# STREETISM IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF UWEM AKPAN'S *AN EX-MASS FEAST*, K. SELLO DUIKER'S *THIRTEEN CENTS* AND AMMA DARKO'S *FACELESS*

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## Abstract

The problem of street children in Africa is a growing concern. Many children in a bid to escape from domestic violence, poverty and appalling living conditions, have turned to the streets in search of better opportunities. These children spend their days and nights living and working on the streets, living in absolute squalor and degrading circumstances. The girls and in some cases, the boys are forced into sexual relationships for protection and food, making them prone to disease and malnutrition. They are often trafficked without education or medical care. Some of them may have no choice; they are abandoned, orphaned, or thrown out of their homes. They live a life of trauma, held captive to their constant cycle of poverty and helplessness, with no hope of a better future; only despair. These children find security and relief from life's anxieties within their group. By extension, some of these children are on the streets because of mistreatment, neglect and lack of basic necessities of life. As a result, they find ready homes in unoccupied dwellings, uncompleted buildings, market places, under the bridges and wastelands more than their family homes. There are a number of common misconceptions about street

children; for example, misconceptions about who they are and why they take to the streets. The focus is on the concept, 'streetism', the perception of the society about these street children, their vulnerability and emotional and psychological trauma in Uwem Akpan's An Ex-Mass Feast (2008), K. Sello Duiker's Thirteen Cents (2000) and Amma Darko's Faceless (2003). These works are selected from Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana, respectively, to show that 'streetism' is not bound by ethnicity or culture; it is a continental problem. These children are vulnerable, and are at risk of physical, social, emotional and cognitive violations. By allowing their characters especially the female children, to struggle against all odds to live like adults, the selected authors bring to fore, the trauma these homeless and abandoned children go through in the African continent. This paper, hence, concludes that street children should be treated as part of the society, not as destitute.

**Keywords**: Streetism, Domestic Violence, Homeless Children, Street Children, Poverty, Vulnerability

## Introduction

The term 'streetism' according to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, refers to 'the life situations of street children who usually live and engage in menial jobs'. These children experience homelessness and they live on the streets of towns, cities and villages. 'Streetism' is a global phenomenon that is characterized by vulnerable children migrating to the streets in urban areas in developed and developing countries ( Le Roux, 2001). For a long time, vulnerable children whose personal and ecological resilience resources were depleted have been adopting 'streetism' in order to fend for themselves or supplement family income (De Moura, 2005). 'Streetism' has to do with children on the streets at the mercy of the weather. These children lack shelter and other basic things in life, such as, food, portable water, healthcare, sanitation, education and the like. A street child refers to a person under the age of 18 who works in the street regularly for economic gain (De Moura, 2005).

Work here refers to all paid services and all manner of activity performed for economic gain. It is not easy to define street children because they are a heterogeneous group of children, and the term itself bears serious emotional overtones (Guernina, 2004) and (Panter-Brick, 2002). In this regard, (Mahlangu, 2002) notes that there are many attempted definitions of street children; however, there is no single, universally accepted definition of street children. Notwithstanding these definitional variations, (Lewis, 1998) and (De Moura, 2005) see street children as young people, under the age of eighteen, who have made a decision to leave their homes and live on the streets in order to take care of themselves without the support and protection from their parents or guardians. Street children have strong connection to public spaces like streets, markets and parks. The street plays an important role in their everyday lives and identities. Street children depend on the street for their survival; they live on the street, work on the streets and have network on the streets. 'Streetism' is a concept which means 'living on the street' or 'being part of the street'.

In many cities of the world, especially the developing countries, children have been the subject of abuse, neglect, exploitation and are even in extreme cases murdered. These children, either by design or default, become victims of circumstances. As a result, they find ready homes in unoccupied dwellings, uncompleted buildings, under the bridges and wastelands more than their family homes. It also includes children who might not necessarily be homeless or without families, but who live in situations where there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults. The street child concept is also used to refer to street children who do scavenging and rubbish picking, in addition to living and working on the streets (Panter-Brick, 2002). Among those children who do scavenging and rubbish picking, there are those who stay permanently outside their homes with no family ties (children of the street) and those who occasionally return to their homes (children on the street). These categories further magnify the

heterogeneity of street children as a group and emphasize definitional difficulties.

