Literature as a Mirror of Society: A Literary Analysis of Mohammed Idris’ “A Mystical Ring”

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Abstract
Nothing in this whole wide world documents, magnifies and exposes the societal shortcomings and ills in the past and present in a satirical and sometimes comical form like literature. It is chiefly through literature that the society enjoys intercourse with creative minds. Literature indeed mirrors the society and presents the reflection for the same society to either commend or condemn. The world of literature is the most remarkable creation of man; nothing else that man creates ever lasts. But in the world of literature volumes live on still as young and fresh as the day they were written, still telling the readers of the hearts of men centuries dead. This paper explores Mohammed Idris’ creative portrayal of a continent bedeviled with vices such as bad governance and consistent battles for succession in his novel A Mystical Ring. The paper observes that the strength and beauty of the literary piece are hinged on effective use of suspense which he heightens and sustains effectively till the end of the novel. The paper also examines the embedded moral lessons in the novel one of which is; one can only be responsible when one has responsibilities and concludes by appreciating the uniquely interesting happy ending of the novel because of the captivating resolutions.

Introduction
The spectrum of modern African literary writing has attained an enviable height and a wider dimension than eve in terms of thematic coverage. It is not a part of African life that is said to be just developing, dwindling or falling. In fact, its pedigrees and diverseness are acclaimed internationally and to a large extent celebrated in the world of literature. This catapults the concept of literature in Africa far beyond a ten letter word. Literature in spite of being simply an abstraction of reality, a recollection of the artist’s imagination and fantasies, still serves as a vehicle of aesthetic and didactic values of any given society within the context of specific and shared experiences as well as a mirror of the society and what this society represents.
Literature in Africa precisely is an artistic production through which writers do not only express the aspirations, frustrations and other experiences of their people but exhibit also the good, the bad and the ugly of their culture. In Soyinka’s (1988) view “… art should expose, reflect, and indeed magnify the decadence, rotted underbelly of a society that has lost its direction”. Osofisan (2001) also corroborated Soyinka’s (1988) views, stating that literature reflects the agonies and hope of the time, shows a way out of all the problems and condemns negative forces. These are explanations on how literature not only reflects but also mirrors the happenings in a society with the purpose of sensitizing and conscientising the people towards changing their mind-set for good.

Literature though fictitious, is a creative work of imagination that affects the human feeling. Basically speaking, what literature does is to mirror the society and creatively re-present the image through the use of suspense, sometimes comic relief, imageries and other effective literary devices with particular emphasis on creativity, emotionality and form. Literature becomes a vital tool in exposing various societal shortcomings. It instructs the mind of the reader; it serves as a window to the world and an effective instrument for national consciousness, integration and development.

A Mystical Ring is a novel written by Idris Mohammed, a budding and fascinating Nigerian writer who is making conscientious efforts in his writing to address an African ill that is universal. Glaringly, the society most of the time provides the raw material that the field of literature feeds on, but it is another ball game entirely for the writer to creatively harness such to make for a good reading, emotional tantalization and to provide embedded moral lessons that are aesthetically packaged in an attractive and acceptable literary format in terms of conventional global
The novel is a timely creative piece deeply rooted in Africa, a continent bedeviled with the issues of bad governance and battles for succession with a number of selfish and self centered leaders. This is supported by the fact that when any of them taste power, they get intoxicated, clinging to it and not wanting to relinquish it even in the face of outright bad governance and the people’s quest for a change for the better. The million Naira question is, how long will this continue in Africa? This justifies the wind of radical and unrepentant revolution that is blowing across Africa currently especially in the Middle East.

The Story Line
The novel is a story that centers on Waibuwa kingdom where a succession dispute nearly led to its collapse. A kingdom “bestowed with very vast plains surrounded by sparkingly blue sea”. It is a place where farming, possibly fishing and to a lesser level mining are the basic occupations of the majority of the populace outside the regular civil service jobs of African creek (pg 1). Waibuwa is said to be a place where royalty in blood is not a requirement for becoming a king but the possession of a mystical ring for three consecutive days. This tradition, it is said in Waibuwa, had been in practice for centuries and never was it said to be negated.

