

# Melancholy and Trauma in David Rubadiri's Poetry

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## Abstract

David Rubadiri's literary works embody a melancholy which is an inevitable outcome of the colonial epistemic violence committed against Africans during and after colonialism. This is perhaps why his works interrogate the dual collective traumatic memory of Africa's colonial and post-independence disillusionment. It is unsurprising that the poetic works of Rubadiri generally, and those explored in this article simultaneously betray nostalgic melancholy of the continent's squandered opportunities and promise at independence. The poetry is characterised by searing awareness of a collective and personal traumatic memory of Africa's post-independence milieu. Using Caruth's notion that traumatic content finds articulation in a language that is literary and Godbout's postulation that melancholic literature aesthetically and artistically discloses philosophical truths, I argue that Rubadiri's poetry foregrounds traumatic experiences and melancholic longings of Africa to provide profound insights into Africa's post(colonial) reality. The melancholic tone of Rubadiri's poetry that nostalgically recalls the missed opportunities of the continent and its people at independence surfaces traumatic experiences that are a lived reality of postcolonial Africa.

## Keywords:

melancholy, trauma, fiction, post-independence disillusionment, poetry, nostalgia

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## Introduction

In his eulogy for David Rubadiri published in *The East African* newspaper, Ugandan public intellectual, Charles Onyango-Obbo (2018) states that Rubadiri was "one of Africa's most widely anthologised poets," with some of his poetry appearing in respectable anthologies such as *Poems from East Africa*, co-edited with

David Cook, and *Growing up with Poetry* that he curated. Rubadiri is not only widely anthologised, but he is also one of the most read African poets because his poetry “has [...] been prescribed reading in many African education systems than his single novel *No Bride Price*” (Onyango-Obbo, 2018, np). In the above passage, Onyango-Obbo makes two important comments about Rubadiri’s oeuvre. First, that his work has been staple reading across the continent. Second, that his poetry has circulated widely and has attracted more critical attention than his novel. It is plausible to conclude that Rubadiri is more known for his poetry than for his narrative fiction — *No Bride Price*. Furthermore, it can be argued that the popularity of his poetry is informed by his thematic issues such as the exposition of postcolonial problems that resonate with a wider African reading audience.

One of the things that make Rubadiri’s poetry resonate with an African reading public is the sense of indefinite and inescapable sadness about the continent that he captures in his poetry. This is perhaps best captured by Nazareth’s comment that the work of African writers such as Rubadiri “contradicted the colonial cultural oppression” (Nazareth, 1976, p.249). Nazareth’s point is that African writers of Rubadiri’s generation surmounted racial and linguistic obstacles thrown at them by colonialism to carve out a space for themselves in African and world literary public spheres. I agree with Nazareth that African writing generally and the work of Rubadiri particularly defies and contradicts the thematic and stylistic dictates of the colonial episteme. This is because his writing shines a torch into the inequities of the colonial and postcolonial moments that inevitably arouses a melancholic tone. The sadness of the trauma that postcolonial Africa has witnessed arouses an inevitable sadness that is brilliantly captured in Rubadiri’s poetry.

The traumatic theme and melancholic tone in Rubadiri’s poetry reminds us of the Achebean (1964) concept of the writer as a teacher or what Adebani (2014) calls a ‘writer-social thinker.’ Rubadiri is a quintessential African writer-teacher-social thinker because he is not “merely [an intellectual] whose work mirrors or can be used to mirror social thought, but [he is a] social thinker [...] who engages with the nature of existence and questions of knowledge on the

continent” (Adebanwi, 2014, p.406). The above argument is true of Rubadiri’s work because its traumatic theme and melancholic tone bestows unto him the Adebawian vision of a social thinker or public intellectual who uses his writing to unearth complex versions of the continent’s reality and, upon its exposition, then proceeds to theorise Africa’s existential questions of the moment such as aid, poverty, change and diasporic suffering. This role of the writer places him in a position of experiencing first-hand the pain of the continent and inevitably the sadness that comes with an awareness of loss. Therefore, a close reading of “An African Thunderstorm,” “Begging Aid,” “Kampala Beggar,” and “A Negro Labourer in Liverpool” using trauma literary theory simultaneously unearths traumatic memory and melancholy as underlying thematic attributes of Rubadiri’s poetry. This is because the traumatic content imbedded in his poetry seeps an inevitable melancholic tone that deserve critical attention.

The central aim of this article is to unearth the traumatic content and melancholic tone in Rubadiri’s poetry. My critical agenda is aware of the caution against reducing trauma stories to “ clichés or [turning] them all into versions of the same story” (Caruth, 1996, vii). Caruth underscores the delicacy required in disclosing traumatic content. The nuance and sublimity in executing trauma fiction is motivated by the representational dangers that Caruth pinpoints, namely, simplification of the experience into a cliché or a trope. This is because the reduction of traumatic content into clichés robs it of its agency and significance. This difficulty is brilliantly sidestepped in Rubadiri’s poetic exploration of the pain of the continent in the postcolonial moment in a way that arouses a sadness of the lost idealism. It is a fact that the selected Rubadirian poetic texts narrate dreadful accounts of postcolonial African suffering. However, the nuance and subtlety with which Rubadiri approaches these painful moments or realities in the African polity ensures that these issues are not reduced to mere clichés or flattened versions of an archetypal postcolonial African reality.

The discussion of the lives and experiences of African subjects in the postcolonial moment in Rubadiri’s poetry elevates the selected poetic texts into

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important literary artefacts of the region. Furthermore, the elegance with which Rubadiri treats postcolonial pain and suffering in the selected texts reminds us of various observations by Scarry (1996), Vera (2002) and Dallaire (2010) that traumatic content turns readers away. Therefore, imaginative and beautiful rendition of such awful experiences facilitate readers' engagement with such content. While in *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry (1996) argues that "the transcendent experience of beauty prepares us for justice by temporarily making us forget [the horror of our reality]" (qtd in Dawes, 2009, p.398), Vera (2002), avers that she writes "with a certain elegance" about trauma so that we are not repulsed by the "crudity" of depiction from witnessing the horror (Vera, 2002, pp.222-223). The two scholars' arguments above are echoed by Dallaire's (2010) observation that often the public insulates itself from horrific subject matter and that evocative depiction is one of the ways of breaching their psychic defences (Dallaire, 2010, p.16). Caruth, Scarry, Vera and Dallaire are linked by their conviction that traumatic content requires elegance of expression in order for the readers to be enticed to engage with it. This argument is true of Rubadiri's poetry because of its powerfully subtle and nuanced grammar that is capