



Echoes of Imprisonment in Selected Poems from East and West Africa

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Abstract. There are ugly indicators that prevent development in many human societies. Committed writers; poets, playwrights and novelists have shown concerns for the development of their societies. They write convincingly to engage some of the social vices, which hinder happy human existence. This article, therefore, investigates the social ills in selected poems from East and West African countries. The study is premised on close reading technique and content analysis and uses sociological approach to literature as its methodology. The choice of the selected poems is guided by the fact that the poets have inclination towards social changes. Findings reveal that the selected poems are centred on condemnation of sordid human conditions and social injustice in East African society.

Keywords: Imprisonment, injustice, East Africa, social contract

1. Introduction

Literature is a creative art that deals with experience, imagination, history, culture and civilization of a people at a given period of time in spoken or written form. It is believed that literature expresses cultural and national consciousness of a people. Culture is an attitude of man, and it is numerous and diverse. This explains why it is often said that no culture is superior to the other (Ayeleru 2019:47). A nation's literature, therefore, x-rays images of actions and events as well as the ideology of a people at a given time. The reflections on a society through literature; fictional or non-fictional will enable a given society to be conscious of itself and its core values. An artist does not need to be a politician before he comments on issues and events which concern his/her society. He/she is at any time a product of his/her society. Adeoti (2015:6) remarks:

For the avoidance of doubt, I am not a politician in the vocational sense of it, neither am I a political scientist. But I have an abiding exegetical interest in the study of manifestations of politics as thematic constructs in literary arts. Thus, I am fascinated by works of literature – drama, poetry, prose fiction, including popular literature – that address the mode of politics and governance in Africa and their implications for people's development or lack of it.

Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are East African countries. Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are also included in the African Great lakes' region. In this article, we intend to study two East African writers to fill the yawning gap in the study of African literature.

Socio-political consciousness in any literary work is the deliberate concern of a creative writer: a poet, a playwright, a novelist or an essayist, with the actions and events in the society where he/she lives. Committed writers are interested in sensitizing and mobilizing the public with a view to solving problems militating against the growth and the development of a given society and humanity in general. According to Ayeleru (2019:47), in Africa, since colonization, literary practitioners have been in the vanguard of the protection of African cultures. Writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Birago Diop, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Cyprian Ekwensi have written expansively on the revalorization of African cultures.

Committed writers are individuals that give a volte-face to oppressive government and governance during and after the colonial periods of African history. They reject colonization, oppression, repression, relegation, discrimination, subjugation and marginalization. Onyemelukwe (2004:15) opines:

They aim to extirpate the mythomania about the African. In other words, they work towards the demystification of the African. These militant central characters with varying degrees of extroversion want to desensitize themselves to the neurosis of the colonizers. They can no longer condone the white man's absolute exploitation and oppression, their ill treatment of the African and so they embark on revolt.

This view of rejecting social injustice continues in the post-colonial political stage of African history. But instead of fighting the white men, the political activists now confront their fellow African leaders for imperialistic tendencies, which are described as neo-colonialism. Indeed, the neo-colonialist activities have impoverished the Black continent. Soyinka sees the African writer as "the conscience of the society" (Onyemelukwe, 2004:192). The African writer – a poet, a playwright or a novelist does not just write for the sake of writing. His/her commitment is to uncover, address and fight against social and political follies and vices of his/her time. *In Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka (1976:148) sees cosmos thus:

The singer is a mouthpiece of the chthonic forces of the matrix and his somnambulist improvisations' – a simultaneity of musical and poetic forms – are not representations of the ancestors, recognitions of the living or unborn, but of the no man's land of transition between and around these temporal definitions of experience. The past is the ancestors'; the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn.

Like Soyinka, Eldred Jones believes that any human society needs redemption when there are tragedies and challenges and such redemption can come from individuals or heroic actions. Jones (1983:11) observes:

Soyinka sees society as being in continual need for salvation from itself. This act of salvation is not a mass act; it comes about through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save... The salvation of the society then depends on the exercise of the individual will.

However, Ngugi opposes Soyinka on individual heroism of redeeming a society from socio-political plague because he sees the idea as entrusting the fate of an entire race or people in the hands of an individual. As a Marxist, Ngugi (1968:11) argues:

Confronted with the impotence of the elite the corruption of those steering the ship of the state and those looking after its organs of justice, Wole Soyinka

does not know which way to turn... Soyinka's good man is the uncorrupted individual: his liberal humanism leads him to admire an individual's lone act of courage, and thus often he ignores the creative struggle of the masses. The ordinary people; workers and peasant, in his plays remain passive watchers on the shore or pitiful comedians on the road.

