

## PORTRAYAL OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN ERICK NGODA'S YOUNG ADULT NOVEL A NAME FOR HIMSELF

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### Abstract

Literature serves as an important mirror to the socio-economic conditions in society and provides an important instrument by which the conditions of poverty and associated social inequality can be studied. This paper examines the literary portrayal of poverty and social inequality in *A Name for Himself* (2013), an important work in the canon of Kenyan youth literature by Erick Ngoda, who won the Burt Award for this book. This study uses a qualitative close reading approach and is underpinned by a threefold theory framework encompassing Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Fish, 1980), Poverty Theory (Townsend, 1979; Sen, 1999) and Postcolonial Theory (Fanon, 1963; Bhabha, 1994). This paper analyzes how Ngoda uses the various literary techniques of symbolism, imagery, irony, characterization and narrative voice to depict poverty in the lives of the characters. The results indicate that poverty in the text is a phenomenon that is experienced in different dimensions: poverty in material resources, education, health care, technology, gender, and crime. The author highlights that poverty restricts one's freedom and is responsible for the continuation of poverty across generations. It can be concluded that *A Name for Himself* is a major contribution to African literary criticism and poverty discourse because of its ability to counter the dominant discourse.

**Key Words:** poverty; social inequality; African literature; young adult fiction; Reader Response Theory; Postcolonial Theory; Erick Ngoda; Kenya

### Introduction

Poverty is still one of the most complex issues in the modern era, being a focus of attention for the international frameworks for development, government policies, and the body of academic literature. SDG number 1 is aimed at achieving global eradication of poverty in all its manifestations by 2030. Despite the fact that progress towards meeting this goal is extremely uneven in developing countries, efforts are being made to address poverty through a number of initiatives. For example, in Kenya, where 38.6% of the population is under the poverty line (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022), the target to reduce poverty by half by 2030 seems to be hardly achievable (Kamundia & Leibbrandt, 2025).

However, the numbers provide only a part of the picture. The qualitative aspect of poverty—its emotional and social dimensions—demands approaches other than quantitative measurement. Literature helps to achieve a deeper understanding of the issue.

The novel *A Name for Himself* (2013) by Kenyan novelist Erick Ngoda, winner of the esteemed Burt Award for African Literature, is exactly such a work. Written in the genre of young adult literature, this novel explores the trials of a poor kid named Mollusk Tambwe who struggles with the experience of poverty in school, at home, and in the community. While this novel falls under the umbrella of young adult literature, it touches upon many complex and mature issues

including social isolation, sexual oppression, criminality, and limitation of human potential. According to Jones, poverty “has occupied innumerable writers as a literary theme but rarely [has] been isolated as a basic category of critical literary discourse” (p. 765). It is within this context.

Contributions made by this paper to the current body of knowledge are three-fold in nature. Firstly, this paper contributes to critical engagements with Ngoda’s novels as such works have been understudied in academic literary criticism despite their cultural importance. Secondly, this paper illustrates how poverty theory and postcolonial theory can be fruitfully applied to the field of reader-response criticism in the study of African literature. Lastly, it highlights the neglected potential of YA literature as a medium for social critique and consciousness raising. Analysis of Ngoda’s work will be done based on themes related to poverty in the novel.

The concept of poverty is one that refers not only to a lack of financial adequacy but also to the inability to meet basic human needs, which include education, health care, safety, and social inclusion. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, poverty means “the condition of being extremely poor,” or the condition whereby individuals lack the means to maintain a level of living that society deems acceptable. This definition can be expanded further by Sen’s (1999) concept of capabilities, where poverty is viewed as a constraint to people’s freedom to pursue the goals they value.

### Literature Review

#### Poverty and Postcolonial Inequality in African Literature

The link between African literature and poverty is not an accidental or superficial one; it is structural, based on the nature of the post-colonial context that characterized the political economy of the continent. Fanon

(1963) in his work entitled “The Wretched of the Earth” theorizes the impact of dispossession in colonialism as a form of economic deprivation that was continued even after the formal end of colonialism. The above mentioned theory reoccurs time and again through the literary corpus of African fiction. In his novel “Devil on the Cross” (1982), for instance, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o critically depicts post-colonial capitalist deprivation that leads to poverty, as he shows how neo-colonialist elites exploit the poor in their society. Likewise, the author Meja Mwangi through his literary piece entitled “Going Down River Road” (1976) captures the harsh reality of poverty in Nairobi through the plight of informal workers there.

