

**THE SHORT STORY AND DYNAMIC OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN
NORTHERN NIGERIA: AUWALU HAMZA YUSUF AS A SOCIAL CRITIC
AND MORALIST**

DR. ABDULLAHI KADIR AYINDE
SR. LECTURER & HEAD OF THE DEPT. OF ENGLISH
FACULTY OF ARTS, SOCIAL & MANAGEMENT SCI.
YOBE STATE UNIVERSITY,
DAMATURU, NIGERIA.

ABSTRACT

AuwaluHamza Yusuf shows that an artist is a critic and a social reformer as he grapples with exposing the ills in his society. As a literary artist, Yusuf in his collection of short stories titled Citizen's Parade and other stories truthfully, honestly and objectively presents his society as it is with all its suffering and explosion. One of the duties of an artist is to expose the truth no matter how ugly it is. Yusuf sees his role as that of one who holds up a mirror to society so that the society can see itself reflected in it. In this paper, the author examines through 'Cheating Destiny' the method by which the short story highlights the predicament of traditional Islamic school in the north and then projects the author's moral vision for change. The image reflected in the story is that of society which is essentially fertile for breeding rogues and hoodlums. He sees the religion uprisings in Nigeria involving the almajiris as a consequence of social breakdown that makes the nation prone to violence. The society wrongly gives religion backing to begging which is obviously un-Islamic. The story makes one wonder if the concerned authorities are making productive effort to rib the syndrome on bud.

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Introduction

AuwaluHamza Yusuf was born in 1959 in Nguru, Yobe State, though his parents are natives of Utai in Wudil local Government area of Kano State. He did his post primary education at Government Secondary School, Gwale in Kano and thereafter proceeded to the City University of New York. Auwalu graduated with a Bachelor Degree in Anthropology. He also studied Professional Diploma in mass communication at Bayero University, Kano. He worked at the Kano State History and cultural Bureau between 1987 and 1997 and subsequently joined the service of the centre for Research and Documentation in Kano where his work commenced in development circle. His major collection titled Citizen's Parade and other stories were published in 2006. His other publications include Love Path, Empty Courts and other stories. Auwalu was a former chairman of Association of Nigerian Author (ANA) Kano state branch.

This paper critically examines the preoccupations of Cheating Destiny, one of the collections of the twelve stories in Yusuf's Citizen's Parade and other stories. The story illustrates the age long tradition of almajiri that is fast becoming a pandemic and recruitment point of hoodlums in northern Nigeria. The author reveals the fetid boil of almajiri syndrome against the gory background of naked injustice and socio-cultural predicament attendant upon it. The narration specifically touches the dynamic of social change by exposing with artist accuracy the multi-faceted nature of life as experienced by different characters. The setting, dialogue and characterization centre on the north where almajiri is a widely known phenomenon. The narrative depth of the story is an indication that the short story has the potential and capacity to handle a wide range of thematic concerns which effectively highlights the social malaise of human life from the personal to the political, social and economic aspects in a way that is complete and hard to ignore. This is a viable indication of the importance of the short story as a means of exploring contemporary issues.

Theoretical Conceptualization

Since this essay is an exploration into the domain of literary sociology, the sociological theory is adopted for its analysis. As a critical theory, sociological criticism recognizes literature as an essential aspect of culture and society. This theory, in its fullest meaning, implies that criticism takes into account the socio-historical factors that shape a work of art. According to Tsiga (50)

Critics have often argued that literary works should be seen as responding to historical change rather than being regarded as a set of discrete capsules subject only to their own internal, timeless laws. In short, as intellectual product of the society, whose roots lies inseparably within the fabric of its historical and cultural ethos, criticism of literature... has everything to do with the criticism of society.

Much of the best English criticism from Sidney to Lewis has concerned itself with the subtle connection between literature and life. It is affirmed that the subtle relation of art to social life is a question that has gained prominence in all literatures that have reached a definite stage of development. Omonode (13) states clearly that

criticism begins with the axiom that literature is an expression of society... the sociological criticism is therefore interested in understanding the writer's social origin, the social value and milieu in which the work was produced as well as the character's response to the society.

The implication here is that the societal events provide inputs for creativity. Literature is more than a technique of expressions; it is a reflection of the spirit of time. This approach, no doubt, provides a viable theoretical base through which 'Cheating Destiny' can be most profitably analysed and appreciated.

Historical Background to the Short Story

As a literary concept, a single definition cannot adequately capture the aphoristic descriptions, empirical formal characteristics and historical phenomenon of the short story. Literary historians and theorists locate the emergence of the short story in folkloric and oral tradition. Every society creates stories as a way of making sense of the world around them. The short story is therefore an integral part of human existence. The short story is a form of condensed fictional narratives, usually in a prose form, typically with a relative number of small characters involved in a single emotional response. Generally, the short story produces a single focused emotional and intellectual response in readers.

