

Class and Parenting Responsibility in Children's Literature: A Comparative Reading of Esemedafe's *The Schooldays of Edore* and Areo's *Mother's Choice*

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Abstract

Although the description of children's literature will naturally suggest that all the characters are children, adult characters also feature in the genre. This is because the former's existence and well-being is depended on the parenting role of the latter in the society. There are numerous studies that have focused on the relations of children and parent characters in children's literature. Nwokolo et al for instance have discussed the parenting role of mother in Esemedafe's *Schooldays of Edore* but without making reference to her class as a possible determinant of the success or otherwise of her role's relation with the child character. This paper attempts a comparative analysis of class influence on parenting responsibility in Esemedafe's *The Schooldays of Edore* and Areo's *Mother's Choice*. The paper adopts the Marxist approach in analysing the element of class; highlighting on the setting and characterisation of the texts, with the aim to unearth how it plays out and affects social conduct and outcome in the society.

Keywords: Children, Literature, Parenting, Comparative, Responsibility

Introduction

Several descriptions of literature link it to happenings in the society. For instance, viewing literature from cultural perspective, Ryan says it "is the expression of the social and economic situations that prevail in a society" (116), while Kehinde puts literature as "the writer's total consciousness or perception and reaction to cultural as well as the socio-political realities of the society that produces" it (301). Oriaku makes it clearer when he claims that literary writers draw their materials from the real life experiences of men in the society (18). However, it is interesting to note that literature does not only draw from the society but also gives back to it in the form of material productions. These productions which constitute literature itself is considered useful to the society. This is why literature is considered valuable in view of the role it plays in sustaining the society, given its focus on multiple social issues. Underscoring the value of literature, Khan

acknowledges the potential of the literary genres in "shaping and cultivating our beliefs, cultural, aesthetic and moral senses" (6). Children's literature, being the focus of this paper, whose main aim is to satisfy the interest of the child reader also contributes to the general good of the society. This can be understood by appraising the impact of the genre, particularly, on the targets. In what is seen as some of its gains, referring to the targets, Festus avows it "nurtures growth and development of their personality and social skills..." (524). Mode believes that the society benefits from the genre because it features moral and religious instructions, well-meaning messages designed for children (199). Ezenwa-Ohaeto, aligning with the above, says:

Because literature provides enjoyment and relaxation, it has become a veritable tool for inculcation and internalization of moral and ethical principles,

norms, cultural ideals, identity and heritage into children. A good children's or juveniles' literary text can through its captivating quality, impact on a child so deeply that he/she unconsciously identifies with it in his/her personality, identity, self-perception, his/her world view in general and the immediate environment in particular" (163).

Class Representation

From the above, the point is re-echoed that literature is about the society. But the materials derived are possible because society is a human habitation. There are clear indications that humans are at the centre of the social situations they themselves give rise to. It is, therefore, indubitable to note that humans are the subject of the literary reflections. Transformed into characters, they represent individuals in society exhibiting different personality traits, of broad social behaviours and approach to life, so that the human experiences captured come out in full, wide and enriching variety. Here, we intend to focus on how characters react differently to social situations on the basis of their social class in the society. By definition, social class is "the hierarchical distinctions between individuals or groups in society or cultures" ("Social Class"). It follows a stratification process which results in the placement of individuals in groups based on the distribution of the society's resources: wealth, power, etc. Apart from the three "principal social classes", upper, middle and working classes, society is majorly structured into two layers of people: the top layer, which consists of the rich class of people with "more resources", and the lower layer consists of the poor, having "fewer resources".