The ability of literature to act as a form of counter-discourse to the official narrative of development has long been recognized by scholars. As stated by Ogude (1999), African fiction brings humanity to the dry numbers of poverty through placing them in the context of particular characters, settings, and storylines. Following this, Irele (2001) suggests that African fiction holds a distinct place where it connects the realm of the experiential to politics, thus providing imaginative possibilities to see structures of oppression for what they are. In more recent times, Habila (2019) has brought attention to the growing genre of African literature tackling poverty as an ongoing process influenced by globalization, bad governance, and environmental issues. Ngoda’s novel is one such example, though it focuses on youth experiences.

#### Young Adult Literature as Social Critique

The genre of young adult (YA) literature has come to be seen more and more as a means of profound social critique especially in places where the youth has to carry the heavy burden of poverty and discrimination. According to Bradford et al. (2008), literature written for young adults in postcolonial settings becomes ideological

through which they come to understand the concepts of justice, identity, and citizenship. Mickenberg and Nel (2011) indicate that the literature aimed at children has been known historically to be a venue of value negotiations, which include class struggle and economic aspirations.

In the case of African literature, Ngoda's novel can be regarded as the beginning of a foray into that arena. The emphasis on the experience of poverty from the child's subjective point of view helps in creating an empathic relationship with the text which is considered characteristic of Reader Response Theory as pointed out by Rosenblatt (1978). As Rosenblatt indicates, aesthetic reading, which is essentially emotional and imaginative, enables one to live through experiences different from one's own, creating what she calls "transaction."

### Research Gap

Despite the increasing number of works written about African literature and poverty, Ngoda's novel does not have adequate critical attention from scholars. Most studies analyzing Kenyan Young Adult fiction emphasize issues of national identity and nationhood (Mwenda, 2018) rather than focusing on the social economic aspects of such stories. In addition, there has been little exploration into the nexus between poverty, postcolonial, and reader response approaches in understanding the youth literature of Africa. This paper attempts to fill some of these gaps in the following pages.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

In line with the nature of the study, qualitative literary analysis will be applied in the investigation. This type of approach is suitable when looking into the representational and interpretative elements in the literary work. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research suits very well the examination of topics that focus

on meanings, experiences, and social realities, areas that relate directly to poverty literature. This research design is based on close reading and thematic analysis using both internal and external data about poverty from the work by Ngoda and related poverty literature.

The choice of *A Name for Himself* as the primary text was deliberate and theoretical. Its thematic focus on poverty, being awarded the Burt Award for African Literature, broad readership, especially among youth in Kenya, and little scholarly attention in literary criticism all support the academic significance of the text. Purposive selection in qualitative research is a valid approach where the researcher is interested in a particular phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2015). This text has unique characteristics that make it a good object of analysis on poverty representation.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

The data was obtained via systematic close reading of the novel, focusing on the following areas of analysis: (a) physical manifestations of poverty in terms of housing, clothing, diet, and transport; (b) education; (c) health care and its sociological determinants; (d) availability of technology as a sign of social inequality; (e) gender dynamics under conditions of poverty; (f) the correlation between poverty and crime; and (g) literary techniques such as symbolism, imagery, irony, characterization, and point of view that serve as a medium through which readers can relate to the issues above. Secondary data used for comparative purposes included material pertaining to poverty, postcolonial theory, and African literature.

Analysis was done using the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). It entails several phases including familiarizing oneself with the data; coding the data; developing themes based on the codes; reviewing and revising themes,

and finally producing the final analysis. The analysis of the textual data took into account the inductive analysis of the text and then using theoretical lens to make deductive sense of the same.

### **Ethical Considerations**

From a literary perspective, this study does not involve any participants, and hence no approval from an ethical review board is necessary. However, care has been taken during the process of analysis with respect to the ethical considerations involved in studying issues of poverty, gender, and trauma, especially when these concepts are related to marginalized groups. Interpretations and discussions based on literary texts always rest on close reading and evidence.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current investigation is grounded on an integrated theoretical framework consisting of Reader Response Theory, Poverty Theory, and Postcolonial Theory. It should be noted that these three theories do not exist independently but complement each other, thereby uncovering aspects of the text beyond the reach of the rest.

