
Poverty and Marginalization in Richard Ntiru's Poems

Panaewazibiou Dadja-Tiou*

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the negative effects of poverty and marginalization inherent in African societies and the necessity to undertake change in order to end up with these plagues. Semiotics and Marxist Approach to literature have been used to scrutinize this study. From the study, it is established that poverty and marginalization threaten the welfare of many Africans and also hinder the development of most African societies. The study reveals that the poor state of the pauper is due to the negligence of the rich who refuse to provide help. In addition, the paper scratches the conscience of the privileged and the rich on the necessity to fend for the needs of the destitute from the society. In the same vein, the paper shows that the poet has used some poetic devices as literary means in his denunciation of the social inequality among human beings. The use of the two mentioned theories helps conclude that the poor and the destitute as well as the rich have each one a responsibility in the eradication of the poverty and the marginalization plaguing African societies in general and the Ugandan society in particular. Finally, the paper shows that the perpetuation of poverty in Africa is partly due to the wickedness of the political leaders who always seek to enrich themselves leaving the majority at the periphery. They should therefore undertake some meaningful reforms in order to contribute to the takeoff of the continent.

Keywords: Poverty, Marginalization, African Societies, Responsibility, Political Leaders

Résumé : Cet article vise à évaluer de manière critique les effets négatifs de la pauvreté et de la marginalisation inhérents dans les sociétés africaines et la nécessité d'entreprendre des changements afin d'en finir avec ces maux. La sémiotique et le marxisme ont été utilisés pour analyser cette étude. De cette étude, il ressort que la pauvreté et la marginalisation menacent le bien-être des Africains et entravent également le développement de la plupart des sociétés africaines. L'étude révèle que la précarité des pauvres est due à la négligence des riches. De plus, l'article

* Université de Kara, Togo / dadjatiouespoir@yahoo.fr

écorche la conscience des privilégiés et des riches sur la nécessité de subvenir aux besoins des plus démunis de la société. Dans le même ordre d'idées, l'article montre que le poète a utilisé des techniques poétiques comme moyens dans sa dénonciation de l'inégalité sociale entre les êtres humains. L'usage des deux théories mentionnées permet de conclure que les pauvres et les riches ont chacun une responsabilité dans l'éradication de la pauvreté et de la marginalisation qui sévit dans les sociétés africaines en général et la société ougandaise en particulier. Enfin, l'article montre que la perpétuation de la pauvreté en Afrique est en partie due à la méchanceté des dirigeants politiques qui cherchent toujours à s'enrichir en laissant la majorité à la périphérie. Ils devraient donc entreprendre des réformes afin de contribuer au décollage du continent.

Mots-clés: pauvreté, marginalisation, sociétés africaines, responsabilité, leaders politiques

Introduction

Every society, however democratic and egalitarian, abounds within itself both marginalized and poor people. Prejudice against people who are different from others appears to be a universal phenomenon and marginalization as well as poverty constitute common marks of these people. Literature in general and African literature in particular is responsive to socio-political and cultural phenomena. It is therefore used by creative writers to unveil certain inherent abnormalities in various African societies.

Studies such as Shallon Atuhaire Moreen's "Human Rights Advocacy in the Poetry of Contemporary Ugandan Women Poets" and Regina Obiageli's "A Linguistic Comparison of Pauperism in African and Non-African Setting: A Study of Richard Nturu's 'The Pauper' and Crabbe's 'The Pauper's Funeral'" have been conducted on the issue of poverty and marginalization. These studies generally show that, there exists injustice, inequalities, and social imbalances that debase the sense of existence of the poor and the marginalized in most African societies in general and in Ugandan society in particular.

