

**Representations and Empowerment of People with Disabilities in
Selected Nigerian Prose-works**

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Abstract

This paper examined the representations and empowerment of characters with disabilities in selected Nigerian prose-works. The study uses the literary sociological approach, and findings showed that the characters with disabilities are empowered with various forms of supernatural abilities which are all grounded in the represented cultures of each prose-work.

Keywords: people with disabilities, literary sociological approach, Nigerian cultures

With its broad influence and its connection to all areas of life, literature no doubt is intimately entwined with our concepts and experiences of disability, for good or ill. Many scholars such as Beauchamp, Chung & Mogilner opine that “literature tells us who we are as a culture; it mirrors our beliefs or challenges them; it helps sell a lifestyle. Literature has been used deliberately to normalize groups of individuals and create social change” (2010). Mbarachi & Igwenyi (2018) add that “literature is said to mirror life (and this) includes the totality of human existence within a given culture or society” (p.30). Likewise, disability studies had had obvious interest in literary representations of disability.

Literature “is a social phenomenon, constantly sensitive to and expressing new aspects of life, current demands and hope giving rise to new social attitude and relationships, which were hitherto unnoticed” (Mkaanem, 2007, p.80). These representations within it also buttress the affinity of literature and the society which is central to the sociological approach to reading literary texts.

With this in mind, the literary sociological approach that this paper adopts, stresses the functionality of literature and re-emphasizes its role as a mirror of society. Obafemi (2008) buttresses this in his assertion that “one of the functions of literature is to serve as an instrument of societal propagation, change, and development” (p.77). The literary sociological approach, according to Aliyu (2013) allows for the examination of “the challenges of living in the society” (p.11).

Furthermore, Kopdiya (2016) states that the literary sociological approach depicts how “literature awakens the feelings and shows the human stories, imagining and showing what the people feel...” (p. 233). An instance of the human stories previously mentioned by Kopdiya (2016) is in the representation of people with disabilities, the focus of this study. People with disabilities have always existed in African societies, however, creative writers are beginning to pay more attention to the projection to this in their literary works. This

brings up the significance of the social commitment of African writers which is also an important aspect of the literary sociological approach.

The literary sociological approach emphasizes the social commitment of writers, further reiterating the functionality of literature. The significance of the social commitment of writers is made evident in a statement by Awosika (1997) that, “the socio-political and economic problems confronting the African world today are so over-powering that it would be surprising if the novelists did not show as much awareness of them as they have done” (p.4). Osundare (2007) adds that “the writer by virtue of his ability to transcend quotidian reality, has a duty to relate not only how things are, but how they could or should be” (p.12). This social commitment of writers is encapsulated in the literary sociological approach, and it occupies a major part of this paper, which aims to examine the representations of persons with disabilities in selected Nigerian prose works. This examination would be done using the selected primary texts: Irenosen Okojie’s *Butterfly Fish* (2015), Nnedi Okorafor’s *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018), and Abubakar Adam Ibrahim’s “The Whispering Trees” (2012). The analyses of the primary texts would focus on investigating the types and causes of the various forms of disabilities in the selected texts, the attitudes of other characters towards the characters with disabilities, the coping strategies adopted by the characters as well as the empowerment of these characters in the selected primary texts.

Representations of Various Forms of Disabilities in the Selected Nigerian Prose-works

Across the three selected primary texts, various types of disabilities are attributed to characters. Irenosen Okojie’s novel *Butterfly Fish* (2015), which is written within the Benin cultural context, identifies both the physical and psychological disabilities of its central character, Joy. Joy is projected as initially having to deal with mental illness causing her distortions, disturbed sleep, and insomnia (*Butterfly Fish*, 2015, p. 260). Joy experiences

mysterious events like feeling the presence of spirits, and constantly seeing a spirit, Anon, who accompanies her everywhere she goes, and influences her to attempt suicide. This subsequently results in her sleepwalking into train tracks and the eventual amputation of one of her arms (*Butterfly Fish*, 2015, p. 300). The cause of Joy's deteriorating mental state is attributed to a spiritual source, a brass head, (which is traceable to the indigenous Benin cultural practices), and which ultimately leads to her physical disability.

Another character with a disability in *Butterfly Fish* is Filo, a female character whose type of disability is psychological. The cause of the mental illness that Filo, who is Oba Odion's fifth wife, experiences is a result of her not having a child of her own and the neglect that she experiences from her husband over time. Across many African cultures, especially in past years, women like Filo who experienced the constant loss of their child(ren) tended to be discriminated against. This in turn affects the mental state of such women as some of these women eventually were deemed insane, and the society members, who were the primary causes of this, end up labeling such women using various derogatory terms. Okojie, in an interview with the researcher, buttresses this when she states that, "unfortunately in our culture, if you suffer a lot of miscarriages you tend to be looked down on, especially during the olden days (I. Okojie, personal communication, November 27, 2020). In the novel, *Butterfly Fish* (2015), Filo is described as the fifth wife who:

wore her sadness on her wrists like haphazard bracelets that wounded her skin. Her womb had apologetically born three dead babies, and on days when the air was thick with disdain for all who resided in the royal enclave, she could be found wandering the grounds harassing whosoever she encountered to return her children. (64)

The causes of Filo's mental illness are multi-faceted. In addition to the continuous loss of her babies, she also experiences total neglect and lack of recognition from her husband

with respect to these losses (*Butterfly Fish*, 2015, p. 64; p. 79). It is stated in the novel that Filo's anger increases due to Oba's refusal "to step in" as he "did nothing to help his forgotten wife" (*Butterfly Fish*, 2015, p. 153). This aspect of the novel illustrates the need for society to stop the tradition of castigating women who experience miscarriages, stillbirths, or any form of child loss. It suggests that, rather than ostracizing such women, there is a need for society, especially the spouses of such women, to be supportive and patiently walk them through surviving such experiences.

In Nnedi Okorafor's *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018), the novelist portrays a physical form of disability (albinism), largely based on the Igbo cultural context. The novel's protagonist, Sunny, is portrayed as a teenage girl with albinism. "Albinism is what some classify as a visible disability, perhaps indeed the 'most visible' one. The disability [...] resides in the fact that the character with albinism is treated differently based on the appearance of his/her skin ..." (Lipenga & Ngwira, 2018, p. 1477). Nigeria "is estimated to have one of the highest albinism prevalence rates in the world, which is about 6 million. Children constitute about 40% of this population, spread across all the states in Nigeria" (Aduge-Ani, 2014). The discrimination against people living with albinism is rampant across many African societies leading to their brutal killings in countries like Tanzania where it is believed that their "blood, skin and hair have magical powers" (Adenekan, 2019, p. 1385). With the prevalence of myths and beliefs about albinism, many Nigerians with albinism experience widespread discrimination from families, schoolmates, and peers (Adenekan, 2019, p. 1388).

These prejudices are evident in *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018). In the story, Auntie Uju (Orlu's aunty) reacts with disgust upon meeting Sunny. This mirrors broader discrimination of those with albinism in Nigeria. "[I]n Nigerian society, children with disabilities have been incorrectly understood, and this misunderstanding has led to their

negative perception and treatment” (Eskay, et al., 2012, p. 477). Auntie Uju portrays the typical inhumane treatment experienced by people living with albinism and the perceptions that some members of the larger society have. This is evident in her use of foul words to describe Sunny:

‘Who is this?’ Auntie Uju snapped.

‘Auntie,’ Orlu said. ‘This is Sunny. She’s my...’

‘She is *albeeno*’ [sic], she said, her face curling with disgust. [...]

‘Look at this evil girl!’ his auntie shouted. ‘Look at her! Like ghost. She’ll bring illness, poverty, bad luck into the house! Child witch full of witchcraft!’

(*Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis*, 2018, p. 36)

Similarly, other works explore cultural attitudes towards other disabilities, including blindness. For instance, in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim’s “The Whispering Trees” (2012), which is grounded within the Hausa cultural context, Ibrahim considers the character’s struggles being treated as the object of others’ pity. The story’s protagonist, Salim, becomes blind due to an accident at the beginning of the story which causes him to postpone plans to become a medical doctor (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, p. 46). The character laments the way he is treated by others. “I developed a phobia for eating in front of people. I felt as if they were looking at me, shaking their heads in pity. I hated being the object of their pity” (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, p. 47). In addition to the personal trauma Salim experienced with a traumatic onset of blindness, he also must endure taunting and indifference from others. In one such case, his sister’s (Jamila) friend, Saratu, teases him for his difficulties dressing himself:

I woke up one morning and came out of my room. Even with my walking cane I still stumbled over the buckets and stools left out of place by the careless Jamila. I was in

a hurry to get to the toilet. Then I heard someone giggling. I asked, “Jamila, why are you laughing?” It was not Jamila but her friend, Saratu. Saratu said, amidst giggles, “You are wearing your trousers inside out!” Then she cackled, very much like a hen. (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, p. 48)

Empowering Characters with Disabilities in the Selected Literary Works

In addition to addressing the various types of disabilities and the attitudes of members of the society towards disabilities characters, the writers addressed here also highlight various coping mechanisms adopted by characters. These coping mechanisms identified in the selected texts reiterate the adoption of the literary sociological approach in this study as the writers project coping mechanisms that are true to the reality of people with disabilities.

In addition to realistic depictions, at times authors may adopt other approaches, including use of the fantastical, in their representation. In Okojie’s *Butterfly Fish* (2015), Filo’s position as the “damaged, troubled wife” makes her unhappy, and she gets succor through spiritual means, from the presence of a brass head. The belief in the spiritual efficacy of the brass head is grounded in Benin history and culture. The people of Benin highly regard their arts, which “primarily consists of cast bronze, ivory, brass heads, figurines, brass plaques, large rectangular metal pictures, and carved wood works” (Irabor, 2019, p. 963). Benin City is historically known for its ownership of brass and bronze, as “casting in bronze - or more accurately, brass, bronze, and sometimes copper - began in Benin before the 13th century [...]” (Gunsch, 2018, para 3). In addition to the Benin arts being historical artifacts, they also have their spiritual significance. The brass head is spiritually substantial in Benin culture, as it combines the belief in the spiritual essence of the “brass” and the “head.” It is worthy to mention that the human head is highly significant across many African cultures. On this physical and supernatural significance of the human head, Ugochukwu-Smooth (2018)

asserts:

In many African societies, the human head holds significant symbolism. It is explored at length in forms and performance arts (including masking traditions). Although the human body is equally celebrated as a reliquary that carries the soul in the mortal life and afterlife, the head holds deeper ramifications. It determines the individual as marker of personal identity and physical identification and ties the individual to family, ancestors, extended family, and community. (para 3)

In Benin culture, the combination of the brass and human head (through sculpting) is spiritually significant:

...the Benin [consider] the human head as imbued with spiritual energy (*ehi*) placed by the creator-god Osanobua and his eldest son, Olokun; this energy guides the mortal individual throughout his or her lifetime on earth. Ultimately, the sculptured head is a corporeal memento in honor of revered deceased individuals such as ancestors. (Ugochukwu-Smooth, 2018, para 3)

In Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015) the mystical effects of the brass head and its connection with Filo are established in the description of the effect of the brass head on Filo. The novel highlights this in the personification of the brass head:

[The brass head] called her, she was unable to resist its slow, rolling whisper. Soft yet insistent, it had folded her lobes before slipping inside her ear drums, saying her name softly, repeatedly [...] Yet behind her raised knees, something inside her locked [...] and Filo decided to stop crumbling beneath her desperation.

(*Butterfly Fish*, 2015, p. 154)

Okojie elevates Filo from the position of a mere “troubled and damaged wife” to one who sets mysterious events in the palace in motion. In a quest for vengeance, Filo, successfully explores her vulnerability and uses it as a source of strength. Filo explores her pain as a “mother” who has repeatedly suffered the loss of a child, by invoking the spirits of her dead babies and those of the previous kings, all through the help of a medicine man (Kalu) who serves as an intermediary. This act of invoking the dead is a practice established in Benin culture and across other African cultures. The description of Filo’s action is illustrated towards the end of the novel thus:

[Kalu and Filo] continued to meet away from the watchful eyes of the palace and planned the unraveling of the Oba [...] It was Kalu that helped her call the spirits of the previous kings. And it was Kalu who told her what **was deemed to be her weakness was actually her greatest strength** [emphasis added]. Nobody would suspect the mad wife of setting the wheels in motion, of turning them with a sure finger. Filo **sent her babies to cause the very thing her Oba had mocked her for** [emphasis added].

[...]

That bright day, at the palace, her babies came back to her, glorious in the light, speaking the tongue she’d taught them. They ate from her hands, led her past the swirling activities, past the guards they’d left temporarily blind, and into the waiting arms of the day, touching the promises of the future.

And so the small procession of dead babies continues to cluck on the long, dusty trails they followed, telling Filo about the parts they’d played in the fall of a kingdom, changing into their chicken guises when Kalu’s whistles became warning winds.

(Butterfly Fish, 2015, pp. 34-341)

Similarly, Okorafor also explores the Igbo belief in the supernatural ascribing specific supernatural powers to the novel's protagonist, Sunny. Although as a person with Albinism Sunny has increased sensitivity to sun exposure (Newman, 2018), ironically Sunny's personal spirit (*chi*) is the Igbo mythic figure, Anyanwu, the sun-god (*Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis*, 2018, p. 1). Before proceeding with this analysis, it is important to mention that the concept of a personal spirit (*chi*) is grounded in Igbo cosmology. The *chi* is integral to the Igbo culture. As Ilogu (1985) explains, "one of the most striking doctrines of the Igbos is that [every] human being has associated with his personality a genius or spirit double known as his *chi*... (as quoted in Nwaezeigwe, p. 9). Arinze (1978) further elaborates about the significance of the *chi* among the Igbos:

Most *Ibos* believe that each individual has a spirit, a genius or spiritual double, his *chi*, which is given to him at conception by *Chukwu* and which accompanies this individual from the cradle to the grave. *Chi* is strictly personal [...] The ordinary *Ibo* man regards his *chi* as his guardian on whose competence depends his personal prosperity. (pp. 88-89)

Sunny's *chi* in *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018), the sun god *Anyanwu* (which means "sun"), is a deity worshipped among some Igbo communities with "special and close association with the supreme deity" (Ukwamedua & Edogiaweri, 2017, p. 327). *Anyanwu*'s position as Sunny's *chi* represents Sunny's elevated position in the supernatural realm. *Anyanwu* is regarded among the Igbos as a good spirit whose goodness and revered high status are such that it is:

ignorantly confused with or even identified with *Chukwu*, the supreme being. Some title names for God in different areas include Anyanwu (sun) as AnyanwuChukwuOkike. Anyanwu is regarded in a special way as a deity bringing

wealth and good fortune to the people (Ukwamedua & Edogiaweri, 2017, p. 323).

The close relationship between both deities (*Chukwu* and *Anyanwu*) in Igbo cosmology is illustrated in Sunny's privileged meeting with *Chukwu*. This meeting is specifically portrayed as a privileged as evident in the description of the reverence of *Chukwu* in the Igbo culture:

Chukwu was the name the Igbo people used for the Supreme Being. The great deity known as Chukwu was so inaccessible to human beings that one didn't even pray to it. If Chukwu gave you audience, you probably would have no idea why and you'd be in such awe, it wouldn't really matter.

(*Sunny and the Mysteries of Osi*, 2018, p. 205)

Okorafor's choice of *Anyanwu* as Sunny's spirit face and *chi* indicates a strong message that people living with albinism are meant to be treated as the humans that they are, respected rather than discriminated against. We have noted that the choice of the sun-god as Sunny's personal spirit is ironic given the sensitivity to the sun experienced by many with albinism (Baker et al., 2010). People with albinism often experience "partial or complete absence of pigment from the skin, hair and eyes...[resulting in lighter] skin, sandy-colored hair, light brown eyes, and [frequently experience] nystagmus, photophobia, and poor visual activity" (p. 169). These experiences are mentioned in the novel with Okorafor specifying ways to manage the situations for people with albinism. It is mentioned in the novel that Sunny had to go for eye exams and resorted to using glasses to improve her sight and protect her eyes from the effect of the direct sunlight (*Sunny and the Mysteries of Osi*, 2018, p. 2). This choice appears to be Okorafor's suggestion that the skin of people living with albinism radiates and shines like the sun, and that as such they could as well stand as honored physical representations of *Anyanwu*, the sun deity.

Similarly, Ibrahim's "The Whispering Trees" (2012) explores indigenous Hausa cultural beliefs as a means of empowering the story's protagonist, Salim. Salim's sudden blindness makes him realize he had previously taken his good health for granted. The first major step that Salim takes as a means of coping with the sudden onset of his blindness is the acceptance of his condition. Salim fully accepts his new state as he starts life afresh by going to the school for the blind and learning to write and read Braille ("The Whispering Trees," 2012, p. 55). His acceptance also guides him towards exploring the possibilities of viewing life from another angle, considering "how it takes being blind to fully understand someone or to see them truly, rather than looking through reality" (Hosking, 2005, p.65). Salim's acceptance results in his exposure to his supernatural ability to read the minds of animate (humans and animals) and inanimate entities ("The Whispering Trees," 2012, p. 60), as well as his ability to interact with the dead (p. 62). The belief that certain individuals can interact with the dead, as well as the belief that inanimate entities have their souls just like humans is traceable to the indigenous Hausa *Maguzawa* religion (Abar, 2019). This religion is still practiced in parts of Sokoto and Zamfara States" (A.A. Ibrahim, personal communication, December 7, 2020). The *Maguzawas* believe that spirits which are referred to as "*iskokai*" (A.A. Ibrahim, personal communication, December 7, 2020) adopt "trees as their dwelling place" (Greenberg, 1941, p. 57). Additionally, *Maguzawas* believe that "spirits can attach themselves to, or acquire the form of, either people, or animals, or inanimate objects (mostly rivers, trees, or mountains (Bala, 2015, p. 11.)

