

## Parenting Landmines: A Critique of Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky*

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### Abstract

### Original Research Article

This article investigates how Lesley Nneka Arimah's short stories in *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky* (2017) engage in social commentary on parenting. The study used a qualitative research design, employing research methods such as content analysis and close textual reading. It was further informed by the reader-response theory and found that Arimah's stories engage in social commentary on parenting by doing such things as condemning disproportionate love of one's children, critiquing inappropriate disciplining methods and questioning long-distance parenting among other commentaries. Arimah's text calls on parents to deeply reflect on their roles as parents and take heed to raise whole, upright citizens.

**Keywords:** Parenting Landmines, social commentary, upright citizens.

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## INTRODUCTION

Prolific American short story writer Edgar Allan Poe defines a short story as a form of fiction that should be read in one sitting, usually within a time frame of thirty minutes to two hours [1]. Precise word counts on the short story vary slightly among scholars, though generally the word count of a short story is deemed to be anywhere from one thousand to seven thousand five hundred words, sometimes extending to as many as ten thousand words [2]. Short stories tend to have a single focus in their plot and often employ few characters due to the limited space that they offer [3].

Like other genres of Literature, the short story has several functions. Firstly, it is didactic. Stevens [4], for instance, observes that the short stories of Nadine Gordimer and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie can be used in a classroom context to teach students about cultures of different peoples. Secondly, short stories entertain. Petite [5] observes that the short stories of George Saunders are greatly entertaining and can make readers have a good laugh. Thirdly, the short story is a critical social commentary vehicle, that is, it informs the general populace about a problem in order to stir or bring about change in the society. Several short story writers like Guy de Maupassant among others have written their stories as significant social commentaries on such issues as injustice, disenfranchisement, and

oppression of marginalised members of the society among others [6]. Short stories such as Ken Saro-Wiwa's "Africa Kills Her Sun" [7] have stood out as prophetic. In the story, Saro-Wiwa not only provides lucid criticisms of Sani Abacha's gangster government in Nigeria but also foretells his crude execution.

Given the swiftness in its writing and production when compared to the novel or the play, the short story lays the foundation of literary engagement with affairs of the world. Indeed, most of the short stories in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Secret Lives and Other Stories* [8] were later developed into novels. But the focus here is to read Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* as a critical social commentary on parenting in a bourgeois world where most parents are busy chasing for elusive wealth.

### Statement of the Problem

The short story, like other literary genres, is a critical social commentary vehicle on various issues plaguing society. In this article, we argue that Arimah's short stories aptly grasp parenting mishaps in a fast-changing, capitalist world.

### Justification of the Study

This study displays the value of the short story in revealing problems in society as well as offering

possible solutions (or urging readers to find plausible solutions) to the said problems. Arimah's short stories reveal problems existing in parenting and in children's upbringing, and further challenge readers to seek appropriate solutions to the said problems.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by the reader-response theory. The proponents of the reader-response theory include I. A. Richards, Louise Rosenblatt, Walker Gibson, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish and David Bleich. These individuals, working during different periods of the twentieth century, had a significant influence on the reader-response movement [9]. Based on their various inputs, the main tenets of the reader-response theory are summarized as follows.

To begin with, in the reader-response theory, the most important component of a literary interpretation is the reader. A text is not sovereign and independent in portraying meaning, rather, the meaning of a text is arrived at when a reader interacts with a text. Hence, the reader is vital in creating the meaning of a text. Secondly, the response elicited in the reader of a text - by the text - is critically important to pay attention to. The effect that a literary work has on the thoughts, feelings and emotions of a reader must be taken into account. The two main tenets of the reader-response theory lie in the name of the theory itself, namely 'reader' and 'response'. The reader is central in discovering the meaning of a text, and the responses elicited in him/her as he/she reads the text are equally important.

This study was informed by the reader-response theory as follows: the researchers read and interacted with Arimah's short stories paying attention to the thoughts and feelings elicited in them by the stories. Ultimately, the readers concluded that Arimah's texts are critical social commentaries on parenting. The body of the study demonstrates how Arimah's texts engage in social commentary on parenting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have been undertaken to show how short stories engage in social commentary. These include the following:

Kuhn [6] demonstrates that the short stories of Guy de Maupassant are a commentary on social injustice. Kuhn puts forth an argument that Maupassant created short stories that mirrored and criticized the society, and which also defended the weak, mistreated and disenfranchised members of society. Kuhn finally suggests that modern-day writers, like Maupassant before them, can also write to bring social awareness to the masses. Indeed, Arimah's stories, like de Maupassant's stories, foreground social awareness to members of society.

