

FOOD INSECURITY IN BEANS WITHOUT KOR KOR

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Abstract. Beans without Korkor? written by Ekow Manuar Smith, was the winner of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Africa short story award in 2021. The story focuses on the Sister Mercy and her five most loyal customers who regularly patronise Mercy's eatery. The shop serves a famous Ghanaian dish of beans with plantain, known locally as kor kor. When Sister Mercy realises that she has only one piece of plantain to serve to her customers, the adults all scramble to get the piece of plantain, only to face a moment of humility when the youngest customer, Baby Cynthia, decides that they should all share the plantain in the spirit of community togetherness. The third-person narration offers a glimpse of ordinary people in Ghana: the hardworking female business owner, the top government person, the local blue-collar worker, the Latin migrant worker, the Chinese immigrant and the voice of reason, Baby Cynthia, a young girl obsessed with social media. The story exposes readers to themes such as community spirit and cultural continuity through food and traditions, while at the same time emphasises the more serious theme of food insecurity. This paper aims to analyse the satirical elements in the text, such as exaggeration and irony. It also explores the story's realistic portrayal of food insecurity and its impact on the ordinary Ghanaians. Lastly, the paper examines how these elements are skilfully woven into the story to create a powerful social commentary which goes beyond mere satire.

Keywords: *postcolonial literature, short story, ecocriticism, cultural continuity, traditions*

Introduction

Beans without Kor, written by Ekow Manuar Smith, was the winner of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Africa short story award in 2021. The story revolves around Sister Mercy, the owner of an eatery in Dzorwulu, Ghana, and her five most loyal customers, who come daily to get a bowl of the Ghanaian dish, beans cooked with plantain, or known locally as korkor. Trouble strikes one fateful day when Sister Mercy realises that she has only one piece of plantain to serve to her customers. The adults all scramble to get the piece of plantain, only to face a moment of humility when the youngest customer, Baby Cynthia, decides that they should all share the plantain in the spirit of community togetherness. The author, whose full name is Abdallah Ekow Manuar Smith, completed his Masters' in Sustainability Science and Environmental Studies at Lund University in 2017. Since then, he has been actively involved in several sustainability projects in Ghana. A Linked-in post published by The Nurubian Institute informs us that Smith is also a writer who has published in literary magazines such as Writers Project of Ghana and Kalahari Review. In an interview with Ghanaian film maker helel Smith, he calls himself a 'science fiction author writing about African futurism' and his latest book is titled *The Men from StayWell*. On his own Linked-in page, Smith writes that he is currently a co-director of the Ghana Food Movement, an organisation which is working on solutions to highlight the potential of Ghanaian food.

Through the eyes of the third-person narrator, the story enables us to get a glimpse of ordinary people in Ghana: the hardworking female business owner, the top government person, the local blue-collar worker, the Latin migrant worker, the Chinese immigrant

and the voice of reason, Baby Cynthia, a young girl seemingly fixated on social media. The story exposes readers to themes such as community spirit and cultural continuity through food and traditions while at the same time emphasises the more serious theme of food insecurity. Though the author has utilised some satirical techniques such as exaggeration and irony, the text is more than just a satire, as it offers a slice of everyday life in Ghana, with its realistic portrayal of food insecurity and the average Ghanaians. This paper will first examine the satirical elements in the text, such as exaggeration and irony. Next, it will explore the story's realistic portrayal of food insecurity and its impact on the ordinary Ghanaians. Finally, the paper will explore how these elements are expertly integrated into the narrative to create a powerful social commentary which transcends simple satire.

