

The Relevance of Literary Studies in the Curriculum of Nigerian Polytechnics

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Abstract

The Polytechnic system is one of the strands of tertiary education in Nigeria, the other two being the University and the College of Education. The Act establishing the Polytechnic spells out the main function of the polytechnic which is to train middle level manpower to drive the economy of Nigeria. From the foregoing it is deductible that students in Polytechnics will therefore be inclined to receive training in the fields of technology, sciences, environmental and other related areas of specialization. This paper pin points the relevance of the study of literary works at all levels by students of Nigerian Polytechnics. The Federal Polytechnic, Ado Ekiti is the focal point and is taken to be representative of Polytechnics in general since their syllabus is drawn up, moderated and regulated by the National Board for Technical Education, NBTE. The relevance of the study of literature by Polytechnic students is highlighted to underscore the right decision of the NBTE to include it in their syllabus. Recommendations are made in support of the continued retention of literature as an integral part of the curriculum of students at all levels of Polytechnic education.

Key words: Polytechnic, Literature, Aesthetics

Introduction

Polytechnic education was popularized in Nigeria in the late seventies when the military administration of General O. Obasanjo established many Federal Polytechnics in Ondo State (Akure), Ogun State (Iloro) Kogi State (Idah) Imo State (Nekedde) etc. These new institutions were to complement the ones which already existed in Lagos (Yaba College of Tech), Kaduna (Kaduna Polytechnic) Auchi (Auchi Polytechnic) and Ibadan (The Polytechnic, Ibadan). Several states also established their own institutions, which were meant to admit students from their catchment areas.

The polytechnic Act (1979) as amended set up the institutions with the primary aim of training middle level manpower which would mean the industries and provide intermediate professional services in the manufacturing sector of the economy.

General Administration of Polytechnics

At the helm of affairs of all polytechnics is a Governing Council which is appointed by the federal or state government, depending on the ownership structure. The Council represents the President or state Governor as the Visitor to the institution, as the case may be. The chief executive and administrative officer is a Rector who is also Chairman of the Academic Board. The Academic Board is the highest decision making organ in all matters affecting academics in the Polytechnic. This is to the Polytechnic what the Senate is to the University. The Rector is assisted by principal officers such as Deputy Rectors, Registrar,

Librarian and Bursar. All the principal officers have subordinates who assist them in the daily administration of the institution.

The Polytechnic Curricula

The number of schools and departments that a Polytechnic can maintain will depend on its age and size. The Federal polytechnic, Ado-Ekiti as focal point of this paper has four schools and many departments in each school. There are School of Engineering, School of Environmental Studies, School of Science & Computer Studies and the School of Business Studies whose academic staff handle the Use of English courses where literature is included. All students of the Polytechnic, regardless of their departments, offer the use of English course at all levels and at both semesters. This underscores the importance of literary studies in the curriculum of the polytechnic.

In the first year of resumption, all National Diploma I students are introduced to one of the genres of literature, fiction. Our students in particular are introduced to Chinua Achebe's **No Longer at Ease** (1960) and Ernest Hemingway's **The Old man and the Sea** (1952). Another genre, dramatic literature, is taught to National Diploma II students. Textual materials for these students include William Shakespeare's **King Richard II** and John Pepper Clark's **Ozidi**. The two materials belong to the category of dramatic work called tragedy. At the outset of the Higher National Diploma Programme, students are introduced to the beautiful art of poetry. At this point students are taken through African and Non-African poems so that they can identify the peculiarities of each type. For this purpose they are taught David Diop's 'Africa' and Dennis Brutus' "A Troubador I traverse". For non-African poems our students are exposed to John Donne's "Death, be not proud" and Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess".

In the final year students are exposed to what is called literary appreciation. This is a pot pourri of all the generic art forms in literature. They study Thomas Hardy's **Tess of the d'Urbervilles**, Mariama Ba's **So Long a Letter**, Ola Rotimi's **Our Husband Has gone mad again**.

Why study these literary art forms?

Many reasons that are helpful and ultimately beneficial to the students' immediate and future life can be adduced for introducing them to literary studies even as Polytechnic students. In the first place literature has an inherent capacity to humanize its readers. The intrinsic concern and focus of literature is humanity. A reading of Richard Wright's **Native Son** (1940) confirms this position. The frustration and discrimination suffered by blacks in a predominantly white society force Bigger into crime which he committed serially without a premeditated intention to be a criminal. The contrast between the blacks who had limited or non-existent opportunity to survive and the wealthy, influential real estate moguls compels the reader to humanize and empathise with the cul-de-sac in which Bigger and his lean, austere family found themselves.

In the second place, students of literature in the Polytechnic are wrapped in a warm embrace with reality after a long session of interaction between man and machine. In spite of their exhaustive and exerting work in laboratories and workshops, these students are never sequestered from the reality of their existence as humans in a complex and protean world. A reading of Ernest Hemingway's **The Old man and the Sea** (1952) reminds them that life is never a bed of roses and no meaningful achievement can be recorded without sustained physical exertion. The old man in the story, Santiago, never lost hope. He could not get a

catch until he had sailed and cast his net in the deep waters for eighty four days. The import of this to students is that there will always be a reward, a fantastic one, after what seems an interminably long time of toil and expectation.

