



*Full Length Research Paper*

## Literature social role and artist's accountability

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This paper treated the question of the social role of literature and the accountability of the artist in society. It explicated that there are actually two types of literature which are oral and written literatures. In spite of the existence of these two main branches of literature, the paper also showed that there exist several other forms of literature which are categorized according to their goals or the intention of the artist. Among these forms of literature, people may cite: pure literature, applied literature, music and songs, literature of propaganda, literature of escape and relaxation. In like manner, the paper demonstrated that literature is by nature linked to the society in which the writer lives, for he is highly inspired and guided by the social realities, as well as the environment which plays an important role in the artistic and literary production or creation. He thus, becomes the servant of his society and the voice of his people. It also described the historic and indisputable link between oral literature and the written one. The study actually concluded that any kind of literature is useful and important, for there is no bad or good literature and it all depends on the taste of the reader and his intellectual and literary capacity to appropriately decipher and appreciate a piece of literature regardless of its form or genre.

**Keywords:** Literature, orature, Accountability, the Literary Artist, Society and Commitment

### Abstract In French

Cet article aborde la question du rôle social de la littérature et de la responsabilité de l'artiste dans la société. Il explique qu'il y a en vérité deux types de littérature : la littérature orale et la littérature dite écrite. Malgré l'existence de ces deux principales branches de la littérature, le texte montre aussi qu'ils existent plusieurs autres formes dans la littérature selon leurs buts ou selon l'intention de l'artiste. Parmi ces formes de littérature, l'on peut citer : la littérature simple, la littérature appliquée, la musique et les chansons, la littérature de la propagande, la littérature de l'évasion et de la relaxation. Dans la même dynamique, l'article démontre que la littérature est toujours liée à la société dans laquelle l'écrivain se trouve car, il est forcément inspiré et guidé par les réalités sociales ainsi que l'environnement qui joue un rôle important dans la création ou dans la production littéraire et artistique. L'écrivain devient donc le serviteur de sa société et la voix de son peuple. L'article décrit le lien historique et indisputable entre la littérature orale et celle dite écrite tout en concluant que toute littérature est utile et importante car, il n'y a pas de mauvaise ou bonne littérature. Tout dépend du goût du lecteur et de sa capacité intellectuelle et littéraire de bien décortiquer et apprécier à sa juste valeur une œuvre littéraire quelle qu'en soit la forme ou le genre.

**Mots Clés :** Littérature, Tradition Orale, Responsabilité, L'écrivain, la Société et l'Engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature, like every other thing in the lives of human beings in general, is of paramount importance in the existence of any people or nation struggling to control nature and live in harmony with its immediate cultural location. For instance, people eat in order to live, they do many things for various reasons which contribute to ease or maintain life, and there are even people among whom some have devoted themselves to the production of works of literature. They may have as an aim to entertain people in their societies; to keep them abreast of their history, past and present, as well as their cultures. In like manner, literature has as well other functions beside giving only pleasure or entertaining the reader or society. The most important function of literature is to raise awareness in the reader on some aspects of life in his society and in his direct surroundings so that he or she could consciously contribute to the development of the society in which he or she lives. This kind of function is expressed through different literary genres such as poetry, drama, short stories, novel, poetry and essays.

As in the above the same function is evidenced in oral literature or orature, especially in riddles, proverbs, songs and others. Although at a first sight, the main purpose of many writers, especially in contemporary societies across the four major continents and in Western countries in particular, is to receive payment for their works, in the African context, this was totally different because African authors in their majority first wrote their pieces of literature to fight against imperialism and colonialism. They are nowadays mainly engaged in the struggle for the mental decolonization of Africa and the deconstruction of the negative depictions and images of Africans and Blacks in Western colonial discourses, media, literature, cinema, as well as in many so-called scientific works. This does not mean that Western authors were or are not committed to the cause of their societies and communities. For instance, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), *Macbeth* (1607), *King Lear* (1608) are examples of literary productions in British literature and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966) are also examples of literary narratives in African literature. They were all written by those well-established writers to make people aware of the various aspects of life and realities which were hidden from the masses in the West and in the South. This implies that both Western and African writers are at the service of their societies and nations. The below sections therefore seek to delineate and explain the important role of literature in society. In other words, the paper strives to show the link between society and literature and to a larger extent the relationship between literature and communities living in a given society. It also accounts for the different forms and kinds of literature that exist and the way in which literature should be seen

and construed by the reader of literature from Africa to Europe. This actually brings us to specify that the problematic of the study is to demonstrate and substantiate that there exist two types of literature (oral and written literatures) and that any literary work should undisputedly serve and be committed to the society where was born or lives the literary artist.