King Abdussalam the father of Amra, the elegant and powerful queen mindful of the fact that some day, someone will succeed him, has a cause to be worried. The issue is that of enthroning a credible successor to the throne of Waibuwa for the sake of continuity and advancement. This is so because his brother Vizier who “stood a better chance of succeeding” him is a wicked man, self centered and very inconsiderate. This is obvious in his attitude towards the queen (planning and executing the death of the queen) who is his sister and a widow. The king is left with the only option of enthroning his only daughter, who it is believed, has the interest
of her father’s kingdom at heart and will love to work for its progress. As regards this very issue, the king opines “… I believe even in death, we all will be happy knowing that she is on the throne” (pg12) of the enviable kingdom because of her character and the love for humanity. This referring to his daughter whose traits endears her to the hearts of the polity in the kingdom.

Vizier not happy about this decision of the king, challenges it though belatedly. The princess is made the queen before the death of her father as that is his last wish. While the queen made many enemies because of her bluntness, the only strong enemy and serious threat to her throne is a man of blood relation to her father, Vizier. He is determined and bent on ascending the throne even if it means killing the queen. Even though he succeeded in killing the Queen, he is never made the king. His evil drive thus ends in futility.

The Vizier punched her in the mouth and when she went own, he lifted her up and again slapped her. ’…I ask you

Glaringly, he was a wicked and desperate uncle to the Queen; unfortunately, this did not solve his problem. The refusal to enthrone him by the king ought to have called for a change in his behavior towards the people, perhaps which would have secured some solidarity votes for him and endear him to the heart of the people. Vizier thinks he could ascend the throne by force using his might as a man. But the question is; where are the queen’s guards while this tussle lasts?

Vizier’s threat and maltreatment receives the reply; “…go ahead, you coward. I know that sooner or later nemesis will catch up with you. And as for the ring, I will rather die than give you the chance to ruin this kingdom.” The queen is resolute. Her determination to
The novel presents a vivid portrayal of the significance of courage in the face of death. Rescueing the kingdom from the villainous threat is absolutely commendable. The kingdom will forever remain grateful for her courage in the novel. Vizier, her uncle, is not a man to dare with such utterances, even at the face of death, because he is blinded by anger. At this point, Vizier interprets her courage for stubbornness as he pulls “a short pointed knife and stabbed the Queen right below her navel”. This is an act of wickedness and must be condemned outright. History records that desperation most times in life, takes a man nowhere; rather it attracts guilt, a waste of efforts, eventual frustration and later, a fatalistic fall.

Before the death of Queen Amra in the novel, she has a grown up daughter for her late husband. At the point of her mother’s death, she escapes. Afra, the Queen’s daughter, has a cousin, the son of the Vizier, who had asked for her hand in marriage in a culture where marriage of cousins is not an aberration. Her refusal to marry him and her subsequent love for a pauper in the same village endangers her mother’s throne. At this critical point in the kingdom, Salma, a house help, alerts the guards who take swift and prompt action.

unknown to Vizier and his men who were inside, busy searching the palace, looking for the Mystical Ring, the place was surrounded by the guards…. Although Vizier tried to escape through the rear door, he was caught …stabbed three times…spent thirty painful minutes convulsing Helplessly…finally dying miserably, imagining himself on the throne of the kingdom.

Afra escapes from the hands of these men that killed the Queen her mother with the ring. The escape is narrow as she is wounded badly though she held to the ring and guarded it jealously with her life. Afra made it with Salma to Nabil’s house and hands the ring to him as instructed by her mother. The climax of it all, Nabil produced the mystical ring on demand by the king makers and he
was made the king of Waibuwa. Nabil, The new king, mindful of Afra’s love, commitment and sacrifice, solemnizes their marriage. A week later, he got married to princess Afra; but before then, he had given his first order- all those involved in the massacre should be beheaded ;…Salma was made the new Diya

It is a time of reward and everyone is rewarded according to the works of their hands and deeds. While Salma is promoted, all the betrayers are killed. The novel despite the tragic incidences ends on a happy note with Afra giving birth to a baby girl in less than a year. The baby is named after the Queen, the baby’s grandmother.

The Issue of Setting

A setting is the fictional world of a novel. It provides the socio-cultural and political milieu out of which the plot of the novel emerges. Setting also is referred to as the background and serves as the literary scaffold upon which characters are drawn or developed to create a story and the fictional world of the novel itself. On a general note, the novel is situated in the northern part of Nigeria, in West Africa. This is evident by the presence and copious use of Hausa language in the novel. “uwar gida yau ta zama babu” “masoyi ka tashi lifiya” and “kunun zaki” which literarily mean “the mother of the house is dead”, “my love, hope you woke up fine” and “a local sweet drink” are few examples of Hausa expressions in the novel that suggest its setting.