By and large, the fact is that, the desired positive change in a society can be attained through the combined efforts of individual will and objective class struggle. The presence of social vices in East African society particularly and Africa in general accounts for why Okot p'Bitek, Richard Nturu, Amin Kassam and Jared Angira have accepted to be the mouthpiece of the oppressed masses. The four poets see poetry as a weapon to protest against inequality and unfair treatment experienced by a section of the society. They challenge the myth of superiority of the ruling class in the quest to establish equity and social justice in human society. The poems selected for this study include Okot p'Bitek's "*They sowed and watered*", Richard Nturu's "*The pauper*", Amin Kassam's "*The Desert*" and Jared Angira's "*No Coffin, No Grave*".

Okot p'Bitek was born in Uganda in 1931. He was educated in his home country and later in England. As a social anthropologist, he has passion for oral literature, culture and traditions of his people. His poetry is an expression of his experiences, imaginations, findings, observations and feelings. He is indeed active in both educational and political life of his country.

Richard Nturu was born in 1946 in Uganda. He studied at Makerere University. He had inclinations towards literary work of art and organized the 1969 Arts Festival. He is a playwright, a poet and a novelist. His collection, *Tensions*, has been published. Jared Angira was born in 1947. He is from Kenya. He studied and obtained a Bachelor degree from the University of Nairobi in 1971. His collection of poems includes *Juices*, (1970), *Silent voices*, *Soft Corals* (1974) and *The years go by* (1980). He is a Marxist. Amin Kassam is also from East Africa. He is a protest writer who uses his literary creativity to suggest development for his home country, Tanzania in particular and Africa in general.

If social injustice and economic inequality continue in any society, revolutionary writing and debates will persist. As a reflection of the society, social realist writers key-into it. Terseer Akwe (2015:45) asserts:

Protest literature has existed in various forms throughout literary history. It is characterised by the existence of a clearly-defined standpoint, a tough ethical conviction, a strong verbal tone, a manifestation of anger, but typically, a positive belief in the ultimate triumph of fair-mindedness by awakening the peoples' consciousness to social ills that ravage society.

As a writer, Ntiru, like many other committed creative authors, expresses his dissatisfaction as regards the condition of the African people especially in his home country, Uganda and in the whole of the black continent in an attempt to play his role as a writer. When commenting on the fundamental role of a writer, Ofeimun (2008:63) observes:

It is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies... I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considers right and deserving expression.

Consolidating the view of Ofeimun on the social responsibility of a creative author, Onyijen (2015:109) also affirms:

The African writer in his contemporary society has always been saddled with the responsibility of voicing the happenings around him. He does not hit the headlines like the historian or journalist, but painfully and artistically bears the burden of exhuming, schematically and consciously, socio-political happenings around him, even when they are deeply entrenched and sometimes escape the eye of the average man. But the writer's critical antenna is such that it is sensitive and picks up every issue for information, education and entertainment. Sometimes he lampoons and satirizes the society as he skillfully presents his facts. This artistic effort has produced many works of literature as demonstrated in the novel, poetry and dramatic genres.

In this study, we adopt the sociological perspective, which holds that literature should be perceived in the light of the structure and historical stage of the society where it is produced. Creative arts, though enacted by individuals, are generally a reflection of the collective life and should be interpreted in line with the social existence of a society that produces them. René Wellek and Austin Warren (1973) propound the social approach. In their book, *Theory of Literature*, they indicate three areas that should be of interest to a social critic. The areas include the writer's background; that is the author's biological/hereditary and environmental factors, which help readers in understanding and explaining social attitudes as well

as opinions that appear in a particular literary text. The world that is imitated or created and presented in the work itself is the second area. It is the aspect that investigates the culture and the society, which are presented in the text. It also considers how the imaginary or poetic world reflects its outer world. The last area is the target audience. This third factor examines the kind of impact the literary work has on its readers. That is to say, the aspect investigates the nature of reception of a given text. This area is of interest to the group of critics called the *receptionists* (Dobie, 2012:15-16).

2. Analysis of Echoes of Imprisonment in Selected Poems

2.1 Richard Ntiru's "The Pauper"

Richard Ntiru's "The Pauper" has thirty lines, which are divided into six stanzas with five lines in each stanza. Simply put, pauper means a very poor person. The subject-matter of the poem is an indictment on the society that paves the way for the existence of paupers. "Pauper, pauper, crouching in beautiful verandas" / "Of beautiful cities and beautiful people". The poem is indeed despicability personified. Ntiru raises the idea of pauper to depict the corruption that has taken over the entire polity of African society. He laments at the condition of the pauper and the author's abhorrence of the pauper shows his dissatisfaction with events in his society. Ngugi (1972: viii) remarks:

I thought then that tribalism was the biggest problem besetting the new East African countries. I, along with my fellow undergraduates, had much faith in the post-colonial governments. We thought they genuinely wanted to involve the masses in the work of reconstruction. After all, weren't the leaders themselves sons and daughters of peasants and workers? All the people had to do was to co-operate. All we had to do was to expose and root out the cantankerous effects of tribalism, racialism and religious factions.

