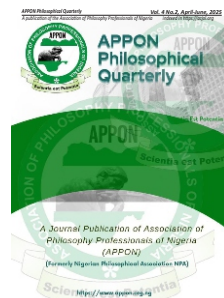


UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF POVERTY IN CONDITIONING HUMAN BEHAVIOUR THROUGH AFRICAN LITERATURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL READING OF 'AN EX-MAS FEAST'



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ABSTRACT

With Africa considered the poorest continent in the world, the subject of poverty is at the core of how the continent confronts its challenges, meets the sustainable development goal mandate, and manages its future hopes. This study takes its basic theoretical starting point from the notion of behavior as it is influenced and directed by poverty, implying also, and including, its varieties and multiplications. To be able to understand poverty in all its dimensions, especially as it relates to mind set, internal fixations and mental acquiescence require conceptual tool that will capture its varieties. It is for this reason that this study employs the philosophical method of dialectics. This study looks specifically at Uwem Akpan's 'An Ex-Mas Feast.' By reflecting the life of people, literature helps to show the links between poverty and behaviour and how this touches every facet of all our actions. Philosophy with its reflective, critical and analytic bent is needed to review the ideas extracted from the story in order to gauge their suitability or otherwise in rendering the African experience. This study finds out that resolving poverty in Africa is tied to the extent leaders are living up to their mandate to guide society to a good life. It also discovered that poverty is the basic element influencing progress, achievement, and, even, how gender roles are balanced, interpreted and executed. This paper concludes that there is need to integrate all societal strata in building a progressive and sustainable society.

Keywords: Africa, Poverty, Human behaviour, African literature, Philosophy

Introduction

Against the backdrop of many devastating effects of poverty in Africa, the notion of understanding it through African literature has potentially much to offer in terms of providing minute and detailed insight into the factors responsible for its origin and

sustenance. For this paper the important feature is the intimate relationship that exists between poverty and human behaviour as it is captured in Uwem Akpan's *An Ex-Mas Feast*.¹ The story offers a persistent perspective on poverty as the foremost condition in determining human behaviour.

¹ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-Mas Feast', *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, Edited by Helon Habila, (London: Granta, 2011), 66-91.

There is a plurality of poverty induced behaviour and they are interlinked amongst themselves. Specifically, we can point to mental, psychological, material, spiritual as such representatives. This calls for considerable, critical and analytic capacity to be able to review all the multidimensional facets of poverty and, especially, how they reinforce each other. This is where philosophy comes in to ensure that cogent and relevant ideas are extracted from literature and properly interrogated. More pertinently, the issues raised by Akpan are far too important not to be explored in any real attempt at understanding the behaviour of those submerged in poverty who need any form of intervention. In the last analysis, poverty overrides, and even overwrites everything: human worth, sense of decency, child abuse, parental responsibility and, even, gender. The academic and socio-political relevance of this study, then, depends on the degree to which its theoretical assumptions and presuppositions can provide insight into the diverse and intricate nature of poverty, provide a road map on how to eradicate it and create sustainable institutional pillars to keep it at bay.

Synopsis

Set in Nairobi, Kenya, Uwem Akpan's 'An Ex-Mas Feast' presents a profile of a street family, machokosh, comprising of eight family members: Baba, Mama, twelve-year-old Maisha, ten-year-old Naema, eight-year-old Jigana (who narrates the story), two-year-old twins, Otieno and Atieno, and Baby. Akpan uses this family as an empirical frame to peg the many faces of poverty. Maisha takes to prostitution, saddled with the responsibility of catering for the family, especially raising money for Jigana to go back to school. Jigana and Naema take turns to beg using Baby as bait to attract people's generosity. Baba is a thief, whose area of specialisation is picking pocket. Mama acts as the accountant general, collecting all the funds and keeping them for Jigana's school fees because he is the first son. Even with all

their creative ways to achieve income diversification, they remained enmeshed in poverty.

