

**CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND THE INCREASING AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE ON THE NIGERIAN CHILD: THE NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT****Muotolu (Ekwosianya), Martha Chinonye****Department of Early Childhood Care and Education****Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe,****Anambra State, Nigeria****E - Mail: [ekwosianyam@gmail.com](mailto:ekwosianyam@gmail.com)****Abstract**

From time immemorial, Literature has been known to be averse to violence, aggression, war and insecurity in general. With the recent economic hardship in the contemporary time, the rate of violence and aggression rose to an increase and became extended even to children. Literature being a means, through which this aggression and violence are reflected, uses children's literature in a very special way to depict these unfortunate realities as they occur in Nigerian homes, schools, societies cum communities and other agencies of socialization. This insecurity and unhealthy nature of the human society has made it necessary that the Nigerian child should be exposed to the social contradictions and inequalities inherent in the society and therefore forges a way of coping with it. The paper therefore employs children's literature as a tool for not just exposing the various insecurities meted on the child, but also condemning and mitigating them to their barest minimum, using Nze, U. Nze's *The Patient House help* as its literary corpora as well as its primary source of data. The Marxist literary theory is used as the frame work for the analysis of the collected data. The study finds out that the Nigerian child is faced with all manner of insecurity as evident in the body of the work. The study then suggests that the study of children's literature as part of childhood curriculum will expose the Nigerian child to this menace, and will possibly enable him to avoid behaviors that may lead to such occurrence. The study will further sharpen the child's insights as to what is obtainable in the environment in which he lives. The constituted authorities on child matters should rise up to their duties of enforcing unnecessary assault on the child.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, Aggression, Violence, Nigerian child, insecurity, National development

## Introduction

Since its incidence in the late nineteenth century to date, the existential style of thought, often expressed through literary works has had a considerable influence on world outlook. Existentialism has clearly manifest in the thoughts of many modern Africans as gleaned from several African literary works. There are strong similarities in existential experiences between events occurring in contemporary Africa and those that occur in the nineteenth century Europe. M. Chatterjee in Jenkwe (2002), makes a similar observation when she states that:

The crisis which man faces in contemporary times is not one which belongs to the Western hemisphere only. Although it was in the West that many of these terms were first used. The crisis is now part of the human condition.

Contrary to what some scholars hastily concluded to be borrowings from or imitations of European masterpieces, one has noticed streaks of existential reflections which the writers of the later day nations consistently express that are similar to those exhibited by Europeans in the nineteenth centuries, which stem from indigenous impulses.

Generally, the phenomenal experiences that triggered reflections were experiences that broke up the organic unity of traditional modes on life and values, thus creating social insecurity and alienation. On the African continent, the major agent of social change was colonialism, which brought in its wake, new cultural mores, new belief systems, new forms of literacy and new methods of status ranking, racism, as well as novel economic exchange relations that were diametrically different from the large subsistence and communalistic forms of traditional economy that existed. All these experiences upstaged the erstwhile settled values and patterns of life, thus creating confusion, frustration and indeed alienation. That situations such as these engender considerable existentialist modes of reflections is confirmed by Macquarrie's observation (quoted in Jenkwe, 2002) that:

The existentialist style of thought seems to emerge whenever man finds his securities threatened, when he becomes aware of the antiquities of the world and knows his pilgrim status in it. This also helps to explain why existentialism

has flourished in those lands where the social structures have been turned upside down and all values Trans – valued. (5).

Today, contemporary writers have made a drastic shift in their sensibilities to capture in their writings, the sad experiences of the Nigerian child and present these malaise in the forms of child maltreatment, child abuse, child labour and other forms of child exploitation and child neglect. It is worthy to note that these experiences triggered by contemporary anomalies like jealousy and envy, poverty, moral decadences, corruption, unemployment, selfishness, excessive greed, to mention but a few engender existentialist musings that inform the writings of contemporary writers as it concerns children's literature. It is against this background that children's literature is examined as a mitigating tool against aggression and violence that is meted daily on the Nigerian child using Nze .U. Nze's *The Patient House Help* as case study.

