



## POVERTY AS AN ENDEMIC FACTOR AMONG NIGERIAN GHETTOS: A STUDY OF BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

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### ABSTRACT

*Nigeria stands among the class of under developing society and one of the poorest nations in the world. The poor are highly depressed by the rich politicians because the politicians manipulate the poor. This research explores the deprivation of basic needs of the poor ghetto dwellers of Nigeria. This paper aims to examine the state of corrupt politics and poverty in Nigerian ghettos with the aim of drawing the attention of policy makers to concentrate on the welfare of the Nigerian poor citizens with reference to Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.*

**Key Words:** *Poverty, Nigerian Politics, ghetto dwellers, corruption, political violence, neo-colonialism.*

Ben Okri, the Nigerian writer, is one of the most distinct African writers of his generation. *The Famished Road*, Okri's most appreciated fiction explores the political violence that he witnessed at first hand during the Civil war in Nigeria. The very title of the book, *The Famished Road*, is first used by Wole Soyinka in his poem "Death in the Dawn", 'May you never walk / When the road waits famished'. The Famished Road means a road of hunger that waits for its victims. The road symbolises the Nigerian state of affairs which swallows the poor by its corrupt political rule.

*The Famished Road* focuses on the political, social and economic conditions of contemporary Nigeria. The paper examines the ill-effects of politics that exploits the poor and makes use of their ignorance. The novel is an exploration of the Nigerian political issues and its adverse effects on the contemporary Nigerian society. Nigeria is now rated as the third most corrupt nation in the world. It has always been in the catbird seat because of its political instability and political violence. Detonation of the civil war from July 1967 to January 1970 had its worst effects on the Nigerian society in the form of political imbalance and social turbulence,

thus made the lives of people wretched. Poverty is venom that kills the placid lives of Nigerian people. The novel helps to study the poverty of Nigerian ghetto dwellers.

Okri uses an abiku child Azaro as his mouthpiece to display the evil nature of the polluted politics of Nigeria. Azaro belongs to a poor family, dwells in a ghetto that struggles a lot against poverty. The clash between the rich and the poor is a common scenario in ghettos. Although the whites left the country, the life of the under privileged remains the same. The country is re-colonised by the elite groups. Neo-colonialism emerged by the process of the white's indirect rule over the country through the new elite group of Nigerian state.

Okri describes the existing crisis in Nigerian society through an incident that relates the struggle between the rich and the poor. In this novel the party of the rich announces a lot of promises to the poor in order to get their votes in the election campaign.

*“VOTE FOR US. WE ARE THE PARTY OF THE RICH, FRIENDS OF THE POOR...”*

*‘The poor have no friends,’ someone in the crowd said.*

*‘Only rats.’*

*‘IF YOU VOTE FOR US...’*

*‘... we are finished,’ someone added.*

*‘... WE WILL FEED YOUR CHILDREN...’*

*‘... lies.’*

*‘... AND WE WILL BRING YOU GOOD ROADS...’*

*‘... which the rain will turn into gutters!’*

*‘... AND WE WILL RING YOU ELECTRICITY...’*

*‘... so you can see better how to rob us!’*

*‘... WE WILL BUILD SCHOOLS...’*

*‘... to teach illiteracy!’ (145)*

The mocking voices of the poor clearly denote that they show no concern to vote for the party of the rich. The poor are highly depressed by the rich politicians.

The present situation of the poor ghetto dwellers is highly miserable with hunger and deprivation of basic needs such as food, shelter, and proper clothing.

The inhabitants of the street crowded round the van, hunger on their faces. Their children were in tattered clothes, had big stomachs, and were barefoot.

*‘What is it?’ someone asked.*

*‘Politicians,’*

*‘They want votes.’*

*‘They want our money.’*



*'They have come to tax us.'*

*'They only remember us when they want our votes.'* (144)

The party of the rich politicians reach out to the poor only at the time of election. Although they are given lot of promises the lives of the poor remains unchanged. The rate of poverty in the country generates an intense public concern because the effects are direct and visible. Politics has become a lucrative business venture where people go for gain and not to render service.

The rich unscrupulous politicians manipulate the poor with 'freebies' in their election manifesto.

*'... WE WILL MAKE YOU RICH LIKE US. THERE IS PLENTY FOR EVERYBODY. PLENTY OF FOOD. PLENTY OF POWER. VOTE FOR UNITY AND POWER!'*

*By this time the mocking voices were silent.*

*'AND TO PROVE YOU THAT WE ARE NOT EMPTY WORDS BRING YOUR CHILDREN TO US. WE ARE GIVING AWAY FREE MILK! YES, FREE MILK FROM US, COURTESY OF OUR GREAT PARTY!'* (145)

The rich politicians keep on crackling abundant promises till they break down the walls of scepticism of the poor. Finally the ghetto dwellers abandon their doubts on politicians and rush towards the campaign van for freebies. There is no point in blaming the poor as their poverty forced them into such actions.

Okri exposes the worst nature of the rich politicians who mesmerize the poor by distributing the freebies. They convert the society into economically rotten because of such freebies.

*As the afternoon passed on into the evening the children crying in the compound began to cough. Men and women queued up outside the toilet, and everyone complained of stomach trouble. The women doubled-up and sat miserably on stools outside their rooms. A man heaved and threw-up beside the well. Women screamed that they have been poisoned and said they had crabs clawing around in their intestines. Children seared the evening with the livid heat of their weeping. Then the refrain of vomiting began.* (153)

The citizens do not realise the secret faces of corrupt politics. The rich politicians distribute rotten milk to the ghetto dwellers which has adverse effects on the poor. The entire poor section of ghetto falls sick.



