

Literature and Character Education: The Interdisciplinary Reflections in Chimamanda Adichie's "Cell One" and "Tomorrow Is Too Far"

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Abstract

*The interdisciplinary nature of literature cannot be refuted as it spreads transversely into many other disciplines. Being instructive in nature, it affects human behaviour, hence its interdisciplinarity with character education. With the use of two of Chimamanda Adichie's short stories in *The thing around your neck*: "Cell One" and "Tomorrow is Too Far", this paper examines the connectedness between literature and character education using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis which explicates the concept of the tripartite psyche as the basis of the analysis. The study reveals that the integration of the knowledge of literature and character education, contributes to problem solving as regards children's character development. It calls on parents to maximize their position in their children's lives in serving as the Freudian superego which works against the drive of the id, and functions according to the morality principles.*

1. Introduction

The fundamental objective of education is to produce sound and useful individuals for the society. This underscores the fact that education is not limited to expertise in a particular discipline or acquisition of certain skills; character formation is essential too. Although there are various disciplines which solely focus on character formation, there are others which combine or cut across other disciplines, integrating knowledge and methods in the interest of problem solving. Literature belongs to the later because of its didactic quality. It exposes learners to the morals needed to navigate life successfully through the genres of prose, poetry, and drama, hence the interdisciplinarity with character or moral education. This connection works towards creating a new platform or avenue in order to handle the potential and conceptual needs of the society. A learner who engages in a literature class gains the knowledge of both literature and character education. He learns the "process that enables him to understand, care, and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, virtues and responsibility for self and others" (Ogu, 2023, p. 1).

Analyses of Chimamanda Adichie's "Cell one" and "Tomorrow is too far", two of the short stories in the award-winning writer's collection of short stories, *The thing around your neck*, portray the interdisciplinarity existing between literature and character education. The writer depicts characters and incidents which can help in inculcating values that can be used in everyday decision making.

The Conceptual Review

Character, as defined by Ndubisi (2019) in Ogu (2023, p.1) is "the total of those traits in a person that sets him or her apart from others. It is a unique mark of personality identity". It is the hub of humanity, and "the distinguishing feature or quality of an individual" (Pradhan, 2009, p. 3). Pradhan goes further to explain that character can be seen as doing the right thing regardless of external forces and anxiety towards the issue at hand, and opined, as well, that character formation

takes a gradual process of growth. In his words, “character is not innate, but rather is a product of gradual individual development” (p. 4). Pradhan (2009) advances further to discuss moral character as one of the dimensions of character which he defines as “the character of the highest ethical standards mainly obeying law and order of society” (p.5).

The concept of character education has been branded by some scholars with such terms as “moral education”, “values education”, and “ethics and education”. These tags revolve around the place of education in forming morally sound individuals. As posited by Uzoji and Muhammad (2025),

Character or moral education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals into responsible and ethical members of society. The concept revolves around teaching principles such as integrity, respect, responsibility, and empathy, which guide individuals in making ethical decisions and fostering positive relationships. (p. 27)

The above assertion corroborates the position taken by Chazan (2022) that character education is the process by which people are trained in order to behave in the expected ways and manners leading to good characters. It extols morality which is defined as “a system of behaviour reflecting what societies regard as “right” or “wrong” (Chazan, 2022, p. 25).

In view of the fact that character education is solely about teaching and learning of certain principles that guide people’s behaviour in the society, the tentacles of literature, as a disciple, extends to and entangles with this type of education that is aimed at developing individuals who exhibit principled behaviour and societal precision; hence, their interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity, according to Augsburg (2005, p. 18) “refers to the general phenomenon of combining or integrating disciplinary perspectives”. Gomez (2020) further simplifies the concept as that which “involves the combination of two or more academic disciplines into one activity” (p. 1). When there is interconnectedness between two or more disciplines, there is the emergence of new answer to a certain problem which consequently results to new knowledge gained in certain areas of the disciplines involved. Quoting Klein (1990), Augsburg (2005) unravels:

Interdisciplinarity ... a methodology, a concept, a process, a way of thinking, a philosophy, and a reflexive ideology. It has been linked with attempts to expose the dangers of fragmentation, to reestablish old connections, to explore emerging relations, and to create new subjects adequate to handle our practical and conceptual needs. (p. 18)

Interdisciplinarity, therefore, creates room for synthesis, complementarity, and integration of knowledge. It is “a means to integrate knowledge and methods in the interest of problem solving” (Clark & Wallace, 2015, p. 1).

The concept of literature here is narrowed to imaginative works of art in the mode of writing. As affirmed by Abrams and Harpham (2009), the term is used “to designate fictional and imaginative writings – poetry, prose fiction, and drama” (pp.177 – 178). Ezeaku (2014) summarizes the various definitions of the concept of literature thus:

It is seen as a reflection of man’s life in the society... it is not based on reality though it represents reality. It is a method of expression. It probes, sees and reflects the tiniest attitude of life. In fact, life is seen through literature. [It] is that species of imaginative writing which proposes for its immediate object ‘pleasure’, not truth which though in a long run is ‘expressed in appropriate elements and memorable language’. Literature exists because it pleases and if it pleases, it is because it imitates as well as presents life as seen and lived. (pp. 1 – 2)

It is, therefore, convenient to say that literature is about creatively presenting man and his society in writings which can come in any of the three genres – poetry, prose, and drama. This form of creativity, in essence, upholds virtues and condemns vices; thereby charting a path towards a livable society.

The Theoretical Review

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis which explains the tripartite psyche is found suitable for this research. Freud conceptualizes the three primary parts of the human psyche which interrelate to meet the innate needs of man – the id, the ego, and the superego. The tripartite psyche functions according to different contrasting principles. Firstly is the id which always tries to satisfy its hunger for pleasure, and operates without any contemplation of the end result; and demonstrating insensitivity towards morality as it embraces immediate gratification. Dobie (2012, p.57) describes the id in this manner:

Obviously, the id can be a socially destructive force. Unrestrained, it will aggressively seek to gratify its desires without any concern for law, customs, or values. It can even be self-destructive in its drive to have what it wants. In many ways, it resembles the devil figure that appears in some theological and literary texts, because it offers strong temptation to take what we want without heeding normal restraints, taboos, or consequences.

The second of the tripartite psyche, the ego, puts the id on check by either postponing certain human actions or redirecting them into socially acceptable behaviour. The ego “is one such regulating agency” (Dobie, 2012, p. 57). The third, which is the superego, works against the drive of the id, and functions according to the morality principles.

Freud's proposition is chosen for the analysis of the data of this research because the tripartite psyche hinges on character development just as Pradhan (2009, p. 5) elucidates that Freud “viewed character as being an attribute of the ego (the self) with the superego (the conscience) the most decisive element in its development”.

Exploring Character Education in the Selected Short Stories

Adichie's “Cell One”, set on the Nsukka Campus of the University of Nigeria and a police station in Enugu, tells the story of Nnamabia, a young boy whose irresponsible behaviour aided by poor parenting eventually leads him into a police cell. The story opens with the narrator telling of how her brother, at seventeen, fakes a robbery incident in their house one Sunday morning and makes away with their mother's jewelry which he pawns to Hausa traders in Enugu, and squanders the proceeds before returning home after two weeks. Because this irresponsible behaviour is not adequately handled, the boy, “in his third year in the university, [is] locked up at the police station” because of cult related activities although he is later found innocent of the crime he is accused of (2009, p. 7). Adichie, in this short story, indicts parents who either ignore or mask their children's recklessness, and artistically emphasizes that the parents who fail in the duties, as well as the society in general, eventually bear the brunt of such behaviour.

In “Cell One”, the writer portrays parental ineptitude as that which results to raising children who are thieves, smokers, and cultists; children who do not always come home, and those described as “ladies' man” and “guy's guy” (p. 8). These children are completely held down by the first of Freud's tripartite psyche, the id. They want to gratify themselves without putting other people into consideration; they neither care about morality, customs, and values nor do they care about the drive towards self-destruction in their attempt to get what they want. The narrator who is Nnamabia's sister, mentions Osita, a neighbour's son, as the first to rob their house. He “climbed in through the dining room window and stole our TV, our VCR, and the *Purple Rain* and *Thriller* videotapes my father had brought back from America” (p. 1). Her brother is the second, and as the narrator puts it, “He did it, too, because other sons of professors were doing it” (p. 5). The lifestyle of these young boys is further portrayed as the narrator tells the story. The Sunday her brother fakes the break-in, the narrator thinks that he has “gone off to smoke and to see some girls, since he has the car to himself” (p. 1). According to the narrator, these light-fingered boys are popular, and they drive their parents' cars in the evening. Going further, she puts it thus:

Cult boys were popular and Nnamabia was very popular. Boys yelled out his nickname – “The Funk!” – and shook his hand whenever he passed by, and girls, especially the popular Big Chicks,

hugged him for too long when they say hello. He went to all the parties, the tame ones on campus and the wilder ones in town, and he was ..., the kind who smoked a pack of Rothmans a day and was reputed to be able to finish a carton of Star beer in a sitting. (p.8)

The above description shows the manifestation of the id when the ego and the superego fail to surface. The boys are allowed to live their lives as they want, and their parents publicly ignore, cover, and deny their actions, and later go behind the curtains to weep.

The place of the superego in the development of a wholesome being is brought to the fore in this story. Explaining Sigmund Freud's tripartite psyche, Dobie (2012, p. 58) asserts:

Parents who enforce their values through punishments and rewards are the chief source of the superego, which furnishes a sense of guilt for behavior [sic] that breaks the rules given by parents to the young child. Later in life, the superego is expanded by institutions and other influences.

Adichie, in this short story, writes about parents who refuse to put the superego in force, and who do not allow other institutions to help them in that aspect. As portrayed in "Cell One", Nnamabia's parents woefully failed in their parental duties. The narrator reveals how her mother pays for a classroom window broken by her brother without telling her father of the incident, and how her mother blames Nnamabia's failure to receive his first Holy Communion on ill health when her brother is never present at catechism classes despite the fact that he will leave the house very early daily for that. Again, at the time her brother fakes a break-in into their house, her professor father, fully aware that his son is the thief, only asks him to write a report on how the incident takes place because her brother is "in that space between secondary school and university and [is] too old for caning" (p. 5), and her mother, on the other hand, feels more heartbroken because of Nnamabia's failure to get a good price for the gold jewelry, and quickly begins to pay for another set of jewelry in installments.

Even when Nnamabia's father realizes his inattentiveness, his mother still indulges him and queries a police officer for the beatings her son receives while in police cell. However, the closing part of the story exposes Nnamabia's self realization "after what happened to him in Cell One, or what happened in the new site ... where they kept people who would later disappear" (p. 21). For him, these two places become the source for the superego as they give him a sense of guilt for his bad behaviour.

In "Tomorrow is Too Far", Adichie tells a story of gender discrimination through a second-person narrator. This short story, just like the first, indicts parents who fall short of their parental duties; those whose parenting style is shrouded with bias. The narrator tells of a girl quashed by gender prejudice in the hands of her mother and grandmother that she becomes so controlled by the Freudian id to the point that she causes the death of her only brother – the one whose presence denies her a maternal attention. Nonso, her brother is the only one who is taught how to harvest coconut pods and the avocados. He is the preferred child; the only one capable of being a reason for certain actions taken by her parents, including cooking. He will be told to "Eat a little more ..." and will be asked: "Who do you think I made it for?" when he perhaps refuses to eat more. (p. 195). When an occasion requires every child to take part, Grandmama presides over it "to make sure Nonso went first" because the protection of Nnabuisi family lineage lies on him (p. 188).

Consequently, the protagonist grows with and bears this emotional torture until she achieves self-realization and becomes aware that "something had to happen to Nonso, so that [she] could survive" (p. 195). She develops a maximum degree of hatred towards her only brother that she plans and executes his death, and even after his demise, she feels so relieved discarding all his belongings for her mother does not bother to inquire if she needs any of them. As the narrator discloses:

She did not ask if you wanted to keep anything, and you were relieved. You did not want to have any of his books with his handwriting that your mother said was neater than typewritten sentences. You did not want his photographs of pigeons in the park that your father said showed so much promise for a child. You did not want his paintings, which were mere copies of your father's only indifferent colours. Or his clothes. Or his stamp collections. (p. 193)

Adichie, in this story, portrays the effects of parenting styles on children's character development. The story depicts that the id can be entirely on the lead without the intervention of the ego and the superego. When parents and institutions, that can be the sources of the superego in children's behaviour, fail in their duties, children live their lives without considering societal morals, norms, and values.

Conclusion

Literature cuts across many fields of study. As regards character education, its didactic nature recapitulates its interdisciplinarity with character education. At school, children should be taught the "society's highest, and most worthy values" (Chazan, 2022, p. 26). The integration of the knowledge of literature and moral education, therefore, contributes to problem solving as regards children's character development. Adichie's short stories which portrays two young protagonists are good examples of literary works that can help children in their day to day relationship with other people because character is the hub of humanity; the focal point of man's relationship with one another. As Nnamabia's self realization in "Cell One" leads him to penitence, the unnamed protagonist in "Tomorrow is Too Far" pilots hers into the abominable act of intentionally causing the death of his brother. This paper is a call for schools to integrate disciplines that can aid children's character development, and for parents to live up to their expected responsibilities, recoiling from prejudice and preference in their relationship with their children.

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