

The Role of Literature in the Prevention of Substance Use and HIV: A Study in Literary Communication

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ABSTRACT With the cardinal objective of contributing to the global campaign against substance use and abuse and against the prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS worldwide, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective from which it explores and illuminates the copious ways in which literature can be, and has been, used to campaign for the prevention of substance use and HIV. It delineates the concepts of literature, substance and HIV in the context of the study and discusses substance use and HIV in their aspects and contents, drawing on the findings and views of practitioners in the field. It selects and analyses literary texts across genres to illustrate specific ways in which literature has been used to discourage substance use and recommends new strategies – including e-literature – to the literary writer towards the prevention of substance use and HIV and towards the global campaign against the spread of HIV and AIDS.

INTRODUCTION

Copious studies/sources have revealed the health effects of substances, the connection between substance use and HIV and AIDS transmission and the dangers posed to humanity by the global prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS. An internet source (<http://alcoholism.about.com/od/pot/a/effects-lya.htm>) accessed on 29/5/12, reports that scientific research indicates that marijuana use can cause such health problems as distorted perception, poor memory and reduced capacity for learning, loss of co-ordination, trouble with thinking and problem-solving, increased heart beat and reduced blood pressure, anxiety, fear, distrust and panic. According to the source, high doses of marijuana in food rather than smoked can cause hallucinations, delusions, impaired memory and disorientation. On lungs, the source discloses, marijuana causes cough and phlegm production, acute chest illnesses, increased risk of lung infection and obstructed airways. Generally, marijuana smoking, the source concludes, lowers immunity, making smokers prone to diseases.

Similarly, a report by the World Health Organization (WHO) as captured by Azuh in *The Punch* newspaper (in Nigeria) of Tuesday, June 12, 2012 coupled with another by American Thoracic Society online, 20/5/12 (quoted in the same source) discloses that tobacco use is one of leading preventable causes of death, stressing that the global tobacco epidemic kills nearly 6,000,000 people yearly of which more than

600,000 are people exposed to second-hand smoke. The report predicts that unless a drastic action is taken, the epidemic will kill up to 8,000,000 people world-wide by 2030, with people living in low and middle – income countries being the most vulnerable.

Vulnerability also informs Marquez's (1985) painting of a picture of the social, economic and health effects of alcohol use on the poverty-stricken fellows in his historical fiction, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, who: "drank themselves blind on homebrewed alcohol, made wild love among the *incaco* plants and broke up their party (at midnight) with bloody free-for-alls". The nexus between alcohol use and transmission of HIV/AIDS via sex cannot go unnoticed. For their part, Mackenzie et al. (2009) in their study: "The Feasibility of Integrating Alcohol Risk Reduction Counseling into Existing VCT (Voluntary Counseling Test) Services in Kenya" identify alcohol use as one of the underlying social factors that drive HIV risk behaviour. Their findings, which are corroborated by those of copious other studies in the field, show that alcohol is known to "fuel HIV transmission by blunting one's behavioural self-monitoring and increasing the likelihood of multiple partners, unprotected sex, intergenerational sex and commercial sex".

Regarding the prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS worldwide, an internet source, Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/list_of_countries_by_HIV/AIDS_adult_pr) last updated on 14 May 2012, shows that as of 2009, 33.3 million people

worldwide were infected with HIV. Using a list/table of 165 countries, the source shows that 19 countries worldwide with the highest prevalence of reported infections with HIV/AIDS are African countries with more than 24.5 million infected persons or more than 60% HIV-infected population. Of the 19 countries, South Africa tops the list with over 5 million infected people followed by Nigeria with estimated 2, 600,000 people. In the same vein, Onuoha et al. (2010) in their study in Nigeria find that “about 1.7m Nigerians have died of AIDS” so far. They stress that HIV/AIDS threat to human security is still real in view of the prevalence of the disease. Anim (2011) in his study also paints this grim picture of the global spread and prevalence of HIV/AIDS, drawing from copious sources across the globe. These sources also give their advocacies towards the control of HIV/AIDS. Anim for instance, advocates using the print and other communication media to fight the scourge; Onuoha et al. (2010) suggest focus on rural level where the scourge is more pervasive, promoting awareness in rural area through synergy among agencies and groups, proper funding of the health sector, providing access to education and instituting good governance. The present study is a contribution towards the global campaign against transmission, prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS.

