E-Literature in the 21st Century Nigerian Society: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The contending issue in Nigerian society is the poor reading culture and literary literacy. This problem has been persistently been a source of worry to educational policy makers and other stakeholders in the sector. The problem becomes compounded with the revolution in internet and digital media that have offered students and youth better opportunities to surf the net to the detriment of reading and their studies. The coming of the internet is not a bad development in its totality but the policy makers and the government need to be proactive and reactive for the proper use of the opportunities of the internet to promote reading and literary literacy among the students and youth in Nigerian society. E-literature is a new development that arrived with the upsurge in internet and social media and the society needs to utilise the opportunities it offers.

Key words: Literature and the new media, sociology of literature, e-literature, reading and literary literacy

Introduction

One of the realities of the 21st Century is the dominant position of information and communication technology (ICT) in all spheres of human activities. This dominance has almost phased out human potential in different sectors of the economy with so much attention paid to the viability of digital tools and media in all humans do. The situation has also affected the literary and creative industry in terms of the production and consumption across different levels of literary interactions. For convenience of description, therefore, e-literature is a form of literary production and consumption that is made available via digital media, film, social media and the internet.

This development reveals transitional modes of literary expressions from oral mode to through the written mode to the electronic mode. This transition has some demonstrated challenges and opportunities as overtly or covertly presented in their forms, content and appraisal during production and consumption. For instance, the oral stage of literary production survived more on the interface between content and context of performance with close attention paid to aesthetics of performance. The written mode, for instance, detaches the psycho-social bond between the writer and its heterogeneous audiences spread across the literary space. The contemporary period of the technological revolution has redefined the trajectory of literary expressions and performances. This redefinition has underlined the emergence and re-emergence of new tropes and dimensions in literary expressions. This position is consistent with the view of Layiwola (2010:17) that:

> *The world around us is growing more complex by the day; reality is changing or mutating at an amazing speed, such that the language and images to represent that reality must continue to mutate with it. In the process, boundaries are bound to emerge and re-emerge.*

The take-away from Layiwola's view is that there is only a shift in the paradigm of literary production with textual mutation from the oral stage of literary production to the digital phase of literary production. With this change in paradigm, there is a shift in the media of production and aesthetic change in the taste and fashion of the audience.

The Oral Source of Literature

Any discourse on modern [written] literature is not complete without any reference to the oral source of literary expressions. The primordial description of literature is connected to different oral performances in the genre of poetry, prose narratives and dramatic performances. Different cultures across the world have different forms of oral performances and narratives that provide aesthetic enjoyment for audiences of different backgrounds. The success of oral performances rests on the creative and functional use of words in the real-life performance contexts. This position, thereby, underlines the significance of words in the sustainability of different oral narratives as found in folktales, myths and legends as well as oral performances as found in poetry and dramatic enactments during rituals

and festivals. In this line of thought, the present writer subscribes to Ong's (1981:47) view on the significance of words in oral literature thus:

> *Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal reflections, facial expression, and the entire human existential setting in which the real, spoken words always occur.*

The deduction from Ong's submission is the close link between spoken words and non-verbal expressions in the performance process and context of oral texts.

The interplay of the verbal and non-verbal activities in the course of oral narrative and performance establishes the clear distinction between oral literature and written literature that emerged after it. Similarly, this interplay dictates the distinction between performers because no two performers can record the same success in the course of the performance. In furtherance to this argument, it said that different performers demonstrate their dexterity with words in performance contexts. This view is consistent with Osundare's (1981:5) that:

> *And owing to the dynamic, flexible, and ever-growing nature of oral literature, this telling may enjoy varying virtuosities in the hands of different raconteurs. In fact, it may be said that no two narrators tell the same folktales exactly the same way, since situational factors such as type of audience, their reaction, venue of performance, and mood and temperament of the narrator are anything but constant.*

Performance contexts often influence the choice and use of words by performers because of the difference in the flora and fauna. The performance and narration of oral texts enjoy some levels of flexibility because there is no strict rule of performance. Each performer operates within his/her creative capacity but to the enjoyment of the audience. This is to say that originality is important but there is no strict rule of performance. The extent of creativity in the course of performance determines the aesthetic enjoyment of the audience which varies from one performance context to another. Apart from the utilization and manipulation of the body and voice of the performer, there is also a need for the significant manipulation of the performance space (Sesan, 2014:79).

There is, however, s shift in the production and consumption of literary texts with the advent of writing. This transition brought the proper classification of creative texts as literature (indicating erroneously that there was no literary production before the advent of writing). The development has caused many debates in literary circles.