What is more important, however, is how their condition affects everything, including their internal power relations. Twelve-year-old Maisha as the breadwinner dictates what happens to the point that when she "came in, Mama stood aside like a maid"² while Jigana can fight Mama to the point of biting her right thigh. This way a poverty stricken family sets the standards of behaviour for how its members relate to others and the society. Moral conduct is thrown to the winds, as actors are equipped to resort to any level of vile behaviour that guarantees their basic survival, not minding if society is brought to its heels. The strength of Akpan's story lies in helping to articulate a conceptual framework for analysing the increasing complex relations between poverty and human behaviour on individuals, families, society and, even, gender and how it is interpreted and accepted.

Poverty and Human Behaviour

To understand poverty and its ripple dimensions, especially as it impacts on human behaviour calls for a structural approach. What does it mean to be poor, to have little or nothing? Has such a person reached Abraham Maslow's first hierarchy of need or is such a person below it? What does it really mean to be unable to afford the basic necessities of life – basic nutrition, roof over one's head, clothes to cover one's nakedness, health, education, and ability to fight against vulnerability? How would such a condition affect a person's sense of worth, conduct and manners? Does poverty predispose its victims to manners of deportment expected from members of society or does it turn them off such behaviour? Does it, even, offer its victims a sense of inclusion as members of society? Or does it render its victims completely powerless, unable to negotiate their welfare through any legitimate means? To what

extent, then, does poverty compel those at its grip to fashion out their own code of conduct and coping strategies? Is poverty gender neutral? Can leadership play a crucial role in its amelioration? These questions reveal three important and interrelated characteristics of poverty – downtrodden, exploited and excluded. They also form anticipations of the discussion that await this study. In what follows, this study will bring out the detailed connections that exist in the tangled knot of poverty and human behaviour through the activities of characters in 'An Ex-mas Feast'.

The Role of Poverty in Conditioning Human Behaviour

This analysis will focus on poverty induced behaviour such as mental, psychological, and material disposition and how they are interlinked. The first question to ask is how does poverty affect thinking? Almost every action of the characters in Ex-mas Feast was directed by the conditions of their material existence. The consequences are most obvious and blatant in the way the children are dehumanised and turned into articles of commerce. Mama sees nothing wrong with Baba picking other peoples' pockets as a means of livelihood. She even accuses him of not working for days. In the same vein, she and Baba welcome, in fact encourages, the efforts of their children who are intensely engaged in providing for the family, but in a rather dishonest and destructive manner. Mama is thrilled that her twelve-year-old daughter "commands musungu and motorcars."³ These are three old white men with a monkey who came in a Jaguar to pick Maisha up. When she came back in an old Renault taxi, slouched and exhausted, her father's only disappointment is that she did not return in the Jaguar with the white men. He was waiting to collect dollar and Euros from them. Even Baby is not spared. Jigana reports that "though people were more

generous to beggars at Ex-mas, our real bait was Baby. We took turns pushing him in the faces of passers-by."⁴ This practice is undertaken with the full support of their parents even in inclement weather. So long as whoever is with baby remembers to put him in waterproof paper bags and sweater then, all is well. Mama, in fact, faults Maisha who considers the act as child abuse and refuses to take part in it. Even though this is a two-parent household the poverty level is all-encompassing: mentally, psychologically, and materially. More importantly, Baba and Mama's conduct fail the test of any acceptable human behaviour as it relates to parental responsibility: providing, at least, basic needs for their children, educating them, among others. Their action instead is that of people who have either lost the power of critical thinking or do not see the need to bother with it. For them all ethical considerations have only one purpose: basic survival no matter how it is achieved. The contraction of culture and wellbeing, the acceleration of hunger to a point where reasoning is directed to only vices that produce immediate survival strategies are pointers to how poverty condition human behaviour in a fundamental way. According to Abraham Maslow the physiological need has to be satisfied first before one can aspire to achieve safety, social, esteem and self-actualisation. The question Marx and Engels posed in the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' also underscores the fundamental way poverty can control human actions. According to them, "Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?"⁵

Poverty also has a way of pushing its victims to see themselves as subordinate

² U. Akpan, 'An Ex-Mas Feast', 87.

³ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-Mas Feast', 81.

⁴ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 69.

⁵ K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 51.

humans. Poor people tend to think that they are worth less than their rich counterparts. Baba is only concerned with the dollars he will get from the three old white men with a monkey who took Maisha away in a motorcar. It did not occur to him to question their character and motive. What if they were organ parts merchants or porn merchants who want to film sex between a girl and a monkey? Both the former and the later have serious health or even life-death implication for Maisha. Yet her father who ought to protect her cannot make that connection because for him anyone with money is high up while people like him should take whatever life throws in their direction. The erosion of human dignity is a reality for those holed in poverty. The challenge remains, not only for the fictional characters in *Ex-mas Feast*, but also for the Kenyan (African) government and people, how to bring back those at the peripheral of existence and include them in the social, political, economic, cultural life of the society in a way to turn them into active productive members for the benefit of all.

Poverty also compromises the humanity of its victims. A person who cannot actively participate in matters that have serious implication for his/her wellbeing is highly compromised. Jigana's family, as the representative of the poor, has no say in the affairs of the government. They are, in fact, political nonentities. Given the cost of aspiring to political offices poor people are automatically excluded. In Nigeria, the 2023 presidential ticket of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) were sold for N100,000,000 (One hundred million naira only) and N40,000,000 (Forty million naira only) respectively. These amounts were not part of the bribe and incentives the aspirants doled out throughout their campaigns. It is

difficult to see how people that are scraping for basic survival as in the case of Jigana and his family and the other street families will dream of occupying a political office. Money aside, to "be a leader, a person should, at least, possess a certain educational qualification"⁶ which Baba and Mama do not possess. It is even difficult to see how they can exercise effective voter right. This is because "to be a follower entails the ability to understand government's policies and programmes and to be in a position to accept, criticise and push for their reform."⁷ Without this ability a voter can easily be manipulated and bought over. It is even difficult enough for them to be able to vote. The only thing Mama worries about is that the police will not disturb them for having a contraband good, here represented as kabire that helps her and her family keep hunger at bay. Besides this, she does not see that the government ought to have policies that should protect the basic right of her family. Her brother, uncle Peter who was shot by the police in a case of mistaken identity had his corpse given to a medical school by the mortuary because they could not pay the bill.⁸ Place this beside the case of Adeola Daniel, a wheelchair user and the son of Gbenga Daniel, former governor of Ogun state, Nigeria, who was discriminated against by Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport, MMIA, Lagos on 27 March, 2025. Following the treatment, KFC was shut down by the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria, FAAN. The Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, FCCPC, condemned the discrimination. In addition, even though the restaurant apologised over the treatment, they were summoned by the House of Representatives Committee on Disabilities. The disturbing aspect this comparison

⁶ MSC Okolo, 'Understanding Social Environment through African Literature: A Philosophical Re-imaging of Shanty Town, *Fahsanu Journal of the Arts and Humanities*, Vol.3, No.1, (2020), 156.

⁷ MSC Okolo, 'Understanding Social Environment through African Literature, 156.

⁸ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 78.

brings out is that the plight of the poor is often relegated to an inconsequential realm while focus and emphasis are placed on how societal arrangement caters for the elites and privileged few.

Resolving Poverty

What should be done to bring poverty to its heel or, at least, subdue its debilitating effects? The first is gender equity. The tension and contradiction exhibited by the characters demonstrate how poverty not only influences human behaviour but is intimately tied to gender. All the financial activities of Jigana and his family during the Christmas period were directed at only one end: to raise money for Jigana to go to school. When ten years old Naema came back from begging with Baby she handed the money over to Mama who quickly “banked”⁹ it. The purpose is to raise school fees for eight years old Jigana, the first male child of the family, who according to Baba should not be allowed to become a pocket thief like him and “can’t be useless as the gals.”¹⁰ As for Naema when she “brought out a half-eaten turkey drumstick, Mama grabbed her ears, thinking that she had bought it with the money she’d earned begging. Naema quickly explained that her new boyfriend had given it to her.”¹¹ So long as no money was removed from the money earned to fund Jigana’s school fees, Mama is not interested in who Naema is befriending. Jigana reports that the boy in question “was a big shot in the street gang that controlled our area, a dreaded figure.”¹² Equally Maisha’s fate in the hands of the three old white men with a monkey does not duly worry her parents even though Mama knows (as Baba should also know) that they can “let their

