

Exploring slum life and urban poverty in Lagos: the politics of everyday resistance in Chris Abani's *Graceland*

Exploring slum
life and urban
poverty

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to look into the implications of urban informality in Chris Abani's *Graceland* as represented in slum life and urban poverty as products of over urbanization and globalization, seeking to unravel multi-layers of the human side of the slum.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper examines slum life from a descriptive approach to highlight how people survive under poverty. The study of the culture of slums entails an analysis of the survival techniques and everyday practices of slum dwellers, the relations and patterns of behavior and the outcomes of the interplay between place, culture and power relations in such communities.

Findings – The urban slum dwellers utilize everyday forms of resistance which comprise a number of “low-profile techniques” to subvert state-imposed power structures and break the cycle of poverty.

Research limitations/implications – Despite the relevance of a post-colonial approach to the texts, this paper is limited to the study of the impact of urban poverty on individuals.

Practical implications – The margin, represented in the urban poor, is brought into focus and perceived in a new light of empowerment which challenges alienating discourses.

Social implications – The multidimensional vision of Nigeria in Abani's text highlights the cultural and economic impacts of multiculturalism, neocolonialism and globalization on the urban poor.

Originality/value – The paper formulates a framework for understanding the culture of the slum as a space of a peculiar nature, seeking to deconstruct a fixed view of slum life and poverty culture.

Keywords Slum narratives, Urban informality, Social exclusion, Lagos literature, Culture of poverty, Survival, Resistance, Chris Abani

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Novels are works of art about being human, about individual human moments that offer readers a glimpse into not only the lives of others, but into their own deep pain, pain they often won't look at.

Chris Abani, A Deep Humanness, a Deep Grace: Interview with Chris Abani

Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004) renders the outcomes of the intersectionality of place, culture and politics in Maroko, one of the biggest slums in Lagos, Nigeria. Set in the late 20th century, the novel taps into the impact of such intersection of power relations on both everyday life and the individuals living under poverty and military violence at the time. Abani identifies with a new generation of Nigerian writers, whom he refers to as the third generation, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helon Habila and Sefi Atta. In his view, this generation of



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writers shifts the emphasis in African literature, particularly Nigerian writing, from an essentialist postcolonial view of Africa as a nation facing post-independence challenges to a more globalized and dynamic view of Africa as an evolving nation, unceasingly developing various strategies to address its historical trauma.

This paper looks into the implications of urban informality in Abani's *Graceland* as represented in slum life and urban poverty as products of over urbanization and globalization. In an attempt to highlight the human dimension of the slum, the paper investigates the impact of urban poverty on the everyday practices of slum dwellers and their attempts to escape the trap of poverty. This, in turn, enables an understanding of the factors formulating the peculiar culture of slum areas and the individual struggles of slum dwellers, both as experiences of high relevance to living in a circle of poverty and historical trauma. The study of the culture of slums entails an analysis of the survival techniques and everyday practices of slum dwellers, the relations and patterns of behavior among the different categories of people inhabiting a slum and the outcomes of the interplay between place, culture and power relations in such communities.

A sociohistorical overview of Lagos, Nigeria

Lagos, the largest city in Nigeria, is one of the most essential economic centers in Africa and is home to a large segment of the population. Being a megacity that hosts millions of people with ever-growing rates of population, urbanization and industrialization are key challenges for the city. Urban and economic aspects of such challenges represent a daily struggle for the city. Defying present day challenges, the Nigerian people carry the brunt of a historical collective trauma that dates back to the years of British colonization and the brutal civil war.

Lagos literature is an established mode of writing for many Nigerian authors from different generations. The multidimensional vision of Nigeria in the literary production by Abani and his generation of writers highlights the cultural and economic impacts of factors such as multiculturalism, neocolonialism and globalization on people and their surroundings. The transnational view of life in Lagos adopted by Abani invites a discussion of the factors controlling life in the slums of this city, mainly the Maroko slum, after surviving British colonialization and the 1967 civil war.

Chris Abani's *Graceland*

Graceland is a tale of the city of Lagos that uncovers its strikingly contrasting urban elements and social categories. The city unabashedly flaunts rich touristic attractions with high-rise buildings and efficient infrastructure side-by-side the slum areas with direly poor housing options, muddy gateways and staggering unemployment. Abani depicts a realistic view of what life looks like in poverty-stricken areas such as Maroko, one of the largest poor ghettos in Lagos, in the eyes of sixteen-year-old Elvis who relocated to the slum at the age of eight with his father after the death of his mother. This realistic view of Lagos in Abani's writing is represented in his deviation from a singular view of Lagos as an African city evolving after decades of colonization, civil fighting and military rule and foregrounding the metropolitan and global positioning of the city which impacts its poor inhabitants. Notwithstanding the dramatic events of the novel, he tacitly accentuates the channels of hope in the slum, represented in Elvis's relentless attempts to break free from the shackles of poverty and pursue a better future elsewhere.

The novel is set in the 1970–80s where the city of Lagos is portrayed as a melting pot for multiple urban contradictions where the poor live in deteriorating conditions in isolation from the rich part of the same city. Abani attempts to highlight the aesthetics of living in poverty and the daily struggles the characters encounter while seeking a path out of poverty and

marginalization. A close examination of the dynamics of poverty and survival in slums such as Maroko reveals different reactions to the experience of urban poverty and informality. It highlights the constant battle between a sense of defeat and surrender to the surrounding environment on the one hand, and resistance and hope for a better life, on the other.

