

Aesthetic and Social Vision in Abubakar Gimba's A Toast in the Cemetery

James Funsho Tope

M.A. Literature in English Command Secondary School Yola

Abstract: *Being the prolific writer that he is, Gimba's collection of Short Stories, A Toast in the Cemetery, brings out the themes of decay and corruption in the urban setting through the use of images, symbols, setting and character. He seeks through these media to reveal the decay and corruption in the society. Gimba uses aesthetics to convey his message, thus making a call for change in the fabrics of society.*

Keywords: *corruption, decay, character, setting, symbolism, images, society*

I. Introduction

For Gimba, aesthetic elements are as important as the social or political subjects. From the narrative device to the setting, and plot structure, we find in Gimba a writer who is conscious of his art as well as his message. Elements of form and content are the central focus of this essay. The work is examined from perspectives of images and symbols, urban setting and social decay, character and social vision.

II. Images and Symbols

Images and symbols are a significant tool in this collection. They play an important role in bringing out the thematic preoccupation in Gimba's collection of short stories. The symbols and images are powerful tools, which he uses to his advantage in bringing out the thematic focus of his collection.

According to Jeremy Hawthorne, (1992),

"Images are usually characterized by concrete qualities rather than abstract meaning; images normally have a more sensuous quality than symbols – they call the taste, smell, feel, sound or visual image of the referred – to – object sharply to mind."

In Gimba's "The Inquisitive Child", images of rot and decay are achieved by vivid and detailed description of the toilet, which appeals to both the sense of smell and sight. We see the image of the dirty toilets, in the hospital rooms where Taalib finds himself. The toilet is described as follows;

"...the toilet stunk. It reeked like tons of rotten eggs!" (p.72)

Then later,

"And the toilet! When Rafiq opened the door on his first inspection of the place, he scampered backward as if he had seen a ghost or a snake. The smell drove him back. The place was poorly lit; the only bulb that served the toilet was dead... he found the floor flooded with water, as was the bath. The toilet itself was black and an obvious beehive of activities by swimming maggots. Slime was all over the place. (p. 73)

Gimba here uses the images of the toilet to portray the level of decay and deterioration that has taken place in the health sector in the country. He compares the toilet to 'tons of rotten eggs'; he describes the toilet so vividly that the reader automatically feels a sense of revulsion.

We see the image of beds without blankets. Gimba describes it thus;

"The patient's bed had a worn-out mattress without any blanket or bedsheet." (p. 73)

We also encounter the image of the air conditioners that are out of order:

"The air conditioner in the room was out of order: a notice by its switch warned users not to put it on." (p.73)

Another image is that of the ceiling fan, described in these words;

“The ceiling fan, which worked, had three dirty giant blades, each of which served as a bridgehead for the spiders’ network of bailey bridges.” (p. 73)

These images go a long way in helping the reader to visualize the nature of decay that has befallen the health sector. The hospital is supposed to be an epitome of cleanliness, neatness and order, but what we find is disorder, rottenness and filth.

Gimba has also used both private and public symbols in his collection to x-ray a cross section of the society, bringing out the themes of morality, religion, justice, violence and conscience.

In Gimba’s stories, the mosque stands out as a symbol of religion and morality. In the story “A Toast in the Cemetery”, Ghufraan seeks solace in the mosque after witnessing the brutal murder of little Layla. It is also in the mosque that he hopes to seek for and find forgiveness from God for his sins as a thief. In the same story, symbols of violence abound. The gun, and the knife and the cemetery are all symbols of violence. The cemetery is the venue of the brutal murder of baby Layla. It is also the place in which the buried body of Hannah’s husband is exhumed, and dismembered, leaving it for the vultures to feed on. The gun and knife are used, both in inflicting injury and killing. They are thus symbols of violence in the society.

In the Story “The Hearsman’s Gift”, the court stands out as a symbol of justice. Even though justice is prolonged in the story, it is eventually meted out in the same court in which it was originally denied. The cell in this story, stands as a symbol of retribution. In the cell, QadiHaakam is forced to face his own sins. He finds himself having to confess them before criminals, who are supposed to be ordinarily beneath him in his station as an Islamic Qadi! The qadi, in the context of the story is a symbol of corruption and greed. His actions are a representation of so many like him in the society who exploit others for their own personal gain.