ma-monkey fuck her.”¹³ Her primary interest is for her to contribute to Jigana’s back-to-school project. Even though Maisha has bought his school uniform, Mama tells Jigana to tell Maisha that he needs more, “shoes, PTA fee, prep fee. We must all save all Ex-mas rate to educate you, first son.”¹⁴

What is important here is that the most important tool - education – in preparing a child to become independent, develop the art of decision making and critical thinking, and to face the challenges of the future is reserved for the male child, Jigana. Bewaji contends that to educate is “to teach someone over a long period of time about all aspects of reality relevant to their existence and survival, so that the person acquires not only knowledge, but also clear understanding of these issues, including the specific contents, ideas, materials, skills, and attitudes that facilitate survival.”¹⁵ Without education the female children in this story are programmed to a life of incompetence, lack of skills and learning that will enable them to earn an income that will pull them out of poverty. The long run aftermaths of this attitude (reserving the acquisition of formal education for the male child) cripples society as women are not able to make meaningful contribution to the development of the society. The story, then, underscores poverty and its implicit role in advancing gender discrimination as the pivotal element fuelling socio-political crisis, hindering development and working against the realisation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa. In the context of the story, the female children are at the receiving end of the unequal treatment which is completely against the United Nations SDGs Goal 5 on Gender Equality.¹⁶

⁹ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 79.

¹⁰ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 81.

¹¹ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 79.

¹² U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 79.

¹³ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 70.

¹⁴ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 90.

¹⁵ J. A. I. Bewaji, 'Philosophy, Education and Art in Africa', *The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy*, Edited by Adeshina Afolayan and Toyin Falola, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 742.

¹⁶ United Nations, 'Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and empower all Women and Girls,' <https://www.un.org>

Akpa and Ekenta note that there is “growing recognition that gender equality can be an accelerator – or catalytic policy intervention – that triggers positive multiplier effects across the spectrum of development.”¹⁷ Babatuyi insists that gender discrimination has robbed Africa of possible progress more than any other factor ever identified.¹⁸ There is need for African countries to institute and implement a national policy on education that guarantees equal and compulsory access to education for all children irrespective of gender. The story champions an egalitarian culture that shuns gender discrimination as the route to creating and sustaining development. This way of looking at poverty implies that it cannot be eliminated without addressing gender and social oppressions. Babatuyi submits that for African countries to harness the developmental opportunities of this age, they should do away with unhealthy categorisation of sex, and jettison every cultural practice and androcentric bias in favour of an egalitarian society.¹⁹

Interestingly, in spite of all the efforts to get Jigana back to school, he did not make it. Why? There is obvious tension between what is expected of a male child and what poverty allows him to expect of himself. To this must be added internal conflict which can be understood, to a large extent, as a direct result of the inability to break the jinx of poverty. Jigana's abandoning school and opting for fulltime street boy was borne out of his guilt that he was responsible for Maisha leaving home to embrace fulltime prostitution due to the pressure to fund his education. Here's Jigana's feeling: “Guilt began to build in my gut. Maybe if I had joined a street gang, Maisha would not have wanted to leave. I wouldn't have needed money for school fees, and perhaps there