Trivedi (841), a prominent literary theorist in his book *Compendious History of English Literature* (1995), defines the short story as a specific form different from novel or the long narrative poem not only in length but also in form. Buldick (307) in *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* regards the short story as a work of art, as a vehicle for commenting on human situation, as a medium of entertainment in which basic fictional elements of character, incident, setting, and motivating ideas are closely blended. In the short story, the writer strives to achieve wholeness, totality of effects, completeness and a harmony in which the effect of the finished piece is far greater than the effect of the individual parts.

As a distinct epistemological form, the short story has achieved distinctiveness in the hands of many prominent African writers. Since the publication of Peter Abraham's collections *Dark Testament* in 1942, the variegated African experiences and landscapes have been well artistically illustrated by writers. Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War* and other stories, Ama Atta Aidoo's *No Sweetness Here*, Ahmed Essop's *The Hajj* and other stories, Nadine

Gordima's *Circles of Conscience* and *Some Mondays for Sure*, Bessie Head's *The collectors of Treasure and Tales of Tenderness and Power*, Luis Berardo Honwana's *We killed Mangy Dog* and other stories, Leonard Kibera's *Potent Ash*, Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*, Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Man must Live, The Living and the Death* and *In Corner B*, Grace Ogot's *Land without Thunder*, Sembene Ousmane's *The Money Order with White Genesis*, Alifa Rifaat's *Distant view of a Minaret*, Tayeb Saleh's *The Wedding of Zain*, Nagibu Mafhfous' *Tombs and Fountains*, David Oyewole's *The will of Allah*, Flora Nwapa's *Wives at War*, and *This Lagos* and other stories, Femi Olugbile's *Men at War*, Festus Iyayi's *Awaiting Court Marshall*, Cyprian Ewenz's *Lokotown*, *Restless City*, Zainab Alkali's *Cobwebs* and other stories, Tanure Ojaide's *Medicine man* and other stories and others too numerous to mention have become a mode of communication by which writers comment on contemporary issues.

The development of printing press marked the beginning of mass production of literary materials and it also brought about the proliferation of newspapers and magazines. The growth of newspapers ultimately played an important part in promoting and developing the short story tradition. During the colonial era, the mass media provided a platform for budding writers to publish short stories and for elites to propagate political views and social ideologies. Prominent journals like *Nigeria Magazine* (1932) and *Black orphus* (1957) blazed the trail in publishing creative works. For instance, *Nigeria Magazine* published a large number of short stories in its literary supplement. Likewise the *Black Orphus*, the first literary journal of Black Africa published a large corpus of creative writings, criticisms and other art forms.

By early 1970s, universities and colleges in Nigeria embraced the tradition of publishing literary materials in magazine and journals. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Okike : An African journal of new writing was founded in 1971, *Black Orphus* was resuscitated in 1981 at the University of Ibadan, *Saiwa: A Journal of communication* (1978) and *Danladi: Forum for the creative Arts* (1986) became prominent at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, *Ijala the poetry and short story Magazine* of the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife sprang up in 1981. The *Tablet of the Alvan Ikoku College of Education*, Owerri and *The Gong* of the University of Calabar also became instrumental in the development of short story.

Apparently, many prominent writers in Nigeria began their writing careers from the short stories published in the literary magazines and Journals. According to Emenyonu (276) cited in Ampah (12) writers like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwenz, Mabel Segun, INC Aniebo, Nkem Nwankwo, Kola Adebayo, Kehinde Lawal and Many other writers were a few among the contributors who cut their tooth of creativity in literary magazines. Writers experimented with the short story to explore a wide range of thematic concerns. Since short story is apt and less voluminous, budding writers find it convenient as a medium for developing creative skills.

In his survey of the short story in Nigeria, Ikeakaram also cited in Ampah (12) reveals that Chinua Achebe began his career with the short stories. Achebe published "The old order in conflict with the New" in May 1952 in *The University Herald* of the University of Ibadan. His story appears in the collection of short stories titled *The sacrificial Eggs* and other stories. Achebe later published *Girls at War* and other stories in 1972. Apart from Achebe,

NkemNwankwo is another writer of short story whose stories had appeared in Nigeria Magazine over forty years ago. Cyprian Ekwenzii had three collections of short stories namely: The Rain Maker (1965), Lokotown and other stories (1966) and Restless City and Christmas Gold and other stories (1975). Given the trend of political history in Nigeria, short stories in the 1960s focused on the socio-political issues with their attendant problems of corruption, greed, lust and self gratification.