Allaham [10] examines the short stories of Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani, African American Alice Walker and Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He observes that the short stories of the said writers were written by their authors in order to fight for the political well-being of their respective communities. The short stories spoke to the political oppression of the writers' times and were intended to engage in resistance against oppressive regimes. Allaham shows that the said writers wrote to comment on political oppression. Arimah's stories depart from the political arena mostly favoured by male writers to disrupt the often-overlooked challenges that flourish in the private space.

However, notable women writers too have dwelt on critiquing political oppressions in their times. Huggan [11] shows that Nadine Gordimer uses her short stories in social commentary to reveal and speak against the plight of marginalized individuals who have been (were) oppressed by the apartheid regime. Huggan further argues that the short story, as a 'more concentrated' form of fiction compared to the novel, allows for inferential techniques to be used to articulate deep issues in society. While Huggan's study shows that Gordimer's works comment on oppression, this study works to show that Arimah's texts comment on parenting.

Ojiambo [12] studies the short stories of Grace Ogot and shows that Ogot uses them to critique the pressures of modernity, juxtaposed against traditional norms. Ojiambo reveals that Ogot writes to project concerns on modern diseases in Africa, as well as comment on the difficulties that exist as far as international travel is concerned. Her work is significant as it provides insights with which our work builds on in the study of Arimah's texts [13].

The literature review above reveals a knowledge gap on the social commentary offered by Arimah's short stories. This research therefore examines Arimah's texts to uncover the ways in which her stories engage in social commentary on parenting.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative research design in the study. Data was collected in word rather than numerical form and hence this research design was most appropriate. The researchers applied content analysis through close textual reading of Arimah's *What It Means When A Man Falls From the Sky* (2017). The data collected from this study was analyzed using iterative data analysis from data that was coded inductively.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

As mentioned earlier, social commentary constitutes informing the general populace about a problem in order to stir or bring about change in the

society. Arimah's stories inform about a problem existing in parenting and appeal for change in the same, as discussed below.

Firstly, Arimah's stories engage in social commentary by revealing the unsound methods that parents use to discipline their children. This is evident in several texts. For instance, Arimah's "War Stories" presents a couple whose lenient disciplining methods fail to steer their daughter Nwando in the right direction. Nwando's parents are extremely lax when it comes to disciplining or correcting her. When Nwando engages in misdeeds, her mother is passive and passes her on to her father, who tells her stories about the ways in which others he knew in the past received discipline. Stories about disciplining methods and actually disciplining a child are two different things. Nwando gets stories, and her misdeeds continue. The one time that her mother tries to discipline her, Nwando describes the experience as "awkward, like running backward" (p. 17). Nwando's parents are lax, and their daughter persists in wrong-doing, engaging in such things as stealing and physically and emotionally assaulting others. Nwando wrongly believes that there are no real consequences for her misdeeds; she can get away with just about anything.

Nwando's parents are what psychologists call 'permissive parents'. According to Cherry [14], permissive parents "make little or no attempt to control or discipline their [children]". As a result, the children of these parents make poor decisions and display extreme aggression - they must get what they want, because their parents have not taught them about rules and boundaries. They have no regard for other peoples' wants or feelings, but must override others and have their way, all the time. Nwando is aggressive: she is the school bully. She hurts others physically and psychologically. At home too, she fights with her mother often. Nwando has no regard for other people's feelings, all that matters to her is her having her own way. Arimah uses "War Stories" to critique parents who engage in lenient disciplining methods (or fail to discipline their children completely), showing that children raised by such parents end up being pushy, aggressive and brash. They do not respect others' boundaries and end up causing them incredible amounts of pain. "War Stories" therefore warns parents against leniency in parenting.