The use of Hausa names like Yunusa, Diya, Nabil, Laura and Salma are all suggestive of the Hausa setting in the novel even though some of the names have their roots from Arabic language which is the language of Islam. There is this cultural element in the novel, the betrothal and subsequent marriage of cousins which is only prominent and practiced in the core northern Nigeria, especially by Hausa people, a permissive concept from the Islamic religion. The setting in this novel cannot lay claim to any specific and definite geographical location in
Nigeria as it is a fictitious creation of the writer. Argungu is insinuated because of the Argungu fishing festival where an individual that catches the biggest fish during the festival is rewarded handsomely with money. Also, the singing and dancing are the necessary rituals of the festival as depicted in the novel.

It must be noted that the artistic organization of the order of events in the novel like the missing ring, the swallowing of the ring, the catching of the fish that swallows the ring, the fight and the subsequent marriage of Nabil and Amar is for special effects to create and intensify suspense and maximize the reader’s enjoyment of the text. Life does not exist in a vacuum, every literary setting provides that space and time for each fictional experience in a novel. For *The Mystical Ring*, it is situated in Ancient Africa when letters were written on cloths and where donkeys and horses are the means of transportation. (Pg 16)

**Thematic Considerations**

Every writer writes with a purpose in mind. This is true of the novelist as well. A novelist writes with the intention of sharing his views creatively on a particular subject matter with the readers. It is therefore the view that the novelist wants to propagate that decides what he writes his story about, the type of characters he uses, the setting he places the story, his point of view and possibly the linguistic devices he may choose to employ in telling his story. The central thematic preoccupation of a novel decides the nature of all the other aspects of the novel. This can never be stated openly on the pages of the novel but implicitly expressed and this can only be understood through logical deduction and inference.

Mohammed’s *A Mystical Ring* revolves round several themes that could be contending for attention from the readers. But central of all the themes is that of the battle for succession. This is so because right from the introduction, it is a source of concern for the king who will succeed him in the land.

...take this. It is the symbol of honour, the
symbol of pride and power and as you know, it is a source of prominence …King Abdussalam felt a mixed feeling of fulfillment and pity. He leaned back again, heaved a sigh of relief. ’ I thank God’…. my brother your uncle,… if he were a different person, no one would have stood a better chance of succeeding me than him. But is he what he should be? The man is wicked, self centered and very inconsiderate.

The desire of every good king is that of continuity especially if he has the interest of his people at heart. This influences the choice of who should take over from them especially when it is within their power to choose. The king’s younger brother is to be the rightful candidate to the throne of Waibuwa after the demise of the king but his being “wicked, self centered and very inconsiderate” as illustrated in the novel, necessitated a change. No wonder Amar the elegant daughter of the king was entrusted with the mystical ring that qualifies her for the throne instead of the king’s brother. Vizier the king’s brother has an inordinate passion for the throne for selfish interest, fate and destiny notwithstanding. “I asked you where my ring is? You will give it to me or I take your life” pg 24.

The quest for leadership, specifically for the throne of Waibuwa led to the death of the queen. This is a common sight and feature in the traditional African setting. Unfortunately, it has become the norm among Africans to go the whole hug to kill if any one stands in their way to any throne or leadership as is being experienced in the countries of the Middle East today. Prayers and patience are no longer regarded as good options universally. One must push his way through even in the most barbaric form. Zambia and Zimbabwe are good examples. No wonder barbarism is associated with African politics and governance. This accounts for the numerous outdated coups that have been experienced in Africa and the refusal to relinquish power or accept defeat by politicians even when defeated at polls. The Queen on the other
side, even in the glaring face of danger was determined but obstinate.

“Go ahead, you coward. I know that sooner or later nemesis will catch up with you. And as for the ring, I will rather die than give you the chance to ruin this kingdom. ‘She spit blood on his face. Vizier, blinded by anger, pulled out a short sharp-pointed knife and stabbed the Queen right below the navel. He pulled out the knife and stabbed her again’

This inhuman and barbaric quest for power as depicted in the above extract must be condemned. What literature does is to mirror such and re-present it to the society for a rethinking geared towards positive action and development. The novelist is portraying that in Africa, man can do anything to acquire power. Vizier killed his niece without the assurance of finding the mystical ring. The same treatment is meted to him by the Queen’s guards. He also dies in pains “…imagining himself on the throne of the kingdom” The succession tussle is associated with restlessness, hatred and anarchy. Normalcy is only restored in the atmosphere of tolerance with the resolve that “what will be, will be”.