Written Literature and Reading Culture

The advent of written literature has been classified by Walter Ong (1982) as the secondary orality. This is the stage where literary productivity is produced on pages of paper. In this regard, there is a sort of detachment from the context of performance most especially between the performer and the live audiences. Prior to the submission of Ong, Osundare (1981: 2) has provided the clear distinction between oral text and written text using the parameters of medium of production and consumption.

	Oral	**Written**
Mode of Production	Voice	Hand
Quality of Production	Utterance	Text
Mode of Reception	Ear	Eye
Immediate Impact or Receptor	Heard	Seen
Basic Linguistic Elements	Phoneme	Grapheme

From Osundare's submission in the above table, oral texts often enjoy oral-aura continuum while written texts often benefit from writing-reading continuum. It is based on this deduction that the present writer focuses on the synergy between written literature and reading.

The reading culture in Nigeria is phenomena owing to the fact that so many factors have contributed to the fall in the sustained reading culture in the country. Reading, in many official and unofficial contexts, is done involuntarily. The consequence of this is the fall in the rate of literary activities in the country. The joy of any literary writer is to see his/her book being read widely by all categories of audiences. Unfortunately, reading of books and other literary texts has not been greatly favoured in the country. Even students of Literature-in-English at all levels of education do not

find it convenient to read volumes of literary texts that are prescribed for their exams. Instead of reading the actual recommended texts for the examinations, they resort to the reading of quick revision texts such as *Exam Focus* and *Fundamental of Literature*. Among the students of higher institutions of learning, the matter is the same especially among students of English studies. The curriculum of English studies in Nigeria's universities is classified into two – Language and Literature. More students often opt for language with the excuse that they will be subjected to reading volumes of literary texts if they opt for literary studies. This observation corroborates the view of Ngwoke (2007:46) that:

> *In Nigeria today, the reading level is very low and this is in spite of the increasing volumes of materials that surface everyday begging for reading. In an interview granted by Ausbeth, a writer in THE SUN of Saturday November 25, 2006, she revealed that the reading rate of Nigerians is very poor and this affects zealous writers negatively … many Nigerians like to read: most people read because they need to pass their examination especially students. The reading culture is generally poor. People do not engage in active reading anymore and it is painful.*

Ngwoke's submission actually captures the aura of reading culture in the country. Students are lazy with reading – the only occasion they read with relative seriousness is when they are to be subjected to one form of assessment or the other.

Teachers and policy makers also have roles to play in the promotion of the synergy between written literature and reading culture in Nigeria. Policy makers should prescribe literary texts that can satisfy two important criteria of (i) accessibility and (ii) affordability. The language of the texts should be accessible to the age and class of the students while the price should be affordable.

The role of teachers is very critical and central to the execution of the school curricular. To this end, there is a need for proper teacher education with view to training teachers that encourage reading among students. It is only a teacher that has serious interests in voluntary reading that can promote effective reading culture among students. In this direction of argument, Onukaogu (2007:7) is of the view that:

> *In order to raise the type of teachers who can turn around our school system, we need to take two vital steps. First, we must put in place a sound reading teacher education package in our Colleges of Education, Faculties of Education, Institutes of Education and other agencies that are charged with the training of teachers. Second, we must undertake the retraining of all personnel involved in the teaching of reading in our schools and colleges.*

Onukaogu's observation offers one of the practical steps towards the promotion of the reading culture in the country. The present writer upholds this view because teachers can only effectively what they are competent in.

The problem of reading culture becomes more worrisome with the revolution in the information and communication technology (ICT). Many youths and students have become addicted to the internet that they hardly devout time for reading of any sort. They spend more of their productive time on social media and other sites but not for educational or reading purposes.

Literature and the New Media

This sub-heading, literature and the new media, is very crucial to the discourse of e-literature in relation to literary production and consumption. The new media that is powered with the emergence of internet has redefined the attitude of many Nigerian students and youths to reading. These students often find it difficult to read printed books and they thereby opted for e-books that are available online. In an attempt to be critical about the interface between literature and technology, the posers given by Olorunyomi (190) need to be answered:

> *How then do aspects of the past inform the present, and also assist in better comprehension of this time interval in aesthetic – epistemological terms. How do social and technology development affect aesthetic and literary production and appreciation?*

The social and technology development has affected the aesthetic and literary production and appreciation in space and time. The use of technology has harmonised differences in socio-economic and political status in such a way that individualism is enhanced without limiting the opportunities of another person.

Still reacting to Olorunyomi's poser, the present writer evaluates the sociology of electronic literatures in Nigerian society. Prior to the revolution in the information and communication technology, there were radio and television reading/presentation of selected literary texts written in English and indigenous languages. The presentation often covers the reading and analysis of these selected texts with a view to increasing the reading pleasure and understanding of the students. One of the benefits of this practice is that it increased the interests of students in literary texts because they would want to have a better reading of the texts. Among these programmes are *Akagbadun* and *Literature for You*. Unfortunately, this practice is no longer attractive to students owing to the problems of digitisation of media. In the media industry of Nigeria, there is a transition from analogue media to digital media with the introduction of new programmes of lesser literary quality.

