



**FLASH FICTION AS AN AVENUE TO ADDRESS SOCIAL VICES: A CASE
STUDY OF VINCENT DE PAUL'S *FLASHES OF VICE, VOLUME 1***

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Abstract

Advancement in technology and the internet age has given rise to new platforms of sharing ideas thereby leading to the rise and development of flash fiction. This paper analyzes flash fiction as a new avenue for addressing social vices in the digital age. Some of the vices addressed in the selected mini-fictions resonate with the Sustainable Development Goals showing how writers rely on global trends in their creative processes. Marxist literary theory was adopted to examine the social vices that the selected texts address. The article argues that these exemplary flashes are used to develop and propagate complex themes with a long literary history and a wide contemporary relevance. It therefore avers that flash fictions of East Africa, though utilizing the contemporary platforms, have a literary significance just like other genres of art. It is a new avenue to addressing human challenges with wide readership. Flash fiction and the new media are therefore seen as new frontiers in fostering educa-

Introduction

Flash fictions are very short stories which are complete in themselves in that they contain all the features of conventional/traditional short stories. They contain the protagonist, a conflict, the obstacles or the complications and a resolution. In 1920's, the flash fiction in English flourished in the USA, under the umbrella-term of short-short story. Its popularity waned in the 1950s but resurfaced in the mid-1970s. The first anthology of macro fiction, edited by Robert Shapard and James Thomas, was published in 1986. The anthology defined sudden fiction to be of 1500 to 2000 words (Shapard et al., 2010). According to Thomas et al (1992) An Eponymous anthology later popularized the term "flash fiction" by setting a limit of 750 words. Today, flash fiction encompasses a wider variety of subgenres, with relatively lower word-limits of up to 750 words or 1000 words at most. Social networking has made flash fiction one of the most popular genres in the digital age. Flash fiction is also known as micro fiction, mini-fiction,

nano-fiction, quick fiction, sudden fiction, smoke-long fiction, short short story, post-card fiction, and very short story (Botha,2016; Holdefer, 2014). Flash fiction therefore is a short piece of creative work that can be read in less than 10 minutes.

Flash fiction mainly differs from short story and novels in terms of length. As flash fiction can be as short as a few number of words, the short story can cover several pages. Short stories can be read in one sitting while flash fiction can take less than five minutes. Flash fiction is brief and may be not give room for character development as opposed to other genres of literature.

Vincent De Paul's "Flashes of Vice" Volume 1 is a collection of six flash fictions with an average of 400 words which depict how class differences in the society fuel social vices. Samuel Vincent De Paul is a Kenyan author, editor and creative writing tutor. In addition to his Bachelor of Science from Egerton University,

, he has a Diploma in Comprehensive Creative writing and a certificate in Copyediting & proofreading from The Writers Bureau, UK. Some of his works include *The Fundamentals of Strategic Writing*, *Twisted Times: The Phantom*, *Inevitable Desires*, *Flashes of Vices Volume I to III*, *Twisted Times: Son of man*, *Holy Crime: A collection of love poems* among others. *Flashes of Vices* is available in both print and the online platform but they first appeared in digital format with later attempt on prints; this study gives focus on the flashes publishes online.

This paper analyses the six mini-fictions in De Paul's first volume of *Flashes of vices* since the stories highlight social vices that ail contemporary Kenya. They are a representation of how the state apparatuses like the church and the justice system are used to champion the dominant bourgeoisie ideology. The selected flashes also highlight issues that resonate with the Sustainable Development Goals; a proof that flash fiction writers are in touch with the societal needs and ailments. The flash fiction writers therefore use their texts to sensitize the society on numerous vices and their effects to the societal wellbeing.

The paper strives to find out how flash fiction is creating a new avenue for addressing social vices. It aims at a closer examination of the emergent flash fiction with particular attention to those published in the online platform. In doing so, topics such as genre definition, its development, its producers and consumers are broached and, finally, its potential as an avenue to critique social vices is discussed.