In “The Inquisitive Child” Taalib is a symbol of conscience. His persistent and penetrating questions always point out the ills in the society. He serves as the conscience, condemning the corruption and decay in the society. He asks questions about the amenity ward, while he is on admission in the hospital. His questions cause his father to look around and the examination of the surroundings, filled with cobwebs, ailing fans and air conditioners, stinking toilets all show that the word ‘amenity’ has become a mockery. He asks probing questions about the strike actions of the doctors and nurses, asking what would happen if farmers also decided to go on strike. He asks questions about the unnecessary fees charged to final year students in his school, and this earns him a suspension. His questions are a searchlight, revealing the ills of the society.

The images and symbols of Gimba’s collection have helped him to highlight issues that need to be addressed urgently in the African society. They point out the vices in the society and seek a redress of the situation.

Urban Setting and Social Decay

The choice of setting by an author, many times, is deliberate. Setting is one of the elements of literature that enhances or heightens the mood of a story, and makes it more realistic.

According to Hawthorne, (1992),

“It is important to note that a setting can also be a crucial factor in the creation of mood or moral environment. The environment in which an action takes place, therefore, is an indication of the message the writer wishes to portray.”

This means that the setting of a story must be appropriate to the actions and events that the writer wishes to portray.

The settings in AbubakarGimba’s collection of stories are mainly urban settings. Only in “The Hearsman’s Gift”, is a little of the rural incorporated. The events take place mainly in the city. Gimba has concentrated on the urban setting, and in doing so has managed to highlight specific areas of the social life of the urban community and portray them just as they are. His choice of setting makes his work both authentic and effective in portraying his major themes of corruption and decay in the society.

In “The Inquisitive Child,” Gimba seeks to address the ills and shortcomings of the health sector. In many African communities, healthcare is mostly concentrated in the urban areas. Even when available in rural areas, it is, at most, very skeletal. It is therefore not unusual for the writer to choose an urban setting for this story.

In the story “A Toast in the Cemetery,” the events, which take place and the status of Hajj Jamiu do not permit a rural setting. The vicious and brutal murder of a baby in a cemetery is best done in an urban community where most people would rather mind their own business. In the rural community however, the society is close-knit, and there would have been some interference in such a ritual.

In "The Herdsman's Gift, we witness a series of bizarre events that lead to a sort of cleansing for the Islamic Qadi Hakam. One such event is his experience in the cell at the police station. The story strongly highlights the need for the qadi to pass through such an experience in order to change his ways. The police station is better identified with the urban area in the African setting, thus the choice of a city for this story is also appropriate.

In "The Angel's Hold", an urban setting is also employed to highlight the theme of inter-continental relationships. This is so since the protagonist falls in love with an American woman, only to discover that she is not to be his. The events that follow and the hostility that is displayed by the lady's boyfriend, brings out the problems associated with such relationships. Because of the theme, an urban setting is also selected for this story. We discover therefore, that the settings have been appropriately chosen to serve his purpose.

III. Character and Social Vision

Gimba's heroes are mostly challenging and stimulating. He manipulates them in such a way that their actions are highly sensational.

According to Sam Adewoye (2003),

"...characters are not particular human beings; they are imaginatively created characters that dramatize certain values in the human society."

Gimba's characters, especially the protagonists, fit into the above description. Quite a number of them stand out and are unique in their responses to situations around them.

The first character that catches one's attention is the unique character, Basakare, in "The Angel's Hold. His personality is unique in the way he plays the role of peacemaker between Hendy and her violent boyfriend. In spite of the fact that Hendy's boyfriend has ill-treated her, he does not become retributive in his approach towards the matter. He behaves like a perfect gentleman, lets go of Hendy, and advocates for a reconciliation between her boyfriend and her. Although there is an element of fear, which rules his actions, his ability to let go without any rancour is unusual for a man. Gimba seems to be making a statement about social human relations here. He seems to be holding up Basakare as an ideal man, who should be looked up to as an example.

