Incredible Narratives of the Power of Money in Adekunle Mamudu's *The Beauty of Madness and Other Stories*

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Abstract

A crazy world out there is sometimes the impression a reader gets when stories about corruption and other social vices are narrated in literature. Adekunle Mamudu's collection of short stories – *The Beauty of Madness and Other Stories* (2016) amplifies that notion. The stories are incredulous, sometimes improbable, just like the occurrences in the societies referenced are unbelievable. This study examines the seemingly unrelated stories in the collection to draw out the absurd behaviours of many people in their quest for money. The qualitative research methodology adopted enables the stories to be dissected, in-text, and analysed to focus attention on the loss of moral values. This objective is achieved by engaging the Economic Power theory (1845) – a strand of Marxist criticism (enunciated by Karl Marx), which postulates that "people's lives are determined by their economic circumstances" (Dobie, 87). Set in recognisable cities in Nigeria, poverty and lack of ethics are juxtaposed in the eight-chapter book to depict how the actions of the characters are defined by their inordinate and high regard for money, believing that "money answers all things." The study demonstrates Mamudu's portrait of moral decadence across all spheres of the Nigerian socio-political space. It concludes that greed, propelled by inordinate ambition, often erodes moral values and entrenches self-debasement.

Keywords: Money, Moral decadence, Corruption, Marxism and Inordinate ambition.

Introduction

Adekunle Mamudu's *The Beauty of Madness and Other Stories* (2016), is a collection of eight stories narrated with a tone of humour and sarcasm, yet weighty enough to convey the author's disgust with the prevalent social ills and moral decadence which centre around money, self-delusion, inordinate ambition, greed and unrealised aspirations.

The eight stories in the collection that are engaged in this paper are: "The Magic of Money," "Long Time No See", "To Shoot a Ghost Wife", "The Hostile Take Over", "The Beauty of Madness," "The Hired Husband", "A Forgiving Spirit" and "Two Suitors, One Bride". The stories, though analysed in no particular order, recount experiences of frustration and efforts to further subvert a dysfunctional social system ostensibly for self-aggrandisement.

Deploying the economic power strand of Marxist criticism allows us to interrogate the role money plays in societies where the commodity is worshipped as a deity while the lack of it reduces many to beggarly and despicable conditions. The theory avers that a society is shaped by material circumstances and historical situations. These forces control wealth distribution which in most cases turns out to be inequitable. This inequitable distribution of material resources, prevalent in capitalist societies, expectedly produces the bourgeoisie class of the haves and the proletariat class of the rest of society who depend on the benevolence of the former to survive or stay afloat at best. The primary text under focus, interestingly, consists of an admixture of the classes of citizens and their class consciousness. The consciousness controls their respective actions, thus leading to most of the calamitous happenings in the book. Significantly, the economic power theory highlights the gulf between the bourgeoisie and proletariat by affirming that "the haves are separated from the have-nots by what they own and what they lack and by their ample or limited opportunity to acquire wealth and power" (Dobie, 88). These negative consequences of what Marxist theories consider to be a flawed system takes its toll on both the rich and the poor. Whereas the rich see their position as an opportunity to impress others or to oppress the poor, the poor are either complacent about their lowly circumstance or attempt to circumvent the system by engaging in questionable acts of corruption in order to climb the economic ladder. The rich also get involved in corrupt practices as a result of greed.

Marxists, according to Abrams and Harpham, in further explicating the power of money, opine that "human consciousness is constituted by an ideology – that is, the beliefs, values and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain what they take to be reality" (Abrams and Harpham, 203). What Abrams and Harpham emphasize here is the way people's feelings and perceptions control what they believe to be real. There is no doubt that this is germane to the issue of class consciousness and class struggle which result in the inordinate pursuit of wealth and its consequences, to which this paper is attuned.

The text under focus has been analysed by a handful of scholars including Divine Ogede and Godday Eronmonsele Ehimen. They examine the issue of bullying and factors responsible for the anti-social behaviour. The critics identify frustration, jealousy and anger and advocate actions to address the incidence in view of the negative impact on the people (n.p.). These are germane observations which expose some of the unruly actions highlighted in the stories. Kunle Mamudu on his part, looks at the cultural significance of the text within the Nigerian short story sub-genre and how setting affects the promotion of necromancy and provide emotional support as well as psychological therapy for characters. Rather than emotional support, our view is that the setting, in the collection of stories under focus, accentuates the immorality because there are no featured institutional machinery to check them.