The methodological procedure that we use to concretize the objectives of the study is socio-historical, for the study uses history as the main tool to describe the indisputable link between oral and written literatures. It then uses society as a primary criterion to show the importance of literature and the accountability of the literary artist in society, as well as the utility of literature for the development of societies in Africa, Europe, America and the rest of the world.

## LITERATURE AND KINDS OF LITERATURE

The word literature as understood by Westerners is generally referred to as written works or written letters. In that scope, people may consider poetry, short stories, novels, drama, books of all kinds, as well as things like sales" brochures, magazines, newspapers as pieces of literature. In Africa, literature is mainly seen as any written or oral composition or material which has an artistic value including written works, as in the above, as well as oral works such as riddles, songs, dances, folktales, legends, proverbs and many other artistic creations. In its simplistic definition, literature is any written or spoken material on a specific subject or theme that has an artistic value and its medium of conveyance is chiefly language and speech. It can also be seen as a field of study that deals with all the imaginative sayings or writings of a group of people in a community, a place and others. In the same dynamics, Agyekum opines that:

Literature is the artistic, imaginative and creative expression of individual and group experiences, nature, and values of a group of people over a certain period of time by the medium of language whether written or oral. It is the representation of life experience and reality of the world through linguistic creativity and imagination (1999:7).

Thereafter, it becomes crucial to emphasize and specify that there are two types of literature which are: oral and written literatures as slightly mentioned in the introduction, but oral literature is this type of literature that is handed down from generation to generation by the words of the mouth. Examples of oral literature include folklore, folktales, myths, legends, riddles, proverbs, praise songs, etc. As for written literature, it refers to the

different literary genres such as novel, poetry, drama, short stories and essays. Besides, literature is a reflection of man's inner life and feelings as well as the outer world in which the artist is born or lives. It makes a connection between man and society and, it does not and cannot ignore the claims of the outside world: the audience, the reader and the masses. That is why, referring to the production of literature, it is said that „No man is an island.™ This ascertains the extent to which literature is highly vital for the survival and development of any society along with its people and civilization. In short, literature, as to John Morley, is a collection of books. Those books could be books of poetry, drama or novels. He goes on arguing that “no exclusion can be made in respect of the country of origin of the books, nor the time of composition or the language used (2009:p.6)”. In like manner, he concludes that literature is “a global heritage which opulence is increased every year (2009:6)”.

On another plan, literature is supposed to be universal in terms of humanistic values and justice but this may vary from one geographical location to another because of the manifold cultural ideological particularities of each racial and cultural location. Nevertheless, literature is to be comprehended as a more or less true picture, or inspiration of actual life and there actually exists a universal commonality between worldly literatures in spite of the fact that every country has its own literature which mirrors its socio-political life and cultural specificities. It is also pertinent to specify that every literature is not only an expression of emotions, of ideas and ideals, which have a permanent value and which are of interest for men in every age and in every country, but it is also the locus whereby cultural beliefs and practices and historical references of a people are preserved. It is the sum total of all these which have engendered and maintained the permanence and universality of great literary canons left behind by peoples in remote ages and countries. This is why Homer's *Iliad* (translation in November 2011 by Richmond Lattimore) and Virgil's *Aenied* (19 B.C.E. Translated by John Dryden) written in ancient Greece and Rome are still read and enjoyed by many people all around the world with different interpretations and appreciations. In the light of what precedes, it can easily be asserted that literature is not of one age but of all ages, not of one country but of all countries. This shows the extent to which literature is borderless and timeless because a Japanese literary work can be re-appropriated by other nations of the world through reading and dissemination. In addition, time does neither limit the contemporariness of a work published in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century, for a literary text is always eternal in subject matter and themes.

