A Critical Evaluation of Literary Research For Sustainable Development in Africa

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Abstract
Contemporary technological breakthrough has ignited great power and a multiplicity of research methods that are readily accessible to the researcher but such power has resulted in variegated information explosion with “good” “bad” and “ugly” features, depending on how they are viewed and use. This has thrown up Plethora of literary and critical theories. There has been no uniformity in the principles of literary research because the multiplicity of critical theories has meant uncoordinated approaches to literary criticism and reviews. A number of contemporary literary artists seem to have to have deviated from the established path for no justifiable reasons than the pursuit of aesthetics and personal ideologies. Lack of thorough research has resulted in the creation of fictional characters without psychological depth and therefore are hardly convincing. The absence of literary works dedicated exclusively to themes of poverty, diseases, and crises and insecurity apparently indicates either a nonchalant attitude towards research in these issues or an in advertent but grave oversight. This has apparently caused confusion in the literary scene. It has greatly watered down the utilitarian value claim of literature in society and has underscored the need for fresh insights from literary studies; hence this study. The study reveals that a streamlining of the various literary and critical approaches to the study of literature is inevitable if the discipline is to meet current development needs. There is need for reinvention or reassessment of the discipline in the context of contemporary development issues and the quest for sustainability; hence the need for an evaluation and a synthesis of literary research principles and practices.

Keywords: sustainability, development, reinvention, ideals, integration.
Introduction
The necessity for consistent and coordinated literary research is underscored by the role of literature as a catalyst in development dynamics. Literature touches virtually every field of human endeavour. It implies that it must be conversant and up-to-date with occurrences, changes and achievements in the various segments of society to be able to represent them fictionally for the purposes of enlightenment and entertainment. This is the onerous task before the contemporary literary artist. In the face of numerous daunting challenges of development, literary research cannot be treated with levity. There is an ever-present need therefore to continuously re-examine and evaluate the way and manner literary works are written (Nnolim. 234-41; Emenyonu, xi-xiv).

It may sound like beating a dead horse because someone can contend that the value of literature has long been identified and recognized or accepted; that its role and purpose have been clearly defined, explained, interpreted, and or restated time without number. But this is the more reason for an investigation into specific issues pertaining to how literary artists serve society with and through their literary products.

Perhaps we need no reminder about the lofty rewards of research generally which include “new insights into issues,” deepened understanding”, among others. (VanderMey, et al: 2007). Of course, it follows the established but flexible research process of conceptualization, planning, conducting the research, and organizing the results.

2.0 Theoretical Framework
Literature is in the business of portraying, representing, documenting, and preserving human experience as well as advocating the creation of a “wonderful Kingdom of nowhere, in which all questions of labor, government, society, and where the foundations of any civilized society are laid on Liberty, Fraternity and Equality (Long: 2007). Situated within the context of African literary experience, African literature cannot be divorced from Africa’s social, economic, political, and cultural history.

More often than not, African literary pieces, whether in poetic, prosaic, or dramatic forms, are hybridized products of realism (“representation of human life and experience in literature”); romanticism (“representation of human life and experience in literature”), romanticism (“the emphasis on the supernatural and human life as a mirror held up to nature”), and naturalism (the human being as merely a product of nature: heredity and environment”) (Abrahams and Harpham, 2009). This discourse is therefore anchored on such correlational and development descriptive research theory, with a view to evaluating the coefficient between literary theories and research principles and practices as well as the degree of the impact on development as the twenty-first century unfolds.

3.0 Literature and Modern Development Concepts
From whatever perspective it is viewed, literature has often served as a catalyst for the societal system to function normally. Whether written or oral, it raises the mirror, albeit fictionally, to society to see itself, warts and all. It is a lighthouse to humanity’s march towards egalitarianism, even as it also entertains. Literature thus provides models, rules, more, checks, and above all, the visions for societal advancement and development.

Literature encapsulates almost all development concepts in the humanities as
well as social, natural and applied sciences, to the extent that it can, and does create, through fantasy and imagination, settings or environments where characters representing real people interact and discuss issues in all fields of human life. The history, development and or refinement of human society would, to a large extent, leave much to be desired with the exclusion of literary input through novels, plays, poems, literary essays, lectures and treatises.

Every national development issue often engages the fiction writer’s attention. Issues of development in the economic social, cultural, religious and political sectors and related subsectors are the concerns or preoccupations of all serious-minded and nationalistic or patriotic literary persons. These sectors are usually galvanized by positive communication or public information dissemination which literature is a part of (Bennett and Royle, 225).