The debate on the relationship between literature and the social media as a literary space has been on the rise since late 1990s. The internet and other social networks create relevant platforms through WhatsApp, Facebook and twitter which provide an avenue for literary interaction. Many authors like Vincent De Paul use the online platform to promote and publish their works.

The online platform has had noticeable

influence on literature particularly on the short story and storytelling. Paolo Coelho – author of *The Alchemist* – when asked about his view on the internet and its effects, responded that “today everybody can tell a story. That is magical because everybody can express themselves” because the internet has given space for democratization of communication hence leading to the rise and development of flash fiction genre.

Flash fiction fits the modern digital media because it easily suits the specifications of tablet and mobile screens. According to Al-Sharqi & Abbasi (2015) and Levin (2020) mini-fiction and the digital media serves the needs of average reader and the “busy” audience who have to utilize the little time they have to read and retain despite a wide variety of texts with other attractive options. Through the communication channels – twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, watt pad, drabble – people have the opportunity to record their experiences quickly and transmit to a wide audience at little or no cost.

Since flash fiction is not only one of the easily available genres but also easily accessible to the digital audience, it is one of the best tools to disseminate knowledge and to sensitize people to be on the fight against social vices. One can easily read a single story between breaks and still attend to their duties. This article examines how flash fiction uses the online platform to address social vices in the digital age where reading culture is said to be dwindling.

Background

In the study of Hyper-compressions; The rise of flash fiction in “post-transitional” South Africa, Blair (2020) states that each flash story under his study is rooted in the psychological and material legacies of apartheid, thus develops contemporary themes with a substantial literary history. He states that the flash fiction in a post transitional South Africa are of historical relevance since they address the historical peculiarities of the southern region of Africa. They highlight ethical complexities, racial segregation and evolving

urban environment among other themes.

Lutch (2014) argues that flash fiction has found a platform in the internet. Through the new media; new digital devices such as smart phones, e-book readers or social networks, short and concise fictional texts can reach people anywhere anytime. Flash fiction literature can be read, consumed and enjoyed within a very short time span anywhere for instance when waiting for a doctor or when shifting between chores, and still fulfil the traditional three main aims of literature; to inform, to persuade and to entertain. This versatile nature of flash fiction makes it ideal for the sensitization of the masses as it can be consumed without interfering with other duties.

According to Agbetuyi and Kolajo (2021) internet has contributed enormously to the achievement of education for all. However, the surge of its elements like social media has led to shift in concentration from the conventional reading pattern adapted from the spread of civilization to a society riddled with technological advancements. The two emphasize that the increase of internet use and proliferation of digital media have greatly transformed the reading habits in such a way that it is fast disappearing into thin air.

Agbetuyi and Kolajo further portray how the internet seems to have reduced the public interest in reading of printed materials for vocabulary development, general knowledge and broadmindedness which individuals get from having good reading habits. This is an argument that the present paper refutes. The diminishing trend of reading printed materials does not mean that people do not read; they read through the online platform. The rise of digital media has given a wider space to propagate literature of every form that can still spread vocabulary, increase general knowledge and sensitize the masses. The digital media has by far made it cheaper to obtain these materials which could have otherwise been expensive in their printed forms.

Owing to technological innovation, internet use is threatening reading culture especially among secondary school students (Akidi et al 2021). They argue that most of the students spend a lot of their time in the internet browsing on matters of less importance rather than reading to acquire knowledge. Such students laze around, surfing the net, playing video games, listening to music with big headphones, chatting with friends instead of taking up some serious reading sessions. They consider sitting in a quiet corner of the library reading as some primitive practice thereby making reading a book or any other information resource a dying entity. The declining interest in reading among young people compared to increase in hours spent on the Internet has become a cause for alarm and a challenge to all and something needs to be done to change the scenario. The current paper argues that with flash fiction, the time spent on the internet can still be productive as the e-platform has provided a lot of information that can widen the knowledge of internet users. Flash fiction comes in handy in that it is succinct, interesting and passes relevant values to the online audience without much expense in terms of money and time. The article therefore examines how the selected mini-fictions are of relevance to the contemporary society.