New trend emerged in the tradition of short stories in Nigeria when writers like Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri and Bello Musa Dankano started experimenting with supernatural elements in their fictions. In their stories, one finds human beings mingling freely with beings from the spirit world- a world of fantasy. For instance, Dankano's collections of short stories, titled The Last Caravan and other stories published in 2006 employs demons and spirits in its narration. The various characters like the blind, the crippled, the lepers, and the lame with the hunchback possessed supernatural powers that helped them to deal ruthlessly with their tormentors. In her cursory survey of short story in northern Nigeria, Jatau (195) identifies Zainab Alkali's Cobweb and other stories published in 1997 as a work that reveals the social and religion barriers that hinder women's self-actualization. Women in the collections are socially and religiously handicapped in their quest for self-determination and empowerment. They are constrained by repressive conventions build around Islamic norms and values.

Alkali shows her bitter reaction against the patriarchal social structure that marginalizes women and makes them inferior, incompetent and irresponsible. Women are shown to be victims of man's aggression and the harsh interpretation of religious values. Apart from Alkali's work, a collection of short stories titled Beyond Gold and other stories (2002) edited by David Ker explores the contemporary issues of cultism on campus, police brutality, early marriage and its resultant effect or VVF. Quite a number of literary writers have seized the potential of the short story to enrich human lives and animate creative writing in Nigeria.

A Socio-Historical Analysis of 'Cheating Destiny'

'Cheating Destiny' aesthetically exposes the social vices of Almajiri in the socio-historical milieu of northern Nigeria. The aim of the story is to draw the attention of the elites, vested with power, to the predicament of traditional Islamic education. The story brings to fore the plight of Nigerian children under this system of learning and proposes what appears as solutions to the pandemic.

Traditionally, Almajiri is a corrupted term from the Arabic word Al-muhajirun translated as emigrants. During the migration of the prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Medinah, a group of believers who accompanied him were known by this name. Over a period of time, the name came to be associated with a group of adolescent children within the ages of seven and fifteen who leave their home to attend traditional Islamic school under the care of a mallam (local teacher). The duration for completing the learning of the Qur'an and its exegesis varies from ten to twenty years. All almajiris are exclusively boys in their tender age. The account by Mohammad Dahiru (3) in 'The Gist of a Flower' opines that

Normally, a learned Mallam (Teacher) would gather a horde of boys from his village and neighboring communities and joins a big Tsangaya (Traditional Islamic School) in another village or city. There he meets other mallams with their almajiris to form a large assembly of helpless and hapless children struggling, on their own, to survive as scholars. When such children leave home to a place totally alien to them, they become exposed to a completely different way of life. Because of the large number of children under one mallam, it is usually difficult for him to monitor and provide them with moral and social discipline they require at tender age. The harsh condition corrupts them. Instead of becoming scholars, they become vagabonds and invariably drift into a life of crime.

It is observed that the majority of the Almajiris are children of indigent families. Most often than not, the poor parents give out their children and orphans under their care to a traditional Islamic School. Children thus become Almajiri for reason bothering on poverty. Because of poverty, many parents abandon their responsibilities by giving away their siblings to a mallam, who eventually exposes them to street begging. The social crises that the system of Almajiri is perpetuating in the polity and its threat to social security forms the plot structure of 'Cheating Destiny'. The story captures the implacable experience of the Almajiris through the essay written by one of the female students in a post primary school. The setting is an occasion of a prize giving day which has the Governor, emirs and commissioners in attendance. The beautifully written essay is titled 'Monument and pit'. Part of the story reads thus:

I was born on January 1; this means every New Year's Day is double celebration day for me. My father tells me a foundation for a monument was laid when I was born. It is the same for every individual, my father confirmed. 'When a human being is brought into the world, he or she is just a baby, completely dependent. When the baby begins to grow, the monument begins to take shape; socialization for a meaningful life in the community emerges almost automatically. Do this, Don't do this, with religious teachings coming along to stress for recognition of the ultimate source of life and death, riches and prosperity. This is the way I hope to grow up, thinking of myself as a Monument, looking up to the ultimate source for everything I need.

But a bitter reality hit me when each day strings of Almajirai come in and out of my grandmother's house in the old city... 'Kodankanzo! Kodan dago-dago!! Iyakokonakomiya!' these Almajirai were born the way I was...Monuments from the start. And the early teaching say I must love for my brother or sister what I love for myself, yet the small boys ask for crumbs, and that is what they get on a lucky day.