This is not to say that digital media have nothing to offer the promotion of e-literature. The digital media can promote e-literature especially in the genre of prose and drama with the adaptation of the texts from written texts to film texts. It is a global practice to do a film adaptation of literary texts. In his categories are films such as *Ma'ami* - a film adaptation from the novel of the same title, *Narrow Path* – a film adaptation from Bayo Adebowale's *The Virgin*, *Macbeth* – a film adaptation from the play of the same title, *Robinson Crusoe* – an adaptation from the novel of the same title and *Sidi Ilujinle*, a film adapttion from Wole Soyinka's play, *The Lion and the Jewel*. The practice of adaptation is still available in our society but the huge financial demands do not make it more viable in the promotion of e-literature among students.

One important thing about the film adaptation of literary texts is that it increases the audiences of the texts. The exposure to the film texts makes audience develop interests in the reading of the published literary texts. The making of the film texts from the literary text is a sort of re-creation with its own unique originality dictated by the camera angle and movement thereby establishing new aesthetic values for the film. Buttressing this point further, the present writer upholds the view of Eagleton (1989:12) that:

> *All literary works […] are 're-written' if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing'. No work and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognisably, in the process, and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair.*

The understanding of literature as unstable affair has actually been reflected in its mutability as a response to different media of production and consumption. The unstable affair in the description of literature and the new media does not suggest that the plot and the subject matter of the texts are unreliable. Rather, it suggests that the making of the text in a new medium comes with specific different qualities offered by the chosen medium. Eagleton's position offers practical explanations for the challenges and opportunities of new media in literary production. Unfortunately, most of the policy makers in the country's education sector and culture sector have not been proactive in the harmonisation and deployment of the new media in the propagation and promotion of e-literature. The new media powered by technologies and the old media of oral and written cultures surreptitiously selects their audiences. This selection is unconsciously done based on the parameters of accessibility and affordability. Some audiences in rural settings may find it difficult to access and afford the opportunities offered by the digital media of films, cables and televisions.

Similarly, there is a critical issue to be addressed most especially the influence of internet in the promotion and sustenance of e-literature. In the contemporary time, many youths and students have been spending more time on the internet and social media to the detriment of reading and their studies. This is a significant moment that policy makers need to be proactive and reactive in the management of the situation. The reactive measures of the policy makers can come in the form of appropriation of the opportunities and potential of the internet and social media in the promotion of sustainable reading culture in the country. This position is consistent with Schaniel's (1988:493) view that "the new technology may create change in society, and that the direction of change is determined by the nature and function (use) of that technology in the adopting culture". Through the nature and function of the new media, Nigeria is not prepared for the adoption and adaptability of the resources of the internet and social media to promote reading culture and e-literature in the country. The practical use of the internet and social media resources should include the production of the user-friendly e-versions of some of the literary texts produced in Nigeria and for

Nigerians. The case for this is made because of the flexibility in the e-production and e-consumption of literary texts. To this end, the present writer supports the view of Baran (2002:16) that:

i. Technological advances have made communication easier and more democratic.
ii. Technological advances have made "creation" and "distribution" of media content easier."
iii. New technology allows seamless alteration of sound and pictures.
iv. New technology allows communication to be presented in a non-linear way.

Considering the four parameters in the description of the online publication of e-literature, one may come to the conclusion that e-literature has the propensity to enjoy versatility, transformability and ability for networking through series of hypertextuality – "hypertext is the presentation of information as a linked network of nodes which readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion" (Keep, McLaughlin & Parmar, 2000:8).

One of the core challenges of e-literature in the contemporary Nigerian society is the paucity of human and material resources for its full implementation. There are few experts in digital humanities in the country and this makes it difficult for people to be trained in digital literacy offered by the e-literature. Similarly, the infrastructure for the accessibility and usage of the facilities of internet and e-literature is unevenly provided and distributed to the end users. This is a serious limitation to the full actualisation of the opportunities of internet and e-literature.

Conclusion

This paper has closely engaged the nature and pattern of e-literature in the contemporary Nigerian society. The significance of oral literature in the overall development of written literature as well as e-literature was reviewed underlining the potential attributes of oral literature and its limitless contributions to the development and advancement of other forms of literary media. The new media and e-literature are the contemporary realities that we need to contend with. Policy makers and other stakeholders in the media, education and culture sector need to combine efforts to ensure the viability of e-literature. Some of the overt and covert opportunities offered by the new media were identified and discussed in the paper. While adopting the opportunities of the new media, there is a need to consider the issues of accessibility and affordability for equal opportunities for all.

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