



*Corresponding author: Pethias Siame, Department of Literature and Languages, School of Humanities and Social sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia.

E-mail: psiam@yahoo.com

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Massaging the Contours of Poverty and General Malaise amid Opportunities: Zambian and African Writers

Pethias Siame^{1*}, Jive Lubungu¹, & Christian Ehiobuche²

¹Department of Literature and Languages, Humanities and Social sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia

²Department of Healthcare Administration and Leadership, Business, Stockton University Atlantic City Campus, New Jersey, USA.

Abstract: This paper addresses the question, 'Why is there a general malaise and impoverishment among writers in Zambia and Africa despite their sweat and well known good record?' Writing is supposed to be a lucrative undertaking. However, most writers in Zambia and Africa continue to massage the contours of poverty. This qualitative study discusses the views of the members of Writers Space Africa –Zambia (WSA). 25 writers and 2 online publishing companies were interviewed via the WhatsApp platform. The study employed a descriptive approach and thematic analysis. The study reveals that writers continue to court poverty due to lack of financial literacy, and heavy reliance on self-publishing. It also shows that most writers lack collaboration with big players in the book industry, not producing books in series and the readers' attitude towards reading. There is a lack of book adaptation by filmmakers while books are not being translated into other languages coupled with a lack of support systems by governments among other reasons, render writers to continue massaging impoverishment and general malaise. The study recommends robust support systems by governments and collaboration among writers to age out of the doldrums of general impoverishment among writers in Zambia and Africa.

Keywords: Collaborations, opportunities, poverty, Writers, Publishers

1. Introduction

The paper problematises the reasons that lead to a general malaise and impoverishment among writers in Zambia and Africa despite their sweat and well-known good record. Writing, just like any other occupation around the world, is expected to be a lucrative undertaking that must uplift the standard of living for authors. On the contrary, the present scenario paints a different picture because most writers in Zambia, and Africa in general, continue to massage the contours of poverty. This state of affairs is demotivating to the writers and would-be writers in Zambia and Africa in general. Based on the above background position of writers on the African continent, this study discusses the views of the members of Writers Space Africa –Zambia (WSA) regarding the publication of literature materials. Writers Space Africa –Zambia is a group of writers and publishers whose aim is to share ideas about writing and publishing. The paper aims to identify the causes of impoverishment among African writers and suggest some of the solutions which



can be used to get rid of the general impoverishment among writers in Zambia and Africa in general.

Kaddu (n.d: 76) says, “African writers are entrepreneurs who dedicate their time to writing on political, economic, social and technological African and related issues.” The above argument justifies that the business and livelihood of African writers are purely writing. This is the more reason they remain impoverished if they are not supported because their pre-occupation is writing. This situation also explains why African writers massage poverty and general malaise amid opportunities because they cannot do away with the creative art of writing which is intended to provide insights in all sectors of the economy in Africa. Writers would rather die poor and leave a legacy of written epistles to be read by all Africans than quit writing due to poverty. Writers become so much obsessed with writing that it becomes part of their livelihood.

2. Literature Review

According to Kaddu (n.d: 72), an African writer can be described as any original author of a text, a play, a poem, a piece of prose, and any other literary output on and about African affairs or issues regardless of their geographical location. This entails that most African writers deal with poetry, novels, novelettes, and other literary works which depict their social, political, economic, academic, and other related matters. Literature shows that Modern African writings evolved many decades ago and became a dominant activity of the writers amidst violence from colonial masters and the attendant socio-political ruptures emanating from the identification of divergent thematic and ideological clusters (cf. Mongo Beti, 1964). This shows that an African writer has not found writing and publication easy throughout all the decades.

