

## **Similarity of Customs and Traditions of Morality across Africa as depicted by African Writers**

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### **Abstract**

Literature is a medium through which people's experiences, life styles and other social issues are documented; whether in drama, prose or poetry. Thus, literature does not develop in a vacuum but reflects the valued customs and traditions of a given cultural milieu. African literature performs the didactic function of representing African beliefs, culture and existing customs or tradition in order to correct, enlighten, and teach morals. This study explores the African family value systems and morality as documented by Asika in his novel, Tamara. The novel deals with some customs and traditions issues which are interwoven around people in contemporary African societies. This is achieved by placing the characters in an African setting in order to explore these values. Hence, the values are identified to uphold existing positive social or moral practices that encourage good behaviors and condemn social vices.

**Keywords:** Literature, Customs and Traditions Values

## **Introduction**

Literature exists in different societies to entertain, correct and instruct. It has values as a result of its basic functions in a given society. Literature performs different functions in society and these functions are useful in understanding the world, people and their different cultures. Thus, the followings are the basic functions of literature:

- Literature is entertaining and aesthetically pleasing.
- It broadens our knowledge and intellectual horizons by making us more aware of the varied and complex nature of human experiences.
- It serves as the mirror of society, because it depicts real life activities.
- It criticizes, corrects and educates us through the universal truth or philosophical view explored by the literary artist in his or her fictional work.
- Literature is affective. It gives an opportunity for the expression of emotions while reading a fictional work.
- Literature is fictional and plausible. A good literary artist makes his/ her work plausible. The term 'plausible' means 'true to life'. This simply means that the stories and characters are invented, but the experiences reflect the reality of human existence.

In essence, literature helps to improve man's behavior for the general good of society. Literature is a humanistic discipline composed in prose or verse form to represent experiences, feelings, emotions and thoughts of an individual or groups of individuals in a given geographical or cultural setting. It heavily draws from imagination but presents some truth about human life. This is to say that literature is useful because it delights and teaches. Philip Sidney in his "Defence of Poesy" elaborates on the moral and social functions of literature. He argues that

Literature imitates both to delight and to teach, and delight, to move men to take goodness in hand, which without delight they would as from a stranger; and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved- which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed...  
(938)

Thus, literature performs the didactic function of entertaining, instructing and correcting. Hence, the audience or readers are presented with issues of morality which are judged based

on the concept of right and wrong. As an embodiment of culture and belief systems of people, literature never lacks moral issues. Enuokoha observes that

The question of morality is not trifled with in any society. From the traditional society through modern periods, social morality is held overwhelmingly high. Literature is an undisputable social force known for exposing evil or commending good... Every society that overlooks the quest for good morals, heads towards extinction. Literary artists condemn the vicious attitude predominant in their environment. (12-13)

Generally, the social relevance of literature as a mirror of society cannot be overlooked. Literature reflects the activities of people in a given society as well as the relationships formed by these people in the same society. One of the most effective values of literature is its ability to expose or reveal the good, bad and ugly attributes in human nature, and subtly presents models to follow. This particular function of literature however deals with the customs and traditions inherent in a literary work. In African literature, the issue of morality has been a recurring theme. African writers have written their literary works to correct vices and uphold virtues in order to guide the behaviours of people in society. African literature in its written form relies heavily on oral literature such as folk songs, folk tales, proverbs and idioms. As an embodiment of culture and belief system of African societies, African literature never lacks moral issues. In oral traditions, stories are narrated orally during a storytelling section, and as such moral lesson are taught using the experiences of different fictional characters in the story. Achebe explains that stories play important role in guiding people. He writes, so important are such stories to mankind that they are not restricted to the account of initial creation, but will be found following human societies as they recreate themselves through vicissitude of their history, validating their social organization, their political systems, their moral attitudes and religious beliefs, even their prejudices. (112)

Chinua Achebe more than Cyprian Ekwensi, Amos Tutuola and other African writers stimulates literary work in Nigeria because of his theme, “the impact of colonization on African tradition” and the use of folklore. Achebe however employs folktales in his novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* to pass moral judgments on his characters, especially those ones who have erred. Thus, such tales that adopt characters like the tortoise and vulture are used to teach morals in most African societies. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe uses

tales to make disparaging remarks about Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel whose actions reflect in the character of the vulture and tortoise.