The paper comprises four segments: a short introduction with objectives of study; explanation of literature, substance and HIV; a discussion of aspects and contents of substance use and HIV; the role of literature in the prevention of substance use and HIV and a short discussion/conclusion, with some recommendations made towards the attainment of the vision of the paper. The segments are presented in the order set out in this introduction.

Objectives of the Study

As implied in the title and the introduction above, the objectives of this study are:

1. To illuminate the dangers inherent in substance use.
2. To show the intricate relationship between substance use and HIV/AIDS transmission.
3. To show the global prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS.
4. To illuminate the role literature can play and has played in the prevention of substance use and HIV, and

5. To suggest further ways in which literature can be used to prevent substance use and HIV/AIDS.

Literature, Substance Use and HIV

Literature as employed in the study denotes oral or written composition in emotive language whose primary function is aesthetics or entertainment. Beside entertainment, literature has such other functions as education, information, social regulation, cultural transmission and preservation as well as socio-political transformation. Certainly, literature has many more functions; but, as Wellek and Warren (1977) argue and caution, the prime and chief function of literature is its fidelity to its nature, which means that literature in the sense employed in this study must retain its literariness which resides in the aesthetic quality across its genres.

Literature exists in three genres: poetry, drama and prose, each uniting with the others through such features as connotative and figurative language, complexity of its texture and structure, vision expression by the writer and the largely fictitious or imaginative character of the text, among other features of literature. Literature, in our context, is often studied as abstract art free from any social functions by some Western critics particularly those in the Formalist school of literary scholarship. But in African situation literature is seen by a good number of its practitioners as a veritable instrument of social, political and even economic transformation. It is in this sense that the phenomenon is employed in this study, an investigation of the role of literature in the prevention of substance use and HIV.

Substance is, generally speaking, a drug. According to Kent (2000), “a drug is any substance that alters the body’s actions and its natural chemical environment”. Drugs or substances are of two classes: the therapeutic drugs or chemicals technically referred to as medicine and psychoactive drugs used to wrongfully alter the state of a healthy body. Some psychoactive substances or drugs wrongfully used by persons are alcohol, heroin, cocaine and morphine. These and others will be discussed in the next segment of the paper. Drugs or psychoactive substances are also found in certain categories of human food; ready examples of such substances may be the caffeine found in coffee, tea,

bitter kola and kola nuts. Alcohol mentioned earlier is contained in food (drinks). This study therefore concerns itself both with drugs (substances) in food and outside food.

The next and final concept that requires explanation is HIV, an acronym for Human Immuno-deficiency Virus, a virus which causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). As will be shown shortly, HIV/AIDS has long assumed the proportions of a pandemic worldwide and specifically in Africa. The campaign to prevent the spread of the virus is the interest of this paper. In the segment that follows ample discussion is made to illuminate the dimensions and contents of the virus to appreciate the need for its prevention.

Substance Use and HIV

As mentioned earlier, substances are psychoactive drugs. They are also dangerous elements found in some human food items. Abuse of drugs or the use of them without prescription by a qualified medical practitioner is, deductively, what is referred to as substance use. Practitioners of health and allied sciences have identified and isolated some of the substances people use/abuse to include: tobacco (*nicotiana tabacum*), heroin, morphine, cocaine, valium, alcohol, coffee which contains caffeine which is also present in bitter kola, kola nuts, tea and cocoa (Selmon 1963; Oyonrinde 1983; Kent 2000; Okoye 2006; Etuk 2007; Joshi 2007). These scholars are united in their apprehension of the destructive/lethal effects of these drugs/substances on those who use them and on the society as a whole. Kent's findings show that in the USA and some other advanced countries almost 20% of deaths are attributed to diseases associated with tobacco smoking, etc. The nicotine, tars and polycyclic hydrocarbons found in tobacco are notorious in their deadly capacity to harm the body. Polycyclic hydrocarbons can release carcinogenic free radicals into the cells, increasing the risk of cancer of the lung (Kent 2000). The same source explains free radicals as unstable chemically incomplete substances that "steal" electrons from other molecules. Free radicals are highly reactive chemicals, which in large amounts are very destructive to the body. It is the antioxidants in our diet (vitamins A, C and E in particular) that enable us to combat and cope with small amounts of free radicals in our body.

