

## African Prose Fiction and the Depiction of Corruption in Islamic Society and Religion: A Critical Study of Abubakar Gimba's *Witnesses to Tears* and *Sacred Apples*

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### ABSTRACT

African prose fictions have written on a whole number of ideas and perception, but have conspicuously paid little or no attention to what is predominant in the Islamic society and religious world. For Gimba, the intrigues and contestation over power, especially within the civil service, assume a metaphorical significance in unraveling social contradictions in society. Gimba thus, evaluates the various dimensions of power and how it is used to subjugate or oppress people. In most of his works, Gimba pillories the repressive nature of power and the conflicts it engenders are graphically illustrated. In his articulation of this disabling environment, Gimba evokes a consciousness, concerned with Manichaeism and alienation. Gimba is sensitive to his characters as they adjust to the uncertainties of a postcolonial society with all the indices of underdevelopment, greed, corruption, bureaucratic tardiness, indiscipline, political instability etc. These characteristics of modern Nigeria form the background from which Gimba's characters are drawn. However, drawing from their Islamic background, the characters in Gimba's works express their morality, conviction and thought through the ideals of the religion. This leads to a remarkable blending of social and moral concerns with the supervening influence of Islam without sermonization. The outcome of this fusion is a balance between aesthetics and spiritual interests in a way that captures the essence of Northern Nigeria with vividness and freshness. Gimba, like Tahir, therefore relates the traditional and cultural values of the people to their response to the dilemma of new experiences and their interpretations of them. Gimba draws his sources from *The Holy Qur'an* in the delineation of setting, action and character. As a liberal feminist, he chooses urban heroines through whom he restructures our visions. This article attempts to investigate Gimba's works using Neo-humanistic theory in evaluating his inclusion of religion and the techniques used conspicuously in the novels, *Witnesses to Tears* and *Sacred Apples*. This scholarly work equally argues that the writer's creativity in religion can best be appreciated through an analytical study of the novel.

**Key words:** Islamic Society and Religion, Neo-Humanist Theory, African Literature, Manichaeism, Alienation, Holy Qur'an, Post-colonial, Gimba

### INTRODUCTION

As a prolific and proficient writer, Gimba had within the span of a decade taken the Nigerian Literary scene by surprise with the following titles: *Trail of Sacrifice* (1985), *Witnesses To Tears* (1986), *Innocent Victims* (1988), *Sunset for a Mandarin* (1991), *Sacred Apples* (1997), *Footprints* (1998), a collection of essays *Once Upon A Reed* (1999), a collection of poetry, *Inner Rumbings* (2000). He is a writer who is interested in the world and the people around him, particularly in the intrigues and intricacies of the civil service and the bureaucracy. His works revolve around morality, encoding sympathy for the innocent characters who are usually persecuted and unfairly treated by the system. Gimba's works are intensely concerned with decency,

proper use and control of power and the creation of an egalitarian society.

However, the emergence of Abubakar Gimba in the mid-eighties was to further expand the scope of the novel in English in Northern Nigeria beyond the point of Tahir's *The Last Imam*. Beyond the concern with the people's contact with Islam and their ensuing attempts at adjustments, Gimba explores the many vagaries of human experience. The significance of Gimba's works lies in the way that he locates his motifs strictly within the bureaucratic structures of post-colonial Nigeria from where he takes a panoramic view of the entire society.

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 Africans, 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.

The problems facing African societies are multi-dimensional and in phases. Slavery is the worst and darkest experience in the history of African people. Religion, including Islamic religion and colonialism immediately followed and now neo-colonialism through African dependent on the Western World for its economic and political stability. To sustain and promote their interests at the expense of Africa, the international hegemonic forces have ensured that their African collaborators remain in power to do their biddings. These agents consider and pursue policies that satisfy their interest and those of their imperialist masters even at the brink of economic collapse occasioned by the "fictitious debts and religious charlatanry and propaganda.

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 ridicule.

The aim of this study is to investigate the theme of corruption in Post-Colonial African Novels. To fulfill the aim of this study the objectives are to:

1. Assess the realism in *Witnesses to Tears* by Gimba Abubakar?
2. Assess the realism in *Sacred Apple?* By Gimba Abubakar
3. Investigate how *Witnesses to Tears* and *Sacred Apple* portray corruption in Post-Colonial Islamic Africa?

## CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF THE NOVELS *WITNESSES TO TEARS AND SACRED APPLES*

*Witnesses to Tears*: 'Tears' is the most important in the novel. "Tears" are the drops of salty liquid that come out of one's eyes usually because one is unhappy, hurt or in pains. The novel deals with the pervading unquenchable drive of the modern man to acquire wealth by perversion as well as

the wanton destruction of both self and others by the perpetrator. Man's inordinate ambition is portrayed as leading to a total disregard for the value of life and humanity in general. It pushes out the bestial nature of human beings, even when they struggle to cover up with open kindness. The fictionalized situation of the novel deals with a beautiful, loving and innocent victim of blind love, Hussaina, whose husband's inordinate desire to amass wealth, even through perverse means resulted in, although by a twist of fate, an impetrable horror that became the ironical reward of Hussaina's innate kindness, love, respect and good manners.