Materials and Methods

A descriptive qualitative methodology was utilised by employing close reading of the text. As stated by Jockers (2013), the primary methodology in literary studies would involve close reading, which is a 'careful [] sustained, concentrated reading of text.' According to Ohrvik (2024), the reader would be studying or exploring the text for 'linguistic elements, semantic aspects, syntax, rhetoric, structural elements, thematic, and generic references...' The data for this study was gathered from the selected text, Ekow Manuwar Smith's short story Beans without Kor Kor. The researchers employed a coding process based on the principles of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" and is "essentially independent of theory and epistemology". The first step involved the deductive approach or establishing the categories based on existing literary theories of satire and realism. The text was scrutinized to identify rhetorical markers of Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean satire. The researchers also combed through the text for examples of 'verisimilitude' (the appearance of being true or real) as put forward by Schipper (1985). This included detailed sensory descriptions and believable social interactions described in the text.

The second step was utilizing the coding schema to identify specific passages. Three categories were identified: satire, realism and social commentary. In the satire category, the researchers recognised markers such as hyperbole, irony and sarcasm. Relevant examples from the passage were found and tied to this category. The researchers created suitable codes for this category such as [SAT-JUV] which stands for 'juvenalian satire targeting institutional greed' and so on. The third step was the data extraction and triangulation. After the codes had been established, a close reading of the text was conducted. Each dialogue or narration which fulfilled the criteria would be extracted into the coding matrix. The researchers also looked for converging evidence. As stated by Thompson, this refers to the concept that 'independent scientific findings acquired with different methodological techniques can come together, or converge, to create strong and well-supported conclusions.' For instance, if a passage was coded as 'Satire', the researchers also checked to see whether it contained elements of 'Social Commentary'. This overlap provided the basis for the discussion in the results section. The fourth step was the identification of manifest and latent content. The researchers examined the data for manifest content and latent content. Kleinheksel et al. (2020) distinguish between manifest content and latent content. The former refers to '...data that are easily observable both to researchers and the coders who assist in their analyses...'. The latter refers to '...data that are not easily observable and require interpretation...'. The researchers used the manifest and latent content analysis to identify the themes in the text.

On the other hand, the latter is defined as ‘...what is hidden deep within the text.’ In the context of this paper, manifest content refers to the literal words used in the text, such as the mad ‘scramble’ for plantain. Latent content refers to the underlying meaning behind the literal words, such as the ‘scramble’ as a metaphor for the country’s struggle for resources.

Results and Discussion

This section will discuss the findings acquired from the close reading of the short story. The findings will be categorized according to the satirical elements found in the text, the social commentary of certain issues mentioned and the elements of realism inherent in the text. The analysis is supported by definitions and concepts drawn from established literary theories concerning satire, social commentary, and realism.

Satirical elements in Beans without Kor Kor

Satire can be quite difficult to be defined precisely. Kernan (1973) comments that satire has been attributed as ‘the general term for any kind of writing which attacks, directly or indirectly, something which is hated or feared’. As for Declercq (2018), he defines satire as a genre which has influenced how literary and artistic works are interpreted and assessed based on the critique and entertainment they aim to provide. Briefly speaking, there are 3 types of satire which are associated to 3 Roman authors: Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippian satires. Holman (1978) defines Horatian satire as a kind of satire which is gentle, urbane and smiling. Its purpose is to correct by evoking gentle and broadly sympathetic laughter. An example of Horatian satire in the text can be seen in the author’s depiction of Baby Cynthia’s character. While she is described as a teen who is constantly ‘glued to her palm-screen’, the author uses her fixation as a contrast between the virtual world of friendship and the real-world spirit of community togetherness. On the other hand, Juvenalian satire is a type of satire which is biting, bitter and angry. It shows contempt and moral indignation towards the corruption and evil of men and institutions. As stated by Sander (1971): “If Horace's satire borders on comedy, Juvenal's comes close to tragedy. If Horace's satire evokes laughter, Juvenal's provokes indignation ...” A relevant example can be seen in Joshua Prempeh’s condescending attitude. When the customers discover that there is only one piece of plantain left, Joshua uses a threatening tone to remind Mercy of what he has done for her:

“...I don’t even need to tell you how much your red-red means to me. I think what I have done for you over the years shows. I am not trying to make you feel bad, or use my job as an excuse, but, come on! Would you be where you are without me?”