Soja (1989, p. 1) contends “we are becoming increasingly aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities”. Hence, the impact of space, environment and the dominating landscape on individuals and their actions is a fundamental thread in analyzing Elvis’s experience of slum dwelling and urban poverty. Elvis, born in 1967 in Afikpo, a large town in South East Nigeria inhabited by Igbo people, is depicted as a young teenager who tries to find his way in a new challenging environment while adhering to his heritage and culture as an Igbo and maintaining his dignity and self-worth.

Throughout the novel, Abani adopts an alternating flashback third-person method of narration where past and present events move along in spatial and temporal juxtaposition between Afikpo and Lagos from 1972 to 1983. This juxtaposition between the two cities mirrors Elvis’s feelings toward his parents where Afikpo is portrayed as the hometown, with all the nostalgia and longing for the mother and the family it signifies, and Lagos as the nasty slum representing the deterioration of present life conditions and the harshness of the father. As the narrative unfolds, Elvis seeks a reconciliation with both his past and present; one which involves an understanding of his feelings toward the informality of the place he lives in and the people he is surrounded by. Moreover, he hopefully aims at stepping out of the cycle of poverty and pursuing his ambitions to become a professional dancer, just like the renowned American idol Elvis Presley.

Place and identity in Maroko, Lagos

Place, materialized in the Maroko slum and Lagos city, is significantly present early in the novel through Elvis’s reflections on his surroundings and how he relates to the urban environment around him:

Elvis stood by the open window. Outside: heavy rain . . . The rain had cleared the oppressive heat that had already dropped like a blanket over Lagos; but the smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies was still overwhelming . . . he listened to the sounds of the city waking up: tin buckets scraping, the sound of babies crying, infants yelling for food and people hurrying but getting nowhere. (Abani, 2005, pp. 3–4)

For Elvis, living in a slum in Lagos where surviving poverty, violence and social exclusion poses an everyday struggle is a significant human experience which he contemplates critically all the time. He is cognizant of the ramifications of living in poverty, without financial or emotional family support. Moreover, Elvis is constantly aware of how this reality shapes his everyday life. Such observations include self-reflections along with critical views of his surroundings and the coping mechanisms adopted by other slum dwellers in Maroko, Lagos. The identification of the slum dwellers of Lagos as “hurrying but getting nowhere” reveals a sense of spatial entrapment experienced by the people living in poverty and social disadvantage.

In *Land and Identity Theory, Memory, and Practice*, Berberich (2012, p. 18) illustrate that “How we feel about place; how we define ourselves in relation to landscape; and how we respond to others’ sense of these complex attachments is crucial”. Elvis’s perception of life in Lagos shows little, if any, satisfaction with his living conditions and career potentials. In his mind, he questions: “How did they come to this? he wondered. Just two years ago they lived in a small town and his father had a good job and was on the cusp of winning an election. Now they lived in a slum in Lagos” (Abani, 2005, p. 6). The evident nostalgic tone reflects a sense of

loss and displacement which controls Elvis's feelings of dissatisfaction with his surrounding environment. He is rebuked by his father on a daily basis for not having a decent job even though the options available are very limited. His job as a street performer impersonating Elvis Presley for tourists on the beach brings him little money and much humiliation.

To combat the present sense of defeat generated by slum life in Maroko, Elvis calls on his childhood memories in Afikpo, his hometown, where the presence of his mother and grandmother fostered a substantially more stable life. Memories of better days in Afikpo, a place where poverty and informality did not constrain peoples' motives and potential for social and economic growth, function not only as an expression of nostalgia and loss but also as a significant marker of an informal mode of resistance through memory. Elvis's attachment to his mother, Beatrice, is highlighted early in the novel through his recollections of his life with his mother in Afikpo before she died of breast cancer. He keeps her journal in his bag everywhere he goes, "... a collection of cooking and apothecary recipes and some other unrelated bits, like letters and notes about things that seemed as arbitrary as the handwriting: all that he had inherited from her, all that he had to piece her life together" (Abani, 2005, p. 11).

There is a persisting sense of melancholy to be traced that coincides with the memory of Beatrice and her sickness as well as a sense of loss of the warmth and intimacy which Elvis misses since he moved to Maroko with his father. Recalling the warmth of the old days when he lived with his mother, Elvis keeps Beatrice's journal close to him at all times to feel the presence of his mother:

He walked over to his bed and pulled his mother's journal from under his pillow. He had taken to sleeping with it there after Jagua Rigogo had suggested that it was the perfect way to contact her spirit in his dreams. It hadn't worked so far, but it brought him comfort to have it within reach. He often fell asleep rubbing his left fingertips against the worn leather. (46)

The conscious act of remembering childhood memories in Afikpo with his mother and other family members is a coping mechanism to which Elvis resorts to endure the onerous burden of his present. Holding on to memories of a once better life represents a survival tactic through which Elvis reassures himself that past experiences of well-being can be restored, strengthening, in turn, the power of hope for a poverty exit. The cherished memory of Beatrice stands in stark contrast with the strained relationship between Elvis and Sunday in the present. It can be discerned that Elvis's conflicting emotions toward his parents echo his perception of Afikpo and Lagos as two cities shaping both his past and present.

In Elvis's view, earlier reference to people inhabiting the slum of Maroko as people moving and getting nowhere signifies a sense of void or spatial entrapment which people internalize and contemplate every day. This could be the case for the lack of better options and an unquestionable acceptance of the social and financial limitations imposed on slum dwellers as a result of urban poverty. Abani foregrounds the hostility of the place while referring to the everyday struggle that comes with moving into and out of the slum caused by the lack of proper infrastructure:

The road outside their tenement was waterlogged and the dirt had been whipped into a muddy brown froth that looked like chocolate frosting . . . Elvis and his father lived at the left edge of the swamp city of Maroko, and their short street soon ran into a plank walkway that meandered through the rest of the suspended city. (Abani, 2005, p. 6)

Poverty, unemployment, poor sanitation and the lack of access to roads and transportation are among the most pressing challenges faced by Elvis and slum dwellers in Lagos, Nigeria and most of slum dwellers on a global scale. The narrowness of the pathways in the slum signifies the limitations imposed on people living in poverty and the inevitability of suffering the lack of financial resources. This sense of being trapped in a poor place, a "suspended city", typically generates feelings of impotence and surrender; however, as the narrative unfolds, people's

resistance to urban poverty, mainly Elvis, manifests itself in persistent attempts to break the cycle of poverty in which they live through seeking better jobs and standards of living.