Marxist literary theory originated in the 19th C through the writings of the German philosopher, Karl Marx (1818-1883). Bressler (2003) states that Marxist theory did not develop until 20th C when critics focused on the study of the relationship between literature and a society that consumes it. Marxism flourished as a practical solution to the working class to better their world. It provided the society with a place of action that could help initiate change in the society. Bressler argues further that Marxist literary theory made it easy to understand the political, social and the economic systems of a society. Marx and Engles argue that the elite use ideology to pass on beliefs and values that help them maintain power over the poor. In what they call false consciousness, Marx and Engles

argue that the dominant social class uses this negative ideology to shape and control people's self-definition and class consciousness.

This study adopted Leninism strand of Marxist theory that championed social emancipation. As Alia (1970) puts it, Leninism advocates for the death of exploiters and oppressors in the community thus creating a world of social justice; a community where each member is treated equally. This theory guides the study to examine how flash fiction reveals the truth about human social interactions in the internet age.

Social Vices from a Marxist Perspective

Marxist theorists state that the society is divided into classes where the rich continue getting richer and the poor get poorer. The gap widens daily as the systems support the rich and further impoverish the poor. Vincent De Paul captures the injustices meted on the poor due to their status in the socio-economic ladder. According to Alia (1970), economic circumstances determine the value of human life. Every action one does or is involved in depends on their economic status or economic goal. The short short stories anthology by De Paul not only reveal that the struggle to acquire and retain wealth contribute to different social vices but also pass lessons to the reader on false consciousness of the masses that make them accept the dictates of ruthless systems.

The stories further highlight lack of morality and common decency due to economic systems. Bressler (2003), states that the structure of the society is built on the conflicts between the different social classes. Notably, the main cause of these conflicts is the way members of the society use their economic power differently. The selected stories portray how gender and religion are used to segregate and subjugate the unsuspecting members of the society. Additionally, the selected texts illustrate how flash fiction is creating a new platform for dissemination of information and sensitization of the masses on the social vices.

In "Guilty as Charged," and "Of Lovers and Cheaters," Vincent De Paul exposes how gender inequality contributes to gender based violence, rape, abortion and infidelity among other social vices. According to Heyman (2018) Marxist feminism is concerned with how the society praise masculinity and treats women as secondary beings valued for their sexual orientation. In "Guilty as Charged," the narrator kills her husband in cold blood for raping their teenage daughter. We are informed that the man has been sexually starved by the wife due to her nature of work and thus he rapes his daughter. This story portrays what results in a society where people give priority to their career progression at the expense of their families. Such violence as indicated in the story is on the rise as the narrator states:

It was a high profile case with high-octane media frenzy. I was now part of statistics of rising cases of police officers killing their spouses. The only twist was that I did not end my life in the process of giving crime reporters a field day (p.1).

Domestic violence is one of the issues affecting the social well-being of the society. The story shows that family as a unit is falling apart due to gender inequality, lack of self-control, prioritizing career as opposed to the family and infidelity among the spouses. As reported by the K24 TV on July 2, 2022, an incident similar to the one captured in the short-short story occurred in Migori, Kenya; a female police officer was arrested after allegedly shooting and injuring her lover under unclear reasons. During the covid-19 period, more of such cases of gender based violence were reported in Kenya and some of the reasons given for their rise are poor mental health and harsh economic times. Since De Paul is able to point out the societal evils, he therefore, becomes a committed writer as Adebambo (2008) avers.