Class depiction, whether of the Marxist orientation or the social inequality with its tragic or comic relations between

the different classes or among members of same class (Warner 231) is common in literature. Just like Ahmed notifies us of how English writers, including Shakespeare tell us "something" about the middle class of the Elizabethan period and the new bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century (133), there are works that tell the stories of the poor in modern societies. Children's literature, whose creators chiefly focus on the presentation of the children characters or, generally, what are pretended to be human beings in stories (Forster 54), surrounded by intriguing, and often times, unpredictable events and situations to successfully convey the intended moral lessons to children may be dealing with the issue of class, describing and showing the characters to reveal where they fall within the social ladder in the society. In this case, the parents from whom the class of the child character is identified become crucial in the evaluation of characters' social experiences in the texts. Texts of this nature are an embodiment of "social issues" which according to Trites have an inherent reform ideology (3). Similarly, Smith says parents who recommend such texts for children see them "primarily as moral agent, an influence upon belief and behaviour" (68) so that an improvement in children's moral life benefits the society.

The Parenting Character

Although, there is the argument that no single definition has completely outlined what children's literature entails, Lesnik-Oberstein in what is seen as the common pointer to the identification of the works that fall under the category of the literary genre reminded that these are books written by adults for children (1). If these books are targeted at the children, and looking at the nomenclature of the title itself, it will suggest to the reader that the characters themselves in the works are children, if not entirely; where they are the major players with no adult characters

assuming important roles. In this case, the attentions of the young readers are therefore drawn to the child protagonists who are likely to be portrayed as heroes or villains. In reality, children do not live in a world of their own; they live in an adult controlled environment where their actions and behaviours are not independent of the influence of the adult figures around them. This is to draw our mind to the fact that for whatever the children are represented, the adult characters play significant but tasking roles called parenting that will add value to the themes of the literature, thereby, not just only making it appealing to the young readers, but the adult readers as well.

Unarguably, parents dominate the representation of adults in children's literature. Obviously, this is due to the fact that they are responsible for the procreation of children and take full responsibility of all the aspects of the child's development that will benefit the family and society. Writers of children's literature are conscious of this fact, and therefore are not just telling the stories of children set in a society of an inevitability of unlike social situations without making reference to the roles of their parents. This aspect of parental role and responsibility in children's literature is the focus of many studies to include the ones by Ohashi, Volman and Semizu. The works establish the relations of children and parent characters in children's literature, highlighting the roles the latter play. But of concern in this paper is the mother, who features more in children's literature. This is attributed to the motherly roles she plays; including, most importantly, child-nurturing, that places on her a "heavier responsibility than men" (Lantara 1). The enormity of her role has induced writers and according to Stakić, she has been made the themes of literary works where she is glorified, displaying "selfless love and sacrifice for the family" and being "the pillar and foundation of their home",

from ages past to the present (246). This paper specifically focuses on mothers' role in children's moral upbringing in the texts not independent of their social class.

Textual Analysis: Depicting Class through Setting and Characterization

Both stories are set in postcolonial Africa, Nigeria to be specific, where many societies have witnessed class division and going through the implications as Ryan observed, that Africa today is reaping from the "bitter fruits" of colonial legacy that destroyed the people's class structure and replaced with "capitalist and colonial policy of divide and rule" which has created two tribes: "the haves and the have-not" (xvii). *The Schooldays of Edore*, recounts the social experience of a child protagonist, Edore birthed into the struggling class of the have-not, while Aro's *Mother's Choice* deals with the "have" class with Junior as its main character. The texts indicate the writers' consciousness of the class structure in their society which inspired their creative imagination. Initially, events in *Mother's Choice* are set in Ikoyi/Victoria Island in Lagos before a shift to England. The Island, as the reader might be aware of, has a record of how the poor owners of the land were displaced only to be "flooded with millionaires" (Clark 121). This is where the child-protagonist's family is located and with all the evidence that it is conspicuously rich with millions of naira. The father, Mr Ade Ogidi, as a successful businessman with business ventures abroad; accounts with different banks containing huge money particularly in England that ease his business transactions; owning a mansion which the family lives and a fleet of flashy and expensive cars. These are glaring illustrations that justify the class claim of the text. Added to the above is the fact that, within the elitist environment, the protagonist is privileged to attend one of the most expensive and best private