While "War Stories" is an onslaught against permissive parenting, "Wild" is an offensive against authoritarian parenting. According to ParentingForBrain [15], authoritarian parents are demanding and cold. They have very many spoken and unspoken rules which must be followed without question. When rules are broken or expectations are unmet, punishment is harsh and is often meted out through corporal punishment and even yelling. Authoritarian parents also shame their children in the

belief that doing so will make them behave better. "Why do you always do that?..." and 'Why can't you do anything right?' are just a few of the phrases that these parents might use on a regular basis" [16]. Children of authoritarian parents are often unhappy and have a high risk of developing mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety [15].

In "Wild", Chinyere's mother is an authoritarian mother. When Chinyere comes home late one night, her mother shouts at her so loudly that even the neighbours are able to hear the shouting (p. 52). She then beats Chinyere thoroughly, tears her dress and leaves her face swollen (p. 53). Chinyere is left crying and sad (p. 54). Clearly, this type of disciplining affects Chinyere physically and emotionally. Ada's mother on the other hand is an authoritarian mother who shames and tries to manipulate Ada into correct behavior by comparing her to her cousin Chinyere. Essentially, Ada's mother says to her, "Why can't you do what is right and be as good as Chinyere?" Such remonstrations leaves Ada feeling inferior and inadequate. In these cases, Arimah is engaging in social commentary by making readers aware of the trouble that arises from authoritarian parenting. She shows that authoritarian parenting leaves daughters (children) broken both in body and soul, causing more harm than good.

Besides shedding light on the unsound methods that parents use to discipline their children, Arimah's stories also critique the disproportionate affection that parents show their children. In "The Future Looks Good", for instance, Arimah presents a mother who loathes her first-born daughter Bibi but loves her second born daughter Ezinma. This disproportionate affection from the mother of the two girls causes sibling rivalry between the girls. Bibi hates her sister Ezinma. The two are not close. A mother's (or parent's) selective love/hatred of their children divides the family as children become enemies when they realize that one warrants affection from the parents but the other does not. This phenomenon is not new: The Biblical book of beginnings, Genesis, reveals that a man named Jacob loved his last son Joseph more than he loved his other sons. This resulted in sibling rivalry so that eventually, Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave and lied to their father that Joseph was dead, having been attacked by a wild animal [17]. When a parent shows disproportionate affection to his/her children, the result is often sibling rivalry that has far-reaching negative effects, as shown in Genesis and through Arimah's text.

"Who Will Greet You at Home", like "The Future Looks Good", critiques parents who believe that some children are worthy of more love than others. The story reveals that children who are created out of 'superior' material like porcelain and raffia are deserving of more love than children created of 'ordinary' material like mud, twigs and yarn. The

protagonist of the story, Ogechi, is created out of mud, so her mother feels that she is not worthy of love. Children created out of porcelain or other quality materials, however, deserve love. Ogechi lives a difficult life, estranged from a mother who thinks that her daughter is 'pedestrian'. Because Ogechi does not receive love and validation from her mother, she struggles, with her meager salary, to create the 'best quality' baby she can, one, who unlike her, will receive love in this world. Arimah shows that when a mother deprives her child of love because she does not think the child is 'good enough' to be loved, the child tries to compensate for this by resolving, by all means necessary, to ensure that their own child receives all the love that they did not receive. Ogechi purposes to make her child out of material 'worthy of love'. She endeavors to make a perfect child who will receive from all who come across her the perfect love that she herself did not receive. Arimah also shows through this story that parents should not demand a 'perfect' child before they can show them a full and perfect love.

However, "What Is a Volcano?" offers contrasting ideals to the two aforementioned stories - it portrays a parent who loves her children. This text reveals that when River-goddess loses her twins to Ant-god, she spends centuries looking for her daughters, even recruiting her friends to help her in this epic search. River-goddess shows that when a mother loves, she can love relentlessly. She can go out of her way and spend as much time as she can to find her missing children. This story is refreshing because it paints mothers in a positive light, hailing their determination to reclaim their daughters/children and protect them from evil.