Okri wants to convey the fact that the agonising poverty and misery of ghetto dwellers stem from the rich politician's lack of concern for the welfare of the poor. They are not provided even with the basic necessities for survival:

*THE RAIN GOD was merciless for two weeks. It rained so much that the sky seemed to have become as inexhaustible with water as the seas. At night water leaked through our ceiling, which we soon discovered was full of holes. Mum had to sacrifice her basins and pots used for cooking to catch the water that dripped down . . . when more holes opened above us we had to keep moving the bed round the room. It got so awful that we couldn't find a place that wasn't leaking. (357)*

The citizens do not have a proper drainage system to canalise the rain water. At the time of monsoon seasons, the rain water comes to their home as an uninvited guest.

*Our street turned into one big stream. Water flooded into our rooms from the gutters. Sometimes it rained so much the compound began to stink because of the water that flowed past the pail latrine . . . Those who could afford it built little cement dams in front of their rooms to stop the bad waters going in. The rest of us sat helpless in our rooms and watched the water rise. (358)*

The slum is worst affected on monsoon days. Creatures like snakes, scorpions, slugs, worms and millipedes invade the rooms of the poor in the ghettos. Sanitation is a question mark in the slum areas. Poverty is seen as a rural phenomenon here. The poor in the ghetto are denied access to the basic needs of a common citizen. But poor housing, malnourishment, unemployment and famine are unavoidable.

In the name of the rich and the poor the political categorisation results in the violation of human rights. Being poor citizens, their personal identity and privacy is neutralized. Okri captures the contrast between the rich and the poor through his characters. Madame Koto and Azaro's parents belong to the rich and the poor respectively. Azaro's parents are best example of Nigerian citizens who stand on the verge of starvation and death. Madame Koto gains power and money by supporting the party of the rich. But Azaro's parent who supports the party of the poor suffers. This symbolises the state of affairs in Nigeria where the supporters of the rich is benefited but the rustic people suffer to the core.

Okri tries to exactly expose the conditions of Nigerian slum through the following incident in this novel. "She tore off the back pockets of my shirts to patch the holes in between the legs. She gave my shirts many different buttons"(322). The ghetto dwellers have inadequate of proper clothing.

The rulers have no intention to develop the nation. They act as disciples of their granddaddy (colonisers). Only the elite rulers are benefited pushing the poor one to the margin. Okri focuses on the fact that a rustic man is only a tool in the hands of the authority, leading a helpless and meaningless existence within their mother land. But now the bitter fact is the Neo-colonisers (The rich Nigerians) exercise the power over their own people (The poor). The elite group remains as Neo-colonisers who violates everything in that society and exploits the poor.

Okri says that money and power are the root causes of violence which is bane to Nigeria. Okri brilliantly exposes the disparity of the rich and the poor through a conversation among the ghetto men. “Some people have too much and their dogs eat better food than we do, while we suffer and keep quiet until the day we die” (323).

Azaro’s mother stands as a symbol of the typical Nigerian poor woman. Women in the ghettos suffer a lot than their men. They struggle both in the society and in their family. Azaro’s mother prays for the welfare of her family.

*She prayed for food. She prayed for Dad to get well. She prayed for a good place to live. She prayed for more life and suffering to bear lovely fruits and she prayed for me. For three days Mum prayed on borrowed wine . . . Always the landlords increasing our rents . . . Always the strained smile of the hunger beneath the brave pride. Always the rats and cockroaches eating away at our dreams. (566)*

Every poor woman in Nigeria suffers like Azaro’s mother. Though they endure in appetite, they work as provision sellers, and as daily wagers for the welfare of their family. The poor if they are hurt physically, they do not seek treatment which costs them money. They look for native treatment which costs nothing. This is obvious from the following incident.

*Mum moved about in the darkness in uncomplaining silence. She kicked something and cursed and sat down and I lit a match and saw blood pouring out of the big toe of her right foot . . . when she came back she had washed the cut and I asked her what she had put on it.*

*‘Poverty,’ she said.*

*The cut still bled through the black stuff she had covered it with.*

*‘Ash,’ she said. (93)*

The poor sacrifice everything which costs money. They diehard to make both ends meet, so it is impossible for them to live even an ordinary life in the corrupt society.

Poverty as an endemic factor for underdevelopment in Nigeria has drained the transitional process of Nigeria towards attaining the global advancement. The government lost its responsibility to make effective policies that would improve the life of the Nigerian citizens. Most of the policies adopted to mitigate poverty turn to benefit only the elites while the poor continue to remain in abject poverty. In most African societies and in Nigeria, poverty is visible through its indices such as overcrowded settlements in major urban areas without basic social services and isolated rural areas major concentration of the poor.

Human Development Index says that in 1993, an estimated 40% of the people in sub-Sahara African (SSA) lived no less than one dollar a day. Nigeria was placed among the 23 poorest nations in the world (HDI.1999). These rural dwellers suffer from lack of basic facilities of life ranging from inadequate nutrition, poor housing, clothing and shortage of water supply to an ever deteriorating state of healthcare delivery facilities and road network.

As defined by Dudley Seer (1972) development is absence or total elimination of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Until these are adequately address and redress that society cannot claim to be developed. The government must take its responsibility to eradicate the suffering of its citizens through proper implementation of policies. They should execute the policies particularly for the employment of its poor citizens. The Nigerian government must act against corruption. If corruption is annihilated, there will be no poverty in the nation. The paper also strongly believes with the policy of the former president of Nigeria, General Muhammadu Buhari of war against indiscipline. This is because when human mind is discipline every aspect of governance will perform effectively without hindrance.

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