Musonda (2021: ix) says, “The present age is in dire need of courageous voices, intellectual thoughts and penetrative minds to thrive and achieve balance. Authors whose desire is to contribute to the well-being of mankind need more enlightenment and guidance on how to write proficiently in a way that makes them have a magnetic impact.” The above quote shows that writers must be pre-occupied with writings that address the affairs of society, provide learning opportunities to society, and balance the welfare of people. The above qualities can be achieved when there are authors who are enlightened, guided, and sensitised in literary writings; components which are missing in most African writers. It can be argued that a writer who is not both efficient and proficient continues to massage poverty and general malaise amid opportunities because the work is not up to the local and international standards to attract readers to buy the artistic works. This shows that impoverishment can be eradicated in the authors who choose to be proficient writers which can be achieved through vigorous reading and writing.

Soyinka (1962) shows that the African writer has been exposed to a disillusionment moment in his society. This situation has been propagated by the political environment where the writer is expected to respond to the aspirations of politics at the expense of the challenges of society. The above scenario has led to the collapse of humanity and has made the African writer visionless because his writings are dictated by the political wave. Due to disillusionment, the African writer has continued massaging poverty and general malaise even if there are opportunities because his writing vision is blared by the political movement. This conflicts with Soyinka (1967:58) who argues that African writers should not be mere chroniclers, but must write with a very definite vision. Nkosi (1967) adds that good ingredients of good African writers are individualism and social commitment. The author argues that the above attributes are unfortunately of less benefit to bad writers.

Larson (2001) shows that African writers face numerous challenges, such as running bankrupt, political and social persecution, business sabotage, loss of life as well as escaping catastrophe by “hair-breadth”. Based on the above literature, it can be argued that the challenge of ‘running bankrupt’ qualifies the massaging of poverty, a situation that has led many African writers to be impoverished and demotivated.



Ayoola (2006) recounts the challenges faced by young Nigerian writers in a climate that is hostile to new authors. The author epitomises both the dilemma and the experiences of the new generation of creative writers. Ayoola says one of the challenges is the problem of language choice either English or a mother tongue. This shows that most African writers are undecided and make the wrong choice in terms of language which makes their sweet artistic works fail to sell. Other notable challenges of African writers include the choice of the correct genre, the new writer's response to democracy and globalisation, the problem of audience recognition, and the failure of do-it-yourself publishing and marketing. Shercliff (2015) observes that African writers and publishers incur large costs in educational publishing houses and the environment in which they operate is very competitive. The scholar argues that the stakes are high, which means that there is very little collaboration or even contact between them, even though the publishers may be located next door to each other. The above literature shows that African publishing houses lack collaboration. The other challenge is that even some of the best-known non-educational publishers have minimal sales and marketing functions and slim revenues. In addition, African publishers face significant challenges of limited capacity and reach.

Uchendu & Kwaghe (2019) documents a discourse on the challenges of writing African women's history. The duo argues that scholars of women's history are faced with quite many challenges when documenting women's history which range from problems of cultural difference, patriarchy, paucity of sources on women's histories, language barrier, financial constraints, unwillingness by some women to divulge information, insecurity, and threat to life, poor power supply, equipment failure, dissuasion from third parties, and infrastructural difficulties. The above challenges have contributed a lot to the poor documentation of African women's histories over time especially in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, thereby leading to massaging of poverty and general malaise of African writers (cf. Zeleza, 1997). The long neglect of challenges of writers on African Women's Histories in mainstream works on African history created a documentary gap for a long time (cf. Paulme, 1963; Walker, 1990; Cole et al, 2007). Therefore, up-to-date, comprehensive, and reliable publications on African women's history remain pertinent and should go a long way in solving the dearth of historical data on African women.

To mitigate the challenges of African writers on women's histories, Walker (1990) suggests that female scholars of African descent should be encouraged to document the history of African women themselves. Okafor (2007) succinctly recommends that scholars writing on African women should urgently gather themselves together under an umbrella name and begin to document their research on women. Okafor (2007) adds that there is a need to have an online forum for African women writers' easy communication of field experiences and frustrations and for mutual support of one another. The above suggestion would help to keep scholars writing women's histories motivated and focused on their projects. It can be argued that African women themselves should take the lead to mitigate the above challenges. According to Mernissi (1995), when every educated woman in Africa begins to write her story and those of her illiterate female relatives, a knowledge bank would be created and ready for mining in the not-distant time. Thus, African women must not continue to leave their futures and their stories for men to write.