### **Reader Response Theory**

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is Reader Response Theory, a literary theory propounded by Rosenblatt (1978) and expanded upon by Fish (1980). The basic premise of Reader Response Theory is the repositioning of literary meaning away from the literary text itself to the reader-text transaction. This theory is especially important in relation to the difference between efferent reading (where reading takes place for gaining information) and aesthetic reading (where reading occurs for gaining experience), as highlighted by Rosenblatt. It should be noted that A Name for Himself invites aesthetic reading where the reader identifies with Mollusk and experiences the oppression associated with him. According to Fish, "interpretive

communities" help influence the way readers perceive texts, and this perspective becomes especially important since the text is being read by Kenyan youth who identify with Mollusk.

### **Poverty Theory and the Capability Approach**

The Theory of Poverty, discussed by Townsend (1979) and Sen (1999), considers poverty as more than an absolute lack of income and instead views it as a multidimensional state of social marginalization and restriction of individual capacities. The concept of relative deprivation introduced by Townsend underscores the socially constructed character of poverty, according to which those deprived are those unable to take part in social processes. In turn, Sen's Capability Approach and its modifications offered by Nussbaum (2011) are focused on freedoms and the capacity to act rather than on the resources at one's disposal. This theory can be immediately applied to the story told in Ngoda's novel, where the shrinking of opportunities available to Mollusk and his relatives because of poverty is depicted.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial Theory, with its origins in the pioneering theories of Fanon (1963) and Bhabha (1994), provides the historical framework required to contextualize poverty in the Kenya context. Fanon's discussion of colonial capitalism, a phenomenon which leads to and sustains poverty in the colonized communities, is still applicable in post-colonial Kenya in that structural inequality is still used to create situations of dispossession. The idea of Bhabha's "colonial mimicry," which involves the ambivalent imitating of colonial values by the postcolonial individual, finds application in the novel as some characters adopt the dominant valuation of wealth and education despite their exclusion from such. Through the application of Postcolonial Theory, this research examines how the issue of poverty

can be contextualized historically within the novel.

Combining all the above three theories allows for the analysis to be comprehensive. Reader Response Theory focuses on how the reader responds to the book, while Poverty Theory gives a context about development and deprivation, and Postcolonial Theory gives a historical background of the socio-economic environment described in the novel. In this case, all the three theories can form an excellent framework for analyzing *A Name for Himself*.

### **Analysis: The Portrayal of Poverty in *A Name for Himself***

In Ngoda's book titled "*A Name for Himself*" (2013), the author presents poverty as more than just a background to his characters' life. Poverty is used as the constitutive element of his main character's universe by employing such literary devices as symbolism, irony, contrast, characterization, and imagery. In what follows, the major themes of this representation are examined.

#### **Material Deprivation and the Semiotics of Poverty**

The opening of the book presents a case where there is a sharp distinction between what is material to set the tone of the whole book. Mollusk Tambwe, who is described as "skinny," attends the Greenpines Academy, a private and costly academy for his studies on scholarship – making him a symbol of poverty wherever he goes (Ngoda, 2013, p. 2). His classmates "belonged to a totally different world" and tormented him in many ways, "pinching his nose, ruffling his hair and calling him names" (p. 5). By asking "was it because his parents were poor?" (p. 2), Mollusk is posing not just a personal question, but an ironical commentary on a society where poverty is the reason for shame.

It is especially apt to see Ngoda's choice of clothing as representing the poverty in the narrative. Mollusk is wearing a "faded, threadbare shirt, patched-up shorts and sagging socks," (p. 4), while his father's best outfit "consists of a grey, somewhat shabby double-breasted suit that his boss had given him on the occasion of his marriage many years ago" (p. 9). The symbolism of using a suit as representing something of significance in this postcolonial narrative is rife with irony since the best clothing the father can afford comes in the form of an employer's hand-me-downs.

The Tambwe family's own house is also a symbol. The house which is "thatched with straw and its walls are made out of mud, [with] a wobbly gate made of wood planks" (p. 21) and a "smoky tin lamp" (p. 22), differs greatly from those inhabited by other wealthy characters, as well as from the impressive building of Greenpines Academy. The idea put forward by Townsend (1979), according to whom relative deprivation takes a highly literal form, finds an adequate reflection here. The Tambwe family lives in the house where their participation in life and society becomes absolutely unacceptable.

Further symbols are used to highlight the poverty of the extended family that Mollusk belongs to. The family of his friend Tim resides in an 'earth-and-grass thatched house' (p. 25), while his mother pours tea for her guest from an "old plastic jug" and offers him a "chipped enamel mug" (p. 25). These are examples of a semiotics of poverty in which poverty is embedded in everyday items. This is another example of Ngoda's literary awareness of the dignity and degradation of ordinary life.