Darko's *Faceless* and Akpan's *An Ex-mas Feast* in the collection, *Say You're One of Them* deal with street children who have a semblance of families and homes (even if these are dysfunctional). However, they resonate with Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* and its representation of a street child without a family and home. This is because the three authors fashion an appropriate register for depicting the horror of street children. The three texts grapple with how urban poverty and attachment of particular erotic fantasies to young bodies allow greedy and callous parents or parental figures to drive children into teen prostitution. The selected authors use fiction to articulate the complicated reality of streetism and street children in the African literary public sphere creatively, informatively and affectively.

The concepts of the subaltern and the 'Other' from postcolonial literary criticism will be used. The term post-colonial and post-colonialism first appeared in scholarly journals as subtexts in Bill Ashcroft's book: *The Empire Writes Back.* By the mid -1990s, both terms established themselves in academic and popular discourse. Originally, postcolonial theory was formulated to deal with the reading and writing of literatures written in previously or currently colonized countries. Now post-colonialism is used as a framework to account for different patterns of discontinuities from the former colonizers and new ways of forging new relationships within and outside the former colonized nations.

Postcolonial theory is largely built around the concept of 'Otherness'. The concept of Otherness sees the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites of the Self which is ordered, rational and good and the 'Other' which is chaotic, irrational and evil. Thus, postcolonial literature is concerned with categorizations of centre and margin. This issue of centre and margin is the major preoccupation of Spivak's Can *the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Her critical discourse raises the issue of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern women. Subaltern here refers to

unrepresented group of people in the society, the lower classes and the oppressed subjects. The life of children of the street is characterized by ambiguity where they are so visible for public and at the same time they are considered socially dead for others. Children of the street are facing a clashing situation where they are totally visible as they reside in public open space and at the same time, invisible due to the continuous violation of rights. Moreover, they lack care and protection of families and authorities, therefore entering into the huge world of marginalization and social exclusion. Trauma theory in literature has to do with the assertion that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Trauma theory first appeared in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, where she posits that the traumatic event '... is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly ... to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event' (Caruth, 1991). The literary trauma theory articulated by Kali Tal and critics such as Cathy Caruth, consider the responses to traumatic experience, including, fight or flight response, endorphins/stress addiction, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, victim to victimizer and so on. Traumatic event(s) overwhelm(s) the ordinary human adaptations to life. Thus, traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat; and consequent upon this, our brains are fragmented as a result. This fragmentation is manifested in the way our world view is altered; the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world, are all profoundly altered by traumatic experiences.

**Streetism and the Broken Family in *An Ex-mas Feast***

Uwem Akpan released his debut short story collection titled *Say You're One of Them* in June 2008. *An Ex-Mas Feast* is one of the stories in that collection. Jigana, an eight-year-old who is the eldest boy of his family, narrates the story. He reveals the

horrifying living conditions of a street family who rely on their eldest daughter's income from prostitution to feed them. Jigana represents hope for his family who want him to go to school and become educated. Most of the story takes place on Christmas Day as the family waits for Maisha to return from her work on the streets. The mother offers her children glue to sniff to stave off hunger and reads aloud the names of relatives in an attempt to celebrate the holiday. Thematically this short story examines survival, family bonds, and the idea of education as hope to elevate oneself from poverty. It raises questions about global awareness of what is happening to families and children on the streets of Africa.

*An Ex-mas Feast* is set in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, and concerns a starving machokosh (street) family and its economic dependence on its eldest (twelve-year-old) daughter. John Kearney argues that Uwem Akpan's text reveals the state of a disempowered family whose efforts to better themselves backfire. The level of disempowerment of this family is reflected in how it exploits its children for survival. The different forms of exploitation to which the children are subjected are subtly highlighted by the protagonist's anguished bewilderment at the way his parents use his pre-teen sister's prostitution as a source of income. Using Jigana's perceptive and empathetic gaze (signalled by his refusal of the role of a parasite that benefits from the sexual exploitation of his twelve-year-old sister as a teen sex worker on the streets of Nairobi), Akpan exposes the extent to which child prostitution is attributable to how a financially desperate family yields callously to the terrible pressures of urban poverty to turn a child into a marketable commodity.