The concern of the novel is the plight of the innocent ones, especially women and children, who suffer over crimes committed by people close to them as they share in the repercussions for those crimes. The message of the text is that acquisition of wealth through dubious means results in the destruction of both the perpetrators and their family members who might be innocent; and that good name is far greater and more enduring than wealth acquired through dubious means. This message is projected at the primitive level using lexis and structure. "Tears" in the title of the novel refers to the fictionalized situation in general and to the major characters in particular. "Tears" come out of one's eyes when one is crying.

In the text's semiotic universe, they are mostly shed due to loss of loved ones. "Tears" are a result of melancholy caused by either pains or grieve. When adults cry, it is often a result of death of loved ones. "Tears" in this novel refers to death and wanton destruction of human beings caused by Lahab's burning desire to amass wealth and to fight for positions through abnormal means, which involve the use of human blood that resulted in multiple deaths. They are both a result and a sequence of the disregard for the value of life. There are multiple killings of souls, which violate the sanctity of human life as preached by all religions of the world. "Tears" serve as a node for the following list of expressions and lexical items that mean or connote death, murder, mourning and other death related terms. The following is a list of some of these lexical items for illustration:

(P.7) A safe *coma*

(P.10) extremely *critical* but safe

(P.11) ...was as awesome as *death*

(P.14)...dead Zarah was very much alive

(P.15) ...khartoum Hospital was filled with about a score of men from the police *homicide* squad.

(P.16) But we are not saying that we have got the *killers* of Sarah and Sani Tanko.

(P.24) But standing there at the bus stop in the windy Torrents, seemed an even greater *danger*, I thought I just chose the Lesser of the *evils*.

(P.27) I appreciate what he did...at least he did prove that even in times like these when abnormality has gained such ...to a state of everyday acceptance, not all men are *wolves* except that my little girl, most are in sheep's attire. (28)

(P.37) A perversion that killed her fountain of love

(P.36) Could it be professional incompetence or simply ineptitude In hospital management that killed her mother.

(P.41) ...increased smugglings, attacks on young girls, *murderers, Kidnappings...*

(P.68) ...that a person should die without trace, unknown to the family.

(P. 71) Lahab had always wished his wife's father *dead*. Anas' shadow had always tormented his moral conscience. The man was too upright.

(P.78) He had secretly despised him for that very trait when he lived, and actually nursed an inner satisfaction when he died ... he was no longer around to see and question his propriety or his bottled impropriety, so ... away from the sight of other men.

The list provides evidence that there is the projection of the message of human destruction resulting from the illicit acquisition of wealth in this novel based on the lexical items and expressions underscored in the list.

Admissibly, Abubakar Gimba is the only Nigerian novelist who presents the world of Islam with some measure of concentration and a sense of metaphorical felony. 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, 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 behaviour. Our religion imposes our ethics, our judgment 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.

### **The Quran (Islamic Influences) on Gimba's Prose Fiction**

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 fight 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 picaresque 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 Sagiir 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 - Unnmaymah, Bilgrees 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-Africanism 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. The 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, Sagiir, 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: “Eschew all sin, Open or secret those who earn sin Will get due recompense for their earnings”.

(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:

Marry women of your choice,  
Two, or three, or four;  
But if ye fear that ye shall not  
Be able to deal justly (with them),  
Then only one...  
(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 wade 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 will 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 Yaagi-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

The reconstruction of the two distinct phases of the post-colonial Nigerian condition in *Witnesses to Tears and Sacred Apples* show the reality as a product historical force and the characters appear to be caught helplessly in the web of conflict, social evolution and post-colonial disillusionment. Although concerned with the contemporary reality, the colonial legacy looms large in the novels. The historical events related to colonization seem to have shattered the spiritual fabric of the Nigerians causing their loss of traditional values and making them participate in the historical development for which they have not been prepared. The immediate consequences are chaos, corruption, and instability in all spheres of life. With a keen awareness to the socio-political forces operating in postcolonial Nigeria, Gimba presents this crisis in fictional term. His conviction about art's "disquieting relationship" with a "recognizable reality" and his understanding of the artist's responsibility in the African context have enabled him to give a poignant expression to the prevailing corruption and instability—the two disrupting forces affecting the health of the entire nation. Gimba has used his prolific writings to awaken the consciousness of the masses to the realities of their circumstances. Some of the writers do not only stop at this level of awakening but go further to recommend serious resistance measures against the enemies of the people.

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 we that are residing in Nigeria, Gimba's novels give the assurance that Islam projects a very dynamic culture and it is inimical to the emergence of a cohesive, virile nation blessed with pageants, heterogeneous yet ensuring homogeneity. Here is without controversy, a work of post-colonial disillusionment.

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