Working on a construction site allows Elvis to observe his surroundings and the dynamics of social relations amidst members of the society of the slum of Maroko. Namely, an image is drawn to show the readers what slum dwellers endure and feel, how their everyday struggles look like, and how they choose to respond to poverty. Elvis contemplates the diversity of the community of the slum:

They were a curious mix. Happy, buxom women who carried cinder blocks on their heads to the upper levels, their fat shaking as they exploded into laughter at some joke. There were also masons with cement-dusted bodies and carpenters strutting with leather tool belts and young girls who should have been spending their weekdays in school and their weekends at home, grooming and giggling as they gossiped their naive knowledge of men. . . . They sat or lay back in the shade of trees that survived the site clearing, or in the shade of the half-finished building. (Abani, 2005, p. 28)

This *slice of life* depiction of the everyday practice in the slum of Maroko is a reflection of the human side of living in poverty. Abani presents, through Elvis's consciousness of the place, an image of the urban poor that is not included in economic statistics and development reports. Elvis's observant eye promotes the authenticity of the depiction of the human side of the slum by picturing the everyday struggles of its inhabitants; moreover, it suggests a redefinition of the prejudiced culture of poverty as a passive culture where the poor choose to exist in a perpetual cycle of poverty while doing the bare minimum to survive.

Elvis's awareness of his spatial environment and the challenges embedded in living in one of Lagos's slums is mostly shaped by his relations to other slum dwellers in Maroko. One of those people was the King of Beggars or Caesar Augustus Anyanwu whom Elvis knew as a beggar and treated him to lunch one day after work. An early exchange between Elvis and the King of Beggars reveals a different standpoint about poverty:

Do you live here?

Yes, here in Bridge City.

I guess that's why you became a beggar.

Someone does not become a beggar; we are made beggars.

Is there no work you can do?

I beg. Dat is my work.

But where is your pride?

I cannot afford it, Caesar said, laughing. (Abani, 2005, p. 31)

Bridge City is another poverty-stricken shanty town in Lagos built under flyovers and populated with different categories of artisans who are part of a larger poor population in Lagos. Even though the majority of the poor in Lagos are resilient in their fight against poverty, some others surrender to those allegations. The voice of the King of Beggars typifies representations of a category of the urban poor in Lagos who are subjected to systematic efforts by neoliberal and capitalist governments and market holders to internalize the notion of the culture of poverty which advocates blaming the victim (the poor) for their socioeconomic conditions and suggests that the poor are born and remain poor.

The culture of poverty revisited

In *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals*, Valentine (1968, p. 1) defines culture as "a collective product of human effort, feeling and thought". Bigoted views of slum areas

and their dwellers presume that people living in poverty develop a static singular model of culture, the “culture of poverty” as suggested by Oscar Lewis in the late 1950s. This model of culture which was adopted by subsequent social theorists and anthropologists at the time and later critiqued by others entails an outlook of culture in poor places as a perpetuation of the “cycle of poverty” and a spatial entrapment in poor places where the urban poor reproduce cultural practices which preclude them from self-development or change. Accordingly, in Lewis’s view, such social and cultural practices lead the urban poor to live the same life every day with no chances for development to break free from this process of reproducing poverty.

This approach to the arguable essence of urban poverty and slum life tends to evaluate the dynamics of poverty in slum areas on a superficially practical basis. It is a rule of judging slums that is mainly concerned with the relation between poor urban environments and the outer world. The evaluation of such areas takes place in terms of the influence of slums on the development of a city or a country, causes of slum formation and, for the most part, proposed plans for slum clearance and combating poverty. Such an essentialist attitude toward slums leads most of the time to a negligence of the human side, the urban interiors of the spaces of the poor and the socio-economic impacts of such informal structures on their inhabitants. Hans-Christian Petersen (2013, p. 7) highlights the significance of developing different approaches to urban poverty to substitute the dominant narrative on the areas of the urban poor, examining, instead, slum life and its culture from the inside. For Petersen, inequitable views of spaces of urban poverty as “solely places of dull backwardness, characterised by spatial and mental narrowness” take for granted the homogeneity of the society of the urban poor. Moreover, a homogenous view of spaces of urban poverty leads to a negligence of the question of what these “narrow habitats” meant for their inhabitants . . . “The view from the outside is blind to the perspective from the inside” (2013, p. 7). Perceived in that sense as a spokesperson of the poor, Elvis draws attention to the dynamics of poverty as an insider whose observations reflect the direct impact of slum life on people.

As a member of the society of the Maroko slum of Lagos, Elvis ponders on the misleading image of the city as a metropolitan center with glamorous tourist attractions and no traces of poverty or violence:

He hadn’t known about the poverty and violence of Lagos until he arrived. It was as if people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around its unsavory parts. People who didn’t live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweeping flyovers, beaches and hotels. And those who did, when they returned to their ancestral small towns at Christmas, wore designer clothes and threw money around. They breezed in, lived an expensive whirlwind life, and then left after a couple of weeks, to go back to their ghetto lives. (Abani, 2005, p. 7)

Elvis’s reflections underline the contrasting nature of the city which embraces both wealth and poverty, skyscrapers and slums as well as famous beaches and swamps. Elvis notes the double reality most people living in Lagos slums embrace as an outcome of the burdening pressures of living in a globalized world. The urban poor inhabiting Lagos slums face challenges to cope with the pace of life in this megacity which is afflicted with years of colonization and the ensuing battles against urban poverty. Both the challenges imposed on Lagos by modernization and globalization and the challenges faced by its inhabitants are inextricable and worthy of analysis to reach an understanding of the dynamics of urban poverty in informal communities such as the slums of Lagos.