Nosakhare Stephan Egbon's attention is on the narrative technique, attempting to match the author's deployment of flashback with the thematic concerns. He avers that the technique enhances the writer's quest for sanity amidst the lack of moral standards. This aligns to some extent with our reading that a person's past has a way of catching up with their future.

It is on that premise that this paper summizes that inordinate ambition fuels greed and that people tend to jettison moral values under the weight of economic pressure.

Inordinate Ambition and Greed

Ambition, ordinarily is a positive desire but when ambition is inordinate, it assumes a dangerous dimension capable of consuming the person and sometimes people around them. One of the stories in the collection under examination, "Long Time, No See" tells the story of Stanley who attempts, without much success, to be economically independent. He aspires to be like his wealthy classmate, Samson. After

their secondary school certificate examination, Stanley has only lofty desires:

> Stanley's plans were clear…, he was certain, he would move over to Lagos and get a better paying job. He would start with Chevron, a high paying oil company, and if it didn't work, he would manage one of those high profile merchant banks. If things went well, he would soon catch up with Samson, a secondary school classmate of his, who was on song in Lagos, following his enormous wealth (*The Beauty*…, 18).

Stanley, for sure, is immodest. It is the high expectations of what he should become, rather than face the reality of his present situation, that lead him not only to dream big but also to desire to be like Samson. Stanley believes that since "money was readily available to Samson as feathers are to a peacock" (19), he too could attempt to aim that high. It is all money and money for him. Stanley fails to realise that economic power is not determined by mere aspiration but usually a function of hardwork and providence. He is not prepared to start on any lowly rank and gradually climb up the ladder of progress. His inordinate ambition meets with a deadlock as Stanley meets his end while living with his fiancée. In another story, "The Hostile Care-take", the major character, Austilo, is described as a 'failed footballer' (34). He lives on deceit. He is haughty in spite of his near zero accomplishments. Not even the fact that "he couldn't afford to pay rent for his one-room apartment and was promptly given quit notice" (35) moderates his behaviour. The narrative tells how Austilo meets a lady, who in her desperation for a caretaker to oversee her property, currently

occupied by a man and his wife, appoints Austilo to the position on an ad-hoc basis. The latter not only takes over supervision of the house, he also oppresses the tenants; imposing extra charges without the knowledge of the house-owner. He deceives the tenants by lying to them that he was related to the house-owner. His greed backfires ultimately as he loses the job of caretaker. Austilo's eventually fall accentuates the popular expression of pride preceding a fall.

Austilo exemplifies the class of persons often described in Marxist criticism as those in "subordinate classes that engage in a struggle for economic, political and social advantage" (Abrams and Harmpham, p.203). He seeks, on account of his greed, to take advantage of the house-owner and the tenants in a house that he literally has no stake in.

Greed and the wickedness in people's hearts is the crux of the story in "The Hired Husband". Chief and Mrs. Ayinke cajole Osaro, an air conditioner technician, into sleeping with Mrs. Ayinke for reason of conception because the couple are unable to bear children. Osaro, at first, reluctant, agrees to the deal following promise of financial compensation. He fulfills his part of the bargain, but Chief Ayinke has other ideas. After helping the couple to sire three children, Chief Ayinke, a millionaire, believes Osaro is dispensable. He organises a killer squad to eliminate him. There is, however, mistaken identity and Osaro's twin brother, Nosa, falls victim. Osaro's life is spared due to sheer providence. The lesson is not lost to the effect that Chief Ayinke, in spite of his wealth and ability to fulfil his promise to Osaro, despises him on account of his lowly status. The bourgeoisie feeling of superiority supersedes his humanity. The reasons for contracting assassins to eliminate Osaro by Chief Ayinke are revealed during the court trial:

> Chief Ayinke didn't mince words. He agreed to having contracted the murder job to Black Bats because his reputation was at stake. His statements revealed that he also contracted the job of raising children to

> Osaro as he was impotent. He confessed that he feared that soon, the truth might be revealed and that he would be ridiculed before the eyes of the entire world. (59)

Narcissism, which is the hallmark of capitalism is responsible for Chief Ayinke's desire to eliminate a man that he had used to fulfil his aspiration of fatherhood. Incredulous as the narrative may seem, the incidence speaks to the actions of privileged personages who believe they can blot out or estaminate persons of lower economic circumstance who help them climb to their ladder of success. Chief Ayinke's action is propelled by arrogance and greed as the life of a man means nothing to him.