Like Ngugi, Ntiru himself has observed that African leaders after the decolonization carnival failed their country men and women in all ramifications. Worst still, military interventions in governance in African states could not bring an end to the socio-economic and political problems which the civilian governments were blamed for at different times. Distressed economy, corruption, unemployment, human rights abuses, poverty as well as ethno-religious clashes are the order of the day. Collaborating Ngugi's view that Africa has many

challenges in her post-colonial political history, Adeoti (2015:12) declares:

Politics, in post-colonial era, ironically dashed expectations in many African nations. Rather than operating a political system that would guarantee economic well-being and true liberation from oppression, the ruling elite who took over power from the colonialist used power to suppress opposition, create for themselves and their supporters' access to wealth. Thus, even after independence, the generality of the people in many African nations are still marginalized and disadvantaged in terms of political power and its exercise. It was decolonization devoid of democratization...

Nturu's poem, "The Pauper" demonstrates that the poor masses are grossly marginalized and disempowered. The hardship persons with no means of livelihood are going through is uncovered. The poem also reveals the state of indifference and contempt the rich people in the society have towards the downtrodden. There is a clear indication that the relationship between the poor, as symbolized by the pauper and the rich, which the word "He" is representing in the poem is sour

The first stanza of the poem x-rays the way the pauper stretches his eyes in all directions with the hope of getting help from passers-by. The pauper is described as a person who is too poor to cater for himself. The poet is unhappy with such wicked or diabolical spirit that falsely created the destiny of the pauper. He holds that the poor is a wasted creature because of his helplessness and hopelessness. Words such as "pauper", "craning", "malignant", "dared" and "to forget" capture the unpleasant imagery of the pauper in the poem. By extension, the poet believes the pauper must not have been created by God rather it is someone or an element, which could be translated as the society that has negatively affected the fate of the pauper. Like the blacksmith or iron-bender who fraudulently fabricates iron tools which turn out bad, unusable and useless to itself, to his manufacturer and to the person for whom the tool has been made. The writer laments that: "Was it worth the effort, the time?" (line 5). Adejir (2000:117) confirms:

The African writer has always been forced by circumstances of the political and social situation around him to be combatant. The problems against which he wrote during the colonial times have, with the coming of independence, simply changed the people creating them and not their nature. The colonial system, manned by Europeans has been

replaced by a system manned by "the man of the people" or the man in uniform, all of whom are more ruthless than the foreigners.

As a matter of fact, it is the insensitivity of our political elite towards the social welfare of the less privileged in the society that aggravated the situation the masses found themselves. This same trend has enhanced the socio-political consciousness of creative writers and it has provided them the raw materials for creativity.

In the second stanza, we can see that everything that is in connection with the said pauper is lifeless, without comfort and even life-destroying. Words such as "leafless", "hairless goat skin", "jiggers" and "lice" are signs of poverty. The poet laments about what manner of crime or sin the pauper has committed to have been subjected to this level of neglect, inhuman and ill treatment. "What crime, what treason did you commit" / "That you are thus condemned to human indifference". For instance, crime means a violation of any established law, which attracts punishment while treason implies disloyalty to an existing government in an attempt to unseat it.

The third stanza investigates whether the rich, represented by "He" understands the gravity of endurance the pauper is compelled to cope with or he is only looking at the shameful situation with careless abandonment. In the fourth stanza, the degree and extent of poverty in which the ill-fated pauper is bottled up caught the poet's attention. We are made to see the anatomy of the pauper; his "emaciated skin", which is as a result of malnutrition, and the dirty environment he lives which accounts for a repulsive world of jiggers as well as lice.

In the second to the last stanza, the poet wonders whether those rich and influential people in our society pat their pot-belly each time they look at the toothless, thin and weak pauper with caking and "grimy" coat without any sign of concern or sympathy for the unpleasant sight. The fifth stanza suggests the carefree attitude of the rich towards the poor.

The last stanza reveals how the pauper crouches or crawls, with fear in beautiful verandas of the corrupt, rich and self-centred men to catch some sleep since he has no means of renting an apartment not to talk about building a house of his own. At the end, the poet promises to work hand-in-hand with the tourists in taking pictures (snapshots) of the pauper. In this last part of the poem, the self-centredness of the

political elite is very glaring. The MP, which can be interpreted as the Member of Parliament whom the pauper voted for has become fat and lives comfortable from his ill-gotten wealth. The case of the pauper is only debated in the House under general matters when all important issues must have been discussed and probably the parliamentarians are already tired: “And your MP with a shining head and triple chin?” Will mourn your fate in a supplementary question at Question Time” (lines 29 & 30).

One needs to note that the entire poem is symbolic. The pauper represents all the suffering people in our bourgeois society, where the winner takes all. Ogundokun, (2017:287) says:

It is evident that most African leaders have no mission, vision or plan for any form of nation building. They are merely a bunch of self-centred people; Lilliputians that paint themselves “Giants”; ridiculous idiots! What an irony of situation! As one can see, the failure of these leaders in their civic responsibilities and social contracts to the people and the society at large rationalizes the fact that corruption is the bane of many forms of poverty, which is found in most African nations. While the citizens die of hunger and penury, the greedy leaders smile at all times as they accumulate wealth for themselves.

