

## **A Retrospection of the Nexus between History and Literature for the Growth of Developing Countries in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

*One of the issues that dominated scholastic discourses towards the end of the twentieth century is the multi-disciplinary approach to issues that concerns the development of societies and nations. This is imperative when the liberal arts are fast becoming endangered species compared to the sciences in the face of demands for the developmental needs of underdeveloped countries. It is in this light that this paper is conceived to primarily examine the interface between History and literature; two obviously related liberal arts discipline that are appropriately distinct bodies of human activities, and in the process point out the significant distinction between them. This paper will also posit for a full and rounded education that ought to provide the space for wide ranging reflection on their importance and value to the growth of developing countries in Africa.*

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**Keywords:** *Retrospection, History, Literature, Interplay, Interface, Distinction and Exploitation.*

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### **Introduction**

In the pursuit of any form of knowledge, it is helpful for scholars to stand back from time to time in retrospection, from their subjects, to reflect upon the general nature of their activities by asking themselves if they can justify to themselves and to others, their expenditure of time and effort on how their subjects and their disciplines relate to other disciplines.? It is when such questions are answered that introspection will become a healthy supplement to scholarship, for without the perspective which it gives, learning will be meaningless.

This paper written from the perspective of a historian with an average knowledge and interest in literature as a subject is conceived as a contribution to the inter-disciplinary research discourse. It is also aimed at espousing the interplay of discipline using history and literature. Section two of the paper attempts an explication of the interface where there is a scholarly dialogue and discourse between history and literature, while it concludes with recommendations and a summary of the major arguments in the work.

### **Meaning of History and Literature**

History and Literature are common names for two obviously related but apparently distinct bodies of human activity. Therefore, for us to have a basis for critical discussion of the subject matter there is the need to examine what the terms are all about.

The Greek word “historia” means a searching to find out. The meaning of the word had made Whitney (1948), to posit that, historical research interpret past trends of attitude, events and facts. To him therefore, history is an integrated narration or description of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry for the whole truth. Putting it more succinctly, historical endeavor may be considered as embracing the whole field of human past that is as broad as life itself, although the data may be viewed from historical perspective as part of social development rather than isolated attitudes, events or facts.

Consequently, historical endeavor is the necessary and inescapable observation of change around us. The above observation had made Bingel (2005) to quote the United States department of labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics which states inter-alia that “Historians research analyze and interpret the past. They use many sources of information in their research, including government and institutional records, newspapers and other periodicals, photographs, interviews, films and unpublished manuscripts such as personal diaries and letters.” In other words, history may not be a strictly vocational subject, but academically trained historians are trained to gather a mass of often conflicting data, sieve through it, interpret and present it in a critical and convincing manner with clarity of expression and precision.

Robert Smith (1973), in espousing the fundamental nature and rationale for historical studies, had asserted that as with other branches of learning, history is concerned with how and why certain events and situations have come about; of both change and stability. While Marwick (1983) pointed out that “this concern about causation however is directed to the past, and to the past human beings. It also connotes the entire past and an inquiry of how it had actually happened or an attempt to describe and interpret it.”

At this juncture, there is the need to clearly state that history on the other hand is not a discipline that operates outside the orbit of other disciplines as it must of necessity embrace aspects of several other disciplines which are able to contribute to an understanding of man by means of what he has attempted or accomplished in the past in his bid to adapt his life to the physical environment where he found himself to his needs by the development of technology. This realization had made Alagoa (1973), to contend that it may then be taken for granted that every discipline concerned with specialized aspects of human life and activities must be relevant to a degree when viewed from a comprehensive perspective of historical studies and to the history of man in his totality.

The above comprehensive view of history should not be taken to imply that all other disciplines are subsidiary to history. Rather, it indicates the essential unity of all knowledge, especially when such knowledge relates to the study of man. Further, it means that just as other disciplines are required for a full and satisfactory historical understanding, history constitutes an important ingredient to the existence and development of other humanistic studies.

Literature, according to the Webster Dictionary (1995) of the English language are the writings in prose or verse especially writings having artistic value or expressions and express ideas of permanent or universal interest. Okot P. Bitek (1973), in his view defined literature as “all the creative productions of the human mind that are expressed in words.” Therefore, the literature of a people involves both oral forms like music, dance, masquerade art and storytelling in traditional societies and written forms as we have it today. In a nutshell, it is also a body of writing, on a particular subject. To buttress the above assertion is the composition and rendering of the Yoruba poetry “*Oriki*” among other variants of Nigerian societies and culture, which is put together or

rendered as an attempt at bringing to memory the ageless praise chant that celebrates the history, heroes, adventures, valor, occupation and hobbies of different towns, groups, and individuals represented in the society.