Literature cannot be divorced from customs and traditions. African literature is no exception since literary genres record people's experiences, moral and social values of a given society, and how these values affect society negatively or positively. Thus, African writers are conscious of some issues that affect their societies and as such, employ themes that reflect past and present events.

Ojaide and Obi observe that “social issues and the way people relate are subject of literature, whether in drama, fiction or poetry. How individuals interact, man and woman in love, friendship, the individual and the large society, human relationships in short, are the sine qua non of literature. Ethics and morality develop in the way people relate” (5).

In the beginning, African literature presents the picture of people who lament over the pains and wounds inflicted on them through slavery, colonization and imperialism. However, in contemporary times writers have focused their attention on issues that affect every sector of their society directly or indirectly.

Contemporary African Literature goes beyond conventional literary studies. It deals not only with purely literary issues of canonization, language, aesthetics, and scholar-poet traditions that have barely been addressed directly in recent studies but also with diverse interdisciplinary topics in literature such as gender, migration, globalization, environmental and human rights. Thus, the uniqueness of African literature lies in representing the life and experiences of people, especially on issues that have become new concerns for writers and the general African populace. The term 'African literature' refers to the literature of the African people which has a lot of prospects in the contemporary times. Poetry, prose and drama as genres of literature perform the role of expressing and documenting the culture, beliefs attitudes and social reality of African society. Certainly, it cannot be denied that African writers consider and reflect these social, political and cultural experiences that affect their society.

African literature as a body of literature has defied definitions, but it still refers to all national and ethnic literatures of Africa. This is to say that African literature merits its

existence since it performs the role of educating, entertaining and correcting people. Literature as a mirror of society explores past and current issues which affect society in general. Hence, the literary artists assume the role of documenting these issues for the purpose of sanitizing society. Ngugi rightly observes that a writer responds, with total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive need; he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success; the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. (46)

The relevance of African literature to the growth and promotion of moral and social values cannot be debated because literature is didactic in function. Thus, literature cannot be divorced from values since it records human experiences through the rich resources of language. This paper discusses the relevance of African literature to the promotion of customs and traditions using Asika's *Tamara*. It attempts a brief evaluation of the novel with the aim of identifying and exploring these values. Thus, the discussion presents literature as a reflection of people's experiences and a useful medium for correcting social vices. Generally, literature awakens and shapes people's consciousness for the sole purpose of condemning social ills or upholding morals. According to Nnolim:

Literature still tills its crops in many virgin forests, and art continues to speak in many voices. It is now commonplace knowledge that contemporary African literature cannot be properly understood and appreciated as an isolated expression but must rather be viewed as part of the totality of human experience. (Approaches to... 16)

### **Issues in African Literature**

African literary arts are primarily pre-occupied with the ways and life of the Africans. In essence, they explore and express the authentic life and experiences of the African people. African literature is a branch of world literature with its unique characteristics and features. It is an autonomous literature which addresses itself to the issues that face African society especially those problems of human existence which Africans share with the rest of the world.

However, these works are imbued with Africanness and originally draw their materials from the realistic past and present conditions (values) of the African people. Critics generally believe that Africa's contact with Europe in the 19th century was not a happy one; this is why Nnolim asserts that "it was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation over the

wounds inflicted on all Africans through slavery and colonialism” (Morning Yet on Criticism Day... 9). The Berlin conference (1884-1885), which empowered the Europeans to exact areas of influence, brought Nigeria under the British rule. Based on the above mentioned view, Nnolim further explains that

This was a mixed blessing: Nigeria became a subjected people under colonial rule but gained a world language that gave us a shared heritage with Europe and the rest of the world. With the English language came its literature and with its literature we gained access to world civilization. And with access to English and European literatures came knowledge of their critical skills and methodology. (Morning Yet on Criticism Day..., 1-2)

African literature is not mostly a 20th century phenomenon which has been influenced by both western literature and African oral tradition. O.R Dathorne observes that “a critical assessment of African literature does the subject a great injustice if it assumes that it begins in the twentieth century. African literature relies heavily on oral literature, and this oral literature, is still very much present”... (ix) Some early western literary works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary's *The African Witch* and Edger Waller's *Scandals of the River* portray Africans, in a bad light, as barbarians, savages and people who lack inventive ingenuity. Many of these western works are not based on factual events but on the imaginary account of the African continent. As a result of this, the consciousness of some African writers is awakened to restore the distorted image of the African people. To this end, they reconstruct in their literary works the various misleading and derogatory pictures painted about Africa by some British novelists. Thus, African literature emerges from the ashes of her past to documenting contemporary experiences as seen in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child*, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* etc. African literature is part of world literature with its own distinguishing marks and characteristics. It is an authentic and autonomous literature which addresses itself to the predicament that faces the African people. It is imbued with Africaness and draws its content or materials from the realistic living conditions in African societies as well as the past and present African value systems.

Criticisms by African critics have also led to the growth of this literature and this is to say that African critics have contributed positively in achieving this great task. Nnolim notes that

Criticism has given direction and purpose to African literature in the twentieth century following the emergence of gifted and serious writers led by Achebe, NgugiWaThiong'o and many others. Critics like Emmanuel Obiechina drew attention to the idea of cultural nationalism in African literature culminating in the part the negritude movement played in the rehabilitation of the African personality.(Morning Yet on Criticism Day..., 8)

Common debates have ensued about what constitutes African literature. One major disagreement is on the use of language. Some critics are of the view that literary texts should be written using indigenous languages; while others support the use of foreign languages (English/ French) for wide readership. However, critics generally agree that such literature should emanate from African cultural background and should therefore deal with the problems of Africa.

Thus criticism by African critics has succeeded in exploring and reviving the African aesthetics, its orature, mythology and folk tradition. Though criticism has succeeded in achieving all these; the problem of language use still raises great concern for most African critics like Chinweizu, Jemie , Madubuike and Emenyonu et al , who argue that African literature must be written in African languages so as to end all foreign domination of African culture. These radical voices are of the opinion that the uniqueness of African literature lies in exploring and representing the culture and experiences of the African people not as an extension of the European literature but as a unique body of the world literatures. Achebe however has contrary view in writing his novels in English. Writing in English, the language of the imperialist conquerors of Nigeria, Achebe's stated goal as documented in "The Novelist as Teachers" is to create "new" African English. According to Achebe ,

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of the word. . . . I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.(45)

Currently, the issue of language is still unresolved as most contemporary writers document African experiences in English language instead of indigenous languages, arguing that indigenous languages limit their creative works to African audiences. However, contemporary writers no longer dwell on the humiliation of the past but have dedicated themselves to a new form of imagination and invention which takes into account the current issues that affect Africa as a nation.

### **Customs and Traditions in Literature**

Generally speaking, the custom and tradition functions of literature in society cannot be ignored since literature broadens our knowledge by making us more aware of the extent and complexity of human experiences. Literature makes a realistic depiction of life and at the same time offers an interpretation of the real world. This is to say that literary artists do not just make a documentation of human experiences but also interpret these experiences through the actions of the characters, thereby reflecting the totality of human nature and the relationships that exist between people in society. Thus, literature performs many functions such as teaching morals, criticizing evil and correcting social vices.

One of the most effective values of literature lies in its ability to reveal both the good and bad attributes in human nature and subtly presents models to follow. This particular function of literature deals with the moral and social values inherent in a literary work.

The term 'moral' according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th) is “concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour or the standards or principles of good behaviour. It is also defined as a practical lesson that a story, an event, or an experience teaches you” (953). Moral and morality can be used interchangeably since they basically deal with the intrinsic values or attributes of people in connection to their society. Hence, the term 'morality' according to the above mentioned dictionary denotes “a system of moral principles followed by a particular group of people” (953). This is to say that the standard of human behaviour can be judged, evaluated or criticized based on what is socially accepted in a given cultural milieu.

The term “social”, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (7th), “is connected with society and the way it is organized: social issues/problems/reforms. It is also connected with activities in which people meet each other for pleasure” (1398). Literature is not written in isolation; it documents the lives and experiences of people in society which cannot be divorced from social values. Similarly, African literature as part of the world

literature documents the experiences of people in order to enlighten and educate the readers on the existing African values.

The word, 'value', is connected to the belief system of people in society. It is a general belief about what is right and wrong and what is important in life. Values do not force people to act rightly or wrongly; rather, they serve as guidelines for people in society. This implies that they help in checkmating people's behaviour for the good of society. Every society has some acceptable behaviours which must be respected and recognized. These values vary from society to society or culture to culture based on the existing norms. However, there are values that are universal among different societies such as obedience, honesty, patience, respect, love, hospitality, discipline etc. Therefore, writers take the responsibility of exploring these values in their literary pieces in order to correct, enlighten and teach morals. The absence of these values breeds corruption and other vices which affect society negatively.

African writers are very conscious in reduplicating experiences in their societies; thus, they do not just write to entertain but to portray the existing social norms in a society which also have consequences when they are not observed. By presenting characters who live and interact with each other, the writer gives the readers a good sense of reality to enable them to evaluate themselves and adjust to the existing social or moral values.

customs and traditions in IkechukwuAsika's Tamara IkechukwuAsika is a contemporary Nigerian literary artist whose novel, Tamara depicts some existing social problems in different societies. The novel is written using the epistolary style: a mode in which a narrative is structured in a letter writing form. The novel explores varied and complex themes such as love, fear, hopelessness, freedom, prostitution, materialism, lack of parental care, marriage and brutality etc. The novel serves as a warning note to young girls whose broken parental background and quest for liberty blind their sense of morality and values. It also comments on the selfish and materialistic nature of parents who pursue wealth to the detriment of their children's well being. The novel revolves around a young girl named Tamara, who is also the heroine. Asika captures a young female who comes from a wealthy home but lacks attention and family love. Tamara, her mother and Kizito, her bother are three individuals whose lives are marred by the action of an abusive, authoritative father and husband. These individuals live in a wealthy home but their lives are unhappy and miserable. Tamara's mother later dies of depression (heartbreak) and her death devastates

her children. Kizito runs away from home while Tamara takes decisions that later ruins her life.

In writing Tamara, Asika succeeds in presenting a man who is obsessed with material wealth. Tamara's father believes that money fills an important gap in people's lives. He lavishes his household with material gifts without offering his love, advice and moral support to them. In essence, he rarely spends time with his family but only subjects them to strict monitoring. As a result, their lives become suppressed in fear and insecurity. On this note, the wife advises him to spend more time with his children for a better future.

...the children...they love you...All of them  
but you are too far from them ...you are pushing these children away. There are more things they need you, they need your love, your attention, your care, your encouragement. They wish to know you... (32)

Tamara like other African novels is not written in a vacuum but reflects the experiences, values and social norms of an existing society. In essence, these experiences are meant to correct and teach morals. In the novel, Asika asserts the protagonist, 'Tamara', as one of the voices that satirizes her father's unacceptable behaviour. She laments:

We are not allowed to visit anyone and no one visits us. Alone you confined us in a big house...lavishing all sorts of wealth, If only you realized that there is more to this than wealth. (27) You will never know what it feels like to be locked up in this building. With little or no care, just money as if money can substitute for Love and kindness. (104)

In African society, parental love and support are highly valued and appreciated by close relations. In Tamara's family, the opposite is the case because it is deprived of paternal love. Though Tamara's mother tries her best to love, protect and nurture her children; but she is also a victim of the same circumstance which enslaved her children. In search of love and moral support, Tamara and Kizito take decisions that ruin their lives. Tamara searches for love in the face of every available young man. In search of love, she engages herself in immoral acts (sexual acts) with Dunga, his father's driver, who is later sacked by Tamara's father when he finds out about the illicit relationship. She falls again for Obed, the guy she meets in the bus. The fact remains that Obed never loved her but exploits her for his own selfish purposes. Again, Tamara seeks for a way of regaining her freedom; she believes that gaining admission into a higher institution would help her escape from the horrors of her home. The statement below confirms her thoughts:

My only option was an escape, the escape that would come when I gain admission into the university. At least for once, I could live among people and allow them recondition my mind set and help me grow. I waited as days turned into weeks, weeks into months, my escape drawing near. At last the news came. (Tamara, 82)

It is so unfortunate that her father frustrates her dreams by insisting she attends her university lectures from the family house. This decision shatters her more and leaves her completely helpless and frustrated. Her desire to be free lands her into complicated relationships which further shatter her future. Her friendship with Senorita exposes her to the realities of human experiences. Tamara confesses:

Father, the more I went close to Senorita, the more I knew I was drawing away from you forever. Days later, she offered me a ticket to escape. She offered to take me to Italy where she resides. The offer was much for me to reject. I would have the chance of escaping from you, for a very long time, not forever as I thought...I would escape that lonely house, mix with real people, pick a new identity, start a new life, be myself, make my own decisions, and my own money, work and cater for myself and find a nice man who would love me. (102)

Even though Tamara gets her desired freedom, she later regrets the high price of such freedom which has enormous consequences. In arriving Italy, she becomes aware of the nature of her job and wishes to return back to her prison home. She receives threats from Senorita who warns her never to escape. Senorita comments:

If you ever leave the walls of this compound, you will be arrested and thrown into jail forever. She (Princess) is going to set you up, with drugs, illegal material, and all. You will never escape alive and no police will believe you're innocent. It is better you don't even try...You see, she has everything about you and you can't do anything you like... (116)

Tamara remains in Italy as a prostitute and experiences a different level of imprisonment. She seeks for freedom and wishes to return to her home. Asika in writing the novel, Tamara, stresses on the importance of building the family in love which is one of the strongest virtues in life. He warns parents to love themselves and train their children in love so as to avoid hatred, division and immoral behaviours from disintegrating their families. Asika also points out that the role of training the children is not left for mothers alone. Fathers should exact their good influence as the head of the family. He points out that providing material wealth for the family members is good, but being close and supportive (morally) is better.

Asika in writing this novel exposes the fact that the family plays a role in shaping the personality of an individual. In essence, a man who has a wrong family foundation cannot perform magic in raising his own family. Tamara's father's action is simply a reflection of his parental background and upbringing. His attitude is interpreted as the consequence of his childhood experiences. As a young boy, he is rejected and abandoned by his parents after birth. He faces many challenges before becoming wealthy. His loveless childhood and experiences change his perception about parenting and this affects his wife and children negatively. He consoles himself when his son, Kizito leaves his house. He is not bothered because he believes that Kizito could take care of himself. He is not afraid of the consequences of his son's action but remains adamant over his plight. He comments:

I started fending for myself at the age of fourteen... He is quite a lucky chap; at least he knows his parent's faces. (38)

It is evident that Tamara's father lacks proper upbringing and parental care. From the foregoing, it is clear that Asika explores the family as the pillar of the society. In commenting on the fallen standard of family, Asika adopts Tamara's family as a satirical portrait of the contemporary Nigerian family; he exposes the failures of parents in raising their children with good moral virtues. He therefore laments that broken homes, marriages and families lead to a broken society. A family is not just about people living together but about people who are united in love while caring for one another. Onyerionwu explains that:

Tamara's father misarticulates his responsibilities as a parent, father and husband; much the same way Eugene Achike in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* does. He is totally dictatorial, crushing his family in the weight of iron-fisted legislature, even while showering them with everything good money can buy. But his family does not need all the luxury; they need that family milk of loving kindness. (ANSU Journal, 127)

In essence, Asika uses the story of Tamara's family to pass moral judgment on people who abandon their families in pursuit of material things or pleasure. He warns that this very act has grave consequences and at the same time poses a big threat to the unity of the family and society at large.

### **Conclusion**

This paper presents the view that African writers do not write in a vacuum but represent the life and experiences of individuals in a given cultural milieu. This is to say that they imbue their works with moral lessons which serve as socially accepted values in societies. The novel, *Tamara*, deals with some customs and traditions issues which are woven around

families in societies. The novel aims at exposing those factors that are responsible for disintegrating the family and so affect society negatively. Asika presents characters whose words and actions represent the image of people in contemporary Nigerian society. This simply means that he is concerned with practical issues that affect society and not merely the aesthetic qualities of his work. Asika is of the view that the loss of customs such as get rich quick syndrome, selfish desires, prostitution, and endless search for freedom are responsible for the decline of custom values in contemporary society. The author blames the parents for failing in different ways, especially in performing their roles as parents. He presents characters that are morally depraved and marked by the absence of virtues. The consequences of their actions however result in a huge tragedy that ruins their lives, family and future. In creating fictional characters like Senorita, Tamara Tamara's father and Kizito, Asika explicitly exposes the reality of human experiences in order to educate and expose the readers on the consequences of these characters' actions and decisions. He presents varied human experiences in order to create moral awareness as well as expose some societal problems for better society. To achieve this task, Asika presents the fictional story of Tamara, a young girl, who is lured into prostitution as she searches for moral support, love and freedom which are absent in her immediate family. Her father's attitude subjects her to emotional torture and sends her in an endless search for freedom. In search of love, she loses her virginity to Dungan, their family driver at the age of sixteen. The same quest pushes her to have sexual relationship with Obed which results in an unwanted pregnancy. Tamara's broken home creates a vacuum for an outsider (Senorita) who lures her into prostitution. She becomes addicted to hard drugs and alcoholic drinks, in order to boost her sex drive. Her dreams are shattered when the doctor reveals that her kidneys have been badly damaged as a result of cancer. Though Tamara marries Carlos, and gives birth to a baby girl; her future, hope and dreams are marred by her past life style. She only remembers her lonely childhood and blames her father for her mistakes. It is thus important to note that Tamara's actions and experiences lead to her tragic end. She only stays in her sick bed waiting for death to strike. The characters in Tamara are thus employed in order to condemn social vices such as excessive materialism, prostitution and sex trafficking. Tamara, does not only highlight social values inherent in African societies, but presents such values that contribute to the formation of human personality. Characters like Tamara and Senorita serve as reference points in creating moral awareness, which contribute to shaping the moral behaviours of the readers. Senorita's job as a prostitute in the streets of Italy has robbed her of all moral

consciousness. She helps Tamara commit abortion and later lures her into prostitution. She claims to love Tamara, but conceals the truth about the nature of her job in Italy. The story of Tamara reflects the experiences of young girls in African societies. In Africa and other parts of the world, sex-trafficking and prostitution have become common issues that debase and dehumanize womanhood. Hence, contemporary writers like IkechukwuAsike, ChimamandaNgoziAdichie and AkachiAdimoraEzeigbo have crafted their literary works to explore the above mentioned issues in order to expose the complexities of human experiences and their consequences.

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