Joshua starts off by complimenting Mercy’s cooking, but gradually he seems to remind her of his authority and how he helped her in her business. He slowly manipulates the situation by using the demanding phrase ‘come on’, and further reinforces his importance by reminding her that her success is entirely dependent on him. He is misusing his power and influence in order to get the last dish of kor kor. Joshua’s character is depicted in such a way in order to provoke anger in the reader, emphasizing the divide between the rich and the poor. As stated by Chrystall and Sayers (2016), Menippian satires seek to enable readers to see themselves and their world(s)

more clearly by playfully attacking their sensibility and/or perceptions. One particular evidence of Menippian satire in the text can be seen in the government's refusal to give up the 'golden goose' (the plantain exports) despite the low yields caused by climate change. In this example, Menippian satire is utilized to criticize an established institution (the government) and its selfish economic policies. Another example of Menippean satire can be seen in the latter part of the text, where the narrator describes three male characters fighting to get the last piece of plantain with their 'mix of push, shoves, and grunts...', while Joshua, the man with credentials, calls them as 'fighting like baboons'. The 'absurd' situation shown in the fight is typical of the Menippean style, which attempts to expose the characters' social masks. By depicting the three grown men as animals fighting over a piece of fruit, the author appears to mock the fragility of human sensibility. Smith employed particular satirical elements in the texts such as exaggeration and irony. As stated by Burgers et al. (2016), exaggeration or also known as hyperbole is a figure of speech which exaggerates and emphasizes arguments more than facts. Additionally, Claridge (2011) points out that the usage of hyperbole can make things appear more important, more frightening or more desirable, which in turn arouses specific attitudes and feeling.

An example of hyperbole in the text is evident when the narrator describes how the plantain drought may eventually put an end to Ghanaians' favourite meal: 'In fact, there had been increasing talks about the possibility of plantain becoming entirely extinct!'. This is clearly a hyperbole. While there might be a shortage of plantains, the possibility of the fruit disappearing from the face of the earth is an exaggeration and adds to the humour. Another instance of hyperbole can be seen when the narrator describes Sister Mercy's agony as she realises that there is only one piece of plantain to for all the customers on that day: 'It seemed that the prospect of serving only one dish was more treacherous than saying there was none'. Here, hyperbole is used to describe Mercy's problem of having not enough plantain for the customers. The usage of the adjective 'treacherous' further intensifies Mercy's feeling of guilt of having to choose on whether she can serve only one piece of plantain, or to tell them the truth that there was none at all. As for irony, Abrams (1993) described that there are 3 types of irony: dramatic irony, situational irony and verbal irony. The first one involves a situation in which the audience/reader and the author are exposed to some knowledge of present or future circumstances; however, this knowledge is unknown to the characters. The second one occurs when there is a discrepancy between the expected and actual results. As for the third one, this occurs when the meaning of a statement implied by a speaker differs sharply from the meaning which is supposedly being expressed. An example of dramatic irony is evident in the first page of the text as the narrator describes Sister Mercy waiting for her early morning customers: 'Just thinking of her patrons a chill ran down her spine. Today was going to be a heated day! Not in terms of temperature (well that too), but having to tell everyone that her famous red-red was finished'. Here, the reader knows that Mercy dreads telling her customers that she does not have enough plantains for everyone. We can feel her tension as she is feeling feverish about the situation. The reader and Mercy know about the plantain shortage; however, the regular customers do not, and this creates dramatic irony. An example of situational irony can be seen in the dialogue spoken by Gonzalo, the Latin American customer, after Mercy asks him about his work:

“Very good! Your country is so advanced with its urban association policies. There is local government, but it is just supporting everyone do their own stuff. And when someone needs a hand-pop-they support, then step back. So I am learning a lot.”