On different occasions, the term literature refers to a certain kinds of writing and to cover a range from all printed writings of a certain quality to the important specialized sense of a body of imaginative writings. Barrel (1983), explained further that the term Literature can be extended to include imaginative composition which was not primarily written to be printed, but to be spoken or in some other immediate way performed. Thus, literature in the important but narrow sense of printed imaginative writing of a certain quality belongs, to a specific historical period, after the invention of printing, specializations and before the inventions of modern media of delivery and performance (especially radio and sound recording). At the same time, however, our thinking about literature, from the experience of that specific period, is commonly extended before and after it, to other related forms of composition.

In a nutshell, literature with its genres which are basically prose (fiction), and non-fiction drama and poetry, can be viewed as forms of writing in which expressions are formed in connection with idea of interest, which are then characterized. Literature like other humanistic and social science field of study draws its strength from actual life and also relates and draws its strength from all languages of the world. Therefore, if a piece of work has been written, it is because it has happened or had the possibility of happening that someone has been able to capture its essence.

The literary genres serve as indicators of the socio-cultural, economic and political events within the society. A corollary would be that these events could be diagnostic of the society's dramaturgical manifestations is the proof that plays and poems are indicators as to why they exist as text that denote their society's heart beat. It is also a vehicle through which social commentaries and personal emotions are administered into the consciousness of man. To buttress the above assertion, Benjamin Njoku in his review of Remi Okeke's anthology "*Exit complaint and other poems*" had posited that the poet chronicles the events of the past, while at the same time predicting the present with utmost accuracy.

However, these shifting meanings of literature bear closely on the question of its actual and presumed relations with history. But the point of this article is that the various disciplines are very interdependent and that broadly speaking, history on its part indicates the sum total and detail of all human actions that are committed to memory or recorded. If then taken to be so, it is clear that history writing includes a form of literature or history as an account or narrative, is a form of literature.

These definitions of the two disciplines taken together, will lend credence to the contention of the paper that in as much as historical inquiry is often a continuous and detailed comparison of the received accounts or narrative and what can be shown from other forms of evidence. But literary work except biography and autobiography seems to have a relatively fixed thematic form.

This is because any inquiry into the dialogue between history and literature has to at some point, if it is to adequately address the issue, recognize the variables and shifting sense of the primary indicative terms of the two disciplines under consideration.

In addition, the possessors of the knowledge of history to Barrel (1983), often illustrate aspects of their source material from the literature of the period under consideration, while the possessor of the body of literature looked to history as background. As a result, the possessor of the body of history and literature tended in practice, according to Barrel to produce effects of completeness.

This is when we consider the assertion that the possessors of literature looked to history as a “background”. But the background to literature goes a long way to show the aspects of history that was relevant to their work; such as change in human activities. While the illustrative literature was all about the writing of historical significance, confident accounts of whole periods, extending in secondary works to reasoned catalogues of “a period and its literatures or the literature of a period” (Barrel, 1983). The paper is of the view that history as we know it now is a form of created literature about the past. It is, or should be, a form of literature, but it is still a form of created literature which is an interpretation of the past in the present.

It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper will contend that in as much as historical inquiry is often a continuous and detailed comparison of the received accounts or narratives and what can be shown, from other forms of evidence and record to have actually taken place, literature in some respects, seem different from this process of historical inquiry, in that its work appear to have a relatively fixed form.

This section therefore concludes that attempting to write the history of related change in economic and social relations can be reconstructed and comparing that construction with what we can learn from the literature brings an understanding of contemporary social changes.

### **Interface between disciplines: An explication**

Ethically, the thesis of complimentary reflection holds that our thought, our lives and entire commitments are authentic and realizable on the condition that they take account of other elements and contingencies in life, and not bury themselves in exclusive one-sidedness. The above realization must have made Asouzou (2005), to assert that we need each other; we need to research; work with others and to also come into dialogue with other discipline if man is to arrive at the *raison-d'être* of its existence.

It should be noted that in the scholarly orbit, there is an unending intra and inter disciplinary discourses and dialogues on various aspects of human activity in her environment. It is the discourses and dialogues that create an interface which continues to provide a platform and reference point for the development of man. For there is so much emergent and urgent social issues that stimulates, complicate and engage academic discourses. By their very constitution and ontology, as asserted by Tsaaior (2006), “discourses do not exercise absolute epistemology and hermeneutic husbandry over assumptions and practices that they generate. This is because as a matter of necessity, they always existed in their eternal matrices of discourses, immanent mechanisms and contradictions that self destruct such discourses.”

