

Escaping the Authenticity Trap: Reclaiming Aesthetic Autonomy in Contemporary Nigerian Children's Literature, with a focus on Nnedi Okoroafor's *Ikenga*

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Abstract

Contemporary Nigerian children's literature is often evaluated according to the moral lessons it teaches or the cultural identities it represents. While these concerns remain important, they can overshadow the artistic qualities that distinguish literature from other forms of writing. This article introduces the concept of the Authenticity Trap to explain how pedagogical expectations and demands for culturally recognisable representations shape the evaluation of Nigerian children's literature. Drawing on René Wellek and Austin Warren's theory of intrinsic criticism alongside Martin Heidegger's understanding of art as the disclosure of truth, the article argues that literary criticism should begin with the aesthetic qualities of the text before considering its educational or cultural value. Using Nnedi Okoroafor's *Ikenga* (2020) as a case study, the article demonstrates how the novel combines indigenous cosmology, speculative fiction, urban experience, and psychological depth to challenge conventional expectations of children's literature. It proposes the Aesthetic Autonomy Model, built on narrative autonomy, experiential authenticity, and ethical openness, as a framework for evaluating contemporary Nigerian children's literature. The article concludes that children's literature achieves its greatest ethical and cultural significance through artistic freedom rather than through predetermined moral or representational expectations.

Keywords: Nigerian Children's Literature, Authenticity Trap, Aesthetic Autonomy, Intrinsic Criticism, Nnedi Okoroafor, *Ikenga*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature has long occupied a distinctive place within literary studies because it is expected to entertain, educate, and socialise young readers simultaneously. Consequently, criticism has often evaluated children's books according to the moral values they promote, the educational goals they fulfil, or the cultural identities they preserve. As Peter Hunt (1994) observes, children's literature is rarely treated as "just literature"; it is almost always expected to perform important social functions. Similarly, Perry Nodelman (2008) argues that children's texts are shaped by adult assumptions about what children should know, believe, and become. These observations suggest that discussions of children's literature frequently begin with its social purpose rather than with its literary qualities.

The same tendency is evident in Nigerian children's literature. Since the pioneering works of Cyprian Ekwensi, Mabel Segun, and other early writers, children's books have been closely associated with moral education, nation-building, and cultural preservation. Such expectations have undoubtedly contributed to the development of the genre. Yet they have also encouraged critical practices that privilege what literature teaches over how literature creates meaning. As Wellek and Warren (1956) insist, however, literary criticism must begin with the work itself because "the natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves." Their position reminds us that literature deserves attention first as an artistic construction before it is approached as a historical, educational, or ideological document.

A second critical expectation arises from debates about authenticity in African literature. African texts are frequently valued for their capacity to represent indigenous cultures, traditional beliefs, and communal identities. Although such concerns are legitimate, they can become restrictive when they establish a narrow standard for literary value. Contemporary Nigerian childhood is shaped not only by folklore and tradition but also by urbanisation, digital technology, migration, insecurity, and global cultural exchange. Children's literature that reflects these realities may therefore appear less "authentic" if authenticity is understood only through conventional cultural markers.

This article argues that these two tendencies—didactic evaluation and representational expectation—combine to produce what it terms the Authenticity Trap. The Authenticity Trap refers to a critical practice in which literary works are judged primarily by their pedagogical usefulness or cultural recognisability rather than by their aesthetic achievement. Such criticism risks overlooking the imaginative, structural, and linguistic qualities through which literature produces meaning. As Heidegger (1971) argues, art does not merely communicate information or reinforce moral principles; it discloses new ways of understanding human existence. Literature therefore possesses value that cannot be reduced to instruction alone.

The article proposes the Aesthetic Autonomy Model as an alternative framework for reading contemporary Nigerian children's literature. Building upon Wellek and Warren's intrinsic criticism and Heidegger's philosophy of art, the model consists of three interrelated principles: **narrative autonomy**, **experiential authenticity**, and **ethical openness**. Rather than dismissing the educational or cultural dimensions of children's literature, these principles argue that such dimensions are most effective when they arise organically from artistic form.