The man in the story, “Guilty as Charged,” is evil to the extent that he sees his only daughter as the only way to satisfy his sexual urge. Vincent De Paul’s flash fiction is therefore a call for revolution. It sensitizes men to stop viewing women as objects for sexual satisfaction but treat them with respect and dignity. On the other hand, De Paul awakens women to stand strong against gender abuse irrespective of the price they have to pay. Since family is a fundamental basic unit in the prosperity of a nation, a happy family creates a happy and prosperous nation. In the 21st Century when career progression is the main goal of many couples, the couples should ensure the stability of their family is given a priority. In the story, the police officer’s daughter (the victim of rape) has for long reported to her mother about the rape cases but the mother has been too busy to pay attention. It then appears that negligence of parental duty might have subjected the daughter to all the pain she ends up suffering.

The story indicates that deaths resulting from domestic violence will continue to rise if things don’t change. The narrator herself, admits that she is ready to do it again should anybody touch her daughter. On Thursday, December 10, 2020, The Daily Nation reported that the UN’s Covid-19 Gender Response Tracker indicated that there was an upsurge in domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence globally and little was done to curtail the rising trend. If this is a fact to go by, De Paul therefore calls for drastic measures, sensitizing women to arise and take every possible step to fight these vices. Men too are warned to stop perpetrating violence and sexual assault on women lest they suffer untold consequences.

In the story, “Of Lovers and Cheaters,” Rita lures Steve into infidelity because of material gain. Despite the fact that she knows that Steve is happily married with an adorable family, she tries her best to take him to bed. She becomes pregnant for Steve and blackmails him to either give her a few millions or continue meeting her for their affair (sexual encounter) to re-

main a secret. Steve is thinking of running for governorship, so such a scandal is not healthy for him. He therefore gives in to Rita’s demands. The need for material gain drives Rita into prostituting in the name of love. All these social vices happen in the society because of the need to climb the economic ladder. Rita does not want to be poor anymore and is using whatever she has to wring money from the unsuspecting rich Steve. Steve ends up giving in to Rita’s demands just to maintain his status. As Rita does the sex game for money, Steve is in it as a habit; he is a philanderer. Through their dialogue we realize that apart from Rita and Cecilia, Steve has another lady, Jacky. Apparently he is promiscuous because of his socio-economic status. De Paul’s sudden fiction, in this regard, illustrates that that promiscuity is a vice that destabilizes the society. He, therefore uses digital space to reach the online users and sensitize them.

“On Lovers and Cheaters” is also an indicator that De Paul is sensitive of the things happening around him and trying to sensitize the society to fight for the eradication of social vices. The story resonates with an occurrence in Kenya where a governor was suspected to have killed a university student who used love to fleece money from him. As Kamau Muthoni reported on the Standard Newspaper on March 9th 2022, details emerged linking the governor to the young girl’s death. Sources indicated that the girl had pushed the governor to the corner with her incessant need for money. Such deaths resulting from the race for wealth are the vices that De Paul is enlightening the society about. He exposes materialism as a force that drives the society into its destruction.

According to Bressler (2003), Marx assumed that the experiences people go through such as their social interactions, employment and day-to-day activities directly shape the development of personal consciousness of an individual. The reader gets to learn that the personal experiences and contradictions in individual needs create conflict in the society through characters in De Paul’s flash fiction,

“On Lovers and Cheaters.” Rita ends up killing her unborn baby due to the circumstances in which it is conceived. Steve does not want the baby because it comes as a result of extramarital affair while Rita does not keep it maybe because it can harm her ‘Miss independent’ tag. De Paul thus creates scenarios that may lead to abortion as a social ill and a practice against the law that every member of the society should strive to end.