All development processes start with an idea. The literary artist always starts his narrative or story-telling business with an idea or ideas from which themes are derived. In like manner, development processes pass through certain sequences. Development policies on agriculture, health, education, communal or cooperative work, social welfare, works, utilities, trade and commerce, and so on, are in this sense all “narratives” that policy-makers and planners tell. You may want to ask in specific terms what literature has got to do with concepts and issues of development such as empowerment, globalization, integration, mobilization, sustainability, inclusiveness, management, public sanction, culturalism, nationalism, patriotism, challenges, opportunities, fertility, acceleration, conversion, legislation, majority, minority, pluralism, opposition, federalism, resistance, performance, competence, cooperation, implementation, protest, employment, socialism, capitalism, endowment, commitment, professionalism, labour, strategy, invention, governance, viability, morality, and so on.

The literary artist is as much concerned about these concepts and issues as are theorists and practitioners whose professions make use of them. He gets into all of these as he creates his own fictional world through imagination and fantasy to mirror life and elicit from us beauty and truth. We thus momentarily suspend our disbelief and see in literature a kind of expression and revelation of life as it ought to be. Little wonder that literature is the reservoir of ideals of a people such as love, faith, duty, friendship, reverence, freedom, and so on. Ideals, it is said, “determine the value of a people to future generation.” It is in this context and the fact that literature “preserves ideals from fathers to sons, while men, cities, governments, civilizations vanish from the face of the earth” (Long, 6), that the literary artist’s role in national development becomes indispensable.

The literary artist is a communicator of sorts and communication is at the centre of human interactions and relationships. It is on record that the different channels of communication have had profound impact in varying degrees from the nascent stage through various developmental phases of human society. The modern society is, and will be, the better or worse for it, depending on the use to which the purveyors of mass information, ideas, and opinions (literature inclusive), have been and are being put. In serving its communicative purpose, literature becomes a catalyst of sustainable vigilance on societal policies, programmes and actions.
3.1 Scope of Developmental Literature in Africa

Literature encapsulates the ideals and values of a society and propagates people’s economic, political, social, culture and religious yearnings, aspirations and experiences. There is literature on virtually every facet of life, from the seemingly mundane to the highly sophisticated or complex, the light hearted, to the serious. By extension, literary research can be conducted into every facet of life.

Central to literature is the theme alternatively called “subject matter”, which is the trunk of issues treated in a literary work. It aligns to societal development trends and changes at a given time. Themes in literature are as varied as there are issues to treat or discuss. The development and or progress of most African societies are inescapably tied to the historical experiences of slavery, colonization, decolonization, and decolonization or neocolonization. As the conscience and seer of his people, the African writer has often used fiction and literature generally to reflect situations, conditions, and circumstances in his or her society against the backdrop of these experiences. Subject matters or theses such as cultural and religious conflicts arising from colonization, struggle or agitation for independence and self-rule, cultural hybridism owing to acculturation, challenges of adjustment and decolonization and the rise of neocolonialism resulting from recolonization, as well as post-independence politics and leadership, have preoccupied the minds of African literary artists.

The dynamics of life in general and development of human societies in particular have ignited profound changes and paradigm shifts in the different facets of life. Literature has not been exempted. Globalization, transnationalism and transculturalism resulting from forced dislocation and willful movement or migration as well as business or commercial activities, have meant a re-consideration of these themes, particularly within the contexts of comparative and postcolonial studies. Relationship, leadership challenges, social vices, and so on, are issues that have continued to engage the African writer’s attention, in the spirit of commitment to charting a new course for the national economy and defining national development patterns in line with modernity.

4.0 Literary Research and Sustainable Development

Sustainability as keystone is central to the success of any worthwhile policy, programme or project. It is the often neglected cornerstone that turns out to be pillar without which the project programme or policy is short-lived. Sustainability, in this paper is seen as the aggregate of all the checks, monitoring and testing mechanisms that are constantly applied to a policy, programme or project to ensure and be assured of its durability. As a project programme or policy is constantly evaluated, monitored and or tested, its potential and present defaults or weaknesses are revealed, and rectified. Such policy, programme or project is strengthened, its quality improved on and its life span elongated. Lack of sustainability mechanism spells the reverse.

A cursory look at many failed policies, programmes and projects in most African countries has shown that either planners had not made adequate provision for sustainability or managers had neglected to put in motion the necessary machinery that could ensure it. Why has it been so? The most probable explanation would be that some official somewhere must have had vested interest in the absence of sustainability and subsequent short life span of the policy, programme or project.