To demonstrate the usefulness of this framework, the article analyses Nnedi Okorafor's *Ikenga* (2020). The novel offers an illuminating example because it combines Igbo cosmology, speculative fiction, psychological realism, and contemporary Nigerian social realities without reducing any of these elements to ideological symbols. Instead, it creates an imaginative world in which ethical reflection emerges through narrative experience. By reading *Ikenga* through the Aesthetic Autonomy Model, this article contends that

contemporary Nigerian children's literature achieves its greatest cultural and ethical significance precisely when it is allowed to function first as literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on children's literature has consistently recognised the genre as both a literary and pedagogical enterprise. Early critics such as Peter Hunt (1994) and Perry Nodelman (2008) argue that children's literature cannot be separated from the cultural and ideological assumptions that shape adult constructions of childhood. Hunt maintains that children's books deserve the same critical attention as adult literature because they are often judged more by their educational function than by their literary qualities, while Nodelman demonstrates that children's texts are frequently designed to transmit adult values and expectations. Together, these scholars establish that children's literature is an artistic form whose social purposes should not eclipse its aesthetic complexity.

Within literary theory, René Wellek and Austin Warren (1956) challenge approaches that reduce literature to history, sociology, or moral instruction. They contend that literary criticism must begin with the internal organisation of the text—its structure, language, imagery, symbolism, and narrative design—before extending to external considerations. Similarly, Martin Heidegger (1971) conceives art as a mode of truth that reveals dimensions of human existence unavailable through factual discourse alone. These perspectives provide a useful foundation for evaluating children's literature as literature rather than merely as a pedagogical tool.

Studies of African and Nigerian children's literature have, however, largely concentrated on questions of cultural identity, moral education, and social development. Fayose's pioneering appraisal of Nigerian children's prose fiction established the literary significance of the genre while drawing attention to the limited critical attention it had received. More recent scholarship traces the historical development of Nigerian children's literature and emphasises its role in preserving cultural values, responding to changing social realities, and shaping young readers' moral consciousness. Other studies similarly foreground the pedagogical and ethical functions of children's literature, particularly its contribution to value formation and cultural transmission.

Although these studies have enriched understanding of Nigerian children's literature, comparatively little attention has been paid to the consequences of evaluating literary works primarily through pedagogical usefulness or cultural representativeness. Discussions of authenticity often privilege folklore, indigenous traditions, or recognisable cultural symbols, while aesthetic form receives comparatively less sustained analysis. This article addresses that gap by proposing the concept of the Authenticity Trap a critical tendency to privilege moral instruction and cultural recognisability over artistic achievement. Building upon Wellek and Warren's intrinsic criticism and Heidegger's philosophy of art, the article advances the Aesthetic Autonomy Model as an alternative framework for reading contemporary Nigerian children's literature through narrative autonomy, experiential authenticity, and ethical openness. The model is demonstrated through a close reading of Nnedi Okorafor's *Ikenga* (2020).

The Authenticity Trap and Aesthetic Autonomy

The relationship between aesthetics and instruction has long occupied an important place in children's literature criticism. While many scholars acknowledge that children's books perform educational and social functions, they also caution against reducing literary works to moral instruments. Peter Hunt (1994) argues that children's literature deserves the same critical attention accorded to adult literature because its artistic qualities are often overlooked in favour of discussions of education and ideology. Likewise, Maria Nikolajeva (2014) maintains that children's literature should be examined as a sophisticated artistic form

capable of representing complex emotional and intellectual experiences rather than as simplified moral discourse.

This critical tension is particularly evident in Nigerian children's literature. Since the post-independence period, writers have frequently been encouraged to produce texts that reinforce communal values, patriotism, and cultural continuity. Such expectations emerged from legitimate concerns about education, national identity, and the preservation of indigenous traditions. However, they have also contributed to a critical climate in which literary works are often evaluated according to the values they promote rather than the artistic strategies through which those values are communicated.

The increasing international visibility of African literature has introduced another dimension to this debate. Publishers and critics frequently celebrate works that foreground recognisable markers of African identity such as folklore, oral tradition, indigenous spirituality, and communal life. Although these elements remain valuable components of African literary expression, they become problematic when they function as compulsory signs of authenticity. As a result, contemporary narratives that explore urban childhood, digital cultures, migration, insecurity, or hybrid identities may be regarded as insufficiently "African" despite accurately representing the lived experiences of many Nigerian children.