### **Aggression and Violence: A Definition**

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines aggression as a forceful action or procedure especially when intended to dominate or master or a feeling of anger or anti – apathy resulting in hostile or violent behavior. It is also a readiness to attack or confront, or a feeling of anger and hate that may result in threatening or violent behavior.

Violence could be seen as a behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill someone or something strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force. According to World Health Organization in the WRVH, Violence is defined as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm and mal - development.

Dictionary. Com defines violence as an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power as against rights or laws, to take over a thing / person. Violence is aggression, usually physical that causes harm. (Wikipedia Online).

**Pre Primary / Early Childhood Education : A Definition**

Childhood education according to the National Policy on Education is education given to children prior to their entry into primary school. Primary education on the other hand, is education given in an institution for children aged 6 - 11 years and above. The primary / childhood level of education thus becomes the key to the success or failure of the education system, since the rest of the education is built on it. When the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004), stated that provisions should be made in teacher education programmes for specialization in childhood education as one of the conditions to achieve the laudable childhood education objectives, it meant in essence that through such specialization, quality childhood education will be guaranteed since teachers will be stuffed with handy skills and techniques for the proper handling of the child's education.

**Children's Literature: A Definition**

Children's literature according to Nnyagu denotes the totality of literature including the three genre – drama, prose and poetry, especially prepared not only for the enjoyment of the children, but also for their positive upbringing. Children's literature is such literature meticulously prepared for the consumption of the child.

In the words of Chukwu, literature for children is art, which has the qualities of edifying through providing entertainment. It may be presented or written by adults, but it has to depict life from the perspectives children by presenting child heroes in settings where their experiences are captivating and their behaviors constantly modified for the benefit of a tender readership. It can be works that present adult experiences which bear impact on the lives of children.

**Analytical theory**

Marxist criticism in its diverse forms, grounds its theory and practice on the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx (1818-83) and his fellow thinker Friedrich Engels (1820-95), especially on the following claims:

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In the last analysis, the evolving history of human kind, of its social groupings and relations, of its institutions, and of its ways of thinking are largely determined by the changing mode of its 'material production: - that is, of its overall economic organization for producing and distributing material goods.

Changes in the fundamental mode of material production effect changes in the class structure of a society, establishing in each era dominant and subordinate classes that engage in a struggle for economic, political and social advantage.

Human consciousness is constituted by ideology – that is. The beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain what they take to be reality. An ideology is, in complex ways, the product of the position and interests of a particular class. In any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant economic and social class.

Ideology was not much discussed by Marx and Engels after the German Ideology, which they wrote jointly in 1845-46, but it has become a key concept in Marxist criticism of literature and the other arts. Marx inherited the term from French philosophers of the late eighteenth century, who use it to designate the study of the way that all general concepts develop from particular sense perceptions. In the present era, "ideology" is used in a variety of non-Marxist ways, ranging from a derogatory name for any set of political ideas that are held dogmatically and applied rigorously, to a neutral name for ways of perceiving and thinking that are specific to an individual's race, sex, nationality, education, or ethnic group. In its distinctive Marxist use, the reigning ideology in any era is conceived to be, ultimately, the product of its economic structure and the resulting class relations and class – interests. In a famed architectural metaphor, Marx represented ideology as a "superstructure" of which the concurrent socioeconomic system is the "base". Fredrich Engels described ideology as "a false consciousness," and many later Marxists consider it to be constituted largely by unconscious prepossessions that are illusory, in contrast to the "scientific" (that is, Marxist) knowledge of the economic determinants, historical evolution and present constitution of the social world. A further claim is that, in the era of capitalist economic organization that emerged

in the West during the eighteenth century, the reigning ideology incorporates the interests of the dominant and exploitative class, the “bourgeoisie,” or wage earning working class. This ideology, it is claimed, to those live in and with it, seems a natural and inevitable way of seeing, explaining and dealing with the enviroing world, but in fact has the hidden function of legitimizing and maintaining the position, power and economic interests of the ruling class. Bourgeois ideology is regarded as both producing and permeating the social and cultural institutions, beliefs and practices of the present era – including religion, morality, philosophy, politics and the legal system, as well as literature and the other arts.

