

THE PERILS OF POVERTY

Uwem Akpan, *An Ex-Mas Feast*, Abacus publishers & Little, Brown Publishers, United Kingdom, 2005, 358 pages

Reviewed by Abby Bundi

An Ex-Mas Feast is one of the stories in Uwem Akpan's book 'Say You Are One Of Them.' It is a story of the struggles that one family goes through to make ends meet during the Christmas season. Akpan introduces the reader to the struggles of the main characters, which directly ties into the details of the impoverished town that they live in. The story is set in Nairobi, Kenya and it is narrated by the first son of the family, Jigana.

The story explores the theme of poverty and how the family copes with the grinding poverty they are mired in. Maisha is an adolescent and first daughter of the family and grows up with the knowledge that her family is forever in want. They cannot meet their basic needs like food and a good shelter. They cannot afford to send their only son, Jigana, to school. Jigana starts off as a naive 8-year-old little boy who was anxious to start going to school. In stark contrast, Maisha, Jigana's eldest sister at twelve years old, is more independent and gets into prostitution to bring in money for her family. The second oldest daughter, Naema, is closer to Maisha than any of the others, and Maisha gives her tips and tricks of her trade, as well as advice on what to do once in the business. Their father is a pick pocket, the mother monitors everything and even the baby of the house is taken as an accessory to get sympathy when begging. The evidence of financial struggles at this point is undeniable but the severity of the situation is brought out when the narrator discloses that the makeshift shack the family stays in is so small that their father would have to sleep with his toes outside.

As the story unfolds, we see the strained relationship between Maisha and her parents. The parents and Maisha are not in talking terms and have no control over what she does. They are only contented with the proceeds she brings home to make ends meet and are even happy when they discover that she has white 'Muzungu' customers who drive jaguars. On Maisha's end, there is a clear detest of their situation and she even warns her younger sister that she would treat her like their mother if she grew up to have too many children.

Maisha has to take to the rough road of prostitution, as the only way of helping herself and her family. Her mother is against it, of course, and so rains curses on her for being a disgrace to womanhood. But she promptly receives proceeds from her illicit sex trade that makes her reconsider her stand on the situation. Jigana is hanging onto the hope that her big sister, Maisha will make enough money to send him to school and sometimes trails her to her sex points. On one occasion he breaks the taboo of the trade by calling Maisha by her real name; this makes the other girls, who are ever jealous of her, boo at her. She then forbids Jigana from tagging along.

The whole family hopes to have Jigana go to school. It is what their whole purpose is centred around. So, the begging money and Maisha's proceeds are all geared towards having funds to meet this end. Jigana however feels guilty when he sees what his elder sister Maisha has to do to get the money to take him to school. At some point, he states adamantly that if she is going to the brothel, he will not go to school. Maisha in response to his claim, says that she will not support the family anymore if Jigana does not go to school. From there, their life continues, and the siblings continue struggling to make ends meet.

The climax of the story begins when Naema comes home one day, from her shift with the baby, dripping from the rain, worn out and announces that Maisha is moving out tomorrow, full time. 'No matter how rootless and cheap street life maybe, you could still be broken by departures.'¹ Amid poverty, there is the bond of family that does not want any member to leave. Everyone felt bad and did different things to take their mind off Maisha's departure. Jigana endures feelings of guilt again, as he thinks he is the reason his family is disintegrating and makes the decision not to go to school at all, which he informs his family of. Despite threats from his father who blatantly calls him a coward, he remains firm this time.

Maisha comes back later in the night, with bags of food that creates temporary excitement in the home. The looming departure of Maisha the next day remains a constant worry and her parents insist that she should not go. However, Maisha leaves the next day with her trunk right behind her, indicating that she would not be coming back any time soon. Maisha's leaving plunges the family into hopelessness. What would they do without her? Even her mother clings tight to the last

¹ 18.

moment at a daughter who has been on the receiving end of her venomous tongue for selling herself to help them out of poverty. The story comes to an end as Jigana, rips the books he had been bought for school, runs through traffic and disappears into the big city of Nairobi, never to return home again.

The author does a good job in the rendering of this story, which is quite realistic. As the story unfolds, the tale of the family battling with the perils of poverty comes to life. He manages to show us a different perspective of Christmas that is often a season filled with cheer and plenty for many. The story brings a new face to poverty, showing people who fight strongly to overcome it. It celebrates the family and shows the deep and strong bond that exists between the members of a family, despite the life obstacles that they must endure.