It is this convergence of pedagogical expectation and representational demand that this article identifies as the **Authenticity Trap**. The Authenticity Trap is not a rejection of ethics or culture. Rather, it refers to a mode of literary evaluation that privileges external criteria over artistic achievement. Within this framework, a children's book is considered successful because it teaches approved values or performs recognisable cultural identity, even when its narrative structure, characterization, language, and imaginative vision receive comparatively little attention.

These pressures are not confined to literary criticism in African contexts. Recent research on children's publishing in the United Kingdom similarly suggests that creators of colour are frequently expected to produce narratives centred on their racial identities rather than exercising unrestricted creative freedom. The BookTrust report *Representation of People of Colour among Children's Book Creators in the UK* (2020–2021) notes that many creators remain concerned about being viewed primarily through the lens of identity rather than artistic merit. As Onyinye Iwu observes, "we just want to be seen as creatives rather than tokens... I'm scared of hearing 'The only reason why you've been published is because you're Black'" (Ramdarshan Bold, 2022, p. 3). Such testimony demonstrates that authenticity can become an external expectation imposed by publishers and audiences rather than an aesthetic principle emerging from the literary work itself.

Such an approach conflicts with the principles of intrinsic criticism developed by René Wellek and Austin Warren. In *Theory of Literature*, they argue that literary scholarship should begin with "the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves," insisting that literary value is inseparable from artistic form (Wellek & Warren, 1956). Their position does not deny the relevance of history or society; rather, it insists that these concerns should not replace close attention to the literary text. Meaning is generated through narrative design, imagery, symbolism, characterization, and language, not simply through the moral lessons a work appears to convey.

Martin Heidegger's philosophy of art reinforces this position by locating the significance of literature in its capacity to disclose truth. For Heidegger (1971), art is not merely decorative or instructional; it reveals dimensions of human existence that cannot be fully expressed through factual explanation or ethical prescription. A literary work therefore invites readers into an experience of discovery rather than presenting predetermined conclusions. This understanding is especially valuable for children's literature because it recognises young readers as thoughtful interpreters capable of engaging with ambiguity,

uncertainty, and moral complexity.

These perspectives provide the foundation for what this article terms the **Aesthetic Autonomy Model**. The model does not argue that children's literature should abandon ethical or cultural concerns. Instead, it proposes that these concerns acquire greater depth when they emerge from artistic integrity rather than external obligation. Three principles define this model.

The first principle is **narrative autonomy**. Narrative autonomy refers to the freedom of a literary work to develop according to the internal logic of its fictional world. Characters should grow from believable motivations, conflicts should arise naturally from the narrative, and resolutions should be determined by artistic necessity rather than by the desire to communicate explicit moral lessons. A text that respects narrative autonomy trusts readers to derive meaning from the unfolding of events instead of directing interpretation through overt didacticism.

The second principle is **experiential authenticity**. Existing discussions of authenticity often emphasise visible cultural symbols such as folklore, traditional rituals, or indigenous settings. While these elements remain important, experiential authenticity shifts attention to the truthful representation of lived experience. Contemporary Nigerian childhood encompasses grief, insecurity, family relationships, technological change, religious diversity, urban life, and cultural continuity. Literature becomes authentic when it captures these emotional and social realities with imaginative conviction rather than merely reproducing familiar cultural images.

The third principle is **ethical openness**. Children's literature undoubtedly engages ethical questions, but ethical openness rejects simplistic moral binaries. Instead, it encourages narratives that present competing values, moral uncertainty, and emotionally complex situations. Such texts invite readers to participate actively in ethical reflection rather than simply receiving predetermined lessons. In this sense, literature educates not by prescribing behaviour but by expanding the reader's capacity for empathy, imagination, and critical judgement.