As experience has proven, the final resolution of scholarly discourses and dialogues in the arts, humanities and social sciences has never been totally resolved or attainable as in the sciences for the fact that human activities remain an unending debate. This, from Smith's (1973) viewpoint, does not imply that controversies, albeit historical can never be resolved, but rather that as new evidences and ways of perceiving issues emerges and changes, new controversies will continue to arise.

Such controversies and the discourse which it generates are of great value and importance to scholarship and human development. This by implication means that no discourse is ever coherent, fixed, monolithic, centripetal, stable, finished or whole. For within the interval of every discourse can be found weaknesses that makes such a discourse vulnerable and susceptible to another emerging discourse or other discourses. That is to say that the emerging academic discourse or dialogue that can be appropriately dubbed a counter-discourse is often instituted and nurtured by the existing discourse. Therefore, discourses are not monologic, as they in due course veritably precipitate the emergence of counter-discourse that compete with the original discourse.(Tsaaior,2006). However, the consideration of variables like the environment where these dissenting views and consciousness interact in respect of discourses and counter-discourses is determined by factors such as power, desire, political and economic ideology with the consideration of individual environment, education and subjectivity.

This type of discourse and counter-discourses has many benefits as It has brought to the fore the need to continually strive to punctuate and interrogate the status of already established stereotypes. This way, it then opens the possibilities to the multi-dimensionality of the past of a society. For in learning their history, societies no longer want to repeat past mistakes but also want to strive to attain greater level of development.

### **Interplay between History and Literature**

In the pre-literate period, it is a fact that history derived some benefits or depended on literature when considered from the oral perspective. But since then, literature had always drawn heavily from history. This is to assert that the two disciplines as veritable categories of human endeavors towards the mobilization of physical and creative energies enjoy a dialectical interaction which has been mutually beneficial and catalytic over the eras. While history in its record of human activities, creates literature and endows it with life and vibrancy, literature on its part also stokes the spirits of human activities and distils its themes, characters, setting, metaphors and tropes among other technical resources and social essences from history. While history readily volunteers raw materials and data from which literature draws for the fashioning and creation of its ontological world.

However, there is no gainsaying that this dialectical interaction between history and literature makes them co-existent and locks them in a symbiotic and robust relationship, which made them task the human will and intellect that have occasioned literary and historical creative accomplishment which have immensely benefited humanity. This is in view of literature's use of history to generate a corpus of writings which were used overtime for educating, entertaining and transformation of the society.

In Africa, what readily comes to mind of what can be referred to as "history in literature or literature based on historical accomplishments" were used for the fostering the spirit and development of African nationalism in the run-up to independence of African Countries. During the period, poetry and literary works sensitized the people and provided the consciousness, vision and sensibilities of being African. This is exemplified in Ngugi Wa' thiongo's use of fictional prose of the Kenyan Mau-Mau nationalist's war for independence to celebrate Dedan Kimanathi as the hero of the historical event in his work titled "*Trial of Dedan Kimanathi*."

Literature also helps to x-ray and mirrors the complexity of life, identifying societal values, ideas, problems, crisis and issues of our time. Many modern writers like Ahmed Yerima in his literary work "*Hard Ground*" had used a theme that mirrored the violence dubbed "militancy" in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria, where a raging scenario that has endured for several years and which is gradually assuming a semblance of war if not resolved is being played out, notwithstanding the amnesty programme initiated by President Umoru Yar'adua of Nigeria.

The existences of such literary endeavors which are products of historical events have sufficiently demonstrated the umbilical-cord that exists between the two disciplines.

### **The distinction between History and Literature**

Notwithstanding the interdependence and interplay between history and literature, there is also the need to point out the distinction that existed between the two disciplines.

Marwick (1983), in his exposition of the nature of history, is of the view that history is commonly held to mean the general and specific accounts of human actions, grouped by period and place, independent of their narration. The historian is concerned with many of the source materials as are handled by the social scientists and importantly, his work must at all times be conceived within time dimension. That is to acknowledge the fact, that while the historian is limited to the hard facts of actual happenings, dates, time, personalities and places, the literator has all to himself the latitude of the complexity of his society with the interaction of man and its environment.

Unlike the historian, the literator uses not only actual happenings as motif, but he also by his works creates situations and influences the course of events. In the process, he is like the historian; sometimes prophetic.

Paradoxically, unlike the historian, literature is also an instrument of protest. This it does through fictitious works, which are mostly untrue stories or imaginative novels and stories written from historical fact, perspective or experience in order to fictionalize, which thus becomes the literators own creation. Nonetheless, there is a close relationship between fiction and reality. In this category is George Orwells "*Animal Farm*". This realization had obviously made Shehu Musa Yar'adua in his foreword to Theo Vincent's work (1981), to assert that "literature is history".