would have been peace between Maisha and my parents.”²⁰ Importantly, Jigana is aware that Maisha wants to go to school and resents the discrimination against her based on gender. It is this epistemic awareness which creates tension in Maisha's relationship with her family that fuelled Jigana's decision. Yet, there is a strong case for stressing how poverty neutralises the advantage of a male child in African cultural arrangement. Jigana's action, then, helps to shed critical light on the socio-dynamics involving poverty and gender and how they can take on different hues and meanings in different circumstances. The story demonstrates one central point: privileges and entitlements carry grave risks when accorded to individuals not on the basis of merit but gender especially when there is no economic power to back such selection. The story further questions whether the patriarchal and androcentric practices engaged by many African countries in any way promote progress in the continent. It questions particularly the profitability of patriarchal policies and practices that elevate a male child above elder female siblings and bestow on him the first right to life foremost enhancing skill – education – even if the female children have to beg and or prostitute themselves to fund this skill.

The second is the role of leadership. This can be approached from a triple-headed dimension: family, societal, and government level. Beginning with the family what kind of parents cannot stop their twelve year old daughter from going into fulltime prostitution and their eight year old son from going into fulltime street boy despite all the sacrifices the family has made to get him back to school? Do they not possess any parental power? Nolan and Lenski submit that with “respect to children, the nuclear

¹⁷ E. C. Akpa and C. M. Ekenta, 'Gender Profiling of the Incidence of Poverty in Nigeria: A Statistical Review', *African Journal of Gender and Development*, Vol. 6, Nos. 1&2, (2019), 101.

¹⁸ O. T. Babatuyi, 'Globalization and the Question of Gender Inequality in Nigeria', *African Journal of Gender and Development*, Vol. 6, Nos. 1&2, (2019), 122.

¹⁹ Babatuyi, 'Globalization and the Question of Gender Inequality in Nigeria', 133.

²⁰ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 80.

family is still expected to be the major factor in personality development, instilling basic values, providing affection, offering guidance and encouragement in school and career decisions, training in the use of many and much more.”²¹ The simple answer is that Mama and Baba do not fit into this category. To put it bluntly, their parental control is completely ineffectual and useless. However, before criticising the parents for not providing their children with the right moral compass, it is important to enquire if they know any better. Consider Baby, for instance, who is being raised in tarpaulin roofed, waterproof wall shack, “which stood on a cement slab at the end of an alley”²² and submerged in flood whenever it rains; used as an article of commerce and is already a street kid, what should society expect him to pass to his child if he eventually has one? Although not much was said about Baba's upbringing but the profile of his mother and the fact that he has never held any legitimate job except to pick peoples pocket and steal, it is most probable that the upbringing he is giving his children mirrors his own. As for Mama, apart from coming to Nairobi with no one to turn to and no social welfare from the government, bearing and trying to raise children under inhuman conditions has turned her into an underweight, ragged looking, bony faced woman whose main sustenance is sniffing kabire which makes “her face pinched like the face of a mad cow.”²³ Their inability to provide effective leadership for their children points to the many ways poverty can alter perception. It can disturb and distort the way we see things, the way we think, the things we accept as normal and, especially, the way we disregard our worth as human being, our dignity as a person and our right to self-

respect.

Coming to societal contribution, by not assisting indigent families to live a better life the society unwittingly short changes itself. The contribution of the home to the informal education of a child is highly compromised as such parents are often overwhelmed with their existential struggles as the circumstances of Jigana's parents in the story depicts. Bewaji is of the opinion that “contemporary society does not seem to adequately appreciate the position of family, relatives, community, and society in the education of humans, thereby unintentionally creating a disconnection between the formal and the informal systems of education, instead of coordinating both to enhance the overall product of the process and system.”²⁴ This is particularly important because “there is a direct correlation between the ways in which humans educate their young and the level of competence of humans in society to deal with problems of existence.”²⁵ Maisha's slumped shoulders at the end of the story, her decision to leave home for fulltime prostitution and Jigana's leaving home for fulltime street boy attest to their incompetence in dealing with their existential problems. Without commitment to their education both by their parents and the society they buckle under the weight of the challenge life threw at them. Bewaji insists that “all the civilised societies invest great resources in the upbringing, teaching, and training of their young, over a long period of time, to make them conversant with the values of the society and to prepare them for carrying the burden of sustaining society on a daily basis and into the future.”²⁶ This is in direct contrast with the final actions of Maisha and Jigana. Their actions

²¹ P. Nolan and G. Lenski, *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology*, Ninth edition, (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 278-279.