As Kent (2000) explains, nicotine mimics the actions of some neurotransmitters in the brain by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system. This stimulation produces a number of harmful effects: it constricts the finer bronchioles in the lungs, reducing air flow in and out of them; it paralyses cilia which remove dirt and bacteria from the trachea; it raises the blood pressure and heart rate of the inhaler, thereby increasing his/her risk to cardiovascular disease. Nicotine also affects hormone production. It lowers blood oestrogen levels and reduces bone mineralization, increasing the risk of osteoporosis.

Cigarette smoke also contains carbon monoxide like car exhaust. Each time a person inhales tobacco smoke, he/she is poisoning his red blood cells. Carbon monoxide combines irreversibly with haemoglobin to form carboxyhaemoglobin. As haemoglobin has much higher affinity for carbon monoxide than it has for oxygen, the formation of the carboxyhaemoglobin reduces the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood, reducing the ability of the inhaler of tobacco smoke to take strenuous exercises (Kent 2000). Cigarette smoke contains also, tars – organic substances which stick on to the cells in the lungs. The most deadly of these substances are polycyclic hydro carbons already discussed here.

The tars in cigarette smoke can also damage the lung tissue both mechanically and chemically. As Kent (2000) puts it, this damage can lead to emphysema or bronchitis. Emphysema is characterized by chronic breathlessness caused by a gradual breakdown of the thin walls of the alveoli, reducing the surface area for exchange of gas while bronchitis is an inflammation of the lining of the trachea.

Similarly, narcotics such as heroin and morphine show their destructive effects by interfering with the transmission of nerve impulses across synapses in the brain. They mimic the action of endorphins, peptide neurotransmitters produced naturally in the brain Kent (2000). Like endorphins, these substances block the sensation of pain and induce a feeling of well being. Sadly, narcotics are potent depressants: they reduce the normal action of the body and reduce or depress the capacity of the respiratory and cardiac centres in the brain. Kent (2000) argues that this situation may lead to death if the diaphragm stops contracting or if the heart

stops beating. Two other stimulants, cocaine and amphetamine, delay the breakdown of noradrenaline. They interfere with the storage of noradrenaline causing the noradrenaline to over-activate certain neural pathways in the brain. Users of these substances feel highly aroused, alert and often aggressive. These feelings are gained at the expense of good health as both substances can affect the heart adversely (Kent 2000). Other side effects of the abuse of these drugs include hypertension and mental seizures.

Other stimulants used/abused are caffeine, curane and valium – a member of the class called benzodiazepine. Caffeine stimulates the nervous system by increasing the rate of metabolism, a situation which leads to the release of neurotransmitters which speed up the heart and breathing rate, making a person feel more alert and energetic than normal (Kent 2000). Curane, a narcotic, blocks the action of acetylcholine and prevents the contraction of voluntary muscles. Kent (2000) stresses the fact that curane is a poison found in the fruits of *strychnos toxifera*, a tropical rain forest plant. Valium is a tranquilizer and a depressant. The unlawful use of these drugs or substances taken together with the pandemic of HIV/AIDS threatens the survival of human race, hence the need to campaign for the prevention of substance use and HIV, substance here including alcohol.

Practitioners of Health Sciences such as Oyonrinde (1983), Kent (2000), Etuk (2007) see alcohol as notorious poison yet a most popular psychoactive drug in the world. Oyonrinde's findings show that alcohol content in alcoholic drinks ranges from 2 – 4% in beer to 50% in whisky, gin and *ogogoro* while Joshi (2007) shows the destructive effects of alcohol on such food nutrients as thiamine, vitamin B6, Folate, etc. even as Okoye (2006) stresses the role of alcohol in the provocation of hypertension. Findings by practitioners also reveal that users of tobacco as well as alcoholic substances do so to help them relax, and be more sociable though both substances constitute powerful poison which destroys the brain and the body (Selmon 1963; Oyonrinde 1983; Kent 2000). But the lethal effects of the drugs on the human society place an urgent duty on interest groups to campaign for the prevention of substance use, and, HIV, which poses even much more threat to societal survival than substance use.