Adrian Knapp argues that experiencing the world through the eyes of suffering children, we cannot but feel guilty about the world we have created (2009). This argument is given force by Akpan's depiction of how urban poverty ferociously preys on basic human dignity of some parents so that they readily and pragmatically send their children into the street to work for survival. Maisha's unruly conduct towards her parents or her engagement in juvenile sex work, is a vivid portrayal of how the

humiliation of brutal cross-generational urban poverty breaks this family's ability to nurture and care for its children. The family's feral attitude towards its children is accentuated by Akpan's portrayal of its feasting on the food that Maisha returns with after exchanging sex for money: Naema almost knocked Baba down as she burst out with the bags of food we had forgotten. … Baba bit into a chicken wing. Mama took a leg. The rest of us dug into the sour rice, mashed potatoes, salad, hamburgers, pizza, spaghetti, and sausages. We drank the dead Coke and melted ice cream all mixed up. With her teeth, Naema opened bottles of Tusker and Castle beer. At first, we feasted in silence, on our knees, looking up frequently, like squirrels, to monitor one another's intake. (*p.*28)

The point that this family's decency has been eroded by their poverty and deprivation is underscored by how the various family members gorge on the food while monitoring the intake of others, like squirrels. It is further heightened by the fact that they allow the toddler twins to partake of alcoholic drinks (beers). The depiction of the parents' lack of concern or proper care for the youngest and presumably the most vulnerable of their children as depicted above stresses the corrosion of their parental instincts.

Teen prostitution in *An Ex-mas Feast* also portrays the consequences of depraved patriarchal predation on the sexuality of children from poor families in most African cities. In one flashback, Jigana recalls the older siblings' role play one particular night when they mimicked Maisha's life on the streets. He observes that 'giggling, we began walking, our strides softened by laughter. Everything became funny. We couldn't stop laughing at ourselves, at the people around us' (p. 13). Here, we see a children's game rendering ridiculous an actual, awful reality. This is emphasized by the nature of their environment, which Jigana describes as the most dangerous part of the city. Although he refers to these dangerous streets as their playground (p. 13), the anxious faces of these visitors in the old taxis, bracing for what would be the most dangerous twenty minutes of their twelve hour journeys signpost the danger with and in which his sister lives.

If adults in the safety of cars are nonetheless frightened, the fear of these travellers focuses our imagination on what it takes for these children to survive in this inner city jungle. Our empathy is evoked by the girl who is forced to share space with the scum of the earth such as murderers, thieves, sex perverts and predators as well as rapists to support her family. Maisha's effortless change of personae; she easily and expertly discards the persona of a carefree playing child to assume that of a sex worker (p.14) underlines the paradox of a child who is a prostitute. Her observation 'someday, I must have to find a real job' (p.14) is infused with the pain that arises from her awareness of how debasing her role as a teen prostitute is.

The horror of Maisha's life as a street child and sex worker is inscribed on her body when she returns home on this particular Christmas evening. Jigana tells us that 'she slouched in the back while the driver got out … her hair stood up in places and lay flat in others, revealing patches of her scalp, which was bruised from the chemicals …and tonight her fatigue seemed to have seeped under the burns swelling her eyes' (p.24). Akpan indicates how this twelve-year-old girl has been deformed and disfigured because of the need to attract clients to obtain the money to support her family. The adjective 'slouched' that describes her posture in the car and the verb 'seeped' provide a vivid picture of a child whose life has been drained out of her by the sex trade.

When we read Baba's and Mama's confessions that at one point they had jobs that they gave up, Akpan shows that Mama and Baba cannot be exonerated from preying on their children because they made a choice; they prefer the easy money from under-age prostitution to the welfare of their children. We recognize the mitigating circumstances that are indicated by the generally dehumanizing environment in which the family exists.

Maisha's trunk which has a range of symbolic meanings is the best illustration that things can stand for and (or) create meanings. The empty space where it used to be, described as a newly dug grave (p. 29), is particularly symbolic. The simile like a newly dug grave construes under-age prostitution as a

metaphorical death sentence imposed on children like Maisha through the callous and selfish actions of their parents who, instead of nurturing and protecting children, cause the destruction of their wellbeing and invert indeed, pervert normal parent-child roles and relations.