²² U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 67.

²³ U. Akpan, 'An Ex-mas Feast', 72.

²⁴ J.A. I. Bewaji, 'Philosophy, Education and Art in Africa', p.743.

²⁵ J.A.I. Bewaji, 'Philosophy, Education and Art in Africa', p.734.

²⁶ J.A.I. Bewaji, 'Philosophy, Education and Art in Africa', p.741.

demonstrate youths who are overwhelmed, overburdened and subdued by their lot and who have lost courage, confidence and faith in their ability to handle their own affairs, not to talk of impacting positively on the society through daily sustainable actions and into the future.

Finally, is the role of government in alleviating poverty. Leadership is critical for a sustainable development to take place. As such to effectively address poverty and its multiple complicated and complex dimensions, require an institutional framework, which has to come from government. It is this that will ensure that different concerns are balanced and represented, that all get a fair chance to participate in issues especially those that define their wellbeing; and that the final decision reached is jointly owned by all. In other words, how does government translate democratic merits into real-life benefit to upturn the challenges posed by poverty? Chinweuba places politics at the centre of civil society. In his view politics:

sets the limits of human condition, implementation of philosophical postulations, existence, nature and mode of operation of other human institutions as well as the socio-economic incentives and opportunities. Along this line, politics is the catalyst behind power distribution, poor/quality education, security/insecurity, stability/lawlessness, conducive/not-conducive environment, economic opportunities, market incentives

and socio-economic space that determine actualization of economic objectives, dream projects, means of livelihood and self-reliance.²⁷

Equally, Daron and James sees poverty as resulting from government's inability or unwillingness to undertake public socio-economic measures necessary to eradicate it.²⁸ To better understand the central role government has to play in eradicating poverty is to raise a pertinent issue: why is Jigana's family unable to escape from poverty despite the many creative ways they tried to diversify their earnings.

All these point to socio-economic failure as invariably tied to bad leadership. The issue of bad leadership and its comprehensive effect on hindering development both at the individual and societal level has long been pointed out by philosophers and scholars. For Plato one cannot be a good leader without submitting himself to core philosophical values. These values include: justice, courage, truthfulness, wisdom. In short, leadership and philosophy should be fused. Achebe insists that the main problem hindering Nigeria's development and progress is bad leadership. According to Cunningham, a "government is ineffective when it does not or cannot take appropriate measures to achieve the goals of the society it governs."²⁹ The lives of the people portrayed in the story show absence of government intervention. Poverty, then, is an offshoot of bad leadership. One way to address this is to reflect on and be guided by what Ojukwu stated in his book, *Because I am Involved*. According to him, for "Nigeria to be great,

²⁷ G. E. Chinweuba, 'Poor Human Condition in Nigeria: The Socio-Political Foundation and Role of Philosophy, Philosophy and National Security: Interrogations in a Distressed Nation, Edited by Alloy S. Ihuah and Philip A. Idachaba, Vol. 1, (2021), 81.

²⁸ A. Daron and R. James, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, (London: Profile Books, 2013), 50.

²⁹ F. Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), 17.