3. Research Method and Materials

This qualitative study takes a descriptive approach and discusses the views of the members of Writers Space Africa –Zambia (WSA). Writers Space Africa –Zambia is a group of writers and publishers whose aim is to share ideas about writing and publishing. The study had 123 informants who acted as primary sources of information. Primary data were justified by secondary sources of information. Out of 123 WhatsApp group members of the WSA, 25 writers and 2 online publishing companies were interviewed via the WhatsApp platform. The study employed a descriptive thematic analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

The focus of the study was to address the question, 'why is there a general malaise and impoverishment among writers in Zambia and Africa despite their sweat and well-known good record?' The cocktail of findings was analysed thematically as follows:

4.1. Lack of Financial Literacy

Financial literacy is one of the key components for the success of any business one embarks on let alone the writing career. For a writer to manage the spoils that come from book sales and adaptation, financial literacy plays an important role. Those who lack financial literacy find it challenging to remain afloat in their businesses. The current study revealed that most African writers continue to face numerous challenges due to a lack of financial literacy as remarked by one respondent (KL):

'I have observed that most writers lack the financial literacy to enable them to manage the little resources they get from their writing. I think financial literacy lessons or short courses for writers would help to minimize the financial challenges most writers face.'

The above finding is in tune with Larson (2001) who submits that African writers face numerous challenges such as running bankrupt. One can argue that this bankruptcy comes perhaps because of a lack of financial literacy among writers as observed by the respondent above.

4.2. Heavy Reliance on Self-publishing

The study revealed that most African writers rely heavily on self-publishing which disadvantages them in terms of marketing their books. Self-publishing has proved to be one of the major hindrances to writers' financial break-through because their market catchment area is limited. Hence, they continue to massage the contours of poverty. One respondent (UP) said that:

'Self-published writers in this country are the worst hit because what they don't realize is that in essence when you self-publish, the global market is not yours. You will only sell your books to a few friends who are virtually sympathizers for lack of a better word.'

The above submission is complemented by another respondent who said:

'The ecosystem of writers is not yet fully developed especially when it comes to marketing and distribution. Bookstores require a cut and then most writers who are self-published do not have the marketing budgets.'

The above findings are a clear indication that heavy reliance on self-publishing contributes to writers' impoverishment in Africa. It is, therefore, cardinal, as Musonda (2021) has suggested that authors need more enlightenment and guidance not only on self-publishing but also on how to write proficiently in a way that makes them have a magnetic impact.

4.3. Lack of Collaboration with Big Players in the Book Industry

The study revealed that most African publishers and writers lack the spirit of collaboration not only among themselves but also with big players in the book industry. Collaboration is critical as it enables publishers and writers to share their experiences, values, strategies, and many other aspects that can help them grow their publishing or writing career. In the absence of these linkages, most publishers and writers continue to pursue their publishing and writing careers individually to the extent of courting and massaging poverty and general malaise. The finding is consistent with Shercliff (2015) who observes that there is very little collaboration or even contact between them, although the publishers may be located next door to each other. We argue that it is not only a lack of collaboration with big players in

the book industry but also disunity among writers that could be a potential cause of poverty among African writers.

4.4. Readers' Attitude towards Reading

The study revealed that a lack of good reading culture has contributed to writers' and publishers' poverty. This is because very few people buy books and as such there is a corresponding low demand for the books resulting in low sales. One respondent publisher (MP) said:

'The answer is that very few Zambians buy books. It is rare for me to sell more than 3,000 copies of a book in Zambia.'

Another respondent (AN) added that:

'I feel that the lack of a good reading culture of books, get me correctly, people read yes, but it depends on what they read to attain a status of having a good reading, contributes a fair percentage of why writers are struggling, not only in Zambia but across Africa. I can assure you that most African writers have the same complaints as we do. The subject is a very wide one because it also encompasses policies and the history of the industry in general. That is why one wise person told me once not to write for money, but just for the love of it.'

