

LITERATURE: A VEHICLE TO THE RE-BIRTH OF ZAMBIAN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

African culture has suffered a serious neglect since the attainment of independence by many African countries and to be precise, Zambia has struggled for identity. The imposition of foreign language has been the major factor in losing the African heritage. Literature has for a long time been neglected too. It must be observed that literature is a window through which Africa and Zambia can understand, nurture and readjust our values, perceptions and practices in a redefined persuasive discourse.

This paper aims at enlightening society on the benefits of knowing who they are, where they come from and where they are going. This can only be possible through the learning of African Literature.

KEY WORDS: Literature, Culture, Values Perceptions and practices

INTRODUCTION/ BACKGROUND

African culture has suffered a serious neglect since the attainment of independence by many African countries and to be precise, Zambia has struggled for identity. The imposition of foreign language has been the major factor in losing the African heritage. Literature has for a long time been neglected too. It must be observed that literature is a window through which Africa and Zambia can understand, nurture and readjust our values, perceptions and practices in a redefined persuasive discourse.

Most African literature is an expression of its country's social change. The writers are concerned about the past, present and future history of their country and this concern is reflected in their works. The social change that Africa had been subjected to since the colonisation of the country- the cultural, political

and missionary influences and its present state of achieved independence with a growing awareness of both national identity and modern problems. The awareness with which nationalist achieved independence is the same kind of awareness that the country should embrace in order for the country not to lose its identity.

The imposition of the foreign language on the citizens of the country has made the citizens to think that English is more superior than the African languages. This scenario is slowly eroding the country of its cultural heritage. The growing tendency of viewing English as a measure of intelligence among citizens is a serious fallacy in that English language is only a medium of communication. For Zambia to stay in touch with its cultural heritage, there is every need that literature be at the centre of this cultural awareness. Literature can be used as a pedagogical tool to promote culture through divergent perspectives. These divergent perspectives the learners are to acquire through literature will help to understand values, perceptions and practices for their identity.

There is an outcry that the child of today lacks discipline, but what the society seems to forget is that discipline as far as it exists, is not of human or religious type but a kind that one gets through cultural training. And this training will never

escape the intellect of an individual and thereby benefiting the society at large.

It is imperative to note that African literature by nature, is a mirror of life, and should be used as the yardstick to develop the identity of the society. For instance, folklore can be used to form and reform the judgements of the society. This is to affirm that literature is to be the vehicle of the re-birth of the Zambian cultural heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rees (1973) defines literature as a permanent expression in words of some thoughts or feelings about life and the world. In addition, Moody (1972) says literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing words in some special aspects of our human experience. Literature is form of human expression; it is perceived as aesthetic excellence and deals with various historical aspects of the society.

Literature is primarily an entire body of human language. As an art, literature is described as the organisation of words to give pleasure, yet through words elevates and transforms experience beyond mere pleasure. Literature also functions more broadly in society as a means of both criticizing and affirming cultural values.

Campbell (1975) defines culture as the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and the social organisation of a particular country, area or group of people. It must be noted that culture and language are always intertwined and they both complement each other. Language helps to identify each cultural group and differentiate it from others. This is because of the unique features the language of that particular culture tend to possess. Campbell (1975) continues to add that language is the most important expression of cultural symbolism that helps in the sharing of the beliefs, thoughts and feelings with others. It must be said that literature is the vehicle that can help Zambia have a cultural re-birth.

In pre-literature society, oral literature was widely shared; it saturated the society and was as much a part of living as food, clothing, shelter and religion. Many tribal societies primarily meaning depended on orature to pass on their cultural ideals from generation to generation

In addition, Neubeck and Glasberg (2005) adds that language is used to transmit culture by clearly constructing reality. Language does define and construct reality because it contains hidden assumptions about the world around us. For example, the English language contains many implicit assumptions about gender abilities which are usually gender biased because of the

cultural beliefs that women cannot do certain jobs. When people use words like ‘fireman’ and ‘congressman’ they are conjuring a mental image of a male, thereby constructing a reality which assumes that only men can fight fires and serve in the congress. This is an English assumption based on their culture and because their language has been imposed on us being the former colonies our cultural perception about women have totally changed as well.

DISCUSSION ON THE TOPIC

According to Achebe, (1988) Literature as a subject helps society regain belief in itself and put away the complex of the years of degeneration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word.” This is to say the education and re-education process in a cultural decaying world, involves the use of literature to teach African cultural and linguistic behaviour. African literature thus seeks to project the challenges facing Africa from the pre-colonial past, to the colonial period, right to the present post- colonial age. It describes the lives of the traditional Africans, their practices, ethos and mores, analyses the conflicts that colonialism engendered in the system and discusses the crises underpinning the modern states of Africa. Therefore, Zambia as a country needs to serious

considering putting literature at the centre of its education for the country to rediscover and redefine its cultural heritage, which is currently eroding very fast. People feel, as they are not worth to be Zambians just because they have acquired so much knowledge about a foreign language and would like to be identified by the same foreign language.