**The Manifestation of Streetism in Darko's *Faceless***

*Faceless* tells the pathetic and gripping story of children plunged into the streets by poverty and parental neglect. Amma Darko in very graphic details presents mind-boggling sociological issues of child-neglect, child abuse, defilement of girls, gender, child-trafficking, child-labour, absent fathers, reproductive health risks, violence and failed governance through the grim experiences of street children. It tells the world that every street child has a story which is rarely told. Parental neglect is the major key point of the story. In Accra, MUTE, a non-governmental organization seeks to unravel the mysterious death of Baby T, a child prostitute whose battered body was found in a slum behind a rasta hair salon kiosk. MUTE's encounter with Fofo, Baby T's sister opens an investigative trail into the lives of neglected Street children.

Amma Darko presents a diseased society in *Faceless*. Society is diseased because the family is diseased. Streetism is one of the many consequences of a diseased society. On parade on the streets of Accra in *Faceless* are Fofo, Baby T, Odarley, Macho, Poison and other ill-clad and malnourished children that include the Northern Ghanaian girls who come down South to work as porters in the markets. Without any preamble, Darko launches us into the world of the street child. It is a world where the struggle to live defeats the essence of living itself and where the semblance of comfort remains forever an illusion. The street child merely exists rather than live. Fofo's bed is an old cardboard in front of the provision store at the Agbogbloshie market. Her new job of which she is very proud is washing carrots at the vegetable wholesale market. But for this rare job, she would have been idling her life away with her fellow street children at the squatters' enclave of Sodom and Gomorrah where they drink the local gin and watch

adult films which are not allowed for their ages by law. At night, they strip off their clothes and with all the reckless abandon that is laced with an ever increasing hopelessness, they find an escape route in sleep. In many of the wooden shacks that dot this haven of these street children, boys and girls sleep together and under the influence of alcohol, they do naughty things with each other. Toilet is the nearby dump where everybody answers nature's call under the scrutinizing eyes of some early rising pigs and vultures. The whole of Sodom and Gomorrah boasts of only one public toilet. It is not only too far away, but also inadequate for the wretched street children of the enclave. No matter at what time one gets there, one is bound to find a queue. This is why according to Odarley, 'people sometimes do it on themselves while waiting for their turn' (p.6). Since many of these squatters do not want to end up like those who do it on themselves the better to empty their bowels on the nearby dump with all its health hazards. Even those who are lucky to get inside the public toilet are none the better, for they hardly finish before the guard people come to harass them out of the place with the excuse that others are waiting on the queue. Street children are always at the mercy of bullies, rapists and ritualists who are themselves seasoned street children.

The first lesson that every inhabitant of the slum of Sodom and Gomorrah learns is how to quickly empty his/her bowel at the dump before the menacing Macho and his bullies come around. This is because if caught in the act, those bullies would line their pockets with the money they extort from them under the guise that they the bullies are determined to keep the environment clean. This claim is itself hypocritical for Macho and his bullies 'also regularly unloaded the solid waste contents of their bowels onto the rubbish dumps and in the gutters and the open drains' (p.3). In one of his numerous raids, Macho stumbles on Fofo's plastic bag containing a lot of money.

Rape is almost a daily occurrence in the enclave that many of its inhabitants have come to regard it as a social norm. Poison, another senior street boy with his scary scars-filled and intimidating build is every street girl's nightmare. For every street

child in Sodom and Gomorrah, the fear of Poison is the beginning of wisdom as he gets what he wants anytime, anyhow and anywhere. That Fofo's determination not to be raped by Poison turns out successful as she fights her way out of the monster's tight grip on her sex is an exception rather than the rule. This is why to Odarley, Fofo's strange experience in successfully fighting off Poison sounds like a tale from the world of romance. The tragedy of street children is that while the boys degenerate into street lords and bullies like Macho and Poison, the girls are lured or coerced into full time prostitution and soon become victims of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Teenage girls end up with some influential women who partner street lords for security. Under the pretext of teaching these girls some trades, these women introduce them into full time prostitution. The hapless girls daily remit money to these women after working at the Circle where roughness and aggressiveness are used to fish out clients and potential clients if they must earn their living. The hazards attached to working at the Circle are so deadly that many of the girls will rather give all they have than go there.

For hapless street children like Baby T, death is the cheapest commodity in town. And when it comes calling, the forever grumbling police inspector simply receives the post mortem report and files it away 'just in case something comes up requiring further reference to it' (p.81). The Police inspector is surprised that the members of MUTE are interested in the death of Baby T who in his own view is nothing but a common street girl. 'Bodies of street children', he tells the bewildered Kabria, 'are found at all kinds of places at all sorts of times' (p.81).