Together, these three principles provide an alternative framework for evaluating contemporary Nigerian children's literature. Rather than measuring literary success primarily through moral instruction or cultural recognisability, the Aesthetic Autonomy Model places aesthetic achievement at the centre of criticism while recognising that ethical insight and cultural significance emerge most powerfully through imaginative literary form. The following discussion applies this framework to Nnedi Okorafor's *Ikenga*, demonstrating how the novel exemplifies an aesthetically autonomous mode of children's literature.

***Ikenga* and the Reclaiming of Aesthetic Autonomy**

Nnedi Okorafor's *Ikenga* offers a compelling example of how contemporary Nigerian children's literature can transcend the Authenticity Trap without abandoning its cultural foundations. Published in 2020, the novel combines elements of fantasy, detective fiction, and coming-of-age narrative to explore justice, responsibility, courage, and grief. Rather than functioning as a moral tract or a catalogue of indigenous traditions, *Ikenga* allows ethical meaning to emerge through artistic form. It therefore demonstrates that aesthetic autonomy and cultural relevance are complementary rather than contradictory.

The story follows twelve-year-old Nnamdi, whose life is transformed after the murder of his father, the respected head of the local police. His encounter with the mystical Ikenga—a symbol of strength, achievement, and personal destiny in Igbo cosmology—introduces supernatural abilities that compel him to confront the criminal violence threatening his community. Although the novel draws upon indigenous spirituality, the Ikenga is not presented merely as a cultural artefact. Instead, it becomes the narrative centre through which questions of justice, identity, and moral responsibility are explored. As the novel

establishes Nnamdi's moral crisis, the Chief of Chiefs sends a chilling message following his father's murder:

"When you dine with the Devil, bring a long spoon. Tell your mother that your father's spoon was too short.

Sincerely,

The Chief of Chiefs."

(Okorafor, 2020)

The letter immediately situates justice as a deeply personal rather than abstract concern. Instead of introducing heroism through triumph, Okorafor grounds the narrative in grief, fear, and moral injury. As a result, the novel resists reducing culture to spectacle; tradition remains meaningful because it is organically woven into the fictional world.

Viewed through the principle of **narrative autonomy**, *Ikenga* refuses the predictable structure of many didactic children's stories. Nnamdi is not portrayed as an ideal child who effortlessly distinguishes right from wrong. Instead, he is an emotionally vulnerable protagonist whose grief, anger, and uncertainty shape the narrative. His emotional vulnerability becomes unmistakable during his father's funeral:

"His entourage of criminals was like a cackle of hyenas come to laugh at the corpse of a fallen lion."

(Okorafor, 2020)

The powerful animal imagery transforms public mourning into a scene of moral desecration, revealing corruption not merely as a political condition but as an assault upon communal dignity. His supernatural powers do not eliminate conflict; rather, they deepen it by placing extraordinary responsibility upon an ordinary child. Consequently, the novel derives its dramatic force from character development rather than from the simple delivery of moral lessons.

This narrative complexity reflects Wellek and Warren's insistence that literature should be evaluated according to its artistic organisation rather than its external purposes (Wellek & Warren, 1956). Okorafor constructs a carefully paced narrative in which each episode contributes to the gradual development of Nnamdi's moral consciousness. Suspense, dialogue, symbolism, and psychological conflict work together to produce literary meaning. The ethical significance of the novel therefore emerges from its narrative structure rather than from overt authorial instruction.

The novel likewise exemplifies **experiential authenticity**. Conventional discussions of authenticity in African literature frequently emphasise visible cultural markers—traditional rituals, folklore, ancestral beliefs, or rural settings. *Ikenga* certainly incorporates indigenous spirituality, yet its authenticity extends beyond these familiar elements. Okorafor presents childhood as an emotionally complex experience shaped by bereavement, insecurity, friendship, family expectation, and civic responsibility. These experiences resonate with contemporary Nigerian realities while remaining accessible to readers from different cultural backgrounds.

Experiential authenticity is especially evident in the novel's representation of grief. Nnamdi's actions are motivated not simply by a desire to become a hero but by the emotional consequences of losing his father. His determination grows directly out of this grief:

"You won't get away with this, Chief... None of you will! You will all be rotting in jail or dead by this time next year... He had no idea what he was saying or what

he'd do, but he'd do something."

