Abstract

Gimba’s *Witnesses to Tears* (1986) and *Sacred Apples* (1994) confirm the Neo-Humanist theory that literature instructs through delighting. In this essay, the utilitarian concept has been applied to demonstrate that the above novels contribute to national development by providing the other side of the influence of religion on the Nigerian novel. Because much of the misunderstanding of Islam is due to ignorance, conscious to present an authoritative picture of this religion, Gimba draws his sources from *The Holy Qur’an* in the delineation of setting, action and character. A moderate feminist, he chooses urban heroines through whom he restructures our visions. Islam and other religions need not be antagonistic; in fact, the best condition for national cohesion lies in a blending; to be perfect in faith, the Qur’an insists on belief and good works, and, finally, in Islam, marriage is enjoined but polygamy is not the given.

Introduction

Religion, a system of faith based on the existence of God, has remained a subject-matter of the Nigerian novel since its inception. Most early writers came from the South-East and were witnesses to the clashes between traditionalism and Christianity during the colonial encounter. Colonialism in Africa found a justification for its mission in certain half-truths peddled about the continent by Christendom in the sixteenth century. Leo Africanus, an ex-slave and Christian convert, for instance, was known to have said: “The inhabitants of the black lands are bucolic people without reason, wit or skill and with no experience of anything at all; they live like brute beasts without law or order” (Claude Wauthier, 1978:48). The colonizing powers convinced the Christian West that Africa was a dark continent of barbaric races, a land of all the iniquities only the devil’s world could muster, which, for this reason, needed to be rescued and civilized. Nigeria, as a colony of Great Britain, was seen in the above light. The country’s name speaks volumes of this unbridled savagery which the colonizers set out, with Christianity in the vanguard, to crush.

Early novelists, therefore, wrote, not to delineate Christianity as a living culture but to dispel this untoward notion. In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), John Munonye’s *The Only Son* (1966) and *Oil of Obange* (1971), Christianity in conflict with traditional religion is the focus. These novels depict traditional Igbo life and its disruption by colonialism. The themes are played out by characters who symbolize either tradition or Christianity. Thus, early narratives are said to be archetypal or situational because, in the words of Charles Nnolim (1988:1), they exist ‘to present a group-felt experience’. The heroes are embodiments of the noblest qualities of Igbo tradition pitched against the formidable forces of the colonial master, epitomized in his military might, administrative set-up and his Christian religion. Achebe’s Okonkwo and Ezeulu are showpieces of Igbo culture which must contend with the whiteman’s instruments of destruction, represented by Clarke and Winterbottom - the administrators - and such missionaries as Smith and Goodcountry. Similarly, Munonye’s *Chiaku* is symbolic of parents in Igboland who had to lose their offspring to Christianity. His Jeri, in the later novel, stands for those who abandoned the ways of their people and over-reached themselves in their quest for Western culture. Achebe (1975:45), states the position of the early writers:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that, their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God’s behalf delivered them.

Achebe and his contemporaries in Nigeria did not write to profess Christianity. On the contrary, their objective seemed to have been to present the truth about the pre-colonial past. Thus, if they ever took recourse to doctrine, they did so only to deride.
The Nigerian Novel and Islam

In early Nigerian novels, little is depicted of Islam. Elsewhere, in Africa, especially in the so-called Islamic States, writers depict this religion as a complete way of life. Novelists demonstrate some great courage in appealing to the *Holy Qur’an* for their delineation of setting and the interpretation of theme and character. The Senegalese Marina Ba in *So Long a Letter* (1981) dwells on polygamy and widowhood in a chauvinistic Moslem setting. Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib* (1982), as another example, portrays a heroine, Ebla - of a Somali background - who questions the marriage institution as enjoined by Islam. And the Egyptian Yusuf Idris, in a novelette entitled ‘The Stranger’ (1984), sets Shurbagi in a quest to explore the Islamic system of social justice and the nature of violence.

Some doctrinal depth is observed in the novels of the Northern Nigerian-born Zaynab Alkali. In her *The Stillborn* (1984) and *The Virtuous Woman* (1986), she examines the relevance of the Moslem girl-child’s empowerment, through education, to her choice in marriage. Thus, Li, in the first story, and Nana Ai, in the second, are enlightened women who, by virtue of their awareness, have places of significance. But unlike Ba, Alkali does not delve deep into Islamic doctrines. Besides, the image of Baba, ‘oiled leather whip in hand, glaring at everybody’ (V. Onyema Chukwu, 2005:121) and Baba Sani’s concern that Nana Ai be given a male escort even if such a guard is old Mallam Jauro who is further enfeebled by illness, both depicting Moslem settings as men’s worlds where the woman is treated as a child, this author does not commit herself to the review of articles of faith.