Apart from the central theme, other minor themes are inherent. The latter implicitly emerge from the treatment of various episodes that make up the major story. For instance, several other meanings (minor themes) can be gleaned from the theme of genuine love, friendship, loyalty, to that of betrayal. The theme of genuine love and faithfulness in friendship is symbolically depicted by Princess Afra’s love towards her age long friend Nabil. That of Mallam Yunusa towards the king is another. Mallam Yunusa’s continuous assistance to the king’s daughter after the death of the king is significant in the day to day administration of the kingdom. This is commendable. Princess Afra against all odds is in love with Nabil, the son of a pauper and
a peasant farmer in the novel. This relationship which is at the expense of her cousin who is to marry Afra endangers her mother’s throne. At a point the princess is seen on her knees with tears to appeal to Nabil’s love and heart forever. This attitude of the Queen is very un-African even as Nabil pretends not to love, or notice her advances and entreaties.

Though void of a royal blood, Nabil is described as a “handsome young man that taught her what she never knew. How could she have let him off just like that?” In another instance, the princess appeals to her mother for the sake of the love she has for Nabil, the love of her life. “My Queen, this person lying here is my life. To me, he represents kindness, affection and understanding. So, he is the one I want …” Her wild expression of love for Nabil is further illustrated by her utterance “I…really wanted a show of love that could quench the thirst in…heart” and only Nabil’s love qualifies. Nabil an Islamic scholar is mesmerized into acceptance not really out of pity. This shows that Nabil’s initial resistance is in the world of pretence. His promise to Afra “I will love you now and forever and will lay down my life for you my treasure….,” justifies this assertion. While tears flow down her cheeks, she squeezes his hands tightly without a responding hug from Nabil, a typical symbol of an African man and what he represents especially in reciprocating a lady’s show of love.

Other minor themes explored include the theme of loyalty cum betrayal and the theme of fate in the affairs of men. Characters like Diya, Soji and Mansu are very unfaithful to the queen hence their act of betrayal. These same characters provide the tragic element in the novel. Their end is catastrophic. Though Yunusa dies close to the end of the novel, when his advice and counsel are needed most, he was buried and mourned for, while life continues in the kingdom.

Use of Characters
The setting of every novel is the world of such a novel; the characters are the people of that world. The characterization is effective and apt in the novel as Mohammed created characters that are good, natural and some that are evil minded. Afram, Amra, Nabil, Vizier and Yunusa are the major characters while Salma, Diya, Ila, Laura, Soji and Tanim, are minor characters. These characters are not only understood or tolerated as robots; they also ooze with life and radiate warmth like normal human beings. The readers discover them by what they do and go on to either love or hate some of them. Also, these characters facilitate the factional experiences and the aesthetics of the novel. The characters are made to be human enough and live up to the human, emotions, psyche and experiences that they represent. Characters are well defined through contrast which the writer employed. This also helps in delineating the central issues of the plot, as the differences in character informs good or evil in the individual and society as a whole.

**Use of Language**

Literature uses basically language as its medium of expression as language provides the code of writing and speech. Language has literature as its experimental laboratory. This results in the obvious manipulation of language by literature as an instrument for aesthetic material for didactic and aesthetic purposes in the bid to enhance creativity. In literature, language is used to celebrate and express the way of life of a people in terms of history, myth and legend. This is also applicable to contemporary day to day experiences that inform the existence of such a people.

The genre of prose uses language that is close to that of everyday speech. This is with the intent of making the novel easily assessable to readers. Mohammed’s use of language in *A Mystical Ring* is quite scintillating and highly clinical. His choice of words is appropriate for every context in the novel. Mohammed further employed the use of code switching and code mixing; a
very creative form of language use especially in an informal context. “Her voice came drifting out in soft cadence as she greeted the hopping bird ’masoyi na katashi lafiya?’ pausing a bit to hug the big bird….’’ In another instance, he used “…took an additional gulp from the bowl of kununzaki which his mother had prepared for him….”