Justice delivery is an issue of concern in many nations’ judicial systems today. Corruption is a major impediment to achieving fair judicial functions. To expose the rot in the judicial systems and land offices in Kenya, De Paul address the stories of land injustices in, ‘Most wanted’. De Paul paints a picture of a judicial system that cares only for the haves. It takes care of the rich irrespective of their criminal records but hunts the poor for their felonies. John’s family loses its ancestral land to the “owners” of the society. The justice system cannot protect them from losing their land because they are poor. John’s father asks about how much a judge costs because he does not understand how he can lose a case involving his ancestral piece of land. The story is therefore an indicator of how wealth created a society divided into classes of the capable and the incapable. The rich use their wealth to oppress the poor who cannot fight back because they lack the ability to influence the systems.

The killer of John’ grandfather wins the case and takes the land because he has money. According to Boone (2017) few individuals who want to uninterruptedly control the resources cause the conflicts in Africa. John feels sad about their predicament and boasts about being the most wanted criminal globally because he is willing to kill any person who uses his wealth and power to oppress the poor. He tells his father: ‘I have a bounty of over a billion shillings on my head. I rob, with violence, and kill the rich—government officials, media moguls, academicians, church leaders, bankers, police, judges, military gooks and all (n.p).’ John be-

comes the judge and jury to fight for the common man. The story is sensitizing the common man to stand up and be ready to fight the status quo. De Paul seems to echo Bjelkental (2020, p.22) that “Change will not come by remaining within the system, only by exiting it.” The systems in place are structured in that they support the haves to maintain their position as the poor remain below the economic ladder. As Bressler puts it, Marxists maintain that the bourgeoisie control the economic base and establish structures and institutions that will help them maintain their dominance. As seen in this story, the justice system is well under the control of the haves in the society. De Paul proves that flash fiction is an avenue to address social vices by exposing how wealth rule the society and in turn sensitizes the society to rise in arms and fight for equality and equity.

In the story “Church Hypocritical”, De Paul uses Irony to expose the effects of religion on the economic status of the believers. The church is designed in a way that it swindles money from the poor as it discourages them from earthly riches. They are made to believe that true Christians have riches in heaven. The poor become more poor as the rich become richer since the poor contribute every little penny they have so as to secure their way to heaven. As Surin (2013) puts it, Marxism has always considered that all modern religions and churches, and all religious bodies of whatever kind, are organizations used by bourgeois reactionary groups to buttress their system of exploitation and to make the working class docile hence De Paul is enlightening the society on the effects of blindly following religion to the extent of failing to take reasonable steps towards societal betterment.

Bishop Rotich wages war on religion. He angers the mother church and the Pope by teaching his congregants on the secrets of the church. He considers himself a whistle blower as he is against some practices of the Catholic church. When Pope Leo asks Bishop Rotich why he (Rotich) is revealing the 2000-year secrets of the church,

Rotich responds:

“And all these trappings of power? Christ Himself was a poor tramp with nowhere to lay His head. But look—all this vast wealth, do you really need it, Holy Father? We live in mansions of human anguish, crowned with pomp and live in gilded rooms while the flocks we shepherd languish in poverty (n.p).

Bishop Rotich in this quote represents the middle class members of the society who have taken the risk to sensitize the poor against being too blind in religion that they are unable to meet their own livelihood but contribute the little they have to cater for the lavish spending of the men of cloth.

De Paul in “Daddy’s Girl,” shows how the rich use their position to fuel vices in the society. Loyce, who is the president’s daughter, is using her position to sneak class A heroin into the country. Upon being arrested, she insults the police officer and tells her how her class would get her out of the cell. Loyce threatens inspector Lina that she would lose her job if she fails to release her. This shows how the middle class and the low class citizens keep supporting the rich to keep their position at the top of the ladder. Those in power use their power to manipulate the system to their advantage. This incident echoes some occurrences in Kenya where the political class use their power to hinder delivery of justice in case they are brought before the law. In the recent past, many cases have been withdrawn from court due to lack of evidence as witnesses are coerced to withdraw. In some cases, judges are bribed to rule in favour of the powerful in the society. “Daddy’s Girl” is therefore a proof that flash fiction is an avenue to address social vices as it exposes corrupt nature of the judicial systems and sounds a wakeup call to the society to fight these vices.