(Okorafor, 2020)

Although this vow is impulsive, it marks the beginning of Nnamdi's ethical awakening. Heroism begins as emotional commitment before becoming action. His encounters with fear, loneliness, and self-doubt humanise him and prevent the supernatural elements from overwhelming the narrative. The novel therefore achieves authenticity through psychological truth as much as through cultural specificity. Such representation challenges the assumption that African children's literature must depend primarily upon recognisable cultural symbols in order to establish its identity.

The coexistence of traditional spirituality and contemporary social realities further strengthens this claim. Okorafor situates indigenous cosmology within a modern Nigerian environment characterised by organised crime, policing, schools, and urban life. Tradition and modernity are not presented as opposing forces but as complementary dimensions of lived experience. This synthesis is symbolised through Nnamdi's father's garden:

"The sight of his father's dying garden added to the weight in his heart... Since his death, not surprisingly, the garden had fallen into neglect."

(Okorafor, 2020)

The neglected garden becomes a metaphor for the collapse of ethical leadership and communal wellbeing, while simultaneously linking personal loss with broader social decline. This synthesis reflects the realities of many Nigerian children whose identities are formed through continuous interaction between inherited cultural practices and contemporary social change.

The third principle of the **Aesthetic Autonomy Model**, ethical openness, is equally central to the novel. Unlike conventional didactic fiction, *Ikenga* does not offer uncomplicated moral resolutions. Nnamdi repeatedly confronts situations in which justice, revenge, loyalty, and personal responsibility intersect in difficult ways. His supernatural abilities create opportunities for heroic action, but they also expose him to the temptation of violence and vengeance. Readers are therefore encouraged to weigh competing ethical possibilities rather than merely accepting predetermined conclusions.

Heidegger's understanding of art as a mode of revealing truth provides a useful framework for interpreting this aspect of the novel. Ethical insight emerges not because the narrative explicitly instructs readers but because it allows them to experience moral uncertainty through imaginative engagement (Heidegger, 1971). The novel respects the interpretive capacity of young readers by inviting reflection instead of prescribing behaviour. In this sense, *Ikenga* fulfils an educational function precisely because it avoids reducing literature to direct instruction.

Okorafor's language further reinforces the novel's artistic achievement. Her prose remains accessible to younger readers while employing symbolism, suspense, and vivid imagery to sustain narrative momentum. The recurring image of the Ikenga functions simultaneously as a cultural symbol, a psychological catalyst, and a structural device linking the novel's exploration of courage, responsibility, and identity. The novel concludes this symbolic pattern through an ordinary but deeply significant act:

"I'll take care of you," he whispered to the plant. "He'd take care of the whole garden from now on."

(Okorafor, 2020)

The garden becomes an extension of the Ikenga itself. Before Nnamdi fully assumes supernatural power, he first embraces responsibility through care, suggesting that genuine strength is ethical before it is

physical. Such narrative economy demonstrates that literary artistry and readability need not be mutually exclusive.

Ultimately, *Ikenga* illustrates that contemporary Nigerian children's literature can remain deeply rooted in indigenous culture without becoming confined by externally imposed definitions of authenticity. The novel neither rejects moral responsibility nor dismisses cultural identity. Instead, it allows these concerns to arise naturally through imaginative storytelling, complex characterization, and carefully crafted narrative form. By doing so, Okorafor demonstrates that aesthetic autonomy does not diminish the social significance of children's literature; rather, it provides the artistic conditions through which ethical and cultural meanings become most persuasive.

Implications for Nigerian Children's Literature

The concept of the Authenticity Trap has important implications for the criticism, production, and teaching of Nigerian children's literature. First, it challenges critics to reconsider the criteria by which literary works are evaluated. While questions of morality, cultural identity, and social relevance remain essential, they should not eclipse the artistic dimensions of literature. As Wellek and Warren (1956) observe, literary criticism must begin with the literary work itself before extending to historical, sociological, or ideological concerns. A critical approach that neglects aesthetic form risks overlooking the very qualities that distinguish literature from other forms of discourse.