How does all of this apply to literature and the arts generally? The multiplicity of literary theories, movements and schools calls for their streamlining thereby jettisoning
and or merging some of them that are unviable or irrelevant to contemporary or future needs. It is research that has revealed the inefficacy of some of the literary and critical theories, movements, and schools, when placed on the scale of preference or potential usefulness. As a matter of fact, some of them such as aestheticism, beat writing, the Bloomsbury group, critics of consciousness, expressionism, structuralism, poststructuralism, Chicago school, among others, are hardly of any significance now or in the future. Research into literary trends has further shown that virtually every literary philosopher, theorist, critic and scholar, nowadays tries to form some kind of literary school/movement instead of seeking ways of improving the existing one(s). It is also on record that certain literary movement or schools prang up as revolutionary responses or reactions to certain development or occurrence in the course of history but have outlived their usefulness. For example, a critical examination of the literature of the United States would reveal that the black arts movement served its useful purpose many centuries ago and would hardly make any significant meaning now other than being a referential milestone in American literary history. So also are black mountain poets and graveyard poets. Some others, however, need to be sustained and improved upon. As at the last count, there are more than thirty types or forms of literature and over fifty critical movements and schools. There are movements, schools, and studies such as Darwinian Literary studies eco-literature and eco-criticism, feminism, modernism and postmodernism, postcolonial studies, and a host of others which still make a lot of literary sense today, but these should operate in concert with or as part of others.

4.1 Nature and Character of Literary Research

Literary research stems from the need to make literature serve society better. The social, economic, political, cultural, and even religious, functions of literature could not have been what they are now but for research into the dynamics of sociology politics, culture, economics, and religion of literature. Research in literature is not much different from that in other disciplines and fields of human endeavors. It adheres to the time tested principles of ethical research and the research process. There are however, certain salient peculiarities in literary research that deserve attention and are highlighted in this paper.

The conventional principles of ethical research include doing the research and writing the paper oneself, conforming to the research practices approved in one’s discipline; obeying school and discipline related guidelines for working with people, resources and technology, avoiding one-sided research that ignores or conceals opposition; presenting real, accurate data and results without “fudged” or twisted facts; and handling source material fairly in writing the research report(VanderMey, 447). Need we go over the research process? No, but it may be stated here that when doing a criticism of a piece of literature literary research follows the broad research procedures of (i) getting started (ii) planning the research (iii) conducting the research as well as (iv) organizing and drafting the research report, in most of their details.

The literary artist does research in two ways. He researches into the subject matter(s) on which he intends or desires to write fiction (prose, poetry or drama) and creative non-fiction (biography, memoir, adventure and the likes) by gathering the necessary information or data he needs on the theme, plot, audience, characterization, and setting of the proposed literary piece before getting down to write it. Secondly, the literary artist or fiction writer as critic and or scholar undertakes research prior to his criticism of a work of literary study; that is when he does literary criticism. In conducting research prior to writing a
fictional work, however, the writer does not, as in conventional research, talk with others to obtain opinions; he does not form research questions or working thesis, and or develop keywords or searching terms. The writer is, at this level, at liberty to create his own imaginative and fantasied people (characters), events and places such as for example, Peter Abrahams’ “Udomo” and “Pan Africa” in his A Wreath for Udomo or NgugiwaThiongo’s “Kamitti” and “Republic of Aburiria” in Wizard of the Crow. At this level, the fiction writer carries out primary research by consulting primary sources through observation (and interview to a lesser degree). He may engage secondary sources by reading books and articles to become properly informed on the subject matter or theme of the work. He is not bound by research rules to adhere to conventional research procedures or process. However, the output of his research will not contain factual information but a fictional report called a novel, play, poem, or film. The literary researcher or writer is free to create his own series of events called ‘plot’ and environment called ‘setting’ or ‘scene’ which may and may not resemble the ones in real human society(Akporobaro, 247).

However, it is this freedom which one may call “creative license” that enables the fiction writer to use his imaginative power anyhow which has resulted in all kinds of fictional products ranging from the good, the bad, and the ugly in the literary circle. This power, coupled with the artist’s role as the pace setter and seer of his society, has often led the writer to create bizarre and incredible people, places, and events that make many a reader wonder what purpose(s) such works serve. It is at the level of research in literary criticism that the literary researcher complies substantially with the conventional research process, because he is required to provide ‘facts’ (and ‘figures,’ if need be) as he analyzes and, or evaluates the worth or value of a literary work in issues related thereto. Such research entails careful reading, listening and or viewing.

The literary artist in Africa knows for a fact and has always tried to come to terms with the fact that Europe and America can have the luxury of engaging in debates on literary “isms” and related abstractions. Their societies have advanced, so to say, beyond a matter of butter and bread and the grappling with common vicissitudes of life. No wonder, they can afford to undertake bizarre and daring experimentation such as cloning gender transplant, space travel, chemical/biological weapon manufacturing, and the likes. Therefore, while they lay premium on aestheticism and the delight function of literature and pay less attention to researching into development issues in literature, which translates to a concern for the role of literature and the arts in general towards sustainable societal development and progress. This underscores the relevance of literary research in Africa. This also explains why the developed societies have gone ahead to produce science fiction and experimented with a number of literary modes while the developing ones lag behind in this regard.