The other day at the market, one small boy came up to my father with such words... '...yabaku mu samu!' my father shouted at him, saying it was neither Thursday nor Friday, he said the boy should be in school... 'Go and clean up', my father uttered towards the boy in disgust. But my attention was not with the filth adorning the child, nor the fact that he was not in school, not even the hunger he advertised worried me, but the words '...yabaku mu samu'. These words mean the little boy is not part of socialization I received. He is not part of the religious lessons I benefited from. He is not being developed to become a Monument, but a pit.

Both Monuments and pits serve humanity in different ways; one is developed in a pleasant way and people associate with it in an estimable kind of way while the other is only fit for waste.

I pray that all children remain Monuments. I also pray that fathers, mothers, commissioners and governors work hard to save the many children who may live to be pits instead of monuments.

As soon as the essay comes to the concluding part, a spontaneous uproar arises. The governor and everyone else were emotionally touched by comparative analysis between the monument and the pit. The audience sees clearly that the system of Almajiri is a form of child abuse. A system that forces a child to seek sustenance at the time he needs a parental care deserves a critical attention of leaders. A UNICEF research quoted in a national daily shows that more than 60% of the Almajiris never return home. Available statistics from the Federal Ministry of Education in 2008 indicates that Nigeria accounted for about 11 million children out of 80 million children who were out of school worldwide. In a similar account of the National Council for Destitute in Nigeria, about 7 million Almajiris of teenage beggars existed in Northern Nigeria in 2009. Almajiris are found in nearly all the nineteen northern states in Nigeria but predominantly in places where Muslims are the majority (Mohammed 5).

As a social critic and reformer, Yusuf glaringly exposes the indifference of the political authority to the plight of the almajiris. Like many other critics, Yusuf observes that the system of traditional Islamic education has outlined its usefulness and thus requires a complete overhauling in order to move with the modern time. Nigerians have witnessed many religious uprisings and riots prosecuted by the almajiris. From the 1980s to the present, different parts of northern Nigerian communities have experienced massive destruction of lives and property through religious violence. The present security challenges poses by Boko Haram started in 2009. Boko Haram militants have slaughtered thousands of innocent Nigerians and destroyed valuables worth several millions of Naira. This fanatic group, whose a majority drawn from the Almajiris, terrorizes Nigerians in a way that is unprecedented in history.

Before the British colonial rule, the traditional Islamic education was perfectly in form. It had produced renowned scholars who have contributed immensely to the society. However, the present trend in which the traditional Islamic education was reduced to the margin and its products unqualified to be employed, the value of Almajiri School began to be diminished and thus suffered a great neglect. Given the effects of colonial legacies on politics and economy, the almajiri system of learning became completely irrelevant for manpower production. The scholars who were at the helm of affairs in the pre-colonial north became irrelevant after the independence. In the emerging status quo, the local teachers had to rely on the almajiris for daily income and sustenance. The corrupt politicians also continue to exploit the almajiris for selfish political ends.

'Cheating Destiny' is therefore a condensed fictional narrative which exposes the violent threats that the almajiris constitutes to the body polity. A child who grew up in an atmosphere devoid of parental care and love is a threat to the society. The short story shows that the

almajiri is a currently a product of injustice, wickedness and bad leadership. The story also indicts the society for giving psychological approval to begging. People tend to offer assistance to only those who begged them. The society also gives wrong interpretation to the practice of begging and thus violates the religious teaching it seeks to uphold.

In recent time, the government at all levels is making effort to eradicate the almajiris' phenomenon. Various programmes and policies involving the establishment of integrated Islamic schools have been pursued, though, without any significant success so far. The central concern of 'Cheating Destiny' is thus about misplaced value. The traditional Islamic education that most people prefer over the western education is no longer producing scholars but hoodlums. The story shows how the leaders who are the custodians of values neglect the almajiris and therefore allow the social foundation to break down. This social breakdown of values destroys the base of the society - the children and ultimately the future of the nation. The manner in which the people react after listening to the presentation of the essay is a testimony of how the politicians neglect this endemic predicament.

Conclusion

'Cheating Destiny' is a story that apparently views the almajiri's system of education as a form of child abuse. The system forces children at tender age to labour for self sustenance in a society where the privileged few and their siblings live affluently. The almajiris roam the street in tattered and dirty wears, hungry and idled, begging for food or feeding from refuse heaps. It is ironic that the almajiris are the dirtiest set of people in the society contrary to the Islamic doctrine that teaches cleanliness. The story shows the moral dilemma in which the Islamic education designed to lift the people from the bug of ignorance became a breeding centre for political thugs, street urchins and potential fanatists. Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers draw inspiration for their literary outputs from communal pool. Yusuf, like other creative writers, has a definite social function which he artistically portrays in 'Cheating Destiny'.

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