Even though Arimah's texts criticize disproportionate affection or no affection at all, and also hail affectionate and loving parents, they also reveal that sometimes, a parent may love their child but become forced by circumstances to dispose of that child. Buchi in "Buchi's Girls" loves her daughters Louisa and Damaris. However, after her husband dies, Buchi is left financially unstable and does not have enough money to feed her children, house them or educate them. She therefore depends on her sister and her sister's husband for sustenance. When Louisa gets into a fight with her uncle in a bid to protect her sister Damaris, Buchi is forced to give Louisa away to her best friend in order to ease tension so that her brother-in-law does not kick her and both of her daughters out of his house. Buchi loves Louisa, as much as she loves Damaris, but Louisa's bravery could cost them, and then they would be destitute, with no place to go and no one to help them. Since Buchi's best friend is willing and able to take on Louisa, Buchi sends Louisa to live with her, hundreds of miles away. Arimah shows that while parents may be good and upright, sometimes desperation can drive them to make very painful decisions. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, a

parent does the best that he/she can to resolve the situation.

"Light" engages in social commentary by showing the problems that arise with long-distance parenting. It reveals that when Enebeli's wife goes to study abroad, she, her daughter and Enebeli keep in touch via Skype. Initially, the conversations between mother and daughter are cheery and warm. After a few months, however, Enebeli notes that the conversations between mother and daughter are starting to sound more like conversations a girl would have with a close aunt, but not with her mother - Enebeli begins to note an emotional distance between his wife and his daughter. Eventually, this distance between mother and daughter widens so much that the daughter does not enjoy talking to her mother anymore and views the Skype conversations with her mother as chores to be completed. Thus, the physical distance between mother and daughter dampens their relationship so that the two do not share the warmth they did any more.

"Light" further unsettles the general belief that the bond and relationship between a mother and her daughter is stronger and better than that with her father. The status quo stipulates that a girl is best raised by its mother. When Enebeli's wife insists that Enebeli sends their daughter to her in America, he is distraught because of how close he is to his daughter. Still, their families believe that it is the best thing to do: a daughter must be raised by her mother (p. 62). Enebeli's daughter therefore travels to America to be with her mother. Unfortunately, under her mother's care, the daughter fades away, her light is dimmed. Her dew is wicked off, and she is "hollowed out, relieved of her better parts" (p. 55). This story engages in social commentary by showing the reader that the assumption that a daughter (or child) is best raised by its mother is flawed. Society ought to revise this misconception because Enebeli's daughter is much happier when raised by her father. She has a closer relationship with him and can talk to him about periods, boys and even sex. With her mother, though, the girl has a distant relationship that leaves her down and deflated. While the works of feminist writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, like *Half of a Yellow Sun*, portray fathers as heavily patriarchal and thus oppressive to their daughters, Arimah carves a unique niche for fathers who care about their daughters [18].

"Windfalls" castigates parents who exploit their children, viewing the latter not as entities to be nurtured and protected, but as tools to be used for their own enrichment. In the said story, Graceline's mother drops her from high heights and pushes her extremely hard, just so that Graceline can fall and her mother can get large financial settlements. Graceline's mother shows her daughter how to engage in sex for money or other favors. When Graceline gets pregnant, falls and loses her pregnancy, her mother is not saddened at the

loss of her grandchild but is happy because they receive a large payoff from the supermarket where Graceline falls. To Graceline's mother, Graceline is a lifeline; she is an object she can use to earn money and survive. Through this story, Arimah is raising awareness that there are indeed parents who are exploitative and view their children as objects of financial enrichment. They will sell their daughters to men in order to get money. If they want a discount on an item, they will ask their daughters to have sex with the owner of that item so that they can save some money. Arimah is strongly condemning parental neglect in this story, urging parents to relate with their children as if they were just that - their children - and not items to be exploited and used for financial or other gain.

Additionally, Arimah uses "Redemption" to show that when indeed daughters are sexually abused, like the protagonist of this story or Graceline in "Windfalls", parents should not shut their eyes to this vice but rather should stand up against it in order to shield and protect their daughters. Graceline's mother not only says nothing about Graceline's sexual abuse, she also exposes Graceline to it and condones it. The protagonist of "Redemption" reports to her mother that Brother Benni, a man serving in their church, sexually abuses her (and other girls), but neither her parents nor the church pastor believes her. It is not until another teenage girl, Mayowa, is found in the process of being abused that the protagonist's mother believes her. Since the protagonist's mother ignored her complaints, the girl was living in distress. Now that her mother knows the truth, she is angry and regrets not having paid attention to her daughter. When daughters (or children in general) report sexual abuse, parents should pursue the matter to its rightful conclusion, not ignoring their children and imagining the children are making things up, but rather fighting to make sure that sexual predators are eliminated and children are left to grow up in safe and secure environments.