Ever since it was first reported or identified in 1981 in the USA, HIV/AIDS has become one of the ever known diseases that threaten the survival of man. Authorities such as Achalu (1993), UNADS (2001), Hubert (2003), Mishra (2005) have widely discussed the menace of HIV/AIDS in today's human society, underscoring the danger the disease poses to humanity. Hubert reports that 6.8% sero prevalence was found in Nigeria among age 15 – 49 group in 2001, a datum that portends serious fear for the human society. For his part, Mishra (2005) calls for tackling individual as well as societal vulnerability if a head way is to be made in the search for prevention of HIV. Of course, all authorities are united in the position that the main source of HIV/AIDS is sexual intercourse done largely in ignorance. All the sources emphasize the need to battle HIV and reduce or possibly reverse the alarming speed of spread of the disease. Hubert (2003) suggests the use of drama and music to educate the population on the methods of prevention. This suggestion coincides with the interest of this study. Though Hubert cites drama as a possible tool for the campaign, this study proposes a holistic approach in applying literature to the campaign against substance use and HIV. The last segment of the paper which follows focuses on the role of literature in the prevention of substance use and HIV.

Literature, Substance Use and HIV

What role has literature been playing and should be playing in the prevention of substance use and HIV? To answer the first part of the question, the researcher shall cite some literature texts and opinions that have directly or indirectly addressed substance use and HIV. From the evidence of that answer, he shall generate the answer to the second part of the question.

As earlier indicated, literature, particularly in African situation, cannot afford the luxury of arts for arts' sake. This position receives the support of prominent literary practitioners: Wa Thiong'O (1973) in *Homecoming*; Achebe (1975) in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* and Irele (1981) in *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. Rather, literature has been deployed for the stability and progress of society. Accordingly, a number of writers have addressed their works to the problem of drug use and abuse within the metaphor of literary art.

In one of his poems in the collection *Songs of the Season*, Osundare (1990) using the title “at the senior service club” is to satirize the use and abuse of alcohol by senior public servants, who reduce state affairs to a joke with alcohol beverages:

*Eeh! Give me a beer
cold, criminally cold,
One that has done several years
in the prison of the fridge (48).*

Not only do they gulp bear and *odeku* (big Guinness stout) with 2 – 4% alcohol content but also “gin, champagne and Scotch whisky” with alcohol content of up to 50%. The author ridicules the senior public servant for his habitual alcoholism.

Yet another poet, Ushie (2005) in his *Lambs at the Shrine* uses a poem entitled “Ogogoro” to teach the reader the dangers of alcohol. The drug itself speaks through the figure of personification:

*This is me, Ogogoro, alias Kaikai here in
the bottle, tiny as fatal bullet.
In complexion, I am the twin brother
Of that spring water flowing from a
fountain down some hill, silently, harmlessly.
But if you give me a kiss of water
You can have the shock of your life (61).*

The substance compares itself to “a fatal bullet” and describes itself as an agent of shock. In other deadly metaphors such as “a tiger”, “a cunning house rat which bites and soothes”, “a green snake resting in green grass” and “the death that leaves you not dead not alive”, the substance continues to describe itself in four more stanzas, calling itself the “definition of sorrow which comes in the cloak of ecstasy” (Ushie 2005). This didactic verse couched in humour goes a long way to teach its readers the lethal effects of alcohol and underscores the relevance of literature to the campaign against substance use.

The dramatic genre teaches, through banter and satire, the deadly character of tobacco and alcohol as seen in Osofisan’s *Who’s Afraid of Solarin?* (1965) and Soyinka’s *The Road* (1965) where characters again reduce statecraft to personal jokes and diabolical mischief using tobacco and alcohol. The Price Control Officer in *Who’s Afraid of Solarin?* constantly and consciously refers to tobacco as dangerous and capable of destroying one’s lungs and the “tar in it as being poisonous (13 and 14), yet the substance is promoted by users.

Iyayi (1979) in his *Violence*, Alkali (1984) in her *The Stillborn* and Adichie (2006) in her *Purple Hibiscus* have taught the reader the dangers of drugs. Adichie satirises the African leader who becomes a drug baron dealing in heroin while Alkali uses alcoholism to portray stunted growth in Habu Adams, a major male character in her story. Iyayi adumbrates the effect of the free use of alcoholic beverages on the society as Obofun who trades on whisky uses this as bait to lure Adisa into adultery.

Hubert’s (2003) findings that show the use of drama and music in some African countries as a potent tool for the campaign against HIV underscore the need to use literature for the campaign for the prevention of HIV. As the author observes, literature has not been significantly used in the campaign against HIV. The role of literature in the prevention of substance use and HIV, based on the foregoing findings, therefore, remains the artistic exposition and portrayal of the dangers of substances and HIV in our literary outputs, using as transparent language as possible to enable the ample education of the populace on such dangers.