Richard Nturu in his poems raises disturbing questions about the poor and the marginalized people in his fictional society and questions the responsibility of the poor as well as that of the rich in the society. The poet sheds light on how the poor and the marginalized are targets of repression

and hostility, forever leading a life of aloofness. Relying on some poetic devices, the poet succeeds in depicting the sorrowful and regretful conditions of the poor in African societies.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and examine the root causes of poverty and marginalization inherent in most African societies and their negative impacts on the development of the whole continent. Furthermore, the paper proposes a series of measures to be undertaken in order to end up with the issue of poverty ubiquitous in African societies. Marxist Approach to literature and Semiotics are used as literary theories. Marxist approach to literature in this paper refers to “changes in fundamental mode of material production effect, changes in the class structure of a society, establishing in each era dominant and subordinate classes that engage in a struggle for economic, political, and social advantage” (Abrahams155). Every literary meaning in semiotics is traced to a sign and its function in a literary work demands the active contribution of the reader who identifies and decodes it. In semiotics, every narrative element—whether made up of words, gestures or images thus corresponds to a sign that needs decoding in order to provide its meaning. This work is structured around two parts: the responsibility of the man and the society in poor people’s miserable life and Richard Nturu’s use of poetic devices in pricking people’s conscience on the harm of poverty.

1. The Responsibility of Man and Society in Poor People’s Miserable Life

Man and the nature have generally been at the center of various debates in terms of their responsibilities of the inequalities among human beings. The desire of each human being is to see his or her condition improve from time to time. Each human being seeks to better his or her living conditions because, since the creation myth, God who is the creator of Humankind has recommended that Man should eat with the sweat of his work (Genesis1:19). This situation put man in a condition of permanent fight in order to better his living conditions. Remarkably, in spite of the fight of each human being for the betterment of their living conditions, many people still live in extreme poverty whereas only few people experience a comfortable life. This situation is a worldwide phenomenon. The situation pushes Richard Nturu to write about this alarming situation in order to call for social equilibrium. In his poems, he

raises the disturbing worries concerning the pauper and the marginalized in African society in general and that of Uganda in particular. The poet's diction which is his choice of words succeeds in calling the attention of the rich who neglect their counterparts in poverty. The speaker in the following excerpt unequivocally says that: "Does he pat his paunch at the wonderful sight?"

Pauper, pauper crouching in beautiful verandas of beautiful cities and beautiful people (Ntiru, verses 25-26)

From the above verses, one can see the speaker drawing the attention of the rich who neglect the poor in the society. By extension, the speaker points out to those who drive beautiful cars and live in beautiful houses but do not care about the marginalized. In African societies, the discrepancy between the rich and the poor is blatant. The African society is a society where very few people are immensely rich whereas the whole majority lives in abject poverty. This situation scratches the conscience of Richard Ntiru, who, as a product of his society, decides to shed light on this evil that undermines African society. For the speaker, the rich are so egoistic that they neglect the indigent and the destitute and consequently, contribute to the stagnation of the poor. It is arguable that the so-called rich people turn to be poor by neglecting the destitute. According to the poet, the lack of the rich people's generosity before the extreme poverty of the indigent is synonymous with poverty. Therefore, poverty, in the words of Ntiru, connotes two meanings: material poverty and mental poverty. For the poet, anyone who lacks financial and material means is considered as a poor person. He also considers those who are financially and materially rich, but who lack generosity, as poor people. Lawrence Darmani in his critical analysis on these poems bitterly observes that "Being so negligent of the poor, the others have demonstrated their own type of poverty in the sense of failing to help the poor. Where people lack generosity, their lack of it becomes poverty for them" (Darmani 45). Darmani, hereby draws the attention of the rich who very often neglect the poor forgetting that nobody is born rich. Poverty and richness are man-made; therefore, the rich and the poor should not take it for granted that it is eternal. Poverty in these poems is caused by diseases, wars, natural disasters as well as human activities. Therefore, mutual love and social action can be of great importance in the resolution of this problem. Individuals have roles and responsibilities in the process of helping the

poor person closer to them (Darmani 46). Poverty has a great impact on human beings and everybody can be found in this sorrowful situation. Richard Nturu being aware of the importance of literature resorts to it in order to draw readers' attention to the necessity of rethinking on the place of literature in the resolution of poverty which for a longtime has been the concern of scholars of hard sciences. Phenyo Butale in his thesis on the role of literature in the resolution of poverty in West Africa maintains that: "The thesis explores the unique way in which literature may contribute to the better understanding of poverty, a field that has hitherto been largely dominated by scholarship that relies on quantitative analysis as opposed to qualitative approaches" (Butale 3). Literature provides insights into the 'lived realities' of the poor and that with its vividly imagined specificities it illuminates the broad generalizations about poverty established in other disciplines. The poet questions himself on the origin of poverty in human society. In this vein, he uses images to paint in the minds of the readers for an effect. He laments the poor conditions of the pauper and wants to know the root cause of this brutal situation that embraces the pauper. In these poems, Richard Nturu gives a clear image of what happens in the Ugandan society as far as the place of the poor is concerned. The persona in the following verses scratches the conscience of the reader as follows: Tourists and I will take you snapshots. / And your MP with a shining head and triple chin / Will mourn your fate in a supplementary question / at question time (verses 26-30).