In yet another story in the collection, "A Forgiving Spirit", Andrew is oppressed by greedy company executives who believe in amassing wealth, inordinately, without accountability. The reader learns that:

> One, two, three months after he supplied the items, Andrew could not get his money out from the ministry. The Director-General blamed it on non-release of funds by the minister. However, he kept hoping that the next day would be better. (62)

It turns out that Andrew was never paid. He suffers a worse humiliation when his brother's wife, Nene, from whom he borrowed the money for the supplies, resorts to selling Andrew's property to recover her one hundred thousand Naira loan. She sells his television set, video player, refrigerator and more, in her greed to earn more than her investment. Andrew's experiences further buttress the Marxist's concepts of the "superstructure" represented by the "dominant and exploitative class – the bourgeoisies, who own the means of

production and distribution, as opposed to the "proletariat or wage-earning working class" – the "base" (Abrams and Harpham, 204). Oppression of the weak by the strong is real and often underlying that tendency is greed and inordinate quest for more material acquisition.

"The Beauty of Madness" exposes this state of affairs in another narrative that presents the major character as desiring a return to his hitherto state of insanity rather than be cured. His unusual wish results from witnessing the atrocities that are perpetrated by armed robbers, bandits and kidnappers. In his mad state, Oki is oblivious of the decadence that has permeated every fabric of his society. When on the way from his rehabilitation centre, after being almost cured of his mental illness, Oki and his co-traveller and driver, Maliki, are stopped by "stop and search" policemen who put up acts unexpected of law enforcers in a decent clime:

> "Are you on essential duty?" queried a pot-bellied officer exhibiting the gawkiest walk ever.
> "Nor Sir, na chatter I dey." Maliki, the driver answered.
> "You are hereby arrested for flouting the state edict on environmental sanitation. This vehicle is impounded forthwith until you pay a fine of one thousand naira with receipt or three hundred naira without receipt. The choice is yours."
> Maliki's dilemma was painful. Nobody had told him about environmental sanitation…. (47-48).

The glaring and barefaced corruption exhibited by the policemen is symptomatic of the oppression of the hapless and the – down trodden by state officials. Although the policemen attempt to play smart by declaring that payment of the one thousand naira fine will be receipted, actual experiences in the Nigerian situation negate such posturing.

Under such a corrupt system, the poor is further impoverished and traumatised as the book narrates further that "with no money left on them, the unspeaking pair embarked on a two hour walk before getting to Oki's family house". Significantly, the complacency of the down-trodden, even in situations where they could either speak out or refuse to be cowed, accentuate their oppression. This assertion is buttressed by Abrams and Harpham's postulation that "in any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimise and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant and social class" (203-204). In class struggle, one either stands or be marched down perpetually. In relegating the principle of fair play and reason, money leads people to lower their standards and very often experience debasement or dehumanization. The next segment of this paper focuses on that tendency.

Love of Money and Flight of Morality

The quest for money, in many instances, leads people to do unthinkable things. People kill, maim, lower principles and betray friends where money means everything.

In one of the narratives in Adekunle Mamudu's short stories collection under focus, aptly titled "The Magic of Money" Chima, described as an "African Chimpanzee" whose "nostrils were short" and his "mouth formless" (3) is so ugly that no one in the village, except his mother, desired his friendship. Rather than be dissuaded, Chima is convinced that having understood the mentality of people in his society, what he needed to attract them to himself is money. He sets about acquiring money. Having succeeded, Chima targets the most beautiful girl in the community and eldest daughter of the village Head as potential wife.