Another everlasting and interesting issue raised about literature is its origins. For instance, literature, as known today, is generally believed to be invented by ancient Greeks and it encompassed history, philosophy, drama

and poetry. On this basis, precolonial Africa is qualified as a period during which neither literature nor civilization exists in Africa and the precolonial African Man is also depicted as „uncivilized and lacks any artistic creativity or imagination. This Eurocentric construction of Africa, to justify the colonization of the continent, is implicitly criticized by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in the following words:

Under colonialism this took the form of destroying people's languages, history, dances, education, religions, naming systems, and other social institutions that were the basis of their self-conception as a people. White adventurers and fortune hunters also stole precious works of art. Some of these stolen items can still be seen in many highly museums in many capitals of the West. But more important in its negative consequences was the wholesale destruction of artistic creations ;either melting them into bars of gold, or, fired by a crusading Christian zeal, simply burning them as symbols of witchcraft or graven images of the devil(1993:42-43).

In detail, Ngugi sustains in the above that Africans were men and women of art before the arrival of the White Man. This entails that art existed nearly in all its forms in Africa and it is with the coming of the White Man that Africa has started losing her artistic creations especially under colonialism. However and from an Afrocentric perspective, literature has its origins in the Ancient World, mainly in Kemet<sup>1</sup> (Ancient Egypt) because it is Africa that is responsible for one of the greatest civilizations in the world. Besides, she contributed to the development of ancient Greece in almost all the domains, particularly in education and literature. In the same direction, it becomes axiomatic to specify that literature does not only refer to written words but also to oral speech which is the mother and father of written literature. Written literature is today rated as modern one and oral one as traditional. All literatures of the world trace their origins back to orature and there is no great literature which is born with written letters.

There are actually different kinds of literature and two major categories of literature. This means that distinction can be made between literatures. For instance, there is pure literature and applied literature. The genre of poetry of Shakespeare's sonnets, the odes of John Keats, the genre of the novel, Achebe's *A Man of the People*(1966), Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) are examples of pure literature. This particular type of literature is called pure because the writer has some kind

<sup>1</sup> This means in ancient Egyptian language the land of black people or the world of the Blacks. The great civilization produced by ancient Egyptians was the work of black Africans who came from Ethiopia to found Kemet.

of fidelity to his own personal experience when writing. Applied literature, on the other hand, is a kind of literature which is more of a science in assertion than a mere literature based on imagination, emotions, actions, stories and artistic manipulations of language to create incident or suspense in a literary narrative. For instance, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1871) and the book entitled the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (2009) by Edward Gibbon are examples of applied literature. In other words, pure literature refers to the kind of literature which is based on imagination, fiction and manipulation of language in a sophisticated and artistic manner. As for applied literature, it refers to books of science and history such as books of physics, mathematics, anthropology, etc.

In addition to the above, it as well becomes pertinent to remind that there also exist regional or continental literatures (African, Asian, American and European literatures.) and generational literatures (young generation versus old generation). Literature changes and evolves constantly as new movements emerge to deal with the concerns of different groups of people and different historical time periods. In the eyes of Westerners, literature is only a written material. However, people can notice that there have always been various types of literatures depending on the place and on the historical time or period. In Africa for instance, literature has always existed and it has been a very important element in the culture. That African literature has been referred to as African orature by Westerners who do not really know how it works and how important it is. This signifies that orature is another form of literature which is detailed below.

African orature is traditionally detained by some well-known groups of people: bards (griots), storytellers, musicians, elders and others. In the case of Mali, Bazoumana Sissoko, Djéli Baba Sissoko and any traditional musician as well as Malian storytellers, were the holders of the secrets of Malian orature, history and other cultural values related to the "Nyama"<sup>2</sup> that they possess. „L' "épopée mandingue" is for example a good piece of music, a history lesson of Mali and a folktale. African orature is given importance based on its audience and the historical time which produced it. In the past for example, storytelling used to be a tool of education and entertainment in most of Mali. Today, because of the development of technology and the influence of Western culture, it is not the case anymore. It is noted that there

<sup>2</sup> The word "Nyama" derives from "Nyamakala" which refers to the class of Djéli, Founé, Noumou and Garanké (Djéli and Founé are terms used to refer to Bards or Griots in Mandingo communities, Noumou refers to the Blacksmiths and Garanké refers to shoes-makers. Nyama means secret and artistic power and the Nyamakala are the only ones who possess this secret and artistic power.

had been and there still is a type of written African literature, not well known by Westerners, especially in Mali where the Tuareg people have an alphabet called the "Tifinagh"<sup>3</sup> which was used for writing literature. With the introduction of Islam in Africa, many people started to write documents in Arabic. Those documents were referred to as Tariq. The most famous of them is the Malian Tariq named, *Tariq el Sudan* (1655). This means that history is a form of literature too. It is interpretative form of literature. That is why several versions of the same historical events may coexist since every author is striving to defend the veracity of his work. The writing of history varied and still varies depending on cultures. For example, some leaders would never allow the publication of historical version carrying from their orthodox beliefs. Also, the history of a nation or of a people, written by an outsider, is different from the one written by someone from that community because, he knows the culture and can explain more clearly certain things that might pose a kind of difficulty, in understanding, for the foreigner.

Beside these types of literature mentioned above, there are secondary types of literatures which can also be seen as subtypes of literature because of their specific functions: "propaganda", "release" or "escape." Propaganda literature is a creative work of art which is influential and transformative, for it is meant to persuade and influence the reader whose attitude or mind would be, in a way, transformed following the propaganda promoted in that kind of literature. About propaganda literature, the Ghanaian scholar, Kofi Agyekum, explains that:

The writer or oral artist is not the discoverer but the persuasive purveyor of the truth. In literature, there is an effort, whether conscious or not to influence the readers or the audience to share one's attitude towards life. The artist wants the users of his work to side with him and perceive the world through his lens. In this view, there is the conviction that all sincere and responsible artists are normally considered to be propagandists. In effect, every literary artist as part of his imagination and creation persuades the reader or the listener to accept his view or theory (1999:16).

As for release or escape literature, the two terms refer to nearly the same thing because there is only a slight nuance between them. In this paper, they should however be comprehended as the same and interchangeable. This entails that through the literature of

<sup>3</sup> It is a system of writing invented by the Tuareg but this particular system of writing is known and used by Tuareg women instead of their men. The explanation is that only Tuareg women master such a system of writing.



release, the reader as well as the writer could both be released from the bound and burden of the pressures of emotions and problems, because when people express their feelings, problems, thoughts and worries, they generally get relieved. This is ascertained in the following terms:

When a work of art and literature functions successfully, pleasure and utility coexist effectively. It is therefore not surprising that most forms of literature works are therapeutic and can heal the wounds of the trembling soul. Clinical psychologists advise people who are stressed up and filled with pent up emotions to listen to good music, jokes and humour, and watch some interesting films and read good fiction books (Agyekum: 1999, p.15).

By release or escape literature, it is also interesting to specify that the writer or the artist can escape from dangerous situations, especially; when he uses indirection and creativity in literature to criticize or comment on political situations or the mismanagement of a country without being overtly committed. If he is to encounter or face a problem, he can easily defend himself under the cover of the ambiguity of literary language. Thus, he can escape from that situation thanks to his clever artistic manipulation of literature through literary devices. Achebe's *A Man of the People* is a good illustration of the foregoing.

To sum up, people should know and not forget that there are three major forms of writing literature which are: Verse, Prose<sup>4</sup>, and free or blank verse. This is because through time, men and women had gradually learned different ways or forms of expressing themselves writing down or telling about their thoughts, feelings, desires and opinions. When man was emotionally moved, he used the verse form: when he wanted to convey some point of view, he used the prose form. As for drama, it came later as additional to prose which so far had been written down to be read whereas drama was mainly meant to be performed on stage. Dramas can be written both in verse and prose. For example, Shakespeare uses both verse and prose for his plays, and the plays of both George Bernard Shaw and John Galsworthy are in prose. But critics like T.S. Eliot are of the view that drama is a form of poetry. This implies that drama is dramatic-poetry, just as there is lyric-poetry or epic-poetry. However, it should also be noticed that most plays are in prose instead of verse and the forms of literature are different from the various genres that make up literature as a whole. The next section would give us a clear understanding of the

<sup>4</sup> It includes short stories, novel, drama and essays. These four literary genres are categorized as prose because they are written in prose instead of verse.

development of literature which is also important for the new reader to grasp the basis of any literature.

## Emergence and Development of Literature

When talking about the development of literature, it is necessary to distinguish between literature and literacy because literature came before literacy and literature has known different forms before being put into writing. This explicates the connection between both. For instance, literature, which people know predates literacy, comes in two folds: ancient and contemporary or modern literature. Ancient literature was oral or spoken. It was mostly in the form of songs or poetry in order to make it easier for the author and listener to remember. With the advent of writing, people have become able to communicate in space and time in a more efficient way. The invention of writing contributed to the birth of what is referred to as recorded history and written art. The earliest writings were therefore geared to inform about laws, prayers and commerce in the society; meaning that they were rather informative than expressive. Like orature, literacy spread out with the invention and development of mechanical methods of printing. This allows literature to evolve from simple provider of information to expressing people's feelings, opinions, experiences and ideological stances and commitment through the written letters. Any literature, either Western literatures or African ones, has developed from orality to written art or literature. Thus, written art before being in written or print form, was first of all oral<sup>5</sup> and expressive and it got developed thanks to the codification and materialization of speeches into written signs, symbols and words. Any literature of the world first emerged in the forms of songs or music and oral poetry. The next section therefore shows the extent to which music is literature and the role that it has always played in the world.

## Music: Another Form of Literature

As announced in the above, it is highly salient to explain that one of the first forms of oral literatures was music, especially songs and dances. Before delving into the heart of the issue at stake here, let us see how music may be defined? According to the *Webster's New Dictionary* (1997), music is "the art of expressing or causing an emotion by melodious and harmonious combinations of notes; the laws of this; composition in

<sup>5</sup> A good illustration of this is the case the Greek philosopher Socrates who never wrote down his philosophical thoughts himself but he presented them orally through debates and occasions of scholarly discussions.

this art; such composition represented on paper (p.230).”<sup>6</sup> The definition shows us that music is another form of literature which permeates wherever people go: at home, at work, in stores, etc. Music has been a type of ephemeral art which existed only for the duration of its performance until the invention and development of sound recording devices and written songs.

### Role of Music in Society

Like written literature, music has various functions across cultures and societies. It is, for instance, widely used in religious rituals; in collective labor to encourage workers in agricultural fields particularly in Africa<sup>6</sup>, in group entertainment like aerobics, and in ceremonies such as marriages, feasts, etc. Besides, chiefly in many non-western countries like in Africa, music has been used by Africans for many centuries before the arrival of the first European or Arab in Africa to educate, guide, inform, advise and prepare societies to face and solve certain difficult situations like wars, death, etc. Even at home, music is also used for different reasons. For instance, parents use lullabies to help their babies sleep quickly in some cases and in other cases parents would read or tell stories to help their children fall asleep as it is commonly done in the West. This brings us to utter that music has existed since the beginning of mankind and it came in different genres and forms and, for various purposes depending on the audience just like pure oral or written literature. Music came in the forms of liturgical music used in churches, in the form of chants or plain songs which were only based on the human voice without the involvement of any instrument of music. This last form of music is called and known as a Cappella which is the opposite of instrumental music.

There is also a form referred to as secular music which has nothing to do with religion. That secular music is divided into four genres: chamber music played for the royalty and nobility to entertain and relax them; orchestral music which is most public and complex because it requires too much logistics; popular music with a very wide audience (rock, folk, country, rap and other types). Jazz, originating from the United States, is a combination of drama and music and opera; a narrative mixing in a song literature in the form of a dialog and music. However, vocal music was the most prominent musical genre for it is the most natural means for people to

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<sup>6</sup> In many communities in western Africa, especially in Mali, people like the Senufo, the Mianka, the Bamanan and the Bobo use music (xylophone, drum, calabash, kora, etc) during rainy seasons on field to encourage the workers to work hard and it can even prevent them from feeling the burden of the work fatigue because of the therapeutic power of music.

express themselves in celebrations, in mourning and in declarations of love. It now becomes pertinent to specify that an understanding of the above about music shows us that it is a type of literature because it has a form and a subject matter like poetry, novel, drama, essay and others.

### Orature and Written Literature: the Link

In most of Africa, oral literature cannot be totally separated from the written one and even Western literature also originated from orality. Literature, no matter what its nature, is about a people, its life, its way of thinking and its self-conception. As such, literature is diverse and its purpose varies depending on the historical and social contexts. This is because of the fact that literatures are not the same and that they are made for various purposes, they change based on the needs of the societies they are designed for. This is to say that literature and society are interdependent and interrelated; each of them influences one another. The writer writes what he thinks his audience would be appreciative of; the singer, the storyteller, and any other artist would do what he thinks would be loved by his audience. The artist who fails to adapt to his audience, that is to say, who fails to do what his audience likes, would see his work depreciated. Even the main concern of the artist should be motivated by problems, realities and dangers of his society and people. This is to entail that he should have in his mind to help, guide and instruct his people and society. It is in this light that Chinua Achebe opines that: “the writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front, for he is after all-as Ezekiel Mphahlele says in his *African Image*- the sensitive point of his community” (1975:44).