Without doubt, rather than providing social amenities and creating sustainable chances for national development, post-colonial African leaders have engineered more gaps between the poor and the rich. What they talk about is the stomach infrastructure. With gross impunity and recklessness, they display their loot, from public treasury, for everybody to see. This ugly trend has aggravated cases of armed robbery, kidnapping, cyber-crimes, pipeline vandalism, militancy, terrorism and other security challenges in most African states.

Poverty, ill-fate, inhumanity, corruption and egocentricity of the ruling elite are the major pre-occupations of Nturu in the poem, “The Pauper”. The political elite and their associates only have interest in the acquisition of wealth and possession without having feelings for the downtrodden in the society.

Apart from the use of simple diction, the poet presents his idea and the physical being of the pauper from a particular accursed state to a universal appeal. He highlights that corruption afflicts every society. He employs rhetorical questions to underscore his lamentation. The tone and mood depict anger, sadness and unhappiness which seriously appeal to the readers’ emotion and reasoning; hence, the poor

man is pitied. The general atmosphere, in the poem, is one of lack and hunger. The pauper turns to different directions without any hope. The expressions below are instances of rhetorical questions in the poem.

...Dared to forge your piteous fate?

Was it worth the effort, the time?

What crime, what treason did you commit

That you are thus condemned to human indifference?

Does He admire your sense of endurance?

Or turn his head away from your impudent presence?

Does He pat his paunch at the wonderful sight?

Again, to express an image of contradiction in human society, the poet uses simile. For example,

Nursing the jiggers that shrivel your bottom

Like a baby newly born to an old woman.

Other examples of simile are:

And when you trudge on the horny pads,

Gullied like the soles of modern shoes,

At the rust that uproots all your teeth

Like a pick on a stony piece of land,

The expression, “At the rust that uproots all your teeth” is a personification while “Pauper, pauper, craning your eyes” / “In all directions, in no direction!” and “Pauper, pauper, crouching in beautiful verandas” / “Of beautiful cities and beautiful people” are used as a form of repetition to emphasize the seriousness of the subject-matter by the poet. The use of symbolism is seen in words such as “pauper”, “He” and “MP”. For example, “pauper” represents the suffering poor masses in the society like the beggars, the peasants, the unemployed and the unpaid or poorly remunerated workers whereas “He” as well as “MP” could be interpreted as the ruling class, the rich, the bourgeois and the influential in the human society.

With the use of simple choice of words, literary devices and run-on lines called enjambment; the poet is able to lead his readers to understanding the condition of the pauper from its conception to the end of the poem, with the intention of condemning the unacceptable situation.

2.2 p’Bitek’s “They sowed and watered”

Comparatively, in his poem, “They sowed and watered”, p’Bitek expresses the disappointment he has with regard to the manner at which freedom is embraced and utilized by the East Africans. There is the picture of disillusionment as a result of the carefree attitude of the citizenry towards national issues. The lack of concern, which leads to the disappointment, is captured thus: “They sowed and watered / Acres of cynicisms / Planted Forest of laughters / Bitter laughters that flowed in torrent /

And men shed tears as they rocked / And held their chests / And laughed and laughed” (lines 1 – 7). The people are cynical and appear not to take anything seriously as they just laugh off everything. The lack of seriousness on the part of the citizens is re-echoed in lines 35 and 36:

“Fat frustrations flourished fast / Yielding fruits green as gall. / On the hillsides/ They planted angers” (lines 13 – 16) reveal the hatred, lack of love and disunity among the citizens. Hence, their kind of independence has turned out to be a helpless lamb whose carcass is abandoned. In lines 26 – 28, the poet says: “Beside the streamlet rotting smelly / A lamb named Freedom / Dead as stone”.

Sad enough, on the account of bad blood among the people, anything they do turns sour; that is, unsuccessful: “Yielding fruits green as gall” (line 14). The wickedness in the land is also documented in lines 38 – 41. The infant boy, who cares and wishes to help the Freedom is eventually murdered and used as a sacrificial lamb. In the words of the poet: “Poisoned arrows / Hit the boy like swords of steel / And blood from his heart / Anointing the land”.

The event in the poem is dramatic. With the use of simple diction and predominantly the register of agriculture, p’Bitek creates a very grim situation of his East African region. Words such as “sowed and watered”, “Acres”, “Planted forests”, “manured the land”, “the soil” and “bananas” show the rural agricultural setting of the poem. However, “the carcass”, “poisoned arrows”, “swords of steel” and “blood” indicates an imagery of war.

Again, in an attempt to achieve his motive, the poet uses some literary devices. For example, the use of simile is dominant in the poem. “... Bursting the soil like young bananas”, “Yielding fruits green as gall”, “Covered the hills like February fires”, “Dead as stone”, “Flies rose like white ants” and “Hit the boy like swords of steel” are instances of simile used in p’Bitek’s “They sowed and watered”.