If Fofo is saddened by the helpless state of the street children like herself she is totally devastated by the death of her beloved sister Baby T. Even more nerve-shattering is the nonchalant attitude of the police inspector. Fofo, therefore, insists that she wants to see Government, but according to Anyidoho (2013), what she doesn't know is that Government itself has lost its priorities, its sense of direction; it has become dysfunctional and deaf to the cries of children abandoned or sold to the merciless street lords

like Poison, and their equally heartless female collaborators such as Maami Broni. The hopeless state of the police station is itself a testament to the hopelessness and utter helplessness that best describe Government. In the face of broken windows, leaking sewerage, cracked walls and peeled painting, confidential file cabinet with a handle missing and a gaping hole where a lock should have been and a dead telephone in an office without even a 'battered Tico', one simply has no choice but to sympathize with the police inspector his unprofessional behavior, notwithstanding. This is because the resources for fighting crime and criminality are not there to use. The police inspector is, therefore, capable of doing just one thing for MUTE: nothing!

The street children of Sodom and Gomorrah are not born as such. Their unfortunate state is the result of a conspiracy of several factors which range from poverty at home, family break-up to brutality at home. The fragile peace at Maa Tsuru's home, for example, takes a turn for the worse when Kpakpo steps in as the children's stepfather. Unable to bear the nightly creaking bed and the moaning from their mother as Kpakpo makes love to her right in their presence in the one room shack, Maa Tsuru's two sons leave in frustration. Kpakpo and Onko's sexual abuse of Baby T soon forces her and her sister Fofo out of the house to find solace on the streets. According to Darko, this urge to seek shelter on the streets is not restricted to the fairer sex. The scar-faced, but soft-spoken Poison ran away from their two-by-four room shack to hit the streets of Accra at the tender age of eight. There was nothing really homely about their home in which his stepfather's only achievement of which he used to boast was his constant lashing of Poison with his leather belt. His facial scars which run sharp and diagonal through his left eyebrow disrupting his hair-flow are silent witnesses to his stepfather's brutality.

Graduating from stealing car-tape-decks to running errands for a brothel supervisor, Poison is not called 'The Street Lord' for nothing. By age fifteen he had mastered the rudiments of pimping to enable him form a gang of his own with a control of a major part of the streets. With this, he became confident enough to embark on

an aggressive recruitment of girls. Ever since, Poison has made a brutal mark and a name for himself on the streets. Having received brutality from his stepfather, Poison has long embraced jungle power and brutality as his trademarks. As the undisputed lord of the streets, Poison is not ashamed to tell whoever cares to listen that since his life is not on the right track, he would ensure too that the life of others never land on the right path. Having run away from their trouble-infested homes, the street children of Accra have come to make the slums of Sodom and Gomorrah their new home where they are at least free to live their lives no matter how miserable. Here, many of them engage in all kinds of menial jobs and prostitution to survive. And when business is low they find salvation of a kind in stealing. According to Fofo, 'one can do anything and everything in peace here so long as one follows the rules'. Over the years, therefore, the faceless scums of Accra have learnt to 'live in peace, trade in peace, steal in peace, cheat in peace and sin in peace by doing nothing to upset them' (p.156) Here they live and dream about the life they never had and may never have because the scale of society is perpetually tilted in their disfavour. It is highly ironic that these unfortunate kids on the streets do not crave for material things but love and care of their parents to truly belong in the family. Their 'freedom' notwithstanding, they truly want to be loved, hugged and kissed as little darlings of the home.

A reporter from one of the private FM stations asks some street children during a survey about their most passionate dreams. His dream, the boy says: Is to be able …to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy on her face at the sight of me I want to be able to sleep beside her. I wish her to tell me she was happy when I came to visit her. Whenever I visit her, she doesn't let me stay long before she asks me politely to leave she never has a smile for me. Sometimes I cannot help thinking that maybe she never has a smile for me because the man she made me with, that is my father, probably also never had a smile for her (p.1, 2).

The girl's reply is even more emotionally revealing: One day a kind woman I met at a centre made me very happy. Before I went

there, I knew that by all means she would give me food. But this woman gave me more. She hugged me. I was dirty. I smell bad. But she hugged me. That night, I slept well. I had a good dream. Sometimes I wish to be hugged even if I am smelling of the streets (p. 4).