nursery and primary schools before he travels overseas for secondary education. But the family's abundant wealth, which does not reflect as much on Mr Ogidi, goes beyond what we see in Junior. Mrs Frances Ogidi, who termed herself a "natural mother" due to the natural love she shows to Junior, and her two daughters, reflects the family's wealth. Everything about her is an embodiment of opulence. The abundance of wealth is captured in her appearance, dressing mode, actions and the family's meal. There is the fleet of cars in the car park that excites her whenever she attempts to display the family's wealth. The manner in which she uses the fleet of cars is something that is fascinating and could be passed as publicity stunt.

Mrs Frances Ogidi...ref- lected the abundant wealth of her husband. She wore expensive dresses, ornaments and jewellery; her shoes and handbags to match, were numerous and were usually the most expensive ones bought from the exclusive shops and boutiques in Europe. The opulence of her husband as a personal rule, always had to show in whatever she did, the food the family ate, the dress the children wore and even the toys the children played with. The BMW car...was Mrs Ogidi's favourite car, among the family fleet... (3).

The show of wealth is seen more in her effort to get a quality secondary education for Junior out of her profound taste for class and her understanding that Junior, like every child from a wealthy home, should be giving the privilege, having completed his nursery and primary education in the most expensive, private schools in Ikoyi. She is confident that her husband's financial strength can match the

demands. And so, when she has to think of secondary schools for him, it is not anywhere in Lagos but England, copying from her neighbours of the same class. And when it is time, she is so delighted to display wealth in a boundless way. We noticed this after she wins the debate to send Junior abroad with her husband. She is hopeful even in a situation where the choice she has made is going to cost the family a great amount of resources. Her confidence is so overwhelming that she does not even envisage anything stopping her to serve her interest anywhere in the world, particularly in England, giving her understanding of the cost of running such programmes over there. This is shown in:

One thing clear to her now was that the programme was really going to be expensive, as, from her experience of having lived in England before, noting, no service, was free: everything had to be paid for. It was also implicit that, sending a child to school implied the parents had got plenty of money, as it would be making the child very sad and inferior if the parents could not afford to pay for some of the extra activities which the pupil would be involved in, and which cost a lot of money. But that was the type of 'international' education Mrs Ogidi wanted for her son, so she did not bother about the cost (54).

All Areo's characters in the novel are drawn from members of the top layer of the society. Kam and Ngozi are other child characters whose behaviours reflect the tendencies of the rich, as illustrated by Junior's mother. Like Junior, we find them in England with similar goals. Kam's father is a wealthy man from Lagos. He "owned a flat in London" which Kam stays. He buys Kam a "coupe" to ride to school. He is prompted mostly by his

wealth to send Kam to England so that he acquires a high quality English Education. Ngozi's parents settled in Lagos too and are termed "very prosperous business people" (71). Everything about them points to the wealthy status. In the words of the narrator, both "respective parents were very wealthy". It is their class that brought them together at a school in Oxford, England. And we can see how the wealth of their respective parents helps to shape their behaviours, actions, desires, etc., while they stay and pursue their education in a foreign land. Being friends for three years after they met, they do things together that always bespeak of them as children from rich families. Kam, conscious of what his father's wealth can offer him, opts out of boarding house and asks his father to buy him a car to ease his movement to school. And Ngozi, too, behaves in similar ways, complementing Kam by opting out of boarding house to take an apartment.