So far, Abubakar Gimba is the only Nigerian novelist who presents the world of Islam with some measure of concentration. In his *Witnesses to Tears* (1986) and *Sacred Apples* (1994), he seeks explication of event and character through references and allusions to the *Qur’an*. This way, his writing can be said to have a special touch of Islam and, by extension, responds to the theme of the role of literature in national development. Nigeria’s unity depends on the extent to which her peoples understand one another, particularly, the religions which inform every group’s ethos. This point is easily appreciated when one recalls that ignorance leads to intolerance and accounts for most of the violent social conflicts the nation has experienced since the amalgamation of 1914.

Our study of Gimba’s novels, for a start, therefore, is bound to anchor on the Pro-Aristotelian or Neo-Humanist concept of literature as a utilitarian art, one which edifies through delighting. For our purpose, what T. S. Eliot (1962:724) has said about literature and religion is significant. ‘The common ground between religion and fiction is behavior. Our religion imposes our ethics, our judgement and criticism of ourselves, and our behaviour toward our fellow men’.

*The Holy Qur’an* regulates the ethos of an Islamic society. And Gimba’s fictional world, though it does not exclude other religions, is fundamentally Islamic.

Qur’anic Influences on Gimba’s Novels

According to F. A. Klein (1971:38), Islamic scholars accept two divisions under which doctrines and religious practices are treated. The *Tauhid* deals with scholastic theology and reviews concepts of the godhead. For want of competence, this is beyond the scope of our discussion. The *Fiqh*, on the other hand, is ‘the practical part’ which ‘consists of precepts and commandments to be obeyed, rules and customs to be observed, duties to be fulfilled’. The exhortations from the Sacred Book, relating to this second part, are the bases for the assessment of social sanctity and parameters with which to gauge the extent to which individual ethics conform with the teachings of Islam. Gimba explores this part in his plot structure, the depiction of settings and the portrayal of characters. Within these aspects of the novel, the author presents the main themes of his writing.

The plot of each of these novels reflects a picturesque structure wherein the major characters are very mobile. *Witnesses to Tears* is the story of Hussaina, the only child of a widower, Mr. Anas Al-Amin. In spite of her father’s cautionary statement that a man who bribes the police could be a criminal, Hussaina marries Lahab: she is enchanted by this man’s taciturnity, and is sympathetic toward him for having just lost a wife. It turns out that Lahab is a hideous character. As soon as the wedding is over, Al-Amin leaves his Futa Toro Heights apartment in Sabonville and embarks on an extensive tour of the country. He dies on the way back. Lahab feels relieved from his father-in-law’s watchful eyes: he amasses wealth through corruption and engages the services of a marabout, Dr. Saahir, for protection. Though Hussaina is suspicious of her husband’s sudden affluence, she is kept in the dark until a traumatic experience happens to her: her only son, Anas Al-Amin Sagir is kidnapped from his school. Later that night, she discovers the
boy’s decapitated head in the deep-freezer in one of the rooms in the basement of her home; he has been the victim of Dr. Saahir’s ritual murder aimed at saving Lahab’s business empire from collapse. Hussaina ends up in B8 at the Female Traumatology Ward of Khartoum Hospital. Her husband returns from a pilgrimage to Mecca only to join his mentor, Dr. Saahir, in police custody.

**Sacred Apples** is a sequel to *Witnesses to Tears*. Lahrah is Hussaina’s great-granddaughter. Zubaydah, Lahrah’s grandmother, is the product of a later marriage after the Lahab-Saahir saga.

When the story in *Sacred Apples* begins, Lahrah has just been divorced by Yazid. She together with her three children - Unnnaymah, Bilguees and Mustapha - is on her way from her ex-husband’s home in New Tymbuktu to her brother, Ya-Shareef, who resides in Rabbah City. Hardly, have mother and children left New Tymbuktu than their car is attacked by an irate mob of protesters. Lahrah is abducted, her car is set ablaze and, as far as she knows, her children have been cremated. As soon as she leaves hospital, she changes course to Minsra, her grandmother’s city. Before she completes her *iddah*, she is re-united with her children: a couple - Rashad and Miriam - had rescued them before their car was set on fire. Lahrah and her offspring finally settle with Ya-Shareef in Rabbah. She gets employed as an industrial officer and soon, her boss, Nousah proposes marriage. This marriage exposes her to the hostilities prevalent in polygamy: Nousah’s other wives - Salma and Ailimah - team up against her. They are regular guests of marabouts. Ailimah, who is already pregnant for her witchdoctor, An-Najmu, brings home the sacred apples which kill Nousah and endanger Lahrah’s life.

These picaresque structures make for a lot of journeys which generate the conflicts built up and expended over panoramic settings. Such settings are utilized to explore themes essential to Islam.