Inspector Lina is sure enough that with the evidence she has, Loyce should rot in jail and she says:

“Not your dad’s, junkie. And if the grapevine is anything to go by, your father is retiring tomorrow. If I were you, I’d be trying to persuade dad to chunk off part of his send-off package to get me the best criminal lawyer around. The judges might decide to get you a few years or a hefty fine, or both, which of course dad would pay, or you will rot in jail and no one will appeal.”

This excerpt reveals how justice is traded along the corridors in the Kenyan system. One is powerful and can control strings only when on power. Things change with every regime. With the fact that the president is relinquishing power, his daughter is bound to rot in jail. It is evident that the rich are able to bribe the system and fail to serve the punishment they deserve. On the other hand, the poor suffer all the injustices. Loyce tries hard enough to bribe the inspector but the latter remains steadfast, ready to change the status quo. Calls from the Minister of internal affairs and the police commissioner reveal that Loyce has been on the trade for long and has always evaded arrest and trial because of the position of her father and her uncle who is also the Minister of internal security. They both come to one resolve, “Utumishi kwa wote.” – service to all.

De Paul uses flash fiction as a genre to explore and expose how the powerful and the rich use their might to oppress the poor. With such rich flash fictions on the internet, the masses can read at the comfort of their work or busy schedule and learn about the vices bedeviling their society and the possible course of action they can take. De Paul has used flash fiction to highlight many social vices that ail the community. Some of the issues raised in his stories are domestic violence, rape, police killings, land injustices, infidelity and abortion among others. Since the new media has created a new avenue where the masses can be sensitized against such vices at a

cheaper cost, then the use of online platform and the flash fiction texts should be embraced.

Conclusion

Internet age has widened access to limitless reading materials. Reading is essential for both personal and academic success of an individual consequently its importance cannot be overemphasized. Furthermore, it aids language development, socialization and civilization from social vices that derail societal equity. To effectively survive in and explore the environment, the society requires good reading materials. It is through reading that individuals are able to interact with information that leads them to transformation. It is therefore important to realize the need to read as a way of appreciating the importance of information and effective communication for the growth of a society. Moreover, the development of reading and availability of standard reading materials are basic needs, which society must confer on its citizens as part of their education. Some technological innovations are a great boost to dissemination of the information. Internet as one of the contemporary technological innovations has a limitless reservoir of information that is readily available and easily accessible for people to use worldwide. Therefore, Internet is a channel that supports wider dissemination of flash fictions. It is opening new avenues to address societal challenges and innovations for sustainability.

Grounding on the scrutiny done on the selected texts and the report highlighted in this article, it is worth concluding that mini-fiction has opened new platforms to critique social vices and give possible ways of correction. The digital age has led to the

rise and development of flash fiction which people can consume anywhere any time through their phones, laptops or tablets. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, twitter, and Facebook come in handy as they are frequently visited. Despite the fact that they are aesthetically created for entertainment, mini-fiction do functions as points of inspiration and sources of correction to the readers.

This paper has shown that flash fiction has created a new avenue to address and critique social vices and further sensitize people towards taking appropriate steps towards change. Through the selected flashes, Vincent portrays that change cannot be entrusted on the elite and the experts, it is the oppressed that should struggle for change. The oppressed have all it takes to transform the conditions of their own oppression through struggle. De Paul in "Guilty as Charged" and "Of Lovers and Cheaters" exposes issues like infidelity, abortion and domestic violence as social vices. In "Most Wanted," he addresses the injustice in the justice systems of the nation. One can therefore conclude that writers respond to global social trends and that way they are able to direct the society towards its transformation.

The study recommends that scholars and avid readers should sensitize the public on the right use of the Internet to access different reading materials, and gaining more knowledge for the socio-economic advancement. Flash fiction should also be treated as a serious genre of literature providing a wide platform for knowledge.

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