The above finding is a wake-up call to writers and publishers alike to embrace online platforms to promote their books since the majority of people now are passionately wedded to social media platforms. Promotion of eBooks perhaps can help promote the reading culture and at the same time bear in mind what content is good for the audience as one respondent (SH) remarked:

'It is almost impossible to write a book that everyone will love. Know your target audience.'

Reading culture has been a source of worry even among educators as most learners abhor reading and resort to social media frenzy. Therefore, the need for creativity and innovation on the part of the writers to entice the readership is a necessity.

4.5. Lack of Book Adaptation by Filmmakers

The study also revealed that the lack of book adaptations by filmmakers makes African writers continue to wallow in poverty yet their works are of high standard. The finances that accrue to writers whose works have been adapted can make the authors lead a comfortable life. Unfortunately, most African authors have not had the opportunity for their works adapted by filmmakers. One respondent (IM) lamented that:

'Film rights seem to be a far-fetched dream concerning book adaptation. I am yet to see a Zambian book being adapted into a film by Zambian filmmakers. In the meantime, I have no idea how that can go.....it worked well for George R.R. Martin on Game of Theories until the later episodes when the TV series adaptation surpassed the books.....'

The above finding speaks volumes about the state of writers' works in Africa concerning wider market recognition especially in the film industry. One would be compelled to insinuate that perhaps African writers produce sub-standard works that fail to penetrate the film industry. There is a high possibility also that a Lack of business management skills and poor writing skills have a big share in the failure of writers' books to make it for film adaptation.

4.6. Books not being Translated into Other Languages

Most writers have not taken advantage of linguistic diversity to market their books. Many writers have not taken deliberate moves to translate their books into various languages. Translation helps in expanding the audience catchment and therefore writers should

consider doing so. The larger the audience, the more sales one gets. The study revealed that books are not translated into other languages and as such the writers' audience is limited. This means that book sales are also limited thereby disadvantaging the authors. This finding is in agreement with Shercliff (2015) who opines that even some of the best-known non-educational publishers have minimal sales and marketing functions and slim revenues. African publishers also face significant challenges of limited capacity and reach.

4.7. Lack of Support Systems by Governments among Other Reasons

For writers to excel in their careers, there is a need for an environment that nurtures their writing spirit. The government and individual persons need to support the book industry if authors and publishers are to escape the grips of poverty and general malaise. However, the present study revealed that the lack of support systems by governments consigns writers and publishers to the corridors of poverty and general malaise. One respondent (IM) said:

'Lack of support systems especially by our government disadvantages writers. In South Africa, creative writers have publishers who can publish their works. In Uganda, from the information I got, they have made huge improvements concerning their writing industry. I even met young people running their own publishing houses and a millionaire self-published author who came for the workshop. He quit his job to write books. This entails the presence of good support systems in their country. Some of us just couldn't get employed. Otherwise being a writer in Zambia and depending solely on writing means you are living in poverty. We still have a long way to go.'

The above findings give a picture that in some countries in Africa, and the Diaspora, writers enjoy the benefits of writing while in other countries it is not the case. Probably lack of motivation contributes to the writers' state of affairs. One would perhaps buy into Soyinka (1962)'s argument that African writer has been exposed to disillusionment moment of their society such that they writer has become visionless because their writings are dictated by the political wave.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that African writers and publishers in general and Zambia, in particular, are massaging poverty, and general malaise amid opportunities which has led to their impoverishment due to the following challenges: lack of financial literacy, heavy reliance on self-publishing, lack of collaboration with big players in the book industry, readers' negative attitude towards reading, lack of book adaptation by filmmakers, books not being translated into other languages and lack of support systems by governments among other reasons.

There is a need for robust support systems by governments and collaboration among writers to age out of the doldrums of general impoverishment among writers in Zambia and Africa in general. The study further concludes that there is a need to have an online forum for African writers' easy communication of field experiences, frustrations and for mutual support of one another if the contours of poverty among African writers are to be erased.

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