As Elvis notes, “Lagos did have its fair share of rich people and fancy neighborhoods, though, and since arriving he had found that one-third of the city seemed transplanted from the rich suburbs of the west” (2004, p. 7). Such dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are controlled by social as well as economic dynamics which lead to social segregation and exclusion of the poor by formal governments. Two important themes emerge from the factors

controlling the relation between slum life and urban poverty hitherto discussed: the urban problems facing Lagos as a megacity in a globalized world and their impact on the urban poor inhabiting slums, and the heterogeneity of reactions to urban poverty by slum dwellers which, in either case, display a dynamic model of surviving poverty and, in most cases, an active resistance to its constraining limitations.

An understanding of the urban challenges associated with living in Lagos and their impacts on the life of the urban poor is feasible through a more explicit definition of the urban characteristics of megacities. A megacity is an urban phenomenon arising from rapid overpopulation in developing cities and usually describes metropolitan areas of a population density that exceeds 10 million people. In most cases, megacities represent an urban challenge for economically developing nations due to the lack of congruence between a country's resources and its growing population. Lagos is one of the megacities in Africa and its population in 2021 exceeds 14 million people. The rapid overpopulation in Lagos by reason of rural migration to urban centers which started in the twentieth century, maximized around 1950 and continues up to the present time, has led to a parallel process of urbanization that follows the same pace. Hence, informal settlements spread out on the outskirts of the city to accommodate migrants from rural areas.

Urban challenges and the paradox of poverty

In *Graceland*, Abani invokes the urban challenges of living in the Maroko slum and their impact on the urban poor through Elvis's critical vision of the surrounding environment in Lagos and the rapidly growing urban landscape around him. When Elvis acknowledges the fact that it is impractical to work as a dancer in Lagos, as he needs regular income, he starts working at a construction site through the help of Uncle Benji, a friend of his father's, who, ironically, "... didn't have a job and earned a living by hooking people up with others seeking a service or a favor or a thug" (2004, p. 26). Thinking about the construction site, Elvis ponders: "Lagos was littered with sites like this one, because new high-rise apartment complexes and office blocks were going up seemingly overnight" (2004, p. 27). Notwithstanding the mass construction projects in Lagos, more than 60% of the population of the city inhabit slums and certainly there is no place for the urban poor in such residential units. Demographic research and development reports describe the rate of urbanization in Nigeria as alarming; annual urbanization and population growth annual rates range from 5% to 10%.

According to *The Challenge of Slums* (2003, p. 23), in most developing countries, the main cause of urban poverty lies in the lack of "adequate economic growth" measured up to urban growth. Hence, governments in developing countries fail to provide minimum living standards for the poor majority of the population or to consider their needs in urban planning and decision making. Rather, housing opportunities and economic resources are concentrated in urban centers inhabited by rich and upper middle classes. In the same vein, quoting David Simon and A. S. Oberai, *Davis* (2007) comments in *Planet of Slums* on the alarming pace of urbanization in African developing countries:

The situation in Africa was particularly paradoxical: How could cities in Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania, Congo-Kinshasa, Gabon, Angola, and elsewhere — where economies were contracting by 2–5% per year — still support annual population growth of 4–8%? How could Lagos in the 1980s grow twice as fast as the Nigerian population, while its urban economy was in deep recession? (14)

That being the case, the problem of over urbanization in Nigeria and in Africa overall emanates from the inadequacy of economic resources compared with the large scale of population and urbanization.

In, *The Paradox of Poverty: A Reappraisal of Economic Development Policy*, Paul Steidlmeier (1987) provides an analysis of the causes of urban poverty on a global scale,

mainly in developed countries. He refers to a “paradox of poverty” which emerges from the continued existence of urban poverty in developed countries regardless of their growing economies. While such countries are economically developed, poverty rates remain consistent and in most cases, the poor get poorer. Steidlmeier attributes this paradox primarily to corruption and social inequality (epitomized in social segregation, classism and discrimination against the poor). In “The Poverty Paradox”, Andy Sumner (2016) emphasizes the lack of social equality in the distribution of resources to be the main cause of the “paradox of poverty” in developing countries. Sumner further refers to the distinction between analyzing “poverty” vis-a-vis “the poor” and confirms that both concepts should not be perceived as indistinguishable; individuals may be financially able but still be labeled as poor as they lack access to the economic resources of a country. This helps explain the behavior of some of the slum dwellers of Lagos who, despite being financially secure, find themselves trapped in slum life.

Valentine (1968, p. 13) explains that “the essence of poverty is inequality”. Even though the causes of urban poverty in Africa are the same as in other developed countries, the paradox in Africa, and in developing countries at large, does not emerge from the discrepancy between economic growth and growing poverty rates. Rather, the disparity between the accelerated pace at which new buildings are erected every day in Lagos and the lack of proper housing for the urban poor and slum dwellers denotes what can be called an *urban paradox*, the inadequacy of proper housing for a certain class, namely the urban poor, in the midst of a growing urban expansion. This *urban paradox* does the poor no justice in terms of social equality and distribution of wealth. “The plank walkways, which crisscrossed three-quarters of the slum, rang out like xylophones as a variety of shoes hurrying over them struck diverse notes. In the mud underneath this suspended city, dogs, pigs, goats and fowl rooted for food” (Abani, 2005, p. 24). Hence, commodifying housing and the social inequality in Nigeria have left the poor with a great deal of suffering both on an everyday scale and in the long term. It is a daily struggle to survive poverty, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, unemployment, violence, congestion, social segregation and crime.