From these verses, the persona mentions other members of his fictional Ugandan society who, in his own view, could help in the improvement of the poor conditions of the pauper. In the same way, the persona is drawing the attention of other rich members of the society to the necessity to respond positively to the solicitation of the indigent. Lawrence Darmani lays emphasis on this issue when he writes "the poet draws the attention to all to respond positively to social actions established to help the poor. As it is said in French: "Noblesse oblige"- nobility implies responsibility. The scriptures render the same idea this way: to whom much is given, much is required" (45).

The poems by Nturu are considered to be the most vivid portrayal of how the indigent are treated among human society and shed light on how poverty dehumanizes people. The poet continues wondering the causes of the pauper's situation in that society. He pursues his

interrogations wondering how come some people are very rich while others stagnate in the perpetual poverty. Who is responsible for the poverty among human beings and how one should come up with this undesirable situation? (52). The poet being a pure product of Uganda and witnessing whatever is taking place in his society concludes that it is urgent to draw people's attention to the harm of poverty in African societies in general and that of Ugandan in particular. He therefore resorts to these poems which offer a ground for the discussion of this burning issue. Pheny Butale reiterates this issue of poverty and its negative impact on human beings. In the following verses he maintains that:

The scope of current interest in the status of poverty in Africa is indicated by the three questions: who are the poor? Why are they poor? And what can be done about it? At each of these levels of enquiry –the profile of poverty, its causes and the implications for policy and practice – there is growing recognition of the value of a multidisciplinary approach...and the need to integrate this with more 'qualitative' evidence reflecting poor people's own experience. (Butale 8)

Poverty becomes a common denominator in most African countries and this has become a canker gnawing people and societies. This evil did not leave many writers and critics aloof. Many studies have been conducted in the view of finding solutions to this disease among human beings for in the view of Bhattacharyya, "billion people are trapped in extreme poverty and reside in developing countries" (3). The rate of poverty in African nations is high and frightening due to the harm it does to people. Alex Addae-Korankye in his analysis of causes of poverty and its negative impacts on African nations points out that "The study found that poverty in Africa is caused by a number of factors including corruption and poor governance, limited employment opportunities, poor infrastructure, poor resource usage, wars and unending conflicts, poor World Bank and IMF policies, among others" (Korankye 45). Unlike Richard Nturu who links poverty to natural power, Alex Addae thinks that poverty is caused by a series of human factors. For Richard Nturu, whoever is responsible for causing poverty in human society should be vehemently criticized. Poverty does harm to human beings. Therefore, the poet calls the readers' attention to undertake concrete actions in order to eradicate

this disease in human societies. It is true that many people do not have the same appreciation on the concept of poverty and its causes but what is important is that everybody is conscious of the negative impact of poverty on human beings and on societies. The persona in this poem questions the brutal force that is responsible for the pauper's state:

What brutal force, malignant element dared to forge your
piteous fate? / Was it worth the effort, the time? (verses 3-4)