The Marxist theory is considered as the extreme view of the sociological approach. It ties literature to the economic base and ideological superstructure in its system of dialectical materialism. It champions the downtrodden of socioeconomic class, critiquing texts that assume a class society of economic elitism and hegemony, and champions texts that support the common man. It asks of the writer that he use his art as weapon to expose the falsities of the bourgeoisie culture, and become a propagandist for the destined society in which all men would be happy and free because they would have lost their economic chains. To the Marxist, the writer who does not do this is unacceptable and even dangerous.

Terry Eagleton, English Marxist critic, has noted that “Marxist criticism is not merely sociology of literature, concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully, and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history.” Marxist criticism often includes analyzing the political tendency of a work. As a way of determining whether its social content and literary form are progressive. Often, interest focuses on the extent to which class conflict is represented in literary works, as well as the manner in which class distinctions are reinforced through literature. All in all, marxist critics sympathize with and endorse the works of authors who project the working class, and challenge the economic inequalities which form the basis of the operations and interactions of men and women in capitalist societies.

**Aggression and Violence in Nze .U. Nze's The Patient House Help**

The Marxist literary theory is relevant to this work and it serves as a good fame – work through which the aggression and violence in the Nigerian society could be exposed and laid bare. The instances of aggression and violence on the Nigerian child are analyzed using this theory. Hence the Marxist approach to children's literature looks at the class structure as well as the social contradictions in the society. This theory shares this in its belief that it should be emancipatory and preaches that children should be exposed to the social contradictions in the society, so that they can begin to think out solutions or workable alternative. Hence in the text, Chuka was being discriminate because of the differences in class. Chuka was the son of a wheel chair ridden parent and could not enjoy equal rights with the children of Mrs. Ginika, his maternal aunt, who accepted Chuka because of the helping hand he would render to her domestic home in Okigwe. His aunt unleashed untold hardship on him and exploited him. He was made to wake up at 4.am every morning to carry on with his duties for the day, while his cousins sleep till 7am. Before then, Chuka had swept all the rooms, washed all dishes, and warmed the leftover food, boiled water for their bathe and so on. (22). Cut off from the comforting essence of his former home, Chuka is subjected to all sorts of domestic torture, ranging from verbal and physical abuse to deliberate attempts to frustrate his efforts at attending western education, even when the government announced free education from primary 1 – 6, Ginika did not send Chuka back to school. While others would be at school, he would be at home doing one domestic work or the other. (48). His aunts usually flog him with electric wire. After doing that, she will mix detergent in water and rub it on his body so that the scar would not be noticed. She would pour cold water mixed with salt on his body after giving him thorough flogging. (55). The ill treatments Chuka received from his maternal aunt placed him at risk and clearly endangered his life. Once, he escaped narrowly the chance of being kidnapped, when sent out to hawk sachet water by his madam. When Chuka related the ordeal to his aunt, she shouted at him, calling him a liar, charlatan and cheat, who lazy about and know nothing but how to only eat and waste her food. She further ordered him to quickly get out of her sight before she gives him a hard slap. (57).

Another aspect of Marxist inclination that constitute a threat and insecurity to his existence was the exploitative measures given to Chuka, who was made to know that he has to work to provide for his education. His aunt practically told him that he has to hawk sachet water and oranges to provide the fees for his elementary education. (50). She also told him that even though he must wake up very early before everyone's else to do the morning chores and later help her out in the kitchen, that he should eat his food alone in the kitchen when everyone else has eaten and that he should not expect to eat everything the family eats. (54).

Other Marxist inclinations evident in the text is that of class struggle. While Chuka was struggling to rise from his lower class, there were attempts by his rivals to keep him down. Hence there are progressive agents and oppressive ones. The oppressive forces that made every attempt at pulling Chuka down include his aunt, Ginika and her children. Whereas the progressive agents that helped in lifting Chuka on board include the UNICEF ambassador who transformed his life and give it a meaning and a future. Another person was the Director of the UNICEF Orphanage, Mr. Williams, who took very good care of Chuka while he was at the orphanage and who threatened to sue Ginika for all the ill treatments she gave to Chuka. He was the brain behind Chuka's scholarship to study law at the University his Choice, as well as transporting his wheel – chair ridden parents to Netherlands, where they were treated. Another person who serves as a progressive agent that really helped Chuka in life was Mr. Ezekwem, Ginika's husband. Though he does not stay with his family at Okigwe, when he learnt of the gross mal treatments meted out to Chuka, he almost dismissed his wife for being so wicked and heartless to her niece and later allowed her to stay in his house on the condition that she will never maltreat Chuka again.