Literature has the traditional functions of entertainment, education and information as earlier mentioned in the study. Practitioners of literature should therefore use the medium for the spread of information about HIV and its prevention. The situation as it is now does not show significant use of literature in the campaign against HIV, though a lot appears to have been done in the area of substance use. The challenge of HIV/AIDS in our society places a duty on us to use our literature and other available media for the campaign against both substance use and HIV, two devastating enemies of our modern society.

DISCUSSION

The paper has explained the three operational concepts that make up its title, namely, literature, substance and HIV. It has discussed substances and HIV in their aspects and contents and has examined the role literature has been playing and should be playing in the prevention of substance use and HIV. Specifically, the objectives of the study have been realised. In respect of objective number 1, the dangers inherent in substance use have adequately been illuminated by the internet source (<http://>

alcoholism.about.com/od/pot/a/effects-lya.htm) and by the World Health Organization report as captured by Azuh (2012). Also, findings by Oyonrinde (1983), Kent (2000), Okoye (2006), Etuk (2007), Joshi (2007) emphasise the destructive/lethal effects of substance use. Similarly, the study by Mackenzie et al. (2009) and Marquez's (1985) creative ingenuity in his novel cited in this work clearly show the causal relationship between substance use and HIV/AIDS transmission which constitutes objective number 2 of the study.

Objective number 3, to show the global prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS, has been adequately addressed by the internet source Wikipedia cited in the study, which uses 165 countries worldwide to show the prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS. Studies by Onuoha et al. (2010) and Anim (2011) also confirm the dangerous worldwide prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS pandemic and the need for synergy in fighting the scourge. Similarly, Wa Thong'o (1973), Achebe (1975), Irele (1981), Osundare (1990), Ushie (2005) along with a few others cited in the study have shown the perennial role of literature in the campaign against substance use and HIV/AIDS, which is the subject matter of objective number 4. But as Hurbert's (2003) findings show, literature has not been significantly used in the campaign against HIV and AIDS, which findings place an urgent duty on writers to explore further ways in which literature can be used to campaign against substance use and the dreaded scourge, HIV and AIDS. This task constitutes the burden of objective number 5 which has been reasonably discharged under the segment on recommendations, just after the segment on conclusion.

CONCLUSION

The paper adopted an interdisciplinary approach to the achievement of its five objectives, namely to illuminate the dangers inherent in substance use, to show the relationship between substance use and HIV/AIDS, to show the global prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS; to illuminate the role of literature in the prevention of substance use and HIV, and to suggest further ways in which literature can be used to prevent substance use and HIV/AIDS. Findings from the copious studies/ sources reviewed and analyzed reveal many dangers in substance use

and keen causal relationship between substance use and HIV/AIDS transmission. The same sources also confirm heavy global prevalence and spread of HIV/AIDS. However, regarding objectives 4 and 5, findings point to the conclusion that while much has been done by writers to reflect the dangers of drug use and abuse in our literature, little has been done in the area of campaign for the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusion above, particularly with regard to objectives 4 and 5, the following recommendations are made:

1. Writers should sustain and step up the campaign against substance use in our literature, using the three genres of poetry drama and prose.
 2. Writers should devote the literary medium to the dissemination of creative information on the prevention of HIV to the society.
 3. Literature that is meant for this task need not be couched in esoteric language but in simple, clear language that produces effect.
 4. Literacy campaign should be stepped up by the relevant agencies to make our people able to consume the products of the literary campaign.
 5. Since our youths today depend more on the internet for their education, information and entertainment, it is recommended that writers introduce e-literature in the three genres on substance use and HIV to catch the attention of this group of the society, found to be the most vulnerable.
 6. The nollywood industry may be encouraged by government to reflect the campaign against substance use and HIV in their stories.
 7. Conferences need be organized regularly by schools, NGO's and government agencies on the prevention of substance use and HIV.
 8. Literature, music and talks need be organized in our local languages to break the frontiers of English in disseminating information on the dangers of drugs and HIV.
- All these will contribute to effective campaign on the prevention of substance use and HIV in Nigeria, Africa, and, indeed, worldwide with language and literature facilitating the campaign.

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