The analysis of these verses shows that the persona wonders about the causes of the miserable and the piteous conditions of the pauper. Most often, many people think that sorcerers should be held responsible for poverty in human societies. Others view God as being responsible for the pauper's poor state. Simply put, the brutal force can be held as being responsible for the pauper's piteous conditions. From this, one can say that it is no use being wicked towards other human beings. Turning another human being into the state of pauper is a manifestation of the wickedness. In order to lay much more emphasis on the alarming condition of the pauper, the poet made use of some figures of speech which have contributed to the understanding of his message. The reading of these poems gives an image of poverty as noted by Lawrence Darmani as follows "The poem depicts several scenarios heavily-laden with imagery. Note the image of poverty, deprivation, and sadness as the poet captures the living condition of the pauper. Also, note how imagery contributes to the theme of the poems" (47). The speaker in the following verses has it that: "You limply lean on a leafless tree, Nursing the jiggers that shrivel your bottom, Like a baby newly born to an old woman" (verses 6-8). The reading of these verses gives the assonance sound and creates the musical effect in the poems. Richard Nturu uses assonance as a literary tool to accelerate the musical effect in the poems. This develops the internal rhyme that enhances the pleasure of reading and helps the reader to grasp the hidden message contained in these three verses. In addition, it creates a mood as well as a flow that allows the reader to connect with the subject matter which in these poems is the depiction of the pauper's miserable condition. Note the [i:] sound in the following words: [limply, lean, leafless, tree] gives the image of despair, hopeless, extreme poverty. In these verses, the poet gives the image of somebody who is without support or has no resistance. This one leans on a leafless tree. It also connotes the image of a desperate person who is abandoned to the mercy

of the nature. He has no support. The tree on which he wants to lean has no leaves. The tree here is personified. The tree symbolizes the rich who should help the pauper in their poverty. Through this, the poet uses images to paint the picture of poverty in the minds of the readers. With sentimental diction, that is the words used in conveying the meaning, the poet seeks to prick the conscience of those who are rich and refuse to help the pauper.

2. Richard Nturu's Use of Poetic Devices as a Means for Pricking People's Conscience on the Harm of Poverty

The poet uses these poems as a clarion to draw readers' attention to the harm of poverty in African societies. To do so, the poet has made use of many poetic devices as literary tools in the eradication of poverty. Poverty turns people into miserable conditions causing death and harm to people as well as to the society. The conditions of the pauper as depicted in these poems show that he encounters many hardships such as the quest for a comfortable place of abode. The speaker expresses this idea in the following verses: "Pauper, pauper crouching in beautiful verandas of beautiful cities and beautiful people" (verses 26-27). Note that the verb crouching as used in this poem shows the miserable and the poor state of the pauper. In African society, it is a commonly shared view that only poor people crouch or bend down begging for food or any other need. The pauper's crouch proves that they live in abject poverty waiting for rich people's favor in order to survive. The pauper is compared to a marginalized and a needy looking for a better condition. In most African societies, the needy and the marginalized constantly look for a better living condition. Revealing all this situation in his poems, Richard Nturu seems to question the rich and the leaders on their responsibility in securing the poor people in their societies. Nobody has chosen to be poor. Therefore, the poor's state of the pauper should be the concerns of everybody. The narrator in the following stresses:

You sit alone on hairless goatskins your ribs and / bones reflecting the light that beautiful cars reflect on you, / squashing lice between your nails (verses 16-19)

From these verses, it is clear that the pauper is abandoned and jilted. Nobody is there to care about him. This bitter situation of the

pauper did not keep Richard Nturu aloof. It attracts his attention and he has decided to use his poems as a tool in the fight against poverty on the continent. He is aware that a successful work of art is the one that movingly engages with the reader or viewer's intellect and emotions, making them empathetic in their interactions with the minds and lives of other real humans. To elucidate this point on the emotive abilities of art, Felski writes:

The significance of a text is not exhausted by what it reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it. Rather, it is also a matter of what it makes possible in the viewer or reader—what kind of emotions it elicits, what perceptual changes it triggers, what affective bonds it calls into being ...their own. We fumble to account for the often unforeseen impact of texts: the song on the radio that unexpectedly reduces you to tears; the horror movie goriest that continues to haunt your dreams; the novel that finally persuaded you to take up Buddhism or to get divorced. (152)

Felski here illustrates how works of art and literary texts in particular, are able to capture the attention of the readers while also having the ability to shock them into full acknowledgement of the subject matter addressed by fictional works. Literature as Felski eloquently argues, moves the reader into thick descriptions of experiences of poverty as experienced differently and uniquely by individual characters, thereby broadening the perspective of the reading public on indigence. This also allows them to re-imagine themselves in other identities such as those of the poor. Nturu gradually becomes aware that there are imbalances in various class-structures in most African societies in general and in Ugandan society in particular in present-day. The poet expresses his major concerns with the pauper's miserable conditions. The pauper is abandoned at the mercy of the nature without shelter. He has no friend and no family member to sympathize with him. He is obliged to struggle daily on the brink of survival and only endurance and determination help him to see another day. Being aware of the importance of the poetry in the resolution of societal problems, Richard Nturu writes: "The business of poetry in particular is to explore the numerous modes of human response to the problems inherent in a world that is naturally hostile and is increasingly