Second, the argument advanced in this article broadens the understanding of authenticity in African children's literature. Authenticity should not be measured solely by the presence of folklore, indigenous customs, or traditional settings. Such an approach inadvertently reduces African experience to a fixed cultural image and ignores the diversity of contemporary childhood. Today's Nigerian child inhabits multiple worlds simultaneously—local and global, traditional and modern, physical and digital. Literary representations that capture these realities are no less authentic than narratives rooted in oral traditions or village life. Indeed, they may more accurately reflect the experiences of twenty-first-century readers.

Third, the Aesthetic Autonomy Model offers writers greater creative freedom. Authors should not feel compelled to produce stories that merely reinforce approved moral lessons or satisfy external expectations of African authenticity. Instead, they should be encouraged to experiment with genre, language, characterization, and narrative structure while remaining attentive to the emotional and social realities of childhood. Such artistic freedom does not undermine the educational value of children's literature; rather, it enhances it by creating richer and more engaging reading experiences.

The article also contributes to ongoing debates in African literary criticism concerning the relationship between aesthetics and social commitment. Since the emergence of modern African literature, critics have frequently debated whether literature should primarily serve political and cultural purposes or pursue artistic independence. This study suggests that these positions need not be mutually exclusive. A literary work can remain socially responsive precisely because of its artistic excellence. As Achebe (1975) reminds us, African literature inevitably emerges from social experience, but its enduring value depends upon the imaginative power with which that experience is transformed into art.

For teachers, the Aesthetic Autonomy Model encourages a shift in classroom practice. Rather than approaching children's novels merely as sources of moral lessons, educators can invite students to explore characterization, symbolism, narrative voice, conflict, and imagery alongside ethical questions. Such an approach develops literary competence while also fostering critical thinking, empathy, and interpretive independence. Young readers become active participants in meaning-making rather than passive recipients of predetermined values.

Ultimately, reclaiming aesthetic autonomy is not an argument against ethics or culture. It is an argument against allowing these concerns to dominate literary evaluation to the extent that artistic achievement becomes secondary. Literature performs its ethical and cultural work most effectively when it first succeeds as literature.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that much criticism of Nigerian children's literature remains shaped by two dominant expectations: that children's books should function primarily as instruments of moral instruction and that they should display readily recognisable forms of cultural authenticity. While both expectations have historical and educational significance, they often lead to what this article identifies as the Authenticity Trap—a critical tendency to evaluate literary works according to external social functions rather than their aesthetic achievement.

Drawing upon the intrinsic criticism of Wellek and Warren (1956) and Heidegger's philosophy of art (1971), the article proposed the Aesthetic Autonomy Model as an alternative framework for literary criticism. Through the principles of **narrative autonomy**, **experiential authenticity**, and **ethical openness**, the model demonstrates that children's literature should first be understood as an artistic form whose ethical and cultural meanings emerge through imaginative expression rather than direct instruction.

The analysis of Nnedi Okorafor's *Ikenga* illustrates the usefulness of this framework. The novel integrates Igbo cosmology, speculative fiction, and contemporary Nigerian realities into a coherent narrative that privileges character development, psychological complexity, and moral ambiguity. Rather than presenting culture as a static performance or reducing ethics to simple lessons, *Ikenga* invites readers to engage critically with questions of justice, responsibility, identity, and courage. Its literary achievement lies precisely in its refusal to separate imagination from social reality.

The concept of the Authenticity Trap therefore extends existing discussions of African children's literature by drawing attention to the critical assumptions that shape literary evaluation. At the same time, the Aesthetic Autonomy Model provides an intrinsic method of reading that recognises artistic form as the foundation upon which ethical, educational, and cultural meanings are built.

As contemporary Nigerian children's literature continues to evolve, criticism must evolve with it. New narratives increasingly reflect urbanisation, migration, technology, environmental change, and shifting cultural identities. Evaluating such works primarily through inherited notions of authenticity risks limiting both literary criticism and creative practice. Reclaiming aesthetic autonomy allows critics to appreciate children's literature not merely for what it teaches or represents but for the imaginative worlds it creates and the human experiences it illuminates. It is through this artistic freedom that Nigerian children's literature can continue to grow in both national significance and global relevance.

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