Each type of literature that we are talking about in this section has some characteristics. Oral literature uses almost the same features used in written literature owing to the link between them although they are different in form. For instance, people may encounter literary devices such as style, rhythms, digression, imageries or metaphors and many other literary elements in both: written and oral literatures. In spite of the undisputable link that connects both types of literature. The most noticeable difference between oral and written literatures is in their methods of presentation. Oral literature is mainly based on memorization, improvisation, innovation and recitation while written literature is based on written letters and faithful repetition or reproduction of written versions without any modification. This implies that when written words are not easily changeable, in orature the storyteller may alter the way he presents a story as many times a day as he wishes depending on the occasion and the situation. In a nutshell, the source of written literature

is orature like a tree and its roots. This therefore foregrounds the idea that they are linked through a mother-and-daughter relationship.

### Literature as Culture

Since we have already discussed what literature is, it becomes pertinent to also define and explain what is culture? According to the online *Merriam Webster's dictionary*, culture is „the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time; it is a way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization (such as a business)“<sup>7</sup>. An understanding of the dictionary definition can lead us to explain culture in another way. The culture of a people is their way of life; it is the sum total of values of civilization, daily habits and practices, their way of thinking and doing things, their way of controlling nature and others. Contrary to what some people thought, there is no bad or minor culture or people who have civilization and others none. All cultures or civilizations<sup>7</sup> are important to their owners. Literature is not separated from culture because it is from culture that literature derived. This is to show that there is no literature without civilization and there is no civilization without literature. Literature and culture are interdependent and some even say that they are the same because the former reflects and promotes the latter through songs, legends, myths, dances, poems, plays, novels and essays in written words or texts. For instance, the culture of a people is expressed through the literature of that group of people and is better understood by them because each people has a different way, their cultures are consequently different too depending on which aspect of life is better stressed in their life. In some places, customary beliefs are predominant. In such places, most of their literature would be on their customs. Those customary beliefs could be in social forms: social values, religious trends, beliefs, ritual ceremonies and other practices. Based on this, people can conclude that literature, be it oral or written, is tightly bound to culture and vice versa and, the substance of any literature is the culture that is responsible for its production and existence. In other words, no appropriate appreciation or analysis of any literature can actually be effective comprehensively if it does not understand and take into account the cultural dimension and parameters. This signifies that literature is the vehicle of culture and culture is the source and root of literature.

<sup>7</sup> Culture and civilization are used in the paper as synonymous which means that they should be considered as the same without any ideological connotation of the two terms.

### Importance of Literature and the Accountability of the Artist

Studying literature allows people to have an insight into their past; an insight which is achieved through reading and exploring written and oral materials. By reading literary texts, people can have a further historic insight as to how influential their past was and the way through which it can shape up their future and development. In order to be more knowledgeable about the world, life, cultures and experiences, people need to read more literature. What would a good reader know and discover depends on the content of the materials read or presented, as well as on the socio-cultural and literary background of the reader. Through reading literature-no matter what the nature, the reader communicates with the author of the work, he also communicates with his past and culture. Here, people should understand by the word „communicate“<sup>8</sup>, the ability of the reader or the listener to comprehend the literary works that are exposed to him and based on his self or culture in written words so as to improve the conditions of human beings and their societies. According to Longinus:

The value of a work of literature can be assessed by introspection on the part of the reader or hearer: if he is carried away, transported, moved to ecstasy by the grandeur and passion of the work, then the work is good<sup>8</sup>.

It may now be summed up that one of the most important functions of literature is to improve the writer, the reader, society and the entire universe as a whole. Through a good understanding of a literary work, a human being would be able to look deep into himself and reflect on the good aspects as well as the bad aspects within him, thus within every individual. This analysis of oneself through literature has been discussed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2010) and Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974). In fact, in his novella, Conrad is trying to make us understand that all human beings are evil. A human being's character and his morality change based on the situation and the environment in which he finds himself. Conrad shows people in *Heart of Darkness* that man is by nature evil and the evil in him pushes him into doing bad things which, in most cases, he will be sorry for even if he does not mention it openly. Although this is the moral lesson that can be drawn from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it is also evident in that text that Conrad blindly or intentionally reproduces the same false ideological propagandas against Africa by negatively portraying Africa and Africans. Through this work, people could also notice that it promotes Western civilization at