becoming more and more complex in all its manifestations” (79). Furthermore, he continues portraying his Ugandan society whereby the discrepancies resulting from the exiting class structure make the artist sincerely align with the pauper who sits alone on the hairless goatskins. Having the pauper sit on the hairless goatskins gives an impression that the pauper has been sitting on them for a longtime leading the goatskins lose their hairs. This situation connotes that the social conditions of the pauper last and have not changed. This pauper’s state is similar to that of most Africans as a result of the unfair management of the nations’ resources. This unfair and unfavorable condition facing most Africans should question every artist on the contribution of their literary productions. Amateshe, in his “The Social Function of Poetry in Underdeveloped Society: An East African Experience, lays emphasis on the role of poetry in the following: “To be of genuine use, poetry must articulate a people’s collective experience – the poet who puts people’s idiom and metaphor into poetic verse soon gains central ground, because the artist becomes his/her people’s collective articulation” (85). Through these verses, the poet informs his readers on the importance of literary works and by the way, he criticizes the injustice inherent in human societies. The poet’s use of language contributes to denouncing social injustices in his society. He convincingly writes to denounce some of the social vices and social pathologies, which hinder human existence. Through the use of the contrast, the poet succeeds in creating the miserable image of the pauper in the mind of the readers. The speaker in the following contrast says that: “You limply lean on a leafless tree, / Nursing the jiggers that shrivel your bottom, / Like a baby newly born to an old woman” (verses 6-8).

In these verses, jiggers represent the pauper whose body shakes as a result of the severe hunger that menaces them. Comparing the smoothness of the baby’s skin with that of the old woman provides a sharp contrast. Lawrence Darwani in his study devoted to these poems unequivocally writes that:

Treason is a subversive or treacherous crime against kings and heads of state punishable by death. The mention of it, coupled with the allusion of condemnation, casts the image of how the narrator perceives paupers on our streets. By marginalizing them, the state has condemned to imminent

death, as if they've committed the high crime of treason.
(49)

This passage gives impression that the leaders have a great responsibility in the miserable state of the pauper. The poet is holding the leaders as being negligent and egoistic by leaving the pauper in poor condition. Those of us who are privileged to have a good education, to have been born on the right side of the track to have been fortunate enough to have come into the world without physical or mental handicaps, we are the ones who must share these privileges with all those who (through no fault of their own) have been less fortunate. In doing this, I think we can contribute to the eradication of poverty and marginalization which plague the development of the continent. “Noblesse oblige,” say the French: nobility implies responsibility. It is our joint responsibility to work for the development of our country and the welfare of our fellow men so that poverty and marginalization crippling African societies could be eradicated.

In his fight against discrimination and marginalization in African societies, Richard mourns the hypocrisy inherent in his society, a society full of political villains who care less about the paupers in their societies (Cook and Rubadiri 114). Okonkwo Gabriel Kosiso in his critical work devoted to Richard Nturu's poems avers that “this is as a result of extreme poverty which is more picturesque in the poet's description of the pauper” (2). The narrator in the third stanzas describes the state of the pauper as follows:

You sit alone on hairless goatskins, / your ribs and bones reflecting the light / that beautiful cars reflect on you, / squashing lice between your nails / and cleaning your nails with dry saliva. (verses 16-20)

In this process of rewriting history, the poet wonders why the pauper would be suffering in the midst of plenty and abundance. It is ironic that such a good-looking member of parliament would be indifferent before the poor condition of the pauper and the only thing he could do is to mourn the pauper's fate in a supplementary question at question time. This shows the artful use of irony in his poetic text. The poet uses irony as a means to mock the leaders who neglect the indigent in their societies. This shows how much Eurocentric mentality has destroyed Africans' psyche to the extent that they do not recognize their own brothers and sisters who are living in abject poverty as a result of the