“Bitter laughters” is a juxtaposition of two opposing ideas; hence, it is an example of oxymoron. “A lamb named Freedom” and “the carcass” are metaphoric and symbolic. Also, “the soil”, “the valley”, “the boy” and “the land” are symbolically used by the poet. The carcass can be interpreted as the poet’s home country, same for the words, “the soil”, “the land” and “the valley”. “A lamb represents the political independence while “the boy” symbolizes the political activists, who often turned out to be political prisoners or prisoners of war in the hands of oppressive governments. This reminds one of “*Cattle*

egret”, which is the thirteenth section of a long poem titled “Song of prisoner” where p’Bitek expresses the social injustice in his East African country. As a political poem, the poet condemns the ills of a newly independent African state. The persona of the poem, a prisoner complains about the oppression of the poor, corruption perpetrated by the leaders, falsehood, assassinations and the ostentatious life style of the leaders at the gross expenses of the state, particularly the poor masses.

Through the use of witty expressions and cynical humour, p’Bitek enacts arresting mental pictures to drag home his ideas. There is a sharp contrast between the peaceful and quiet nature of the village life and the crime-prone nature of the city life. In most of his poems, p’Bitek’s mood is always sorrowful and his tone is harsh and unpleasant because of the disappointment he experiences.

2.3 Amin Kassam’s “The Desert”

Meanwhile, Amin Kassam’s “The Desert” is an appeal to the superior being, the creator of the earth and the heaven. The metaphoric poem is a monologue which presents a lamentation of a helpless person, who terribly needs assistance. The victim of this poem is disillusioned by everything around him. He expects someone, nature or God to urgently help him out of the calamity that befalls him. In lines 1 – 3, the persona cries out thus: “Hear my burning cry O Heavens! / Hear the lament / Of a disillusioned soul”.

Lines 8 and 9 show the extent of power the nature has upon man. “Through whirling storms / Staggering over dunes”. This suggests that man has become a robot completely deprived of his humanity. The poverty in the land is marked by the title of the poem in itself, “The Desert”, which means a dry and unproductive area. The expressions, “Gasping with thirst” /and “Plead for but a drop” underscore the theme of poverty in the poem. Also, the persona expresses his pains through the rhetorical questions in the fourth and fifth stanzas: “Is there no emotion in you O heaven, / No compassion?” / “Must I believe we are robots, / That the spark of humanity is lost?” These rhetorical questions have intensified the degree of sympathy his audience has for him.

It is obvious that the poem has a universal appeal. In lines 22 – 24, the persona points out: “Then I am not alone / For many have crossed this floor / Many have to the garden.” The personification in line 16; “Even the cactus raises hinged arms” confirms that not only the persona that is in need of help. The poem, “The Desert”, ends with the themes of helplessness and

hopelessness: “With hopeful despair” (line 25) and the expressions, “I have not the strength / To thunder forth my words” which are locked up in oxymoron (“hopeful despair”) and onomatopoeia (“to thunder”) respectively explain the calamity faced by the persona of the poem. The “dry” and “water” (line 12), which is equally an oxymoron and the word, “a mirage” (line 26) reveal any illusion of hope which cannot be realized.

The use of metaphors: “The Desert”, “a disillusioned soul”, “whirling storm”, “robots” and “a mirage”; the use of apostrophe: “Hear my burning cry O Heaven! as well as the repetitions of O heavens laced with the “I-narrative” technique make the poem to appear real and touching. The mood is that of despair and the tone is glum.

2.4 Jared Angira’s “No Coffin, No Grave”

As if that was not enough, Jared Angira’s “No Coffin, No Grave” is a satirical poem, which highlights the brutal murder of a proud sit-tight and corrupt leader, whose dead body was found “in front of the night club”. The poet presents this self-important leader as a criminal because he starves his subjects and engages in promiscuity: “woman magnet, money speaks madam” (line 25).

This politician is so wicked that his people cursed him: “... so he wrapped himself well / who could signal yellow / when we had to leave politics to the experts / and brood on books / brood on hunger / and school girls grumble under the black pot / sleep under torn mosquito net / and let lice lick our intestines” (lines 15 – 23). As a result of the state of disenchantment and disillusion, the experts and intellectuals decide to live reclusive lives by “brood on books in hunger. That shows there is a poisoned political situation in the country. As a mark of protest against the regime of terror and cruelty and the rising tide of public dissatisfaction; “one noisy pupil suggested we bring tractors and plough the land”. This implies that even the school children are not excluded from the suffering. Hence, the rude politician was cursed: “and ask our father who is in hell to judge him” (line 28). It is Satan, who is in hell that is expected to judge the bad leader not the God in Heaven because he belongs to the hell.