The Schooldays of Edore relates the story of the protagonist and his single mother, Erhumu, from a poor background located in the neighbourhood of Igbi, only popular as a locality inhabited by the struggling masses in the city of Warri. Opomu and Oboli's argument that Esemedafe's fiction deals with the rot in the society; with the Igbi neighbourhood as one of its references portrayed to be "debatably inhabitable" because of the "abysmal infrastructural decay" due to government's negligence (126), strongly attests to the above. The story, which shares similar motif of educational pursuit with *Mother's Choice*, vividly describes the endemic poverty in the family which threatens the dream and aspiration of, not just the child, but also his mother who, like Mrs Ogidi in *Mother's Choice*, is determined to make sure that her son attains an optimum level of educational and moral development she desires for him as her only child. The mother, who is the backbone of the protagonist, is shown to be

a petty trader, having a kiosk on which the survival of the family is dependent. The writer is particular about her poverty stricken status in the society and how it affects her dreams for Edore with the manner in which the narrative records the family's ordeal in every financial and economic challenge. One of such predicaments is unfolded in:

The teacher had come round to collect him that morning, but Erhumu had no money to give him for biscuit as she was wont to do. That was when trouble began. He cried and flung away his slate. He would not go to school again. A man in the neighbourhood who often admired Edore settled the problem. He gave him money when he learnt it was the cause of his cry. Erhumu thanked Uncle Joe and Edore went to school; but deep down her heart, she was as disappointed as she was surprised, and she marked the incident. After a deep consideration, she decided to stop giving him money because she knew she would not be able to continue to give him money... (33-4).

During widespread economic hardship, the family is mostly hit so that it worsens the mother's plight and makes the family appear sympathetic to the reader. At a point, following the suggestion of a neighbour, Erhumu has to ask the little boy to start hawking to complement her effort in raising money for the family in order "to feed herself and her son, buy his books and pay his school fees and her rent too" (53).

While Edore is not given money to buy biscuit-the only thing it could afford-because his mother is shown not to have it to give, Okpomo, his friend at school is "rich and generous", because his father is a wealthy businessman. The introduction of Okpomo and the friendship that ensues between them is an indication that the narrative is not a completely one-sided

class reflection in spite of the fact that it is dominated by the life of its protagonist from a poor economic background. While the narrative highlights the burden and challenges of the poor in the society, in terms of their responses to social and economic situations, it equally brings to the reader's attention the behaviours of the rich on a different economic and social scale. This is hoped that it will help to expose and attest to the existence of the gap between the poor and the rich in the society. The writer succeeds in achieving this through the medium of the contrast he employs showing the friendship between Edore and his friend, Okpomo. The dialogue that ensues between them during a break time when they are out to buy food items attests to this argument. It is by a question Edore asks Okpomo to know who gives him money. Okpomo informs that his "father is very rich...a businessman he gives me money every day", while Edore in his reaction says, sadly: "My mummy does not give me money" (36).

More so, Tarela, another character and Edore's friend, is from a rich family and his choice of actions is well influenced by the wealth of his parents. The celebration of birthday is one social event that the rich will always use to mark out their class against the poor. While Edore has not celebrated his birthday in his life, not to talk of having the thought to do it because he does not have the resources, Tarela takes advantage of his parents' wealth to mark his birthday in grand style, but not to the surprise of his poor friends like Edore, who are familiar with the lifestyle of the rich. Introducing Tarela, the narrator says in the story:

His parents were very rich, and this showed by the kinds of cars that brought him to school. While his father, himself an old boy of Beme Boys College, was manager in a multinational oil firm, his mother was a medical

doctor. It is not surprising when one morning he announced to his classmates that he was going to mark his 16th birthday in a grand style (145).

The description of his father's compound itself is paramount in highlighting the class concern in the novel. Edore's observation of the compound invokes a feeling of admiration. Vast, with "splendour of its natural setting", it has a magnificent, palatial mansion that thrills Edore on his arrival. It is no doubt that he is carried away by the beauty of the environment that he could not pay attention to the pleasant chirping, too, of a bird that enters the compound at that moment. For a child who has been overwhelmed by the poverty of his single parent, Edore knows he has come to a rich man's home which is in sharp contrast to his. So, when he meets Tarela, dressed in the best of attire; "a navy blue suit and a sparkling sky blue coloured long sleeves with a white tie...and a solid pair of Italian black shoes" (147-8), there is no way he would not have envied him, especially when the celebrant's sight draws tremendous cheers from his classmates.