The instances above stand to attest to the existentialist scenario from which themes of aggression and violence are derived, and that these experiences constitute a threat to the child's existence is not in doubt. Other house helps who go through the same plight advised him on different ways to get even with his aunt, but Chuka politely turned them down saying that evil should not be paid with evil. (34). In the face of all these, Chuka remains respectful, diligent and gets an academic success when he finally gets a chance of going to school. In fact, it is his consistency in respecting his aunt even in the face of her unbelieving tyranny and his full hearted

application to any given job that made good fortune to smile at him/ He has gone out as usual to hawk for her aunt, anxious to sell his oranges, he dashed into the main road without knowing that an oncoming vehicle was so near. The UNICEF Ambassador who was being driven at that time took care of every expenses and made sure that Chuka was well provided for, since the problems of orphanage which Chuka was going through at the moment falls within the jurisdiction of his office. Chuka was opportuned to further his education to secondary level.

The depiction of existentialist experiences by the protagonist was clearly presented by the use of existentialist themes of maltreatment, abuse, neglect, exploitation, aggression and violence, child labour, all of which constitute a threat to the child's security and existence. This ugly experience has been the concern of African children literature writers, who use their works to reflect the sad plights and the general insecurity that confronts the child not only in Nigeria but also in African society in general, where the social political, moral and religious ethos in this part of the continent have been turned upside down and all values trans - valued.

### **Implication of the Child's Aggression and Violence on Childhood Education**

In the face of these increasing aggression and violence on the Nigerian child, Childhood education comes as an apt remedy to providing an escape route to the child from the world bedeviled by vice and tends to save him through a sure footed and quality education which it hopes to achieve as one of its laudable educational objectives. In addition it provides the child with the following under listed skills and techniques to ensure his success in life:

- 1 Enrichment of the individual through development of insights and understanding. (Anyadiegwu & Nzekwu, 2016).
- 2 Creating a world saved from vice and insecurity.
- 3 Giving the child the opportunity to understand himself, his personal problems and the problems of others.
- 4 Impartation of handy skills and techniques into the child to ensure a successful life.
- 5 Providing the child the opportunity to escape from routines.

- 6 Assessing and utilizing the knowledge of child psychology in dealing with the child's problems.
- 7 Implementing programmes with specific objectives that are geared towards the needs of the school child at each stage of development.
- 8 Developing and upholding characters and situations that favour the establishment of models.
- 9 Development of themes that are relevant to the all round development of the child.
- 10 Development of elements that are useful in forging a peaceful society.

### **Conclusion**

From the study so far, it is observed that the present state of violence, injustice, aggression, animalistic brutality and all forms of dehumanization of the child prevalent in today's society as reflected by Nigerian child literature writers, who questions the essence of life structured upon insecurity, corruption, disorder, chaos, selfishness, greed, poverty, brutality, depravity to mention but a few. Hence, children's literature is committed to exposing, condemning, and dethroning evil, while commending, upholding and enthroning virtues and fair play structured upon peace and harmony among the people.

### **Recommendations**

- 1 The study recommends that the study of children's literature will play a cogent role towards fighting against this menace and reducing it to its barest minimum.
- 2 The study of children's literature as part of childhood curriculum will expose the Nigerian child to aggression and violence, thus enlightening him on how to cope with it.
- 3 The study of children's literature further sharpens the child's insights as to what is obtainable in the society he lives and further develops his insights into his own personality problems through reading about others with similar problems

- 4 The study of children's literature develops in the child appreciation and love for one's country and her ideals through appropriate transmission of cultures and development of interest in reading
- 5 The constituted authorities on child matters should rise up to their duties to enforce any assault on the child

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