Another interesting character in this collection is that of the boy Taalib in "The Inquisitive Child." His boldness in challenging people on issues in the society and happenings around him are rather unusual for a child his age, especially an African child who would rather be silent about what is going wrong, than risk offending an older person. In the story, it is his challenging attitude towards his principal that earns him the suspension that brings him home in the first place. He dares to question the school's policy of collecting a certain amount of money from outgoing final year students. Consequently, he is at home when robbers come. It is his challenging questions towards the robbers that get him into the hospital in the first place. The robbers aren't happy that a mere boy dares to challenge them with boldness, so they give him the beating of his life.

At the hospital, Taalib's penetrating questions about the amenity ward in which he has been admitted cause his father to think deeply. The place is called an amenity ward, but it could better be compared to a stinking latrine! The questions of Taalib expose the poor state of things in the amenity ward, and how the word 'amenity' in itself has become a mere mockery. Taalib is a voice, used by the author to question and challenge the decay that has eaten deep into the society. He doesn't just sit down and take it as it comes. He challenges it.

Ghufran is another unique character in the collection. One can say that he is a dynamic character who changes because of events in the story. He starts out as a thief, but at the end of the novel, he has become a reformed man. He is introduced in "A Toast in the Cemetery." His sudden repentance and willingness to confess that he is a thief is quite unusual. After he witnesses the brutal murder of baby Layla, Hannah's baby, he is struck with terror and the fear of God. He decides to change his ways. In an unusual twist of events, he comes in contact with Hajj Jamiu, the murderer, in a mosque. He decides to confront him publicly, and this leads to volatile events, which culminate in the eventual exposure and consequent suicide of the Hajj. The peculiar thing here, however is the ability of a thief, fleeing from discovery, to suddenly become bold as to confess his sins publicly. He risks the public disapproval in order to expose a murderer.

The Hajj Jamiu is himself a mirror of a society where many rich men have gotten rich through dubious means. He is a demonstration of the corrupted use of power in the society, and the capacity of a man for wickedness and evil. He is not satisfied with killing his rival, the husband of Hannah and his chauffeur. He goes ahead to arrange for the removal of the man's head from his body at the cemetery. After this, he still goes on to kidnap Hannah's only child and slaughters the innocent baby in a cemetery. He would have gotten away with all this, had his brutal actions not been witnessed by Ghufran. In all these, the Hajj wears a cloak of mercy, and generosity, which make it almost impossible for him to be a suspect.

Qadi Hakam is another character worthy of consideration in "The Herdsman's Gift." He goes through a harrowing experience, which is a direct result of his shady and corrupt practices as an Islamic judge. He can also be regarded as a round character, since at the end of this experience he undergoes a change in his character. He is held up as a typical reproduction of many judges like him in the society who are involved in bribery,

corruption, and sexual misconduct. In the past he has given many unjust verdicts in the court, causing the innocent to suffer, and denying justice to the poor. He receives bribes and he is corrupt. However, his actions boomerang when one of his victims decides to teach him the lesson of his life. The night he spends behind bars is an experience, which causes him to re-think about his life and to make a decision to change. As soon as he gets to court the next morning, he proves his change by immediately giving justice to all. Qadi Hakam is a mirror of the society; he mirrors a society where justice is hardly ever meted out, especially when a man is too poor to buy it with money.

The characters looked at here are used by Gimba to exhume certain issues in the society, that call for serious consideration. They are very powerful tools in his hands. They are mirrors through which we see ourselves as a society, and as such, there is a call for change.

IV. Conclusion

One of the things that strike the reader after reading Gimba's collection is the sensational and captivating nature of his stories. Gimba has employed powerful plot structures, which keep the stories captivating all through. This collection has certain unique features that are worthy of note. The first is Gimba's use of plot, which enables the stories to assume a very sensational dimension. The second is vivid images and symbols that are used in portraying the message and thematic preoccupation of the collection, which is corruption and decay in the society. The third is Gimba's creation of certain characters that mirror the society, thus being tools in the writer's hand for revealing and examining the society. In all, Gimba's collection makes an interesting reading.

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