The poem, “No Coffin, No Grave”, is a warning to uncaring leaders, politicians and public office holders who are so engrossed in acquiring money and other materials illegally that they demeaned their personality and eventually made themselves a laughing stock on their death: “He was buried

without a coffin / without a grave.” What a shame! Such is the sad end of every pompous earth-man. This reminds one of the sad ends of some African leaders in Liberia, Togo, Nigeria and Zimbabwe among others. It is ironic that the “wealthy” politician who wished to be buried in a “gold-laden Coffin” was buried without any coffin. The imagery of “Red, black, white symbolizes the national flag of Kenya, the poet’s home country. The “black pot” shows the country’s backwardness and underdevelopment while the “cave of our mouths” explains their yawning helplessness. There is a general feeling of solemnity, gloom and malignity. Putting his message across, the poet uses a piteous tone, a stern tone which reflects his melancholy.

Across the selected poems, it is obvious that the East Africans suffer neglect in the hands of insensitive government. There are generally feelings of disillusionment, helplessness and hopelessness. Poverty is all over the land occasioned by the failed system. There is a common mood of sadness and unpleasant tone. David Diop who was born in Bordeaux, France in 1927 and whose father was from Senegal and his mother was a Cameroonian belongs very much to the era of protest writing in African literary scene. His early education was in Cameroon and Senegal before moving to France where his condemnation of colonialism in Africa becomes obvious and intensified. At the end of the World War II, David came back to Senegal where he picked up teaching appointment. He died in a plane crash at a prime age. Denunciation of the hypocritical as well as arrogant way of life of the colonial administrators is often the focus of his poems. Most critics described David Diop as a militant poet.

2.5 David Diop’s “The vultures”

David Diop’s “The vultures” is a narrative poem which paints Africa’s colonial experience. The phrase, “*The vultures*” is metaphoric. It describes the image of European imperialists who oppressed the black continent in the 18th and the 19th centuries. The poet frowns at the colonial operations in Africa: “In those days / When civilization kicked us in the face / When holy water slapped our cringing brows / The vultures built / in the shadow of their talons / The bloodstained monument of tutelage” (lines 1 – 5). These lines show the imagery of violence which a “weak” race is subjected to by a perceived strong race. The contrast in lines 3 and 5 is equally ironic. In line 3, there is a picture of a gentle looking Christian who kneels down to take holy sacrament of baptism which is described as “holy water” but in line 5, there is an image of violence where the said gentle looking

Christian has built “the bloodstained monument” in the “shadow of their talons”. This explains that there is an alliance between the Christian missionary and the colonial masters. At the expense of Africans’ socio-cultural and political heritage, the Europeans work fervently to convert Africans to Christianity, a belief system they proclaim teaches humility and tolerance.

The second and the third stanzas give vivid inhuman conditions of Africans during the colonial period: “In those days / There was painful laughter on the metallic hell of the roads / And the monotonous rhythm of the paternoster / Drowned the howling of the plantations / O the bitter memories of extorted kisses / Of promises broken at the point of a gun” (lines 6 – 11). From this part of the poem, we can see how Africans are forced to build roads. They are also sexually molested. Words such as “hell”, “bitter memories” and “gun” suggest suffering, unpleasant experiences and death.

The poet displays a total rejection of racial discrimination and oppression and calls for a revolution. He sees the Europeans as wicked and selfish: “Of foreigners who did not seem human / You who knew all the books but knew not love/ Nor our hands which fertilize the womb of the earth / Hands instinct at the root with revolt”

The poet uses the last part of the poem to proclaim hope. He is optimistic that despite the tribulations the Africans suffered in the hands of their colonialists, they will prosper: “In spite of your songs of pride in the charnel-houses / In spite of the desolate villages of Africa torn apart / Hope lived in us like a citadel / And from Swaziland’s mines to the sweltering sweat of Europe’s factories / Spring will be reborn under our bright steps” (lines 16 – 20). This last hope is a common feature of David Diop’s poetic constructions.

2.6 Sly Cheney Coker’s “Myopia”

As for Sly Cheney-Coker, he was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone in 1945. After his basic education in Freetown, he studied at the Universities in Oregon, California and Wisconsin. He lived some parts of his life in exile during the oppressive regime of President Siaka Steven in Sierra Leone. He lectured at different occasions at the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria and at the University of Philippines. He has four poetry collections and a novel entitled *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*. Sly Cheney-Coker’s preoccupations in his literary works take into account the disenchantment to slavery, the hardship faced by

the masses and his disgust as regards the unfortunate life he experienced in exile.

In this narrative poem, “*Myopia*”, Sly Cheney-Coker presents the plight of the poor people of a given society, most likely his home country, Sierra Leone. The farmers who are the main contributors to the economy are treated unfairly by the government. Frustration, poverty and suffering are written all over the ordinary members of the society: “On rainy mornings / you will see them drenched / PEASANTS / shivering in their emaciated bones / along the boulevards of misery (lines 1 – 4). These expressions indicate that the common men are not faring well. Their emaciated bodies are also being battered by the heavy rain. “The boulevard” which implies a broad high way gives an impression that the poor masses are suffering where there is surplus. This actually shows the insensitivity of a clueless government.