inherent injustice in the society (54). The poet being member of Ugandan society witnesses the ordeals of the poor and how the masses turn a blind eye to it. In his role of reforming his society, the poet used some literary devices as tools in the expression of his concerns. Among other things, one can cite irony, contrast, paradox, hyperbole.... Note that, the poet uses four times the adjective “beautiful” in order to contrast the pauper’s state and that of people surrounding him. The pauper lives in abject poverty but at the same time, he is surrounded by a beautiful environment and beautiful people. This state of affairs shows the extent to which injustice prevails in Ugandan society. The poet paints a picture of an African-based pauper with life of hopelessness, abject poverty, and absolute dependence on non-dependable factors. This pauper of African location receives no organized assistance from his neighbors (Moreen 57). The pauper is marginalized and left aside as if he were responsible for his precarious condition. No assistance is offered to him. He finds himself in loneliness. The Society in which he lives neglects him and considers him as a woe to the society. The situation under which the pauper finds himself is in contradiction to what human rights seem to advocate in the following: “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic” (58). In the light of this statement, one can notice that the pauper does not enjoy this inalienable right and his society does not care about his pitiful state. The poet notices that the case of the pauper is not presented seriously before law makers by the members of parliament so as to receive attention. Pauper is given no hope of betterment of his situation and he yields to his unfortunate destiny.

Much of the East African poetry of the nineteen sixties gave such a convincing defense indigenous African culture that the poet of the seventies had to diversify his themes and techniques. Richard Nturu’s aim in these poems is to examine the ills of his society and at the same time, he proposes some solutions for the eradication of these ills. Interestingly, the poet speaks not for himself only but for his fellowmen. His cry is their cry which only he can utter. That is what gives it its depth. But if he is to speak for them, and offer with them, rejoice with them, work with them, fight with them. Otherwise, what he says will not appeal to them and so will lack significance (Ngara 200). Through the use of some literary

devices, the poet has succeeded in painting the miserable state of the pauper in Ugandan society. Note, for example, in line 25, the poet uses irony as a literary device in his denunciation of the inequality and injustice inherent in African society. “Does he pat his paunch at the wonderful sight?”(125). The poet uses irony in this verse when he talks about ‘beautiful sight’. How can the abject condition of the pauper be beautiful? The poet uses this figure of speech so as to create sarcasm and absurdity. The poet knows that there is incongruity in regards to the conditions of the pauper and how society seems to reveal it. The writer is conscious that the poor conditions of the pauper are due to the fact that authorities in charge of people’s welfare and the development of their society rather siphon public funds and are involved in high-level corruption. Very often, the deterioration of the poor condition of the pauper is due to the fact that those who are rich and powerful snatch the little that belongs to the poor people. It is clear that if the world were not run with injustice and inequality, all human beings should be in good conditions. It is the wickedness of some people that is at the source of injustice and imbalances among human beings.

Richard Nturu in this poem seeks to call leaders as well as the rich people’s attention to review their way of viewing the poor people in the society. In his view, leaders ought to be transparent in their actions so that every citizen could enjoy equally the resources of the society. A good leader should embrace the variety of good qualities and, therefore, can be compared to what Nwachukwu and al. think a leadership should be “the leadership calls a hybrid of habits” (286). A good leadership is neither a question of ferocity, huge appetite nor about weight or heaviness.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to examine critically the negative effects of poverty and marginalization as depicted in Richard Nturu’s poems. From this study, it has been revealed that the abject poverty of the pauper results from the rich people who are well-to-do but refuse to help the poor and the marginalized. The study scratches the conscience of the leaders and the governors who are negligent towards the powerless people. The study shows that it is the responsibility of the privileged people to care for the welfare of the marginalized and the destitute in the society, because the nobility implies responsibility. It is the

responsibility of the societies to fend for the poor and marginalized in the society.

Furthermore, the paper shows that the poet has resorted to some poetic devices such as irony, contrast, metaphor and others as literary tools in his denunciation of injustice and social disequilibrium inherent in most African societies. To eradicate the problem of poverty and marginalization which plague the welfare of most Africans, the paper invites the few privileged to revisit their ways of governing. It is when the interests of every citizen are taken into account that development of the society and the welfare of the masses can be possible. Solidarity, one of African values, should be reinforced in order to eradicate the blatant discrepancy between the rich and the poor.

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