Literature, especially the comic type, affords the students the opportunity to unwind amid mirthful gusts of throaty laughter when reading comic plays. The comic reality and entertainment is forcefully brought alive if the play is acted on stage. Banter, bear hugs and pleasantries are exchanged as students sit and watch entertaining plays. Ola Rotimi's **Our Husband has gone mad Again** exemplifies this. The scene where Lejoka's Brown's wife is ridiculed for her chain of degrees from Yale University etc is truly entertaining. One is also faced with the reality that the struggle for political power is one of life and death. The dominant party in power and the opposition are locked in an infernal battle of life and death in an effort to wrest political power for their parties. The jokes that litter the plot of the story from start to finish serve as delectable visual entertainment for the students of literature.

In the course of their study, Polytechnic students learn that success in life depends on the ability to be developmentally ambivalent. There are always two sides to a coin, the tail and the head. There are usually moments of mirth, brought about by resounding accomplishment and luck. There are, again, periods of depression occasioned by terrible reversals of fortunes. The study of literary works makes this reality the second nature of students. Tragic plays or fictional works are intended to ingrain these harsh realities of life into the chemistry of the students. Shakespeare's **Richard II** says it all. What tragedy, what misfortune, what calamity can be greater than all that befell the king in that play. He is doubly divorced; both from his throne and his marriage. A king who was once a rich, mighty and powerful aristocrat swarped greatness and influence for want, anguish, sorrow and bitterness. That could be the lot of any man who has not married the bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, to use a biblical expression.

Robert Browning's "My last Duchess" reveals many sickening attributes of men in power. The Duke is portrayed as unrepentantly arrogant and unfeeling. He was heard speaking vauntingly about himself throughout the dramatic monologue in which the poem was presented. It was also seen that men of importance are almost always guilty of abuse of power. In the Duke's case, his darling wife, the Duchess, was summarily executed for being neighbourly and affable. A student is impelled to shudder at the unreasonableness of a king who would order that his wife be killed because she smiled at other people. Hear the demented Duke; "I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together". This experience will make it very difficult, if not absolutely impossible, for Polytechnic literature students to deal callously with their spouses later in life. That way, society is greatly enriched and ennobled.

Man is, in a single breadth, at peace with man and God when he reads and understands the import of religious poetry. That is what the student learns when he undertakes a literary appreciation of John Donne's "Death, be not proud". Students will be truly enamored of the poem because of its language, message and tone. It dwells chiefly on the theme of resurrection, one of the doctrines of Christianity. The speaker apostrophized death, when he rebuked him not to be proud because those whom death had slain die not but sleep. One learns that the feat for which death may want to swell and puff can also be achieved by poppy whose soporific properties have sedative effects. Charms and incantations can also put humans to sleep. Donne ends the poem prophetically and in an unwavering belief and faith when he said "one short sleep past/ we wake eternally/ and death shall be no more/ death, thou shalt die."

The student of literature is able to deduce from here that after his earthly toil he has a permanent place of rest on the resurrection morning at the feet of Jesus. To get to that priced destination he must be at peace with all men by obeying the Ten Commandments put in place to moderate and guide his conduct and relationship with God and man.

Nationalism and patriotism are twin virtues that all citizens should exude in all circumstances with particular reference to the interests of their country. David Diop's 'Africa', one of the poems studied by HND 1 students reminds them of the need to have faith and belief in their country. The poem is ranked in the category of poems called negritude. In general this sort of poetry places emphasis on the uniqueness of the black man's outlook, his cultural ancestry, his thought pattern and his personality.

In 'Africa' David Diop depicts the beauty of a race that had been raped by several years of European domination and exploitation. In spite of the abuses to which Africa, the continent of black people, was subjected in the colonial past, its citizens, one of which Diop is, are still proud of it. In line 7, Diop talks about "the beautiful black blood that irrigates the field". 'Black blood' is employed as a deliberate oxymoron intended to heighten the awe and admiration of the black race.

Okafor (2012) notes that negritude poems generally celebrate Africa, Africans and the black heritage with particular reference to the pleasant past experiences in Africa before the coming of white men. Students' exposure to this poem, more than anything else endears them to their continent, their country, their town, and the immediate environment in which they live. After all it is said that charity begins at home.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the fore-going it is safe to conclude that the inclusion of literary studies in the curriculum of Polytechnic students in Nigeria by the regulatory body, National Board for Technical Education, NBTE, is well thought out. Literature should indeed be taught to all students, not just students in Arts and Social Sciences. Doing this has a groundswell of advantages. Gbenedio (1996) captures this concern when she said:

The teaching of any literary genre should therefore be done in such a way that the students obtain the fullest possible gains from it—they improve on their language ability as well as on their knowledge of the world around them p 199.

The following recommendations are made to further enhance the study of literature as an integral part of the curriculum of students in Nigerian Polytechnics.

- (a) The study will humanize them, they become further aware that they are humans and should relate thus to their fellow humans.
- (b) The study makes it abundantly clear that life is not a bed of roses; there are tragic circumstances which are a test of their faith.
- (c) The study of literature accentuates the truth in the statement that all work and no play make Jack a dull boy. Comical plays enliven them and help to ease tension.
- (d) The study assists them to further understand the virtues of moderation and modesty.

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