The second stanza of the poem demonstrates that the leaders are really suffering from lack of vision and mission. Remember, “*Myopia*” simply denotes short sightedness. Rather than preserving the national monuments and securing them for the future, the carefree administrators abandoned the collective national heritage to rot away. The “marshlands” which ordinarily would have made to yield good harvest are mindlessly neglected to die since required nutrients, which the poet called “magic fertilizers” are not given to the marshlands to improve its potency.

The final part of the poem underscores the poet’s reaction to the whole unhealthy condition the downtrodden are found. The poet is prepared to be an agent of positive change. He is battle ready to fight against social injustice and madness in his society. He writes: “mountain if the wind blows tomorrow / makes me a saber of that wind” (lines 12 – 13). The poet also suggests a revolution to put an end to any unfavourable social order if the need arises: “make me the incendiary bomb / if madness we must have let me be the hangman hanging myself / hanging them ...” The phrase “the incendiary bomb” connotes a violent change. To put a stop to misrule, the poet is also prepared to commit suicide. He wants to kill himself and kill those visionless leaders. There are the moods of dejection and helplessness as well as the tone of anger. The pictures of “emaciated bones”, “putrid marshlands”, “hangman hanging”, “the boulevards”, “railway tracks”, “the skeletons of stillborn” and “the incendiary bomb” make the poem to be like a film.

2.7 Niyi Osundare’s “*Ours to plough, Not to plunder*”

Another notable African poet is Niyi Osundare who was born in 1947 at Ikere-Ekiti, Ekiti State. He studied English at the University of Ibadan and later at Leeds University, United Kingdom where he obtained his M.A. He got his Doctor of Philosophy from York University in Toronto, Canada. He is at present a Professor of Literature at the Department of English, University of Ibadan.

In his poem, *“Ours to plough, Not to plunder”*, Osundare preaches for orderliness and carefulness on how human beings treat nature and the resources there-in. He is of the view that earth, which represents nature, needs to be handled with care and respect. The earth provides man’s food, water, shelter, wears and other useful things.

The first part of the poem reflects on the theme of agriculture. We “plough and plant”. With the hoe, the land is tilled and crops are planted for man to get his food. The second stanza shows the time of harvest. Farm implements like “mattocks”, “machetes”, “calabash trays” and “Rocking baskets” indicate that it is a season to enjoy the fruits of one’s labour. “Heavy heaps” and “earth root” demonstrate that the resources from mother earth are inexhaustible.

In the third stanza, the poet advocates for obedience in following the natural course of events: “let wheat fields raise their bread-some hands / to the ripening sun / let legumes clothe the naked bosom / of shivering mounds / let the pawpaw swell and swing its head ward breasts”.

The fourth and the fifth stanzas continue the poet’s line of thought that earth is capable of providing man with all he needs for a happy living: “Let water spring from earth’s unfathomed foundation / let gold rush / from her deep unseen-able mines / hitch up a ladder to the dodging sky / let’s put a sun in every night”. The expression “let’s put a sun in every night” connotes that the poet is calling for technological advancement, which will translate to progress and sustainable development. The poet believes that there are still resources yet untapped from the earth. He says: “Our earth is an unopened grain house”.

In the last stanza, the poet re-echoes that earth remains the most veritable and inexhaustible asset for mankind. Hence, man must not destroy it. Man, only needs to “plough” the earth but “not to plunder” it. In a mildly sharp tone but hopeful mood, Osundare calls for caution in the way and manner we carry out certain activities on earth, with an advice that earth must be respected and preserved if our future is to be guaranteed.

In a nut-shell, Osundare’s major concern is the ecological issue. Tyokumbur (2010:7) explains ecology thus:

Ecology is the biological study of the interrelationships between living things and their environment. It includes understanding the effects of man and his activities on the living and non-living components of his surroundings. Human activities that have both positive and negative impacts on man himself and his environment include agricultural, industrial, urban development and a plethora of other land uses. Other human activities include wildlife exploitation for genetic, meat and food resources, holiday camping, transportation, waste disposal and water management.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that there is an undoubted relationship between man and his environment. Poets like other practitioners of the arts reflect on matters of their environment to provide important information for a happy living. The bottom line is that universal man must treat earth with care.

2.8 Veronique Tadjo’s *“Sing to me”*

Furthermore, it is very important to examine the work of Veronique Tadjo. She was born in July, 1955 in Paris, the capital of France by Ivorian parents. After her basic education in Ivory Coast, she attended and obtained a degree in Afro-American studies at the University of Sorbonne in France. She is a university teacher at the National University of Abidjan. Her collection of poems entitled *Laterite* won ACCT Literary Prize in 1983.

“Sing to me” is a poem that expresses an aura of intimacy between the poet and her interlocutor. Readers are made to feel serious empathy with the persona of the poem. We are better informed of the roles of a poet, a narrator, singer and a guide: “Sing to me / the history of the labourer / his burning sweat / and the over-heated land” (lines 1 – 5). Through the word “over-heated”, we note the discomfort and suffering of the citizens, particularly the fore-fathers of the poet, who experienced slavery and colonialism.