The contradictory description of the city of Lagos, which combines the glamor of fancy beaches and hotels together with the deterioration and stagnation of slums and ghettos, is a constitutive part of Elvis’s consciousness of the city. “Giving up on reading, he let his mind drift as he stared at the city, half slum, half paradise. How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? he wondered” (Abani, 2005, p. 7). At this moment, Elvis’s perception of Lagos conveys both the good and the bad; the “ugly” and the “beautiful”. Elvis’s condemnation of the place that is infiltrated with his admiration of its beauty indicates an objective position which strengthens his reliability as a representative voice of the marginalized poor; his discontents about living in Maroko, Lagos, the “suspended city” with its poor slums, do not prevent him from seeing the charming side of the city. As keen on reading as he is, “Elvis pulled a Dickens out, *A Tale of Two Cities*, his favorite, and read the first line: ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’ Smiling, he closed the book. That was the perfect description of life in Lagos” (Abani, 2005, p. 111). As such, Elvis’s impression of the place emphasizes the paradoxical formation of Lagos and its contradictions owing to the social ills of poverty, violence and exclusion of the poor.

The racing pace of urbanization in Nigeria in the late 20th century has dictated a jump in industrialization as a by-product of urbanization. As a result, urban centers such as Lagos were surrounded with slums which hosted those who moved closer to the center seeking employment and better life conditions. However, as mentioned earlier, urbanization and the ensuing industrialization in Nigeria did not enhance life conditions for the poor as long as social inequality and corruption persevered. Abani presents, through Elvis, a realistic analysis of the urban scene in Lagos, Nigeria at a time where social injustice widened the gap between the rich and the poor:

Elvis had read a newspaper editorial that stated, rather proudly, that Nigeria had a higher percentage of millionaires—in dollars, not local currency—than nearly any other country in the world, and most of them lived and conducted their business in Lagos. The editorial failed to mention that their wealth had been made over the years with the help of crooked politicians, criminal soldiers, bent contractors, and greedy oil-company executives. Or that Nigeria also had a higher percentage of poor people than nearly any other country in the world. What was it his father had said about statistics? “If you have it, flaunt it; if you don’t, flaunt statistics.” (Abani, 2005, p. 8)

The aforementioned *paradox of poverty* affiliated with Lagos, Nigeria is highlighted in Elvis’s analytical view of the contradictions of life in Nigeria, and the intentional concealment of the reality of poverty. Nevertheless, Abani’s assertive tone as a third person narrator indicates his reproof of the economic situation in Nigeria with social inequality and corruption dominating the urban scene. Hence, in this part, the narrative reads as a piece of news or a historical record which lays out actual information about the place and its culture at the time. Therefore, the recurring historical and social references spanning the novel promote a depiction of the human side of poverty that is more authentic.

Urban poverty in globalized Lagos

Globalization as an expansion of social, economic and political interconnection across nations has a strategic impact on shaping the consciousness of slum dwellers in the way they react to poverty in terms of coping mechanisms and the efforts to reach individual agency in postcolonial Nigeria. A discussion over planning for the future between Elvis and Redemption reveals the cultural penetration occurring in Lagos as an outcome of globalized modernity:

I said we got to think beyond our guns. See you spend your whole life fighting with your father and no time on making your own life. What will you do when he dies? Fight yourself?

“What of you?” Elvis asked.

Me too. I spend my life hustling for small money, staying one step ahead of de police. But I will not do dat all my life. You see, I done read Napoleon Hill and as a thinking man, and with de grace of God, I go be millionaire before I reach thirty.

So what is your plan?

What’s dat thing they say on dat TV show?

What show?

Bassey and Company, by Ken Saro-Wiwa.

I don’t know.

Dat’s why you are poor. Bassey always says, “To be a millionaire, you must think like a millionaire.”

So something someone said on a television show is your plan?

Dis Elvis, you no get faith. Television is de new oracle. (Abani, 2005, p. 54)

While Redemption’s pragmatic thinking is a reflection of the cultural imperialism and global capital invading Lagos, Nigeria, it further conveys an impression of slum culture that conflicts with stereotypical images of the poor as incompetent docile citizens stuck in the poverty trap. Whether Redemption’s ambitions are within reach or not, his dream to become a millionaire echoes propagated capitalist ideas of growing rich quickly in a world of free markets and equal opportunities. Elvis, instead, is Abani’s censorious voice that mocks commercial T.V. shows which, for the west, allegedly spreads progressive thinking to help end poverty.

Globalization and the westernization of life and language in Lagos, Nigeria, mainly after decolonization and under corrupt democratic rule and military dictatorship, are critical issues which Abani traces throughout the narrative to highlight the multifaceted challenges of living in cosmopolitan Lagos under poverty. Impersonating Elvis Presley for a living reveals the western influence on the Nigerian people and their culture, represented in Elvis and his career aspirations to become a professional dancer. Also, it further highlights the toils of following one's dreams and artistic ambitions in a commercialized world such as the one of Lagos.