Literature is the mirror of society and as such human activities cannot be separated from literature. Human activities are the main reservoir from which authors and poets get their themes and then with much creativity present them in different types of literature related to the experiences of the society. In other words, literature is a reflection of what goes on in the society. In the case of Zambia, it is very difficult for one to reflect what goes in the society because people are of the view that our traditional Zambian ways are gone and it is time to be abreast of what is trending in the world. Our failure to promote our literature even though unwritten has led the nation to be without a distinct identity. Zambia like many African countries are rich in Orature and should strive to have this orature documented that generations to come should learn of their background and appreciate why they are Zambians. Every society should always value literature in order to

inculcate values, perceptions and attitudes to the generations that are in their infancy. This should always be a deliberate move by the older generation. However, the case is different in Zambia in that the younger generation, which is in its infancy, is the one teaching the older generation values and perceptions about the world around us.

There exists a mutual relationship between culture and literature as each reinforces the other. African literature serves to enlighten, educate and display African worldview, practices and problems. Against the misinformed notion of Africans as a people without culture. Culture is a dynamic phenomenon encompassing the totality of attitudes, behaviours', beliefs and world-views. It is an integral part of every human society and all social groups is characterized by it. (Amah, 2002). Literature is indeed the mirror of the society in that it reflects what happens a particular society. Zambia as a society is very difficult to comprehend because its people who to run away from their own heritage by embracing the heritage that they have learned and acquired through the book.

Ngugi (1980) in the "Devil on the Cross" portrays the main character Jacinta Wariinga as one who has big dreams and does not like her African skin. Faced with problems, she heads

back to Illmorog as thoughts stream through her mind. As a young girl she always had dreamed of being an engineer but the old man of Ngorika, the hairy chested Waigoka, shattered her dreams.

More to that Wariinga does not like herself. She use ambi cream to bleach herself. The depiction of the character of Wariinga shows how the African culture has lost its touch among the African people. This also goes to show the level of cultural imperialism that has rocked the African continent. The Zambian society today cannot be clearly defined because it is very receptive to whatever it watches and listens to either through music and various television shows.

Literature helps us to develop perspectives about events that are happening locally and globally and thereby giving us the understanding of the world we live in. Many Zambians think that by forgetting their roots and embracing the culture of others is the best way of understanding the world we live in. Currently, world over there are cultural exchange programs that different institutions and individuals alike are taking part in. Only a very few Zambians are actively interested in such programs because many of us Zambians believe that our culture is primitive. Achebe in “Things Fall Apart” (1958:141) through the character Obierika puts it that “how

can the white man understand our custom when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. **He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.**” The division we are experiencing in the way we perceive our cultural beliefs has a lot to do with the view the white settlers have given us on the things we held so dear. Our lack of appreciating culture is a big problem that requires a paradigm shift beginning with this very generation.

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that the aspect of individual brilliance has greatly contributed to the African and Zambian society losing its identity of being one united family pursuing one common goal. Family values have been lost in pursuit of individual brilliance. Street kids were not a sight in the African and Zambian setup because of the strong extended family system that existed. But all this great African initiative can no longer hold because Africa and

Zambia are trying to move with what is currently trending in the western world.

For example, when UNESCO announced that it had engaged the University of Zambia to develop a program about Intangible Cultural Heritage, there was a public row that the University of Zambia had started offering witchcraft as a program. However, the concern by UNESCO was that Zambia's cultural heritage was on the verge of being extinct hence the need to preserve it. Therefore, it must be observed that Literature should be used as the vehicle for Zambia's cultural re-birth. In addition, our education sector has a wrong perception on the subject literature. This has been one of the greatest national fallacies of not being able to fully appreciate literature as a subject. Literature is the subject that should be placed at the centre of learning because it helps learners and teachers alike to fully appreciate who they are.

The ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs should be tasked with mandate of revamping our cultural heritage. The citizens of the country should be educated the importance of cultural heritage and the publicity of traditional ceremonies will do a great job in given a re-birth to our culture.

CONCLUSION

There is need for a paradigm shift in the society on the way we view our culture. literature should be used as the vehicle for the cultural re-birth of our nation. For a long time, we have struggled to have our cultural identity mainly stemming from the imposition of the foreign language. And as such many Zambians are slowly adopting the culture that does not belong to the at the expense of their own culture. Literature should be at the centre of educational development in the country for the country to remaining in touch with its cultural heritage.

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