Arimah also engages in social commentary on parenting by calling attention to parents who place too many expectations on their children. In "What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky", for example, the protagonist Nwando has a father who places too many expectations on her. Nwando is a Mathematician who has the talent to 'eat' people's pain away. When Nwando's mother dies, her father cannot understand why Nwando cannot eat his pain. He thinks her gift is valueless as it cannot be used to help her own family. He scolds Nwando with words he cannot take back, and this breaks their relationship. Nwando's father does not understand that Mathematicians cannot work on (treat) their relatives as it goes against career ethics (p. 167). His expectations on his daughter are high: he wants her to help him even though it goes against career ethics. His expectations damage the father-daughter relationship for good. In the story "Glory", Glory's parents are disappointed that Glory does not have a real

career, or a man to call her own. They have high expectations of her: she should be 'someone' by now, with 'someone' to call her husband. Glory's failure to meet her parent's expectations drive her to near suicide (p. 177). In the two mentioned stories, Arimah is decrying parenting that expects too much of daughters/children and puts too much pressure on them. This kind of parenting is detrimental: it can break parent-child relationships, and it can also lead to depression and other mental illnesses in children. Parents should have realistic expectations on their children and not push them too much to perform that they push them to destruction.

"Second Chances" shows some of the troubles parents experience from difficult children who refuse to adhere to their parents' correction. It elicits compassion for parents whose children make it their mission to agitate their parents. Uche is one such child. In her own words, Uche tells us that she "was a child prone to hysterics" (p. 70), and, "above all else...was exhausting" (p. 71), and self-centered (p. 71). In her mother's words, Uche is "so disappointing" (p. 75). Unlike her sister Udoma, Uche does not seek to create a positive relationship with her parents. She is demanding and seeks to have her own way, all the time. She is willing to throw tantrums to get what she wants. When her mother asks her to drive to the airport to collect her sister, she continues watching television and eventually falls asleep. Finally, her mother has no option but to drive to the airport herself to collect Udoma. In the process, she gets involved in a road accident and loses her life. Uche is a difficult daughter who is knowingly and purposely hysterical and exhausting. She is a demanding and disappointing daughter whose self-centeredness causes her mother's death. Uche is further shunned by her father, who twists his wrist away from her while they are out shopping, unwilling to be engaged by her (p. 66). A difficult daughter makes for a difficult relationship with her parents. While "Second Chances" calls for compassion towards parents with obstinate daughters/children, it further challenges these children to be pleasant and respectful to their parents in order to avoid causing harm not only to their parents, but also to their family as a whole.

Through her short stories, Arimah gives social commentary on parenting ultimately to show that parents shape children to be who they become. While the fact that parents' parenting techniques are what mold children into what they become/who they are is not a particularly groundbreaking revelation, Arimah's short story collection nevertheless serves as a vital reminder to parents that they must not for a moment lose sight of the fact that they have a critical responsibility in bringing up whole, upright children. The role of parents in appropriately bringing up their children cannot be overemphasized. As Russian writer Leo Tolstoy as quoted by Goodreads [19] once said, "everything depends on upbringing".

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has endeavoured to show that Arimah's stories as presented in her collection *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky* (2017) engage in social commentary on parenting. The study used a qualitative research design and was informed by the reader-response theory. It showed that Arimah's stories engage in social commentary on parenting by condemning poor disciplining methods, criticizing disproportionate affection shown to children by parents, castigating parental abuse, critiquing over-dependence on children by parents, and calling for compassion on parents with difficult children. The study further concluded that parents are vital in molding children into who they become; the former should therefore take their role seriously and bring up whole, upright adults.

The study recommends that researchers engage in further study of the short story genre. Additionally, issues such as mental health in Arimah's stories are rich areas for researchers engaged in the short story genre. Finally, rather than analyzing women as a homogenic category, this study recommends narrowing women to specific groups as this approach grasps the specific concerns of each category.

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