#### **Educational Exclusion and the Politics of Access**

Educational institutions emerge as one of the most controversial arenas of inequality depicted in the novel, being both a place where Mollusk's aspirations lay, and a

system that continually emphasizes his distinctiveness. The distinction between “Kyanzale Primary School, a small village school with unplastered walls and earthen floors” (p. 4) and Greenpines Academy is not only structural but political. It symbolizes the stratification of access to quality education according to social classes, which has been widely explored in research into education and inequality in sub-Saharan Africa (Unterhalter, 2012).

The transport used by Mollusk to reach school is a form of text that requires interpretation. He sets off to school early in the morning in an “old rickety bicycle” (p. 64), and during the day when the bike required a new rim, his father “could not readily” supply him with one (p. 64). The irony is made explicit through the comparison between the effort put forth by Mollusk traveling on a damaged bicycle early in the morning and the arrival at school of another student, Abby Gezira, who had been driven in “her father’s black Prado” (p. 65). This is not a coincidence but rather a strategic move on Ngoda’s part to highlight the disparity between the privileged and the less privileged when it comes to accessing education.

In this regard, Sen’s (1999) capability approach provides us with further insights into what is at stake here. While Mollusk may have access to education via the scholarship he gets, the key question is whether such access is equally substantive—that is, whether such access truly increases his capability. The bullying, the social exclusion, lack of the rim of the bicycle, and other signs that he comes from a poor family make one realize the fundamental difference between access and capability.

### **Technological Marginalization and the Digital Divide**

The digital divide also features prominently as one of the most insightful depictions of modern forms of poverty

presented in the novel. In describing how “Mollusk’s friends talked about Facebook status updates, laptops, modems and signing into Facebook through their phones,” it comes out that the “only accounts Mollusk had ever heard of were bank accounts” (Ngoda, p. 30). This depiction is not only humorous, but also deeply thought-provoking. It should be understood in light of the current state of ICTs and digitalization where access to ICTs becomes one of the main determinants of educational opportunities, economic prospects, and socioeconomic development.

Indeed, the problem of technology exclusion is discussed by scholars researching the digital divide (e.g., Selwyn, 2004; Warschauer, 2003), who show that it further exacerbates preexisting inequalities and leads to cumulative disadvantages that make it increasingly difficult to escape the vicious circle of poverty. Ngoda implicitly recognizes these findings in his work and presents them in literary form, demonstrating that Mollusk’s technological illiteracy is a product of poverty and cannot be perceived as an individual choice or weakness. The irony inherent to the description of Facebook accounts and bank accounts is a powerful literary technique.

### **Healthcare Inaccessibility and Bodily Vulnerability**

The novel portrays healthcare as an institution whose services are out of reach of the impoverished population. One of the most memorable scenes in the novel, where Mollusk comes across his father carrying a wheelbarrow on which he is transporting his ill sister Sally to the health center, captures the effects of poverty on people’s physical well-being very vividly. As an instrument used in farming rather than human transportation, the wheelbarrow here becomes an image of the degradation of the human body under poverty. In the health center, Sally had to share her bed with two other patients.

“Bodily health” is a crucial aspect of human capabilities that according to Nussbaum (2011) is severely undermined by poverty. The portrayal of Sally’s health issues is a perfect example of such an undermining carried out within the scope of the literary work’s plot. The affective reaction that the reader evokes while reading this part, inspired by Rosenblatt’s (1978) ideas of experiencing literature from the point of view of Mollusk, is an expression of a deeper understanding.

### **Gender, Exploitation, and the Compounding of Poverty**

Gender relations in the novel constitute a very analytically complex topic as well. The life story of Sally Tambwe from being sponsored to study in a school to being sexually exploited by the Member of National Assembly who was providing financial assistance for her schooling demonstrates the gender dynamics of poverty rather vividly. Indeed, “he sexually abused her, not once or twice but several times, all the while warning her of dire consequences should she tell on him” (p. 97). This use of language plays an important role because such warnings imply suppression of one’s voice, just like poverty does in general.

The way in which Ngoda describes Sally’s plight connects patriarchy and poverty as intersecting and interlocking mechanisms of oppression. According to feminist theorists of poverty, such as Chant (2007), women and girls living in poverty are doubly disadvantaged insofar as not only do they suffer from material poverty, but they endure that condition within societies that offer limited protection through gender hierarchies. Sally’s subjugation by an individual who wields both educational and physical authority is a clear example of this concept. The abuser’s freedom from any repercussions whatsoever, either social or legal, is a crucial point made by the text.

