

**The Short Story and the Challenges of Traditional Islamic  
Education in Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of Auwalu Hamza  
Yusuf's *Citizen's Parade and Other Stories***

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**Abstract**

Auwalu Hamza 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 entitled *Citizen's Parade and Other Stories* objectively presents his society as it is with all its suffering and explosion. In this paper, the author examines through 'Cheating Destiny' the method by which the short story highlights the predicament of traditional Islamic education 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. The researcher sees the religious uprisings in Nigeria involving the Almajiris as a consequence of social breakdown that makes the nation prone to violence. The society wrongly gives religious backing to begging which is un-Islamic. The story makes one wonder if the concerned authorities are making productive effort to rid society of this syndrome.

**Introduction**

Published in 2006, Auwalu Hamza Yusuf's *Citizen's Parade and Other Stories* is scarcely known in literary circles. Inadequate publicity may have accounted for its obscurity. Again, since Yusuf is relatively new in the field of literary writings, this essay is probably the first scholarly study carried out on this artistic writing. 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, New York where he took a Bachelor's 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 entitled *Citizen's Parade and other stories* was published in 2006. His other publications include *Love Path*, *Empty Courts*, among others. Yusuf was a former chairman of the Association of Nigerian Author (ANA), Kano State branch.

This paper critically examines the thematic preoccupation of 'Cheating Destiny', one of the collections of the twelve stories in *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 some parts of 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 characterisation 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 Conceptualisation**

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 Ts iga (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 criticisms from Sidney to Lewis have emphasised 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 meaningfully 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 the 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 characters, 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 Gordimer'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 Mahfouz's *Tombs and Fountains*; David Oyewole's *The will of Allah*; Flora Nwapa's *Wives at War*; and *This is Lagos and other Stories*; Femi Olugbile's *Men at War*; Festus Iyayi's *Awaiting Court Marshall*; Cyprian Ewenzii's *Lokotown; Restless City*; Zainab Alkali's *Cobwebs and other Stories*; Tanure Ojaide's *Medicine man and other Stories* as well as others too numerous to mention become artistic modes of communication by which writers comment on contemporary issues.

The development of the 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 Orpheus* (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 Orpheus*, 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 Orpheus* 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 Ekwewenzi, 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. He 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 entitled the *Sacrificial Eggs and other stories*. He later published *Girls at War and other stories* in 1972. Apart from Achebe, Nkem Nwankwo is another writer of short story whose stories had appeared in *Nigeria Magazine* over forty years ago. Cyprian Ekwenzi 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 entitled *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 religious barriers that hinder women's self-actualisation. 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 marginalises 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 entitled *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 of Vesico-Vesical Fistula. 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'**

Thematically, '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 Nigeria children under this system of learning and proposes what appears as solutions to the pandemic. In relation to style and diction, "Cheating Destiny" lacks the quality of a literary text. The content looks more journalistic than literary. The plot structure is extremely linear, devoid of literary characteristics. The narrative technique is third person in form and lacks artistic qualities found in prominent works of established literary writers. However, the theme of the story is suitable for analysis with a view to exposing the challenges of 'Almajiri's form of learning in modern Nigeria.

Traditionally, Almajiri is a corrupted term from the Arabic world 'Al-Muhajirun' translated as emigrants. During the migration of the prophet Mohammed 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 Mohammed 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 neighbouring 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 wrongly influences 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 entitled '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; socialisation 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 Almajiri come in and out of my grandmother's house in the old city ... 'Kodankanzo! Kodan dago-dago!!



lyakokonkomiya!’ 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 mean the little boy is not part of socialisation 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 as well as everyone else was 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 a million teenage Almajiri 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 outlived 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 posed 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 members are drawn from the Almajiris, terrorises Nigerians in a way that is unprecedented in the country's 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 diminish and thus suffer a great neglect. Given the effects of colonial legacies on politics and economy, the Almajiri system of learning becomes 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 constitute 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 in the affected parts of northern Nigeria is making effort to eradicate the Almajiri 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 Muslim parents in the north 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 to how the politicians neglect this endemic predicament.

### Conclusion

'Cheating Destiny' is a story that apparently views the Almajiri 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 roamed the street in tattered and dirty cloths, hungry and idled, begged for food or fed 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 fanatics. Literature does not emerge from 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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