The dialogue implies that there seems to be a mismatch between what is expected, and the actual results. Gonzalo probably expects good management from what he observes as a country with advanced urban policies. However, he later realises that the government only intervenes briefly and practises a hands-off approach when people really need help. Regarding verbal irony, this can be seen in Gonzalo’s utterance: “Very good!” Without hearing the tone of Gonzalo’s voice, we may think that he is speaking positively about his work. Only when he elaborates further, we get the feeling that he is probably not pleased with the government’s lack of support. The phrase could mean that Gonzalo is being sarcastic about what he is involved in at the moment.

Social commentary in Beans without Kor Kor

Social commentary can be defined as the act of using rhetorical means to provide insight, criticism, or reflection on social, political, or economic conditions in a society. As stated by Eagleton (1996), literature is often ‘imprinted with the social conflicts and contradictions of its age’ making it a vehicle for such critique. Smith uses the eatery as a symbol of Ghana’s economic problems. As reported by World Bank, Ghana’s unstable economic situation has worsened due to the Covid 19 pandemic, restrictive global financial conditions and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and more than 20 percent of Ghanaians currently live in poverty. The text provides a social commentary of a particular population in Ghana by exposing certain issues. One particular issue is food insecurity. Smith depicts Mercy as having a steady crowd of customers coming to the eatery every day, to the point that she wonders ‘when her mornings would be for herself rather than her patrons’. The irony is that while her business seems to be successful, she is also struggling to get a steady supply of plantains for her famous ‘red-red’ dish. This situation demonstrates an absurd system, whereby local people cannot get hold of the usual food produce as the goods are exported to richer countries for bigger profits. Smith utilizes this satirical example not just to entertain readers but also to make them think about the illogical food policies being implemented in Ghana, and perhaps in other Third World countries as well. The second issue involves government policies. The narrator describes how the government started promoting plantain as a cash crop, and later marketed it as an agricultural export. However, recent climate changes have caused plantain yield to drop. As it is more profitable to export plantain, the narrator explains that the government and its agencies were not going to give up ‘the golden goose’ so easily. The situation is indeed ironic as the locals would be forced to make do without their staple food as it would be sold at higher prices for the global market. Irony is utilised in the story to criticise a government which is fixated on economic gains at the expense of the people’s well-being. The effects of ill-advised agricultural policies are much exaggerated in the text, thus enabling readers to witness the imbalance between national development and the people’s suffering.

The third issue featured in the text is class inequality. The loyal customers are mainly people who face economic vulnerability, such as Sammy and Shin-Shin. Sammy works as a fitter and he has to depend on his daily wages for his meals. Sammy’s query on whether Mercy would raise the red-red price as she mentioned previously implies that he is struggling financially. He is probably worried that he might not be able to enjoy

the dish if Mercy increased the price. In the case of Shin-Shin, he is described as the 'neighbourhood' alcoholic who spends most of his time getting drunk. However, on that fateful day, he arrives at the eatery and declares: 'Today, I have my money saved specifically for Auntie...I mean sistah Mercy's red-red. No alcohol oh! Aye, Chale, I will eat like a fool today. Hip-hip-hip?' This utterance probably implies that Shin-shin does not have enough money. He can only choose either one: the red-red dish or the alcohol. His vow of eating 'like a fool' informs us about his plan to indulge on that day, which also suggests that this is something which he does not do often, probably due to financial issues. The two characters are contrasted with the character of Joshua Prempeh, 'the Deputy Coordinator of the Dzorwulu borough', who arrives at Mercy's shop in a black Katanka. From Joshua's mentioned position in the government, as well as the car that he drives in, we can infer that he belongs to a higher social class, compared to Sammy and Shin Shin. In order to get the best service from Mercy, Joshua pompously reminds her of how his assistance enabled her to have several vendors. The class divide between the rich and the poor can be seen in Joshua's display of entitlement, which also serves as a mockery of the self-importance of the political elite. The satire here amplifies the daily hardship faced by the lower classes, transforming a squabble about food into a social critique. Joshua's character is somewhat similar to Koomson, a minor character in Ayi Kwei Armah's *the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Firstly, both of them are high-ranking Ghanaian government officers with titles. Joshua is the 'Deputy Coordinator', while Koomson's titles are much longer: 'His Excellency Joseph Koomson, Minister Plenipotentiary, Member of the Presidential Commission, Hero of Socialist Labor.' The usage of the titles as described in both narratives probably shows the society's emphasis on titles and status. As stated by De Graft-Johnson (1990), titles in Akan society (the biggest ethnic group in Ghana) served as a foundation for the social, political, and economic organization, as well as promoting social cohesion and stability.