Elvis, defying the odds, never stops trying to earn a living in Lagos while being clearly aware of his misfortunes. A persistence that shapes the manner through which the urban poor are determined to resist poverty and exclusion by choosing not to quit. He does not surrender to the unfavorable circumstances of living in the Maroko slum with no financial stability and holds out hope to make money and grow into financial independence. Elvis later decides to find another steady job, while not giving up on his dream to become a dancer: "It wasn't that he was giving up on his dream to be a dancer, he rationalized; it was more like he was deferring it for a while. Maybe with the money he earned, he could save up to go to America. That was a place where they appreciated dancers" (Abani, 2005, pp. 24–25). Elvis, as the narrative unfolds, does not sound like someone without a plan; rather, he is fueled with determination to overcome the poverty of the slum in Lagos and accomplish a stable career.

Elvis, together with his Aunt Felicia and his friend Redemption, share together a keen desire to leave Lagos and move to the U.S. where their dreams of welfare and stability can come true. Such mindset is adopted by a considerable percentage of people in Lagos who consider leaving for a western country, like the U.S. to be their way to exit poverty.

Exploitation of the poor and the culture of resistance

Core human needs such as seeking visibility, the need for social recognition and the social justice which Redemption dreams of reveal the unjustifiable social inequality and discrimination they encounter in their everyday life. His words hint at police and military brutality, to be discussed later in this paper, which exemplifies another form of oppression experienced by the urban poor in Nigeria under oppressive military rule. Redemption, Elvis and other representatives of the urban poor are aware of their position as social outcasts who suffer segregation, inequality, violence and exploitation trying to survive life in Lagos. However, they do not surrender to such limitations and choose to resist exclusion in their own way. As they watched sunset in Maroko, "A few generators thudded around them, and Elvis absently wondered why anyone who could afford a generator would live in Maroko. To their left, through a skirt of trees, was the road, and across the lagoon from it, on the distant shore, were lights" (Abani, 2005, p. 137). Caught by the glamor of lights on the other side of the shore, Elvis asked:

Is that Ikoyi? Elvis asked.

Redemption squinted.

"Oh yes," he replied. "Dis is why I like Lagos."

Why?

"Because though dey hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as dey might, we don't go away."

Elvis laughed, triggering Redemption, and soon they were gasping for breath.

Ah, Redemption, you are funny O!

True talk, true talk. (Abani, 2005, p. 137)

Ikoyi is one of Lagos's most affluent neighborhoods that is popular for its luxury hotels and upscale entertainment venues. The city exemplifies what Ben Mendelsohn (2018, p. 456) refers to as "antipoor, elitist urban development in Lagos". Being a renowned destination for tourists and members of the social upper class in Lagos, the place is located as a far-reaching dream on the other side of urban chaos and poverty. The neighborhood stands in stark contrast with Maroko where swampy dangerous roads lead to ramshackle bungalows and poor squatters. By giving voice to the silenced majority, the urban poor, Abani renders the human side of the experience of poverty and how it feels like being deprived of basic human needs such as the right to decent housing.

"Hearing from the margin" indicates how people surviving urban poverty and social segregation identify with their circumstances and engage with the hegemonic "other". This type of engagement may be seemingly passive, however, it denotes an active resistance to the socio-economic restrictions imposed on their existence. In this sense, the urban poor persevere and endure the constraints of poverty as a statement against corrupt governments and social inequalities. This act of resistance to systematic physical as well as psychological attempts to sweep the poor away is what may be referred to as *resistance by existence*. Furthermore, Redemption's criticism of the society of Ikoyi as representative of rich capitalist societies challenges the norms of power structure which are conventionally in favor of people with financial and economic power. As such, the rich classes are subject to the gaze of the poor who not only understand the dynamics controlling the rich-poor divide but also condemn them.

Ikoyi, Nikon Town Estate, Banana Island Estate, Calton Gate Estate and other private residential areas in Lagos represent an urban trend known as "gated communities" which widens the gap between the rich and the poor. In *Human Geography: People, Place, and Culture*, Fouberg *et al.* (2009, p. 308) define gated communities as "... fenced-in neighborhoods with controlled access gates for people and automobiles. Often, gated communities have security cameras and security forces (privatized police) keeping watch over the community, as the main objective of a gated community is to create a space of safety within the uncertain urban world". Moreover, the rising expansion of such communities highlights the paradox of poverty in African megacities like Lagos and amplifies social polarization, a matter which leaves the urban poor prone to more discrimination and economic disadvantage. In "The Edge and the Center: Gated Communities and the Discourse of Urban Fear", Low (2001) touches on urban fear as a discourse which justifies social and urban practices of exclusion of the poor by building gated communities to protect the rich from the sweeping violence and crime in poor areas. According to Low, this "fear discourse" has legitimized the urban exclusion of the poor and the increase in the number of private communities as a result. This discourse of fear is manifested in Lagos and most megacities of the Global South where a social segregation between the economically privileged and the urban poor is in effect. However, the "fear" experienced by slum dwellers as a result of the lack of secure tenure and the impoverished life conditions is overlooked.

On a similar note, *The Challenge of Slums report* (2003, p. 16) points out a growing awareness of the fact that "slum dwellers are not the main source of crime. Instead, slum dwellers are now seen as more exposed to organized crime than non-slum dwellers as a result of the failure of public housing and other policies that have tended to exclude slum dwellers". Therefore, most slum dwellers should be perceived as victims of poverty and exclusion instead of "perpetrators of crime" (2003, p. 17). Moreover, inhabiting slums jeopardizes the security of slum dwellers against exploitation by capitalist employers: "Urban slums, in a wider sense of meaning, generate both economic opportunity and risks of exploitation for their residents . . . the primary motivation of most voluntary in-migration is the hope for a better job and economic security . . . Critics of the capitalist system have observed that slum housing thus enables capital to undervalue labour" (2003, pp. 32, 67). Elvis and his father

moved to Lagos for the same reasons, seeking better life conditions and stable jobs. Nevertheless, their aspirations for a prosperous life in Lagos were unavailing due to a number of reasons: The Nigerian ailing economy after decolonization and the ensuing over urbanization in Lagos, negligence to the poor who immigrated to urban centers as wealth concentrated in the hands of capital owners and military officials.