Also, Mohammed’s sense of description through language is commendable. He presents a vivid picture of scenes and individuals. The description of Vizier’s death is a good example

“Vizier tried to escape through the rear door, he was caught by the Queen’s personal guard and stabbed three times in the stomach and left there where he spent thirty painful minutes convulsing helplessly and later shivering before finally dying miserably, imagining himself on the throne. This presents a detailed picture from when Vizier is caught to how he dies. The writer captured the imagination of Vizier at the point of death. This is creativity and a show of good imagination which is the place of literature. Mohammed’s depiction of the pot shows mastery of the arrangement of English language adjectives “…a small shiny silver pot” showing the properties of the pot and a very good example of alliteration as a literary device. Furthermore, the amorous but captivating description of the princess’s skin also heightens his kind of description and expressive power “Nabil looking down at the princess’s white skin, a well carved pink lips on a beautiful face, raven black hair and dark eyes, thought this lady is truly royal….”

In addition, Mohammed manifests his prolific knowledge of English language in his work. The appriopriety of his choice of diction improves the aesthetic quality of his literary work. His language use remains intelligible to users of English all over the
world and simple enough to carry across the message. This simplicity is further enhanced by his employment of short chapters which develop each idea or movement in his narrative within a chapter.

It is important to observe that the language of A Mystical Ring is highly reportage; though this gives the work an easy flow of a newspaper report. Also, the sight of the events as they unfold does not lose originality and life associated with literature. This is as a result of combined effort of narrative voice and the creative cum imaginative flair of the artist. Other instances of colourful use of language include expressions like; “…you refused to let me in on it”, “…is it naivety or was he being deliberately evasive”, “my imagination remained silhouetted.”

**Literature and Moral Lessons**

Society from time immemorial values literature not only because it provides entertainment, but also because it is a useful instrument of education embedded with moral lessons to be learnt through the eyes of the characters. This could either be by their mistakes, what they fail to do or what they do wrongly or through the courage and determination of characters use in the novel. Some of the moral lessons gleaned from the novel include;

The need to take up challenges as individuals are confronted with them every day and the place of determination is the first lesson “one can only be responsible when one has responsibilities.” (Pg12) There is the need not to shy away from responsibilities as we cannot tell until we start. Amar after the death of her father and his friend Yunusa, was determined. This singular determination facilitates the quality and credible leadership during her reign as queen of the kingdom.

The modern youths must cultivate the culture of respect for elders especially their parents and should tolerate their parents’ inadequacies as everybody like the moon has a dark side which is hidden. “…never you use that word again… remember he is my father’s brother” pg 13. Nabil the young man was an embodiment
of respect and a good example for the youths of today “I know father insist that I go because he feels I should be married…, well he will have it his way. I will go.” Respect for constituted authorities is another. Nabil refuses to go home until he sorts for the teacher’s consent and permission “… should let him know that father sent for me, pg 17” In the novel, betrayal and wickedness are rewarded with a prize-death.

The society must come to the sharp realization that there is the need at all times to invoke the power that is beyond every other power especially in national and individual trying times for help and succor.

“My queen, I have given directives to the Imam to organize our most competent scholars in order to perform special prayers for your protection, recovery of the symbol of our throne and God’s continual support and guidance….”

The power that is beyond man must be acknowledged in perilous times and always as this power controls and regulates the affairs of man. With this power on our side, we are assured of victory and a smile in seemingly hard times. This indeed is a good lesson for Nigeria now and always. Finally, is the need to patiently wait. If love is genuine and divine, even the power of royalty cannot stop it. Whatever fate has destined to happen, with prayers and hard work, no force of wickedness can stop.

Conclusion

The strength, beauty and uniqueness of Mohammed’s A Mystical Ring are hinged on his effective use of suspense. From the point when the fish swallows the mystical ring to the scout and fight for the ring is packed full of suspense. Mohammed is further able to heighten and sustain this suspense till the end of the novel when Nabil marries Afra, presents the ring and is made the king. This gives the novel a happy ending that is interesting and
captivating full of resolutions.

In addition, the overt simplicity of the novel lies in the straight forwardness of its narration and orderly arranged plot. But underlying this is the fact that certain prose works are designed with plots and narrative techniques that make their appreciation tedious, clumsy and very confusing. This is not so with *A Mystical Ring*. It is straight forward and the plot is unambiguous. This indeed makes it intellectually stimulating, culturally entertaining and interesting with easy flow of thought and idea. Hence, *A Mystical Ring* is good writing and good literature.

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