Unlike the traditional settings of the earlier novels, Gimba’s fictional world is a diffused picture of ‘the social realities of the new African urban aggregations’ (Eustace Palmer, 1978:105). Events or actions move, along with characters, from one city to another. In *Witnesses to Tears*, most of the happenings occur in Sabonville, the capital of an imaginary country known as Songhai. In this city, there are such street names as Gambia, Mali, Zimbabwe, Angola and Libya; there are institutions named after major African landmarks and personalities: Khartoum, Lusaka, Futa Toro; Cabral, Luthuli, etc. In *Sacred Apples*, action begins in New Tymbuktu, moves on to Minsra and Rabbah City. The distance between the first and third destinations amounts to about ten hours journey by road.

In both novels, therefore, we are dealing with cosmopolitan settlements. Thus, Gimba brings together characters with diverse religious interests. In such settings, the author presents the theme of Islam as a tolerant religion. It is very likely that Serah Bello, in the first novel, is a Christian; yet, she and Hussaina, a Moslem, are so close for the one to die in an effort to protect the other. In *Sacred Apples*, the union of faiths is symbolized in the marriage between Rashad, a Moslem, and Miriam, a Roman Catholic Christian. Each of the spouses retains his or her faith. Their marriage succeeds while those where both partners are Moslems hit the rock. Gimba is making a point that is fundamental to the unity of our country: Islam respects human interaction, for to God ‘belongs every being’ (*Sura xxx:26*). The true faith is that which upholds the one-ness of God and man should set his face perpetually ‘To the pattern on which/He has made mankind’ (*Sura xxx:30*). The author is suggesting that every sect should strive to build bridges across those religious gulfs that threaten Nigeria’s unity in diversity. The reflection of pan-African ism in the settings conveys a message of the brotherhood of all men.

Closely related to the above theme is another - the quality of Islamic faith. The orthodox doctrine holds that faith is a thing of the heart and one can be faithful without confessing and without performing any good works. As Klein (1971:40-1) puts it, ‘A man ... may be a believer, though he neither confesses his faith nor performs any good works, but on the contrary be an evil-doer so that consequently faith and wicked works may be combined’. Islam sees this kind of faith as the lowest. ‘He, however, who combines belief with confession and good works’, Klein continues, ‘has reached perfection ... in faith’.

In Gimba’s novels, these categories of faith are displayed. Evil and violence are rife. The first lines of *Witnesses to Tears* introduce us to a comatose in B8 in the Female Traumatology Ward of Khartoum Hospital. The rest of the story shows the bestiality of man with violence as its aftermath at all times. That Hussaina begs for a lift, a choice which introduces Lahab into her life, is to avoid exposure to a looming storm as well as a possible attack by hoodlums. That choice only ensnares her. Ill this society, evil is pervasive. She is eventually wedded to a criminal: Lahab steals students’ fees, a crime for which his weak messenger is to be incarcerated for ten years; he connives with school contractors to dupe the government; he fraternizes with a witch-doctor who ensure that he is protected; the last violence to which he is a party is infanticide, and, in a twist of fate, his only child, Sagir, is murdered for the ritual. At the time of this last evil act, Lahab is in Mecca asking ‘for Allah’s forgiveness for’ himself and his marabout
Sacred Apples begins and ends in violence. Protesters in New Tymbuktu attack Lahrah’s car; her life and those of her children are in jeopardy. She is nearly abused physically and psychologically by Al-Aswad; then follow the murder of her new husband and the shooting and arson involving An-Najmu and Al-Aswad.

Gimba does not refute the existence of evil and violence in the Islamic world. In fact, he highlights these as factors which have aroused universal suspicion and ridicule for Islam. However, he acknowledges that this situation is far from what the Prophet has enjoined. The faithfuls who are malevolent end tragically: Lahab in Witnesses to Tears returns from the hajj and walks straight into prison; An-Najmu and Al-Aswad in Sacred Apples, pay the bitter price of death for their crimes. The Holy Qur’an says:

\[
\text{Eschew all sin,}
\]
\[
\text{Open or secret Those who earn sin}
\]
\[
\text{Will get due recompense For their ‘earnings’}
\]
\[
\text{(Sura VI: 120).}
\]

Those who heed this injunction attain perfection in faith. Anas Al-Amin, though dead, leaves his good name behind. Blessings accruing to his good works pave the way for Hussaina’s husband. Ya-Shareef, Lahrah’s brother, sees the divorce of a dutiful wife, rape and murder as violence, and goes on to guard and protect his sister. Gimba approves of these men because they combine faith and good works.