According to [The Challenge of Slums \(2003, p. 64\)](#), slum growth in urban centers and the change “from earlier economic systems” in some countries to capitalism are inseparable owing to the fact that the hallmarks of capitalism including social inequality, profit-seeking and exploitation are among the worst features associated with slum life. Thereby, workers in construction sites in Lagos and other low-paid jobs were fired daily by owners of capital and substituted by others regardless of their financial obligations and family needs. The “dirty work” of firing and hiring exemplifies the injustices, let alone the indignation, endured by the economically disadvantaged population of slums which amounts to an inevitable part of their everyday life under a capitalist economy. Therefore, employment opportunities, the principal cause for urban in-migration to urban centers like Lagos, become unobtainable in an economy that has not yet reached full recovery.

In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel [Castells \(2010, p. 475\)](#) sets forth a distinction between capital and labor: “At its core, capital is global. As a rule, labor is local”. Thus, thriving under a capitalist economic system puts the poor at risk of economic exploitation by depreciation of the value of labor by the owners of capital. Moreover, the global (capital), as the main factor controlling a capitalist economy, conquers the local (labor), a matter which originates a space for exploitation of labor or the urban poor. For Lagos, in this case, poverty and unemployment make the poor liable to all forms of exploitation, including human exploitation. Prior to his decision to work with Redemption in the club, Elvis had an opportunity to make money by selling his blood to the hospital. He learned about the option of trading one’s blood with money at the hospital from Okon, a poor man to which he offered food one day and they became friends ever since. Surprised by Okon’s neat appearance, Elvis pondered on Okon’s transformation: “Okon was the man who had scabbled in the dirt for rice. How come he was so kitted out now? Had he taken to a life of crime?” ([Abani, 2005, p. 75](#)). The first anticipation that comes to Elvis’s mind is Okon turning to crime for money reflects an implication by Abani denoting that under such dreadful living conditions, crime is the only option to earn money. Okon explained, “Blood. De hospital, dey pay us to donate blood. One hundred naira per pint. If you eat well, you can give four pints in four different hospitals, all in one day. It’s illegal, of course, but it’s my blood, and it’s helping to save lives, including mine. Right?” ([Abani, 2005, p. 76](#)). Abani exposes another aspect of the deficient life of the poor in Lagos who are driven by the need for survival to sell their blood as a commodity, unaware or even negligent of ensuing health complications or social ramifications. Moreover, state officials, manifested in hospitals administrations are critically involved in these corrupt practices by turning a blind eye to such desperate attempts by the poor to subsist and allowing for these exploitative patterns to persevere.

As the narrative unfolds, what may allegedly come out as desperate attempts by Elvis and other characters to get employed is basically Abani’s denouncement of the corruption and violence practiced against the poor in Lagos. By rejecting Okon’s offer to “connect him” to donate blood illegally, Elvis disallows poverty to be a reason for the state to capitalize on his body. Exposing the poor to the capitalist market without supply of capital which they need to manage to survive economically puts them at risk of being raw material for capital themselves. The pace of over urbanization and neoliberal economy in Lagos leads not only to the commodification of housing but of the poor population as well. Unknowingly, Elvis gets involved with Redemption in a mover job which later turns out to be an illegal work involving organ trafficking where “human spare parts” are exported to other countries for organ transplant. Redemption explained to Elvis that “American hospitals do plenty organ

transplant. But dey are not always finding de parts on time to save people life. So certain people in Saudi Arabia and such a place used to buy organ parts and sell to rich white people so dey can save their children or wife or demselves.” (Abani, 2005, pp. 241–242). When Elvis expresses his shock and denouncement of this crime, Redemption, in an affirmative tone, explains that “Dis world operate different way for different people . . . People like de Colonel use their position to get human parts as you see and den freeze it. If we had cross de border yesterday, airplane for carry dose parts to Saudi hospital so dat dey can be sold.” (Abani, 2005, p. 242). Redemption identifies the inequalities associated with being poor in a decolonized African city like Lagos; hence, the rich and the poor belong to two different worlds and their paths do not cross, unless there is potential for capitalist exploitation that will generate profit, be it oil or even human “spare parts”.

Elvis’s first encounter with the Colonel, a man of power and hegemony, was in the club. The Colonel threatened to kill Elvis simply for having stepped on his foot while dancing. He was only spared thanks to his connection to Redemption. The Colonel’s powerful dominance represents the corrupt military power in Nigeria which functions in alliance with the west and other capitalist countries to exploit the poor. Power dynamics, particularly state power and the oppressive military dictatorship under corrupt democratic rule in decolonized Nigeria, are closely tied to the human and economic exploitation of the urban poor in a place like Lagos. As emphasized by Stefan (2008, p. 33) “Abani also critiques neocolonial Nigerian and American essentialism. In particular, the novel questions the West’s economic exploitation of those living in Lagos and the government’s reliance on military control when the West will not provide aid”. Other forms of human exploitation are pointed out in the novel when Redemption shares with Elvis information on how The Colonel and other representatives of the military are involved in slave trade. When Redemption assumes the kids with restrained hands in the back of the truck are to be sold in Europe, Elvis asks “Who still buy slaves?”. Redemption explains, “Plenty people. Dese children can become prostitute in European country or even for Far East.” (Abani, 2005, p. 236). Feelings of repulsion dominate Elvis as he expresses his rejection to be part of this violation in a manner which conveys constant resistance to infliction of capitalist commodification of the poor. Human exploitation of the poor resonates through the end of the narrative when Elvis meets Okon again informing him that he stopped selling his blood as he “hijacked corpses from roadsides and even homes which we sold for organ transplants” (Abani, 2005, p. 308). Okon responds to Elvis’s feelings of rejection that this is the only way he could survive: “It is bad for a man’s soul, waiting at roadside like vulture, for someone to die, so you can steal fresh corpse, but man must survive. When dey start to demand alive people, me I quit. I am not murderer. Hustler? Survivor? Yes. But definitely not a murderer.” (Abani, 2005, p. 308).