Secondly, we can ascertain a similar attitude in that both Joshua and Koomson misuse their power for their own good. As shown previously, Joshua tries to get the last kor kor dish for himself by reminding and threatening Mercy of what he has done for her business. In the case of Koomson, he is invited to a dinner party by the unnamed protagonist, an old school friend. The man, his wife and his mother in law have heard about a fishing boat deal involving Koomson which is supposed to bring them money. However, the latter later reveals that the deal may not be so profitable. In order to buy the boats, Koomson and Estie, his wife, need signatures of people who are not working in the government. He says it is not difficult to get the funding, as the '...Commercial bank is ours, and we can do anything...' Here he appears to think of the bank as his own private property. However, instead of making money, the villagers will receive some fish from the business, and will only make enough money after 12 years. Koomson's misuse of power is evident in his use of the illegal signatures and public funds, as well as his act of depriving the villagers of monetary profit. The depiction of Prempeh's character is a modern representation of the post-independence disillusionment which has plagued African literature since the 1960s. This recurrent theme, which is eloquently conveyed in Armah's *the Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, portrays the unpleasant transition from the joyous celebration of independence to the stark reality of dealing with corrupted officials. While Armah's Koomson represents the pioneer group of corrupt officers, Smith's Prempeh characterizes the modern equivalent of the same problem, now sanitised by symbols of 21st century progress. The theme of post-

independence disillusionment is also evident in books by prominent African writers such as Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood*.

Closer to home, this parallel theme is reflected in Malaysian literature in the post-independence era. The criticism of the nation's elite by both Armah and Smith is apparent in works written by Shahnnon Ahmad. Two of his works, *Menteri* (The Minister) and *Tunggul-Tunggul Gerigis* (Stumps) reveal political and sociopolitical issues in the Malaysian society. According to Busu (2010), Shahnnon utilised satire in his novels to raise awareness among the lower classes towards those in power. Amir (2005) stated that particular themes such as weak leadership and elitist politics were evident in selected works by Shahnnon. The analysis of Prempeh's character alongside figures such as Bahadur from *Menteri* and Su Usul from *Tunggul-Tunggul Gerigis* enables us to discern a transnational pattern of what can be described as a 'literature of disillusionment'. This viewpoint is utilized by authors to criticize how some postcolonial governments tend to prioritise their survival and political interests over the needs of its people.

Realism in Beans Without Kor Kor

According to Baldick (2008), realism is defined as a style of writing which provides 'the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life'. He further elaborates that this mode of writing is "based on detailed accuracy of description". In other words, realism is used to describe the actual problems of life. In Baldick's view, elements of realism can be found in 19th century literature, especially in works by Chaucer and Defoe. Realism is also evident in literatures outside the Western world, such as African literature. Schipper (1985) informs that authors of African novels have referred realistically to African history, directly mentioning historical names and places as well as well-known events such as wars, battles and conflicts. She cites an example from Ousmane Sembene's *L'Harmattan*, which is based on the theme of the "Referendum" of 1958. This historical event was organized by the French authorities in order to keep the French colonies under French rule. Schipper also cites another example from *A Grain of Wheat*, written by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in 1967. This novel makes frequent historical references to the colonial times, the fight for freedom, the World Wars and the ceremony of independence, among others. As stated by Shumway (2017), a realist novel will contain these features: (a) it describes contemporary or recent social life, (b) it describes in detail any visual or sensory aspects, (c) the characters in the novel are psychologically and socially plausible, (d) it describes quotidian events or ordinary life/people, (e) the events in the text are plausible given the assumptions of the audience; and (f) the text exposes aspects of social life which are usually not known or represented in artistic works. These features are all evident in *Beans without Korkor*.