<sup>8</sup> The quotation is taken from [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longinus\\_literature](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longinus_literature).

the expense of that of Africa. Besides, through literature; other aspects of life are tackled and dealt with in one way or the other. For instance, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) is also a good illustration of that. Orwell uses animal characters in an allegorical manner to criticize tyranny in the Soviet Union. An understanding of that tyranny led to a mass revolt. During the revolt, people could see how easily human beings can also easily betray one another. In Emecheta's work, she shows the extent to which African women suffer from two major networks of oppression: racism and sexism. She also draws people's attention upon this fact, especially, when African women migrate to a racially diverse society like London. People can therefore see that Conrad, Orwell and Emecheta, in the works listed above, try to denounce and correct societal problems through literature even if that of Conrad can be questionable at different instances because of his ideological engagement and the perspective from which the reader or critic may intend to see it.

Other functions of literature are of recreational ones, but even through the recreational works, people would still be able to draw a moral lesson if they understand them very well. For example, *l'Avare* by the French writer Moliere shows us that being avaricious is not good. Shakespeare's plays were mostly designed to entertain the upper class but, at the same time, they are criticizing the bad deeds of the leaders of the time of the dramatist. Whoever reads and understands *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, would begin to know more about life and its intricate problems better than the way they could be before. The songs or the accounts of Bazouma Sissoko urge people to be manly, to be courageous while, Djéli Baba Sissoko's tales were to entertain people and make them see and understand some aspects of everyday life in the Malian context. Every piece of art is to fill up some purpose. Sculptures, songs, paintings and others, all carry in them some type of messages that the artist is trying to convey but which are understood only by those who try hard.

### Social Functions of Literature

At first, the main social function of literature was religious and ritualistic in the Ancient World. The writings of that period were about religious beliefs and practices of a given people, of a given culture. Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman mythologies had had a very powerful influence on Western cultures in their totality. That is due to the fact that both writing and religion started in those nations, especially in Egypt, and then travelled to the other parts of the universe. However, it is very important to specify that the origins of Greek and Roman myths are in the history of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Let us also mention that African traditional literature had thus its

roots in African traditional religions and it was oral and expressed through songs and tales which were kept by a group of selected people known as „Djéli” or griots in some areas and referred to with other names in other geographical locations. Novels and short stories as they are today were later developments of oral literature. Initially, the modern novel was an account of long popular tales (especially in the Italy of the thirteenth century) but, in the eighteenth century, the novel is identified and associated with prose narratives that developed in Europe.

Another key social function of literature is that it serves as a communicative tool and an act of communication in any society. It becomes normal and very important to take into account the audience and the setting for whom and from where literature is produced. For instance most literature, in the past, was meant to be recited, sung or read aloud for or in groups for specific purposes. Some writers, even today, read their works in public places such as libraries, bookstores and schools for people to enjoy. This is another indication that the oral aspect exists in both: ancient and modern literatures. In the same dynamics, Ngugi, in his *Writer and Politics*, highlights the social function of literature as it follows:

Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity, embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community's wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process of creating and recreating itself in history (1981:pp-5-6).

The above clearly emphasizes what should actually be the function of literature in society and the accountability of the writer or artist in his or her society where he or she lives. Thus, the writer as a literateur should serve the people and the society in which he lives. This, in other words, means that the very act of writing implies a social relation and a social function because the writer should be the voice and the eyes for the voiceless and the masses. A writer or artist cannot be excused from the social task and responsibility that he or she must assume by writing about the socio-cultural, economic and political landscapes and realities of his or her society. In sum, the accountability of the literary artist can be construed in the following words of Koné Klohlinwele:

Si les vies sont des récits, les récits ne sont pas moins des vies. Le récit en tant que création humaine, ne peut échapper aux conditionnements de la vie réelle de ses



créateurs. Il fait une mise en scène littéraire des contradictions et des conflits que l'on peut identifier comme similaires à ceux observés dans la vie réelle. Parce que les personnages de fiction a qui l'auteur donne vie lui sont inspirés par cette vie réelle, ses expériences quotidiennes ou fantasmées, le récit romanesque ne peut qu'être nourri des contradictions que l'on peut observer dans la vie de tous les jours. (2013 : 2)