Parenting and Moral Responsibility: the Implications of Class in the Texts

The term moral is the ability of an individual to make value judgments about what is right or good (Sahakian 2). Inculcating a sense of morality in every child undoubtedly is the responsibility of the family (parents), first, before any other socialising agents in the society. Therefore, the outcomes of moral behaviours from children have a way of revealing the moral strength or weakness in the responsibility entrusted with parents in the society. Parents do belong to a particular social class with characteristic identity and behaviour which when activated is without its moral consequences upon the child: whether positive or negative. This is the truth one encounters in children's literature

represented by the "numerous moments of crisis" where characters are seen making "moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for the decisions" (Norton34). Ugochi attesting to this important aspect of children's literature notes that it creates situations in stories to inform children on the choices of moral decisions as they "naturally reflect the information" and come up with "their own concept of right and wrong" (52). *Mother's Choice*, besides disclosing the display of wealth, also, more importantly, highlights the moral experiences of children from such class. The work reveals that despite the economic advantage, characters exhibit behaviours that break the moral code of the society. It is to be seen that, to an extent, their background influences their choice of moral behaviour, particularly on the negative side that endangers the society. Mrs Ogidi, the parenting mother in the story is carried away by the wealth of her husband so that her only desire for her child is a luxury life and she forgets to shoulder the responsibility of training him with good morals. This taste for extravagant lifestyle influences her choice of education for him in England against her husband's wise counsel, failing to anticipate the moral challenges that await him. She affects him with her lifestyle which aids his path to moral destruction. Junior, lacking morals, rather than eschew himself from anti-social tendencies joins a criminal group of drug dealers that is sustained with huge money. We are told that Kam, Junior's friend, had joined the gang because he wanted to enjoy some level of freedom which his father's wealth guarantees him. Like Kam, Junior is lured and willingly accepts such lifestyle because he knows he has a wealthy father and a willing mother whose only interest is to spend the money, and is ready to give him all the money he would need to maintain his membership status. Before he swore to an oath of membership, Kam interrogates him about how rich his father is. He says

his father is "quite rich" and his mother deposits money for him in the school bursary and "a savings account is opened for me in a bank in the city" (111). When there is a challenge to meet his obligation, he resorts to devising unapproved means to get money from his mother.

Junior gave Kam fifty pounds every week to buy him the stuff. When he had almost exhausted the money he personally kept, he started going to withdraw money from the school bursary. The bursary staff was getting curious about his frequent withdrawal of money, but she was not suspicious. She knew many of the students had, or spent some pocket money monthly, which was higher than the monthly earning of some of the staff members of the school, since all their students came from wealthy families. Sometimes he gave eighty or one hundred pounds for his weekly supply. Then he started writing his mother to ask that more money be sent to school bursary for him, as they were embarking on one excursion or another, lying to his mother. The mother was glad, and was always writing her bank in London to pay money into her son's account at school in Oxford (113).

The mother's inability to, first, be responsive of the level of her son's moral consciousness and be wary of the boy's spending, gives him the leeway to begin the amoral habit of telling lies. Consequently, because he goes on unguided, he sinks deeper into immorality, getting addicted to drugs and suffers mental problem at the end. The family loses, shamefully, as he is taken back to Nigeria without achieving the objective for which he was sent to England. As the

writer supposedly wants us to believe, this level of moral void in the lives of children is common among the well-to-do families as we notice that Junior is not the only casualty. His friends; Ngozi, suffers same with Junior, while Kam takes part in a rape, get arrested and sentenced to jail. The exposition of this moral degeneration echoes Aoudjit's submission that prose works have the capacity to depict the workings of good and evil in the individual and social relationships (53). In the whole, the tragedy of the kids points to the moral void in their lives and it is blamed on the parents, particularly Mrs Ogidi whose abuse of wealth exposes Junior to the hazard of a criminal life. The effect of the tragedy which includes "untold emotional pain" is not suffered only by them, but, as Jiloha notes, everybody in the family and the society because it records loss of human potential (170). It also justifies Ojaide's claim that the modern African writer is the "conscience of society" because he does not only expose the limitations of the classes and its implications on the society, but also reminds the readers of the need to sustain the moral standard of the society (44).