Lines 6 – 10 announce the state of helplessness and hopelessness in the land: “speak to me / about the heavy-breasted woman / with a calabash-stomach / in the burning furnace / of a night without a morrow”. From this stanza of the poem, there is an image of a pregnant woman, “a calabash-stomach” who is at the same time, nursing a child as contained in “heavy-breasted”. All these careless attitudes can be interpreted as being myopic. There is no family planning and prospect for the future. In other words, it connotes lack of vision and mission. Hence, there is

a state of mirage, uncertainty and a bleak future. The expressions: “closed books”, “taut hands” and “blocked hopes” re-affirm the suffering, frustration as well as hopelessness in the African state that is enacted in the poem.

However, in the last two lines of the poem, Veronique Tadjó’s “*Sing to me*”, she presents a kind of relief to readers. The poet reduces the effects of suffering elsewhere in her country, Ivory Coast, by painting the capital, Abidjan in a beautiful delight. There is indeed a bustling life of an attractive city in lines 15 – 16: “in the dark oblivion / of an over-decorated town”.

By implication, Veronique Tadjó is tactically reminding the African leaders what common men and women face on a day basis in the rural areas while the inhabitants of the cities live luxury. She invariably advocates that the leaders should improve the conditions of life in those remote and forgotten villages rather than over-concentrating on the major cities, which are already established.

There is a mixed feeling in the poem because of the contrast between the rural life and the urban life. Readers have pity for the suffering people of Africa. For example, the breast-feeding woman who is also an expectant mother is a symbol of high rate of illiteracy, ignorance and poverty. But the picture of a superficially beautiful city makes readers easily relaxed and probably forgets the hardships in the rural areas.

3. Findings

The poems of those selected East and West African writers are clarion calls to their fellow Africans to resist any form of marginalization and inhumanity in the society. P’Bitek, Nturu, Kassam and Angira are not alone in this struggle. In West African countries, we have creative writers like David Diop, Niyi Osundare, Veronique Tadio, Wole Soyinka, Ousmane Sembène, Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Kofi Anyidoho, Fatou Keita, Sly Cheney-Coker, Jean Pliya, Tunde Fatunde, Emmanuel Dogbé, among others who use their artistic works to fight against social injustice. South African writers such as Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali as well as Central African authors like Ferdinand Oyono; Mongo Beti, Guillaume Oyono Mbida, Henri Lopes and Calixthe Beyala should also be mentioned. Besides being committed writers, they could again be described as social realist writers or socio-political activists. They use their arts to suggest solutions to societal

problems. Hence, committed writing is a revolt of a kind.

Possibly influenced by the ideas of these protest writers, a former military president of Nigeria, Babangida (2018) echoes:

At this point of our national history, we must take some rather useful decisions that would lead to real development and promote peaceful co-existence among all the nationalities. We must be unanimous in what we desire for our country; new generation leadership, sound political foundation, democratization of our politics, enhanced internal democracy, elimination of impunity in our politics, inclusiveness in decision making, and promotion of citizens’ participation in our democratic process.

Principally, it is the poets’ socio-political consciousness that informs them to expose the follies and the vices in their society with the aims of not only ridiculing the situation but also correcting the ugly trend of affairs. One of the popular slangs in Africa at the moment is “*our mùmú don do*”; that is, our stupidity is over. The poems have universal appeals to both the colonial era and the post-colonial political experiences. The study concludes that for African countries, in particular and the whole world in general; to move forward, social vices such as injustice, hostility, inhuman treatment, corruption, greed and all practices adjudged anti-progress must be avoided at all costs as the people in positions of power should be made accountable and live up to the social contract they signed.

4. Conclusion

Every piece of writing has its function(s) to perform. In other words, an art is not enacted in vacuum, if not for its own sake; it is for the sake of man and his society. Layiwola (2010:5) affirms that: “It is agreed that all works of literature in most cultures of the world have the motive of communication and, in performative cases, of representation”. We have demonstrated a concern about the condition of living of the poor masses in East and West Africa based on the contents of the selected poems. The kind of politics and the idea of governance that Africans are subjected to in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania in particular and by extension in Africa generally are the causes of many challenges faced by the Black people.

Having shown the entire filth and perceived accursed state of poverty, corruption and disillusionment, occasioned by misrule, the poets extend the concepts of the literary works to include the corruption that

eats up the African society and any other societies that characterize abuses of power and corrupt practices. The poets call for the condemnation of corruption by all. To guide against this harsh and brutish experience, social justice, equity and fairness are all that societies need in the distribution of available resources. As committed writers, the poets, through their socio-political consciousness have made themselves relevant to their immediate society and the world at large.

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***Note:** The extracts of the poems used in this study are from Johnson, R. et al. (1996). *New Poetry from Africa*. Ibadan: University Press.