those who aspire to lead must bear in mind the fact that they are servants and as such cannot ever be greater than the people, their masters.”³⁰ If leaders can see themselves as the servants of the poor they will do all within their means to eradicate poverty because they would not want to subject themselves to the condition under which poor people live. Is there any African president who will live in a shack and watch his/her children beg, including a baby, for daily sustenance? And this is not the worst of the indignities the poor were forced to face. Some street kids do not have anything at all: no shacks, no parents, no money, and no food. They sleep in the open air, steal what they can, prostitute themselves to whomever is willing, and leave the rest to fate. Here every aspect of streetism is represented. Streetism refers to children in the streets at the mercy of the weather without any of the basic things in life such as food, portable water, healthcare, sanitation, education and the like.³¹ Among these some are children of the street, those who stay permanently outside their homes with no family ties; and children on the street, those who occasionally return to their homes. Streetism also has to do with children “who might not necessarily be homeless or without families, but also live in situations where there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults.”³² This is where Jigana and his siblings belong. However both children of the street and children on the street share common characteristics. These “children are vulnerable to exploitation, and survival means learning how to cope with physical danger, terror and sexual and physical abuse

from some members of the society.”³³

Othniel and Ile highlight the paradox of street children being visible yet socially dead to the public. They noted that “children of the street are visible as they reside in public open space and at the same time, invisible due to the continuous violation of rights.”³⁴ This raises a fundamental question as to whether a street child is in essence different from a child in proper home setting. Before questioning the absurdity of this assumption there is need to reflect on the rights of a child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) outlines the fundamental rights and freedoms that all children are entitled to. These include the right to life, education, health, protection from abuse, exploitation and discrimination.³⁵

What this implies is that poverty forces a metaphysical redefinition of what it means to be a child – its meaning in context is different from its reality. The children in the story fall outside the circle of Child's Right. At whatever age they can fend for themselves. They do not know anything about Child's Right, they do not enjoy any, they are not concerned about it and the government do not deem it fit to extend it to them. Granting children their right is a matter of enlightened protection for society as this will go a long way in curbing criminal activities and insecurity. In 2024, at least, thirty minors were charged with treason and inciting a military coup after they took part in end-bad-governance protest in Nigeria. They were out-of-school children. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and The World Bank warn that “failing to address growing poverty in

³⁰ C. O. Ojukwu, *Because I am Involved*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1989), 58.

³¹ O. C. Othniel and O. J. Ile, 'Streetism in African Literature: A Study of Uwem Akpan's *An Ex-Mas Feast*, K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and Amma Darko's *Faceless*, *Awka Journal of English Language and Literary Studies (AJELLS)*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (2023), 181.

³² Othniel and Ile, 'Streetism in African Literature', 282.

³³ O. C. Othniel and O. J. Ile, 'Streetism in African Literature', 296.

³⁴ O. C. Othniel and O. J. Ile, 'Streetism in African Literature', 283.

³⁵ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, 1989.

Africa risks rising violence and crime and imperils the peaceful development of viable states. Thus measures to reduce poverty are not a luxury, they are essential for the peaceful development of Africa and for other regions.”³⁶ In the story, with no government safety net to cushion what they are going through, the street kids devise their own means and coping strategies “one man screamed and pointed at two kids, who were holding his wallet. No one was interested. His pocket was ripped to the zipper, leaving a square hole in the front of his trousers. He pulled out his shirt to hide his nakedness.”³⁷ In addition, visitors who have to take taxis from the part of the town where the street kids roam are always afraid of being robbed by the street kids, “the anxious faces of ...visitors..., bracing for what would be the most dangerous twenty minutes of their twelve-hour journeys, fearful of being robbed whenever the taxis slowed down.”³⁸ For a hypertensive passenger this may be a life and death journey. What all these point to is that poverty alleviation is a necessity in any genuine effort towards building creative and productive individuals, safe and secure society, and an inclusive and a progressive and sustainable world.

Conclusion

To sum up, poverty is a reality with far-reaching social implications that affect human behaviour. The role of poverty in shaping human behaviour is characterised by diverse responses and profound consequences, evident in individual, families and society at large. Understanding poverty's dynamics, root causes, and sustaining effects is crucial, as is identifying effective strategies to address it at multiple levels: individual, family, societal, and governmental. Akpan's 'An Ex-mas Feast'

highlights the importance of integrating all societal strata in building a progressive society, thereby, providing a framework for grasping the complex relationships between poverty and human behaviour, and its implications for individuals, families, society, and even gender dynamics.

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