Firstly, the text does describe contemporary social life in Ghana. This is evident from the author's description of the technology usage in the text. Mercy's eatery features 'afro jazz melody' from the stereo speakers and monitors showing video clips to entertain the customers. Mercy also utilises a Kitchen Bot to help her prepare the food in the shop. All these technological advancements indicate that the social life depicted in the text happen in the current day and age. Secondly, the text describes daily life in Ghana with realistic details. The narrative introduces us to the vibrant suburb of Dzorwolu, with its colourful high-rise buildings and pedestrians and bikers going about their daily affairs. The details of the building are meticulously described: 'pink of the

Adu-T building... blue of the towering Stanbic Bank... jade from Green Ventures' blocks...' This vivid description of the setting functions to provide readers of some background information before they read the rest of the story. Thirdly, the characters in the novel are psychologically and socially plausible. As stated by Harris (1952):

"Plausibility consists in the subsumption of fictional events under laws of nature; and since the subject matter of fiction is for the most part human action and character, the relevant laws are mostly laws of human nature and laws of the formation of character."

Harris explains that if a fictional story is to be believable, the events in the story need to make sense. As stories are mainly about people, the characters need to act as how real people would behave. If a character does not act as how a real person would act, or if an event defies the common sense of human behaviour, then the story loses its plausibility. In terms of psychological plausibility, the characters have realistic emotional responses. Sammy gets annoyed and calls Shin Shin 'buffoon', when the latter cuts into the queue. When the customers learn that there is only one portion of plantain for everyone, they fight with each other to get the remaining piece. As for social plausibility, this can be seen in the customers' liking for the particular dish. We can assume that the characters have spent some time in Ghana and have been sufficiently exposed to Ghanaian cultural background to be able to enjoy the dish daily. Fourth, the text describes quotidian or everyday events and the ordinary people. This is certainly evident from the narrative as the story opens with a realistic description of the pedestrians going about their daily activities and Mercy watching the potential customers passing by her shop: 'Sister Mercy watched this show every morning, munching on her chewing stick while sweeping the floors of her Waakye spot'. Fifth, the events in the text are plausible given the assumptions of the audience. Perceived plausibility is defined as whether the events in a story could occur, independent of whether or not they actually did occur (Hall, 2003). A story which contains more common events should be perceived as more plausible (Valesia et al., 2017). Smith's narrative can be considered as containing plausible events, as they can be considered everyday occurrence. The scene where the customers are queuing up in order to get their daily meal is a common occurrence in many cultures worldwide. Lastly, the narrative contains aspects of social life which are usually not known or represented in artistic works. One particular social life aspect which is uniquely Ghanaian can be seen in the author's description of Mercy preparing the kor kor dish. Readers who are not familiar with the Ghanaian food culture are transported to Mercy's kitchen while reading the text. They are informed of how Mercy has to hand-grind the spices in order to make the bean stew. Another particular aspect of social life which is unique is the narrative's emphasis on the plantain shortage in Ghana. As stated in the GARDJA website, this problem has been affecting the nation due to the low produce yet high demand of plantains. Smith's narrative has made the issue known to readers outside Ghana as well as part of the bigger global issue of food insecurity.

Conclusion

Smith's depiction of a satirical look at everyday life in Ghana enables us to witness a multi-faceted critique of Ghanaian society. Inherent issues in the society are exposed in a funny, yet thought-provoking way via the author's descriptions of the exaggerated

quarrel over food, the ironic situations concerning agricultural policies, and the portrayal of different social classes. Smith's combination of irony, character contrast, and situational absurdity influences readers to think about the personal hardships affecting each character, as well as the wider societal systems that support them. This leads to a storytelling technique which both informative and enjoyable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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