Irony is especially bitter in this case since it exposes one of the representatives of the government as one of those who takes advantage of the poorest members of society. It fits the postcolonial concept of political elite that uses structures established during colonization to serve their purposes of personal enrichment (Fanon, 1963). Sally’s shattered hopes of receiving education and improving her life may be considered an example of capability catastrophe according to Nussbaum (2011).

### **Poverty, Crime, and the Sociology of Deviance**

The novel’s treatment of crime and deviance rounds off its description of the results of poverty. Egesa, for example, described as “wearing a grimy T-shirt and a tattered blue jacket,” himself a poor individual because of his clothing, is a marijuana user as well as part of his mother’s business activities involving bhang, cannabis, and chang’aa, a type of traditional alcohol which is forbidden. In this case, Ngoda does not moralize since her character is depicted to have taken part in illegal behavior due to poverty.

The above discussion echoes sociological views on the connection between poverty and criminality. In their work, Manhica et al. (2021) show that “low parental income is likely to entail several risk factors associated with drug use and drug-related criminality” (p. 175). Further, young individuals residing in such deprived environments are at higher risk to become involved in such illegal activities. This is a realistic portrayal of what goes on in life and is supported by the sociological literature. What should be noted here is that the novel’s voice never judges Egesa but allows readers to reflect on why he behaves this way.

### **Discussion**

What emerges from this analysis is the remarkable feat accomplished by Ngoda through his novel, which presents poverty as

more than just an abstract notion or a setting; it presents poverty as a defining factor in one's life and as a socially constructed state of mind that limits all possibilities and affects even the body.

Conceptually, this project provides a successful example of how to combine the application of Reader Response Theory, Poverty Theory, and Postcolonial Theory to the critical analysis of a work of youth African literature. Each theoretical approach sheds light on aspects of the reading experience that other theories fail to illuminate: Reader Response Theory focuses on the emotional and interpretative aspects of such an experience (Reader Response); Poverty Theory and the Capability Approach on its structural and developmental context (Poverty Theory); and Postcolonial Theory on its historical underpinnings (Postcolonial Theory).

This research also has important bearings on the emerging academic field of African youth literature. According to Bradford et al. (2008), YA literature within post-colonial settings carries an important ideological function, helping to construct the ideas about justice and social order held by the young readers. This novel can thus be viewed not just as a literary piece but also as a pedagogic tool that would enable poverty reduction through the cultivation of critical literacy and social consciousness.

### Conclusion

Erick Ngoda's novel, *A Name for Himself*, has been shown to be a highly important and valuable addition to the study of African literature on issues of poverty and social inequalities through the novel's detailed exposition of the multi-faceted dimension of poverty, which encompasses material poverty, lack of education, technological poverty, physical poverty, gender inequality, and criminal activities, all

achieved through literary techniques that not only engage the readers emotionally but also intellectually.

This study has used a three-dimensional theoretical approach in analyzing Erick Ngoda's novel. The theoretical framework, which combines aspects of Reader Response Theory, Poverty Theory, and Postcolonial Theory, has allowed for the examination of the novel from its inner textuality as well as its wider sociocultural implications. Such an analysis contributes to the small but growing body of scholarly research on African youth literature.

Further avenues for scholarly inquiry may include comparing the portrayal of poverty in other young adult literature in Kenya and Eastern Africa; conducting reception studies that consider actual reader response to the novel; or applying post-colonial feminist theory as a means of exploring the gender issues of poverty portrayed within the story. Indeed, the study of African literary criticism is set to benefit from the critical analysis of the works of writers such as Ngoda, whose literature addresses aspects of life that have not been recognized.

### Recommendations

On the basis of the above analysis, some key recommendations arise from this study, as follows:

- Literacy programs in schools and higher learning institutions should include literary works like '*A Name for Himself*' within curricula of social justice, development studies, and African literature. This is because, according to this study, literary treatment of issues of poverty encourages a sense of empathy and critical thinking that cannot be achieved through social sciences.

- Literature publishers, literary prize organizers, and cultural agencies should actively support the production and distribution of literature for young people that captures the socioeconomic situation in Africa. The Burt award for African literature is one such exemplary attempt that needs to be extended.
- The authors of poverty reduction policies should consider the power of literature as an intervention alongside other traditional policies on poverty

reduction. Literature, as seen in this study, has the ability to foster discussions on poverty in a way that the official policy documents cannot do.

- Researchers in African literary works should pay more attention to young adult literature since very few studies have been done on it despite its cultural relevance and widespread readership.

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