Like Mrs. Kamane, one is deeply concerned that the street child of today is being bred to become the kind of future adult with a psyche that has little or no comprehension of basic respect for human life.

**Street Children and its Manifestation in *Thirteen Cents***

A 13-year old South African boy turns tricks in Cape Town in Duiker's emotional debut novel. After his parents are murdered, blue-eyed Azure vows to live on his own amongst a violent community of children and cunning adults. He sleeps by a community swimming pool and earns money by parking cars or as a prostitute, meeting adult male clients and trading sexual acts for cash and an occasional meal. Knowing little to nothing about financial management, he gives his money to a woman who promises to safeguard it. Then, after accidentally calling a light-skinned gang leader by the name of one of his dark-skinned friends, Azure is beaten for days and confined to rooms and a rooftop, initiated into the gang against his will and renamed 'Blue'. He learns that the funds he assumed to be safe in a bank account have been stolen, and his limited trust towards adults transforms into hatred. But amidst the discomfort of disturbing content, hope glimmers in small yet poignant moments of selflessness.

In *Thirteen Cents*, the novelist projects into the underworld that epitomizes a family and home of sorts for children rejected by society. Even though he is the lead character, Azure, who bears the brunt of harrowing maltreatment at the hands of adult ringleaders, shows us what it feels like to be a street kid in South African cities. From the early pages, we learn that Azure's parents' assassination prepared him for his entry into street life. He abandons school and runs away from the family. Consequently, the street becomes his abode. To get a glimpse into the beginnings of his new life as a

street child, we hear him: I walk a lot. My feet are tough and rough underneath. But I'm clean. Every morning I take a bath at the beach. I wash with seawater. Sometimes I use a sponge or if I can't find one I use an old rag. It's just as good. Then I rinse off the seawater at the tap. It's not that bad washing with cold water. It's like anything you get used to it. (p. 2)

Surprisingly, Azure takes the new twist in his life in stride. He has not hitherto gnashed his teeth about his new situation. Seemingly, he has it in mind to make a departure from the traditional paradigm of street youth life. He is mentally prepared to live up to the challenges attendant upon his job as a traffic warden of sorts: …So during the day I help car park in Cape Town. It's not easy work. You have to get there early. Sometimes you have to fight for your spot. The older ones leave us alone, they get all the choice parking spots in the centre of town. It's like that. I don't ask questions. (p. 3)

A measure of Azure's gutsy intention to put himself out of harm's way and steer clear of the underworld shows in his move to "sleep in Sea Point near the swimming pool because it's the safest place to be at night…In town there are too many pimps and gangsters" (p. 3). By the same token, he is equally minded to earn his keep with dignity and genuineness: "I don't want to make my money like them, the pimps and gangsters" (p. 3). The sobriety that he displays regarding his new plight and his strait-laced attitude reflect a youngster's desire to be a child 'on the street' as opposed to a child 'of the street'. The nasty stock-in-trades associated with street life are anathema to Azure. For example, he does not have any qualms about scolding his friend, Bafana; and, sometimes, physically disciplining him in order to help him keep on the straight and narrow. He says: My friend Bafana can't believe that I saw my dead parents and didn't freak out….And he is naughty. He has a home to go back to in Langa but he chooses to roam the streets. He likes sniffing glue and smoking buttons when he has money. I don't like that stuff, it makes my head sore…. So whenever I see him smoking that stuff I beat him. I once beat him

so badly he had to go to Groote Schuur to get stitched. I don't like that stuff. It does terrible things to your body. (p. 3)

The harshness of street life and the dangers to which children living on the streets are exposed make it a necessity for them to dance to an adult's tune in return for protection. As it happens, Azure has found in Allen, a guy who 'works as a pimp', a guardian, a shield against harm. Thus, he stands in awe of Allen in that he 'knows his temper' and, more significantly, 'he's killed someone before and I saw the whole thing happen' (p.13). Azure says how lucky he is to make Allen's acquaintance, stating that 'Knowing him has helped me a lot on the streets. I can't say that we are friends. But if I'm ever in trouble I just have to say that I know Allen and I'm usually left alone' (p.13). But being under the protection of a man as Allen comes with a huge price. The 'protection money' that he pays to Allen is hard-earned. Yet, by his own admission, he can't help it: '…I have to do it. It's the only way I can be safe on the streets. There are too many monsters out there' (p.16).