The Village Head, Eze Obiajulu, and indeed the entire community are so scandalized by Chima's boldness and effrontery that they bring him to the town centre to flog him. Chima is not deterred. He leaves the village for the big city in search of the proverbial golden fleece. After a while, he returns a wealthy man with a car and even buys buses for local transportation. With a change in Chima's fortune, the story records that:

> The women-folk didn't mind his ugliness anymore. After all, a man was a man they would say. Chima's long starving for women did not push him into just any woman who came to him. No, it did not…. Nne Chima was overwhelmed. Almost every woman wanted him nowadays…. "Life is essentially ridiculous", she would say. (14-15)

Nne Chima's (Chima's mother) statement, "life is essentially ridiculous" adumbrates the incredulity of the entire situation and eventual capitulation of the village Head and his daughter because of money. The conclusion of the narrative, whereby Chima entices the Village Head, Eze Obiajulu, with the gift of a bus is followed by the presence of Eze Obiajulu's daughter in Chima's home:

> The Eze was overwhelmed with joy…. Later that night, Chima rolled over on his bed and stumbled on something warm and succulent. He put on the light to be sure. It was Ihuoma Obiajulu lying by his side. (17)

The question that readily arises is what changed? The obvious response would be the lowering of principles and moral values because of love of money which precedes corruption. The Eze is overwhelmed with joy because Chima, the hitherto cast away, has

returned with gifts beyond the Eze's imagination.

Certainly, at the base of corruption is the desire by people to dominate and cheat others. In the story above, corruption of the mind, which is moral decadence occurs as a result of the pre-occupation of society with materialism. George E. McCarthy views the lack of moral fibre in human beings as the loss of "ethics and beneficence which nurtures and enhances the function or end of humanity (p.10). In other words, humanity suffers when men or women can no longer be resolute in their decisions. Society is the worse for it when materialism overtakes reason.

The absence of moral principles is also enacted in "To Shoot A Ghost Wife". Reuben, a sick man, suffers perpetual deceit by one healer or the other – traditional and orthodox. Rather than give him correct diagnosis or admit incompetence, the various doctors recommend medicines and methods without being sure of their efficacy. They do so because there is profit to be made. It is the method by Bokolo, recommending the positioning of Reuben at a location in the forest to "shoot" his ghost wife "afflicting him", that raises the story to extreme ridiculousness. At the end of the narrative, calamity occurs when Reuben inadvertently shots Adu, an innocent maiden going to the farm:

> "Fire, fire, just fire", the crowd chorused….
> He pulled the trigger and the woman fell down to a crouching posture…. The music stopped and someone took a close look and announced that she was Adu, the town crier's wife. Everyone fled, scampering in different directions. (32)

Bokolo, the medicine man represents the class of religious/spiritual "healers" who exploits the people's ignorance for gain because both the exploiter and exploited have lost the moral compass that requires integrity, understanding and empathy. It is on account of the erosion of morality that Fred Moseley

avers that "capitalism is inherently and unavoidably unjust and exploitative" (n.d., 2)

The lack of moral values and expected decent behaviour lead Shade's father to give her out to Tunde, the "higher bidder" in marriage, in "Two Suitors, One Bride." Shade had been engaged, prior, to Jacob, a teacher and "Pastor's son". Tunde indulges the maiden's family with material gifts. On a day appointed for the marriage ceremony, the audience is shocked to learn that there are two suitors. On her part, Shade contemplates why she should get married to Jacob, "a mere school teacher who everybody knew had not been paid his meager salaries for the past three months" (74). The rhetorical question is: was she just realising that after over two years of being engaged to him? Money is what sways her and her parents to choose Tunde over Jacob. Shade retorts further that: "If given a chance to choose, she would go for Tunde, the wealthy one who rides in a convoy" (74). The family throws caution to the wind and the entire village is caught up in the same insanity that the love of money bestows on people.

Conclusion

Improbable as the stories are, *The Beauty of Madness and Other Stories*, is undeniably an expose of moral decadence and the flight of reason as well as self-discipline in human relationships. This phenomenon of deliberate inconsiderate behaviours is increasingly noticed in societies like Nigeria where money is venerated. The collection of short stories represents Adekunle Mamudu's concerns about social ills, drawing attention to how decrepit and ridiculous the society has become.

The social commentary specifically targets the issues of greed, love of money, absence of moral values and lack of empathy to tell stories which invariably end in tragic circumstances and undermine trust, which is essential for the sanity of society. Although the author engages artistic tools such as sarcasm and humour, the incidents are not to be taken lightly as they have serious consequences on human cohesion and power dynamics.

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