Ibrahim elevates Salim to the role of a "doctor" who could now "treat ailments of the soul" ("The Whispering Trees," 2012, p. 64). Salim can use his newfound ability both for his own good as well as that of others as he helps them solve their life problems. His supernatural ability to treat soul ailments and correct false historical antecedents is illustrated in his ability to unravel the mystery behind the death of one of his childhood friends, Hamza. Salim helps

to correct the previous impression that Hamza had been killed by the “resident *iskokais* that made the trees whisper” (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, p. 53). He was able to unravel this truth through his interaction with the soul of his childhood friend, Hamza, who had died when they were young (“The Whispering Tree,” 2012, p. 62). Salim, through his unraveling of the real cause of Hamza’s death, helps heal Tanimu (another childhood friend), who had always believed that he was responsible for Hamza’s death. Tanimu feels relieved after Salim recounts Hamza’s narration of his death, from the realm of the dead. (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, pp.63-64). Salim’s retelling of the true incidents that led to Hamza’s death results in the liberation of Tanimu’s soul from years of guilt and restores calmness and joy to Hamza’s mother (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, p. 65). The story ends with Salim’s full acceptance of his blindness and supernatural abilities. Salim then becomes more relevant in the community due to his new role as an intermediary between the realms of the living and the dead, which is a belief grounded in the indigenous Hausa *Maguzawa* practice. Salim’s new role is described thus:

I rediscovered life in serving and I discovered heavenly peace in the Whispering Trees, where I now spend hours listening to the melodies of nature and to the dead. They come once in a while, seeking to reach out to loved ones before taking their final leave.

So it was that I lost my sight to find my vision, I lost my life to find my soul and I lost my vanity to find my purpose (“The Whispering Trees,” 2012, pp. 65-66)

Conclusion

This essay has examined attitudes toward people with disabilities, the suggested

coping mechanisms for people living with these disabilities, as well as the ways the selected writers may be seen to empower disabled characters by reintegrating them into their larger communities. The paper examined these using a literary sociological approach to analyze the selected primary texts: Irenosen Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015); Nnedi Okorafor's *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018); and Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's "The Whispering Trees" (2012).

The selected writers address physical and psychological forms of disabilities experienced by people with disabilities, some coping strategies some employ, and more largely their treatment by others, including discrimination. Sunny is born with albinism in Okorafor's *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018). Salim in Ibrahim's "The Whispering Trees" (2012) becomes blind due to an accident, while Filo in Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015), experiences mental illness related to life challenges. Also, the mistreatment of the primary disabled characters represented in the selected primary texts reflect prejudicial attitudes towards people with disabilities more broadly. This is evident in the attitude of Orlu's Auntie Uju towards Sunny due to her albinism, the mockery that Salim experiences from his sister's friend, Saratu, as well as the neglect that Filo experiences from her husband and other members of the palace. The writers project these societal negative attitudes as means of sensitizing and changing the perception of society toward people with disabilities. Various coping mechanisms are also suggested in the primary texts. These include the need to ensure persistent eye check-ups for people living with albinism identified in Okorafor's *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osis* (2018), and the potential to reassess one's relationship to self and community present in self-acceptance in Ibrahim's "The Whispering Trees" (2012).

The selected works addressed here evidence authors empowering disabled characters with various forms of supernatural abilities, all of which are grounded in the represented cultures of each primary text: Benin in Okojie's *Butterfly Fish* (2015); Igbo culture in

Okorafor's *Sunny and the Mysteries of Osi* (2018); and Hausa culture in Ibrahim's "The Whispering Trees" (2012). These characters all gain empowerment and assistance from the supernatural in different forms. The supernatural empowerment and assistance are for the benefit of the individual characters and the community, re-establishing the communal spirit that exists across many Nigerian cultures. The study, therefore, concludes that the selected writers have succeeded in representing people living with various forms of disabilities in Nigerian societies, by raising relatable issues, establishing the place of these issues within various Nigerian cultural contexts, and proffering solutions.

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