Azure has gone gay overnight out of the necessity to stay alive in a seemingly ruthless environment, and in this regard, the proceeds that he gets from his first sexual activity are divided in three parts: one for his protector, one for himself and finally what he keeps for a rainy day, which he entrusts with his aunt Joyce. He 'learned from Allen that money is everything…because you can get a house and call the shots' (p.16). Scarcely is he done with one client when 'another white man looks at me with come-to-bed eyes' (p.10). The harshness of living on the streets, whose hallmarks among other things are sleep and money deprivation to say nothing of dilapidated wear, compels kids to go down the path of prostitution, theft, homosexual practices, and into other nefarious activities. In the world of *Thirteen Cents*, all children living on the streets do their level best to adapt themselves to their environment because 'the streets, they are not safe. They are roads to hell, made of tar. Black tar' (p. 66).

Azure gets paid beyond his wildest dreams for his sexual activity, but he has embarked upon a self-destructive path. We hear him after being paid for sex: 'My face lights up even though my asshole is sore' (p.30). Life on the streets is pretty much a dog eat dog world that allows no room for the expression of humanity. The end point of the raw deal meted out to street boys, not least Azure, by the likes of Gerald, is to break them down psychologically and physically. And little wonder that in the world of *Thirteen Cents*, children have to live with fear: I know what fear is. I know what it means to be scared, to be always on the lookout. I know what it means to hear your own heartbeat. It means you are on your own ...I know what it feels like to bite the insides of your mouth to control the fear. I know what it feels like to bite your nails till your fingertips are raw and sensitive to everything you touch. I know fear. And I hate it. I live with it every day. (p. 66)

Street children are viewed by society not as part and parcel of the citizenry, but as a bunch of lawless kids, who pose a great to the well-being of the society. In hospitals they are treated like dirt; on the streets they are on the receiving end of jibes as well as disparaging comments on their plight; they are not considered as victims of family breakdown or the ravages of individualism for that matter, but as a liability to society in that they bring nothing to its enhancement. In the novel a hospital worker sums society's mindset as regards children on the street, stating: …Problem with these kids is that they want everything now. They won't wait for anything. Have you seen how they harass you in town begging you for money after they nearly make you crash into the car you're supposed to park behind? I don't trust them. And i never give them money. What for? So that they buy drugs. (p.43)

Street children are the butt of rejection, even from their own families and we see this through the technique of direct interior monologue in response to Azure's despondency and grief at being sort of cast adrift by his own flesh and blood: What's there to think about? My mother died. My father died. I hiked to Cape Town with Mandla, Vincent. And now I'm here. There is nothing much to say. There is nothing much to think about. I can't write. I can't

phone my relatives. They don't care about me anyway. And I don't miss them. I don't miss them because they never gave me anything. And that's all right, at least they didn't give me bullshit like Cape Town grown-ups. I feel better when I say this. You see sea Point. I'm getting stronger. (*p.* 90)

Azure's lack of family connection and the pains that he suffers from being ditched by his relatives are an offshoot of his experience of parental death during childhood. Interestingly, his mantra all through the storyline is 'My mother has died. My father has died', and then he adds this rider: 'I say to myself. I say it over and over like a song, a chant' (p.154). When all is said and done, the life of a street kid is squalid and harrowing. As it happens, the unsparing and blow by blow portrayal of street boys' existential distress, not least the lead character's, is meant by Sello Duiker as a gruesome reminder that post-racial Africa has reneged on its promise of social equality and regard for human rights. In Duiker's estimation, children sleeping and living in the streets are robbed of the joys of childhood and the worst of it, is that their future is regrettably bleak.

**Conclusion**

As the stories of these street children differ so do their attitudes about their situation and their hopes for the future. What is overwhelmingly similar is that on the street, these children are vulnerable to exploitation, and survival means learning how to cope with physical danger, terror and sexual and physical abuse from some members of the society.

Here, *Thirteen Cents*, *Faceless* and *An Ex-mas Feast* are comparable. As Azure in Duiker 's *Thirteen Cents* observes: "there are too many monsters out in the streets where these children ply their trade" (p.16). They include the married middle and upper class white men who fuck Azure until blood is expelled with his shit in *Thirteen Cents*; the tourists who might racially and humiliatingly let their monkey have sex with Maisha in *An Ex-mas Feast* or the likes of the Onkos who come searching for Baby T's pubic hair in *Faceless* for good luck medicine.

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