Finally, God’s commandment on marriage is another theme that engages this writer’s attention. Islam enjoins marriage and discourages celibacy. The Qur’an permits polygamy but it is not the given:

\[
\text{Marry women of your choice,}
\]
\[
\text{Two, or three, or four;}
\]
\[
\text{But if ye fear that ye shall not Be able to deal justly (with them),}
\]
\[
\text{Then only one ...}
\]
\[
\text{(Sura IV:3).}
\]

God knows that no man can be fair to four women at once; that makes the proviso absolutely important. Gimba is in favour of monogamy, knowing that polygamy was expedient as a result of the depletion of the male population during the Jihads. Flis heroines are women who are emancipated, empowered and urban, characters whom Gloria Chukukere (1989:64) would describe as ‘dynamic and politicized’. Their pedigrees mark them out as women who have exceeded Nana Ai, in Alkali’s The Virtuous Woman, in their quest for self-actualization, even though they do not attain Li’s militancy in The Stillborn. In Witnesses to Tears, Hussaina’s father, a graduate of Queen City University and, before his death, a director in the Department of Information and Culture, ensures that his daughter whom he has brought up single-handedly is adequately educated and can depend on herself. Her freedom at home is unhindered and her father has ‘absolute confidence’ in her ‘sense of judgement’ (54). Lahrah, in Sacred Apples, is a graduate. She demonstrates her empowerment when, after her divorce, she settles at Rabbah, gets employment as an industrial officer and, within a short space of time, heads the investment unit.

These heroines come into marriage with their physical elegance and innocence. Hussaina is cast in the image of a Madonna: ‘Not a single person either among her fellow students or her instructors could ever point to a single stain of mean act on her’ (15). She is conscious of the
abundance of evil in her world but she cannot bring herself to suspect how close it is to her. In spite of her father’s cautionary statement, when she seeks his consent to marry Lahab:

She tried to imagine Lahab as a bad man, a vile character immersed in base practices. No! she couldn’t convince herself that Lahab could be that bad...

She shuddered at her own thoughts with a sense of guilt. She felt she had committed some sin against a saintly character (24).

As for her great-daughter, Lahrah, in the next story, she is wise, though she is not evil. She can tell a lie to ward off a rapist, but she is incapable of doing harm. Her husband wrongfully accuses her of plotting his death. She puts up this sincere defence: “It’ll be too cruel to do what you have accused me of...! (64).

These women go into marriage believing that their husbands will be satisfied. They know what the commandant says. They do not endorse polygamy. Hussaina remains Lahab’s only wife till the end. Her great-grand-daughter, in the other story, accepts Yazid on this promise: ‘... that as long as she lived, there would be no other woman in his life ... no face so attractive, no voice so sweet, and no companionship so cherished as Iters’ (63).

Their husbands turn out to be beguiling devils in saintly garbs. Behind Lahab’s youngish face and its seeming calmness is a lurking snake. As long as Mr. Anas remains alive, his son-in-law’s criminal nature is kept on hold. As soon as the gentleman’s death is confirmed, Lahab collects the casket with relief:

Yes, Amen! Lahab said to himself as he began to drive home. Amen, he said repeatedly with a kind of inner satisfaction of one who had achieved the ultimate victory over an obstacle that posed the biggest threat to the achievement of his life’s ambition. Satisfied with the finality of his father-in-law’s exit (69).

From now on, he waxes strong in crime. And not until he inadvertently causes his only child to be murdered, Hussaina remains ignorant of his evil nature.

In Lahrah’s case, Yazid Yaag-Mankow, her husband, is also vicious. He is irresponsible enough to allow an extra-marital affair get into his head such that he divorces a loving wife. After this, he gambles with marriages.

Gimba is a moderate feminist and this means a lot in a society where the dominant males have interpreted the commandments subtly to enhance the enslavement of women. However, notwithstanding that his heroines are enlightened and no longer need physical male escorts, a long oppressive tradition, innocence and gullibility render them very vulnerable.

Conclusion

Gimba’s novels appear like sermons based on The Holy Qur’an. His stories create the healthy impression that, in Nigeria, Islam has the potential to repeat the Prophet’s achievement in Arabia. In the words of Ahmed Aziz (1980:xviii-xix), this would translate into transforming ‘tribes who had been for centuries content with ignorance into a people with the greatest thirst for knowledge’. With such learning crystallizing, Nigerians shall make ‘universal human brotherhood a fact and principle of common law’.

Coming as they do at a time when Islam is being sniffed at as a religion that instigates terror and opposes peace and stability in the modern world, Witnesses to Tears and Sacred Apples provide food for thought. The world appears to have mistaken political and secular practices for religious observances. For us, in Nigeria, Gimba’s novels give the assurance that Islam inheres a very dynamic culture and it is not inimical to the emergence of a cohesive, virile nation blessed with pageants, heterogeneous yet ensuring homogeneity.

References