Contrastively, Erhumu in *Edore* comes out successfully as a responsible mother despite the poverty she experiences with her son. She lacks the resources to cater for his needs but is endowed with moral wealth: perhaps the only treasure she has in abundance to inculcate ethical values in him. Against the backdrop of the poverty that defines her being, the writer presents her admirable, in a way that it tends to ridicule the rich families where moral training for children is lacking and can plunge the families into disaster. Erhumu forbids the effect of such disaster befalling her economically battered, singly parented family. She specifically instils in Junior the values of discipline and hard work; like not bothering to give him money from the little she struggles to get with her awareness of the implication. It is her unrelenting

insistence of discipline and abstinence from anti-social activities that gives Edore the impetus to distance himself from the riot in his school that results in the destruction of properties. He knows he is from a poor home and its problems and so avoids associations and friendships in school that will derail him from the stream of moral uprightness his mother is taking her whole life to build. This is encouraging as he lives and emerges uncorrupted from an environment of "multiple deprivations" notorious for anti-social behaviours among children and adolescent (Chia 8).

For a mother who values good conduct and worries about the moral life of her child, she is swift in demanding to know whether he participated in the riot when he returns home. His response that he did not take part in the tempting riot gives her the fulfilment of her role as a morally conscious mother. In fact, it signals a victory for her after succeeding in enforcing moral discipline in him, which in turn translates to a triumph of morality that Esemedafe seeks to promote in the novel. So, it does not matter, even if she is to pay for the consequence of a mass action that Edore stayed away from. Her lamentation that she will not be able to raise money to pay for the damage he is not even a part of, although, is to further highlight the profundity of her level of poverty, however, she gains as it strengthens her in an assuring way that Edore has attained a satisfactory level of moral growth and development. She defies her poverty which Katz, *et al* observe "can contribute to parental stress, depression and irritability leading to disrupted parenting and to poorer long-term outcomes for children" (qtd. in Utting 12) to produce an inspiring result.

Conclusion

In as much as adults feature in children's literature as characters and the authors, we expect different behavioural outcomes from the child characters that will be of

great interest to not just the young readers but the parenting and guiding adults. This paper deals with the important topic of parenting in the children's literature with special interest on the mother character, as it examines how her class induced role, or responsibility to the child in the society affects, particularly, the child protagonist's moral well-being. The examination relies on the evidence of the selected texts, bearing in mind that the works are representations of diverse social experiences. Through the examination of the stories' settings and characters, it is revealed that the texts are divergent in terms of class representation and social outcomes. *Mother's Choice* focuses on the relations of Mrs Ogidi and her son, Junior, from a well-to-do family. It is discovered that, carried away by wealth, she loses touch with the morals of the society and, therefore, fails to guide and direct her son properly. This show of irresponsibility results in the son getting addicted to drugs as against the expectations of the society, and suffers mental illness. In *Edore*, Esemedafe discloses the poverty of a single mother, but however shows that despite the magnitude of her poor economic being, she remains unaffected and committed in her role's relations with her son. Motivated, she vigorously pursues and wins over his moral well-being at the end by consistently preaching about good behaviour to him.

Above all, both writers have kept to a duty of keeping a check on the society by pointing out the areas of strength and weakness in parenting responsibilities. This paper, therefore, shows that parenting role is not just evaluated on the basis of the status of motherhood, but the class of the mother.

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