *Kinjeketile* (1970) whose revolutionary drama when performed in Kenya and Tanzania respectively irked the authorities.

Osundare is no less radical given that one of his major artistic goals is to awaken the consciousness of the poor and the downtrodden and mobilize them for fruitful change. His poetry, which is also enmeshed in Yoruba traditional imagery and symbolism, advocates a new social order which is decent, orderly, progressive and people-friendly as Abdullahi (2017) captures it:

He [Osundare] writes to promote the interest of the teeming alienated and oppressed members of his society through a polemical poetry that could awaken their consciousness. He seeks to mobilise the numerous voiceless have-nots ... for social transformation ... [He] employs a series of novel poetic styles to communicate his vision of social change.

In ‘Olowo Debate Talaka’, taken from *Songs of the Season*, Osundare deploys a conversational style, the devices of repetition, irony and mockery to reveal the ruthless oppression and exploitation of the toiling, hapless citizenry by the haughty, cannibalistic and affluent drones in Nigeria and elsewhere. He agonizes over the horrendous divisions in the nation’s social strata and laments the numerous afflictions of the common man as follows:

*Olowo*:  Call me hyena, call me leopard
            Call me the bloodiest in a tribe.
            Of monster beasts;
            But this I know
            A leopard labours hard for his daily prey;
            I work hard for every kobo in my bank.
**Talaka:**  
Hard work! Hard work!  
The lazy bobby-horse of the rawdy rich!  
Hard work! Hard work! ...  
The insufferable drudgery of loafing barons  
Hardwork! Hard work! ...  
Of absentee barons and surrogate fortunes  
Hardwork! Hard work! ...  
Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop  
Money man, how many hands do you have?  
How many heads stand on your neck?

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**Impact of Language and Literature on Society**

Mack (2012:1) in his book, "How Literature Changes the Way we Think?" argues that literature has a “unique and underappreciated capacity to make us aware of how we can change accustomed forms of perception and action”. He argues that literary art can be used to elicit empathy for under-represented groups as well as to teach readers “abilities that are central to democracy and global citizenship” (Mack, 2012:12). The morals which are derived from oral narratives, published stories, poems and dramatic pieces for young readers are good examples of orature and literature that mould their character and prepare them for effective citizenship roles in adult life.

Change is also needed in respect of language of communication. Jibir-Daura (2014) and Olaoye (2013) among others have argued strongly for the transformation of Nigeria through indigenous language education. Nigerian indigenous languages constitute an effective medium for the education of young learners as research efforts have proved. Arguments for the use of indigenous languages in place of English have appeared in numerous books, journals and essays and are largely educative. But Nigerian policy statements have not emphasized the teaching and learning of indigenous languages beyond the secondary education level.

Indeed, many nations – Germany, China, Japanese, France *etc* – whose language education policies are in harmony with their practices have gone ahead to effectively use their indigenous languages not only as an official medium of communication but also in education, especially science and technology. The Ife Primary Education Research Project (1970 – 1978), a research in mother tongue education (South West, Nigeria) is pointer to the potential success of indigenous Nigerian languages as a medium of instruction across educational levels. The book arising from the research makes a reasonable case for the mother tongue as a medium of education for the first
twelve years of the child’s life (Fafunwa, Macauley & Sokoya, 1989). It is difficult to justify why
the findings of the research are not being utilized for the furtherance of mother tongue education
for its eventual use as a medium of education in Nigeria. The pertinent questions we should ask
ourselves here are: Will political exigencies perpetually stifle the needed change in Nigeria’s
language policy? Can Nigeria achieve any meaningful transformation in her language policies and
practices in the foreseeable future?

At any rate, whatsoever language medium that Nigerians use – English or indigenous
languages – the preference is for a productive use of language. We desire language use that will
engender trust, mutual understanding and collective desire to build an integrated nation where
national aspirations and goals override personal, ethnic or regional desires and interests. As
suggested earlier, indigenous languages can indeed co-exist and develop with English. Nigeria
does not have to set English aside and adopt one indigenous language as the national official
language. The heated and often sentimental arguments for the adoption of one indigenous language
as the Nigeria’s official sole language in the past few decades have obviously become stale and
redundant and the nation should now have overgrown a false and unprofitable sense of
nationalism. She ought to face the stark language realities of her corporate existence as a nation
and forge ahead with her development plan with the continued use of English, alongside her
indigenous languages.

Conclusion

English and Nigerian languages and literature are veritable instruments of change in
actualising the Nigerian project, in effecting desirable changes in all spheres of national life. It has
been established that language is God’s most precious gift to man, without which man cannot
contemplate or establish communal life. Though it is often denigrated and misused by some,
language binds people together, promotes their cherished traditions and beliefs, values and virtues,
potentials and strength. Nigerian languages are the emblem of her ethnic values and symbol of her
national ethos. Yet, English is relevant to a large extent in fostering the collective desires and
aspirations of Nigerians. English facilitates the interaction of individuals/groups with one another
at important levels of national life as well as with the English-speaking world.

We have also seen that literature is an artistic mirror through which we have a graphic
picture, and a clear understanding, of life. Nigerian writers are not only creatively endowed but
are visionary artists who are committed to the moral, cultural, social, economic and political well-
being of their society. Through their dramatic arts, prose works and poems, they expose the
numerous ills and vices of the society seeking for better life. Much of their literature is protest
because it subtly indicts and challenges the existing social order. The poetry is rich, beautiful and
rooted in Nigerian traditional imagery and symbolism. Nigerian drama and poetry are, in part,
revolutionary seeking to bring about a radical change of the established elitist and exploitative
order which has existed since colonial times.
Language is the singular, most significant medium through which Nigeria, like other nations of the world, has ensured her survival, unity, continuity and progress despite the opposing forces of destabilisation and disintegration. This is all the more reason why the nation should jealously guard the continued use of English alongside her indigenous languages. Literature enriches the nation’s cultural and democratic values, serves as a vital watchdog to help curb the excesses of her leadership through constructive criticism of the system. The creative writer is a visionary whose irressible voice is loud and clear to those who can hear. And we do hope that Nigerian leadership and followership can indeed hear!

References

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