Another major difference between a literary and historical work is the presentation or style of the writer which is very important in a literary work. Style in literary parlance refers to the narrative or analytic technique, sentence structure, use of poetic or non-poetic language in a piece of writing. This includes the diction which is the choice of word which may be archaic or modern. For example, Shakespeare's English is archaic which historically could serve as a pointer to the age at which the work was produced or written. The historian to Carr (1961), when writing uses the ordinary language of everyday life, with all the dangers of the impression it entails. This, historian has to do "to fulfill his sense of duty to share his discoveries with his audience or readers and thereby exposing him to intelligent and intellectual criticisms.

This paper in agreement with the importance of the above agreed that documentation is the hallmark of scholarly exposition, which the historians had to “strictly” adhere to when collecting and abstracting sources of information for future use in order to disclose the basis of research findings, protestations and conclusion to their readers. However, it is germane to point out that documentation which is a basic requirement for scholarship works is not mandatory for literary works, except in prose where it is used in biography and autobiography to substantiate some claims. Furthermore, documentation in literary work might be needed if the work is an adaptation such as Ola Rotimi’s *“The gods are not to blame”*, which is an adaptation of *Oedipustres of Sophocles.*”

In addition, the subject matter of any literary work to Palmer (1980), is its theme; its main preoccupation, essential or principal concern. However, some literary work can be imitative or imaginative with its own life and pattern. Pattern here refers not only to the abstract details, plot, structure, point of view, style and other aspects of techniques. But historical inquiry is often a continuous and detailed comparison of the received accounts or narratives and what can be shown, from other forms of evidence and record to have actually happened or had taken place. Antithetically, literature, in some respects, differs from this process of historical inquiry, in that its work appears to have a relatively fixed form.

### **Conclusion**

This paper will like to conclude that in the intellectual debate and search for appropriate means to reform and develop the socio-economic and political growth of a developing country like Nigeria, it will be highly instructive if we keep in mind the initiators of economic development models who only have one tool: The Hammer (Technology), for it is a truism that, he that has only the hammer see’s everything as a nail. This is to state that if you approach a problem from a particular theoretical point of view you will only end up asking only certain questions and answering them in particular ways. You might be lucky and the problem you are facing might be a “nail” for which your hammer is the most appropriate tool. But more often than not, you will need to have an array of tools available to you, for, there is not in existence a single solution to the socio-economic and political predicament of nations, as each situation is unique and requires independent, creative and informed analysis. Conclusively, there must be a continuous search for answers through the multi-disciplinary approach to issues that concerns the development of societies and nations of the world.

### **Exploiting the nexus between History and Literature for the socio-political and economic growth of developing nations**

There is this growing realization that what is needed in most nations in Africa striving to develop is a cultural revolution and complete re-orientation in which Africans will seek to know their origins and clarify their identity. This is in view of the fact that the European renaissance came by way of a revolution in the arts and literature, not science and technology as perceived in this age and clime, though there should be an interface of the two.

- There should be a cultural revival at the local level by the appreciation of our indigenous language, literature, philosophies, values, cuisine, dress, drama, etc. History and the arts generally at all levels of education system need to do more to encourage a cultural revival

and to blend it at the national and international levels. In other words the two can be used as agents of social mobilization for nation-building purposes, through its employment of the concepts and tools of tradition and culture of the continent in its quest to catch up with the rest of the world.

- This paper also recommends the exploitation of the two disciplines for the sustenance, promotion, preservation, propagation and exportation of the continents culture and ideas to other cultures of the world to counter the onslaught of globalization.
- Both can also be used for national development through the maintenance of a vigorous dialogical relationship with its past and then coating it with cosmopolitan flavor of a contemporary outlook. In other words, a literature that is based on actual historical event could be generated to effect a positive and sustainable change in the cultural and economic development of the society.
- The two disciplines can also be employed in the effort to diversify the economies from the over dependence on oil. This is possible through the development of the entertainment and tourism industry which has been acclaimed worldwide as vital to the economic growth of nations. To this end, Film producers could be encouraged to use historically based and locally produced literary works as motifs for their work as had been maximally utilized in Asia by China and India.
- History in form of oral tradition and folktales in traditional societies in Africa had been used to impart beneficial ideas to the younger ones. In this light, History with its interpretations and literary work can be used not only to merely entertain, but also to direct the community to moral and patriotic beneficial standard in countries yearning of ridding her society of corruption.
- Historical inquiry and literary works are two important ways through which an individual and a society can question itself. On the individual level, it offers an avenue in which imagination that can be catalytic to development can be stimulated.

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