Conclusion

Abani draws a juxtaposition between Elvis’s endeavors seeking employment and the different forms of human as well as economic exploitation of the poor that unravel along with these attempts in an assertive style which grants the urban poor agency and visibility. On his journey toward self-exploration and observation of his physical surroundings, Elvis’s awareness of the socioeconomic and political situation in Lagos evolves owing to his exposure to the King of Beggars’ oppositional political convictions. Surviving as a product of his environment in which the poor are “made” beggars with no freedom of choice, the King of Beggars, in a protest at Tinubu Square, “nicknamed Freedom Square”, denounces corrupt state officials and military officers for sponsoring capitalist projects which only facilitate the exploitation of the poor. Amy Novak (2008, p. 42) comments that “Africans themselves become the latest natural resource exported to the West. This new exploitation, though, is also a return as the West trades yet again in African bodies, this time in silent fragmented

pieces". In part, Novak's argument supports the idea of commodification of the poor by the west. However, it could be argued that in their battle against exploitation and resistance to the restrictions of poverty, slum dwellers of Maroko are not silent in the traditional sense. Rather, the poor recognize the power dynamics which create a state of impoverishment for which they are not to be blamed given the fact that they do not have an active role in this global scheme. Collectively, the choice of resistance is not made by everyone in Lagos as reactions to poverty in *Graceland* cannot be perceived as homogenous; rather, they vary considerably between different characters based on their personal experiences of loss and their identification with their environment. Nevertheless, resistance as lived experience materializes in the ways the majority of the poor population attempts to circumvent the repressive power of the state.

Besides poverty, the dwellers of Maroko had to resist threats of removal and physical dislocation, which certainly involve unlawful practice of power against the poor. Among the overlapping power relations in Maroko at this stage, the transformative power of poverty which drives the slum dwellers of Maroko to repel removal threats by the state demonstrates their agency over their physical environment and their right to the land. Collective solidarity emerging in active resistance to state violence mirrors a significant characteristic of the human side of the slum that disproves the passive role of the poor.

The clearance of Maroko in 1990 is a manifestation of the systemic violence implemented by state power against the poor in Lagos that arise in analyzing the human side of the slum. Before Maroko was bulldozed with military supervision leaving 300,000 Nigerians homeless and many others killed, Elvis asks his father about the reason for announcing a forthcoming removal of Maroko; Sunday replies: "Well, according to de paper, dey say we are a pus-ridden eyesore on de face of de nation's capital." "Not only Maroko, but all de ghettos in Lagos. A simultaneous attack on de centers of poverty and crime, dat's what dey are calling it. Dey even have a military sounding name for it—Operation Clean de Nation." (Abani, 2005, p. 247). Now that slum clearance, notwithstanding aids provided for the poor to relocate, has become a national mission, the urban poor are perceived as a surplus humanity which hinders the progress of capitalist economic development (Davis, 2007, p. 174). The ruthless removal of Maroko features an act of racism against the poor or what (Foucault and Davidson, 2004, p. 261) defines as "state racism" which is a form of discrimination that "society will direct against itself, against its own elements and its own products. This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization". The savagery and violence inflicted on the slum dwellers of Maroko was an event equal to an ethnic cleansing of the poor to encourage investments by Europeans and Rich Africans in Lagos. As a means to create space for new extensions of capital, the government imposes further restrictions on the poor by forcefully displacing them from their houses while offering no alternatives.

Resonating with notions of inequality as the essence of poverty invalidates orthodox interpretations of the culture of poverty as an inherited set of relations and attitudes which brings on a perpetual cycle of poverty that is practically impossible to overcome. In most cases, poverty is in fact a legacy passed down through generations when potentials for development and economic growth are unattainable inasmuch as social inequality and corruption persevere. The social and economic division of land and wealth in Lagos, Nigeria and other developing countries and the absence of equal opportunities in terms of housing, employment and education are externally imposed economic challenges which perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Seeking answers to questions that explain the essence of urban poverty such as who is poor? Do the poor choose to remain poor? And how do the poor develop strategies to break the cycle of poverty? The line of thought explored so far in reading *Graceland* discerns poverty as a consequence to socioeconomic practices instead of a *natural* condition into which people are born poor and undeveloped. Furthermore, it dismisses views equating poverty to a social disease that needs to be controlled and prevented from spreading out, an interpretation

which elicits discriminatory practices of social exclusion performed against the poor and eventually halts efforts toward socioeconomic development. In addition, a revised model of slum culture has been introduced which reveals a dynamic resistance to poverty by slum dwellers and an inclination to do more than just survive. The urban slum dwellers utilize everyday forms of resistance which comprise several “low-profile techniques” to subvert state-imposed power structures and break the cycle of poverty, namely the utilization of the margin to maintain ties to the center through perpetual movement and job seeking, the everyday practices of persistence and survival tactics against poverty and strategic social and economic exclusion and the active role of memory of the past as an act of resistance to the injustices of the present. The end to blaming the victim and perceiving poverty as an outcome of socio-economic practices rather than a condition in which people are born entails a closer analysis and investigation of the multifaceted forms of violence and persecution which the poor live through.

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