Literary theorists in Europe and America could afford to formulate ‘queer’ theories such as absurdism, decadence, dadaism, formalism, surrealism and transcendentalism. Ours in Africa are didacticist, existentialist, realist, humanistic and utopianist literature. In other words, African literature has gone out of the western-created fictional world of imagination and fantasy into one of ‘faction’ (a combination of facts and fiction); hence the imperative of continued research into all ramifications of life in African societies. So, while the ‘first’ and perhaps ‘second’ worlds churn out “fantastic literature”, Africans bother about “literature of fact” (Abrams and Harpham, 230-32).
In conducting worthwhile research the researcher asks important questions, systematically seeks or searches answers to them and shares his or her findings and conclusions with end-readers and users of the research report (VanderMey, 424). A literary researcher adopts the scientific approach to research as founded in John Dewey’s four-fold analysis of reflective thinking process which includes experiencing the problem, defining the problem, constructing the hypothesis on the problem, and reasoning deductively on the formulated hypothesis. This is expected, in so far as scientific method of research is the set of general principles which guide scientific search for knowledge and which serve scientists and laymen alike in the evaluation of claims to knowledge” (Easley Junior:). The creative fiction and notification writer as researcher therefore often finds himself/herself engaging in “reduction and control of bias, to interfere with the conclusions to be drawn from the evidence collected” (Anonymous: n.d). Although the fiction writer (literary artist) tasks his or her imaginative capacity to produce his/her story, he/she nevertheless largely bases the narrative on certain factual materials; (that is, actual happenings, people and places) observed, read and or orally told. Facts are subject to the essential elements of scientific method of research.

One other vital relational link between literary research and scientific method of enquiry is that both have systems of classification and structures of concepts, in addition to having theories. Furthermore, the literary artist, like the scientist often predicts and provides a framework which can foretell future occurrences “from known data and generalization.” For example, through the joint use of facts and his imagination, Achebe prophetically reported a coup d’etat in Nigeria in 1966 in his novel A Man of the People the same way the planet Pluto was also said to have been predicted years prior to its actual discovery. Thus, like scientific research as a “systematic, controlled, empirical and unbiased inquiry, ”literary research covers a wider canvass than and encapsulates science research to the extent that literature covers every area of human endeavor.

5.0 Challenges and Prospects
A wholistic re-inventing of research principles and strategies is inevitable if African countries are to make more speed and less haste in sustainable development endeavours in the twenty-first century and beyond. This calls for inclusiveness and integration in the area of policy design, programme packaging and implementation at both the national and regional levels. In this regard, a synthesis of the past and present to get the futuristic; a combination of the old and the new to get the renewed, is therefore, of the essence. Specifically speaking, all research-oriented institutions have to fine-tune and reinvigorate interdisciplinary research as a deliberate strategy to identify areas of common needs, challenges, and collaborative actions thereon. Such strategy cannot be overemphasized especially that theoretical perspectives by most African intellectuals favour a multicultural approach to setting the standard cannons of intellectual property. A charge from the ‘third’ world against Eurocentricism is that the standard canons have for long been formed and skewed “in accordance with the ideology, political interests, and values of a dominant class that was white, male and European” and , consequently, comprise “mainly of works that convey and sustain racism, patriarchy, and imperialism” (Abraham and Harpham, 39). This is the case in all areas of humanistic study, literature inclusive, particularly in relation to postcolonial studies in a neocolonial era such as what most African countries are passing through.
Economic, Political and social policies affect literary production either positively or negatively, and therefore necessitate literary research. Thus a writer who knows next to nothing about a people, for example, can research into their customs and traditions and come up with a literary masterpiece if he or she puts his/her mind to it and does not become sentimental or prejudiced - thanks to research. One of the greatest challenges an African literary artist has to confront and surmount is having to key into the daunting task of tackling research problems such as high level of illiteracy, low culture of records keeping, and unnecessary bureaucratic bottlenecks. Dealing with such challenges would clear the coast for easy practice of the craft of fiction and literary journalism writing.

6.0 Conclusion

Achebe (1988) has asserted that stories serve the purpose of consolidating whatever gains a people or their leaders have made or imagine they have made in their existential journey through the world; but they also serve to sanction change when it can no longer be denied (108,112). Literature does not only provide ‘latent support for things as they are, for it does also deeply concerned with the change”, with concrete aspiration like economic growth, health for all education which actually educates”(115).

It is incontrovertibly true that literature has got to do with everything about development, change and modernization. Literary research is therefore a sine qua non, just as research in any field is the pathfinder into the unknown and a revealer of knowledge to humanity.

Works Cited

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