### The Problematic Issue of Good or Bad Literature

Like anything done or created by Man, there are good and bad literatures. Every work people do is targeting something or somebody. Literature is made or written to fill up some specific purposes which depend on the target, the time and the environment. Because every branch of literature, oral or written literature, aims at something, it is sometimes judged by its consumers or the reader. That is how some pieces of literature are qualified as good and others as bad. The choice of the adjectives to judge anything is based on the people's needs and expectations. A piece of work might be well appreciated in a place at a given time but be poorly judged and rejected in another part of the universe. The negative appreciation of literature is generally due to the lack of its appropriate understanding because of cultural reasons, as well as the lack of interest in the subject matter dealt with in the work in question by the reader. For example, a European would probably and negatively judge the themes in Seydou Badian's *Sous L'Orage* (1997) while a West African would love them and learn from them to improve himself and his society. The same would be true for music or for any other type of art. Rap music is today very popular among youths throughout the universe. However, that Rap music is nonsense, it is noise in the ears of the people who are one or two generations older than today's generation, especially in the Malian context. This is to remind the reader that there is actually no good or bad literature because all literatures are useful in one way or the other if people are really endowed with the required literary skills to appropriately appreciate any piece of literature in consistence with the society in which it is produced. In other words, this signifies that there is no literature which is better than another one, for each literature produced has some social utility depending on the reader or the critic. This also leads us to interrogate the belief which consists of rating some literary works (Western literatures) as good or canons and others (African and non-western literatures) as bad.

### Influence of Environment on Literary Production

Socrates said that "literary creation is based on the frenzy and inspiration that seize the writer" (Wikipedia). This is to say that before producing a good piece of literature, it is as if the writer is in a kind of a trance during which he would think what to write about and what the best way to write it would be. This idea of Socrates is supported by many literary scholars among whom Milton who argued that "a good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit", and Rilke who thought that "a work of art is an infinite loneliness." Both Milton and Rilke are saying the same thing Socrates said but just in a different way. To sum up, all three of them stand for the fact that before producing a good piece of literature, the writer needs to think well, to get in a state of meditation. By doing so, the writer would produce something that would be liked by his reader, by his audience. The same idea is developed by William Shakespeare in the following lines:

*"The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to  
heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet a pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name."*<sup>9</sup>

In the above, Shakespeare is saying that the poet's craze in his creativity acts upon the heaven and the earth and sets out the power of image making a distant view of a reality undreamt of before. Socrates' view is the same – he argues that while producing a good piece of literature, the poet would be in such a state that he would appear to be out of his senses. What is meant here is that a poet should be ready for a change, he should adapt to his environment and to his audience while writing. Why should the poet be like that? It is simply because he is a creator who makes the hidden known to his audience. That is captured in: "the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shapes..." That is to say that a good writer does not need to use big words and complicated structures. A good writer normally, thinks not of himself and for himself but puts himself in the shoes of his audience to produce something that could be easily understood and appreciated. He explains to his audience what they did not know; he helps them discover and understand the unknown, the complicated through the mystery of words. In sum, any literature is influenced by the environment in which the writer lives. It is the factor responsible for the commitment of the writer and the issues that he intends to write in his literary narratives. The same way that the writer is influenced by his socio-

<sup>9</sup>It is taken from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5 and Scene 1.

cultural environment, literature is also altered to bear the realities of the same socio-cultural environment.

## CONCLUSION

Literature, in all of its forms, is a tool that can be used for the improvement of the human condition and nature in any given society. It can be a social stabilizer which could prevent many desolate and bad situations of conflict and problems to happen in society. If leaders exploit literature positively, they would be good rulers, especially, in the case of Africa and developing countries where many military coups and political instability could be avoided. Students, children as well as adults, all across the continent, can learn a lot from literature no matter what the form; mostly from music, since most of African history comes in songs and tales. As mentioned earlier, „l'Épopée Mandingue"; the tales of Djéli Baba Sissoko; the riddles discussed around the fire at night, etc..., all make us aware of things from the past, the present and even future predictions. In the ancient world as well as in the present, be it in Africa, Asia or Europe, any good piece of literature glorifies a person, a group of people, a fact, or a good action on the part of one or many people. We also have literatures which do not glorify but criticize a person, a group of people, a fact, or a bad action on the part of one or many people. That criticism is not necessarily negative; most of the time, artists aim at improving what was going wrong, giving a moral lesson on something not well accepted. All in all, it can be said that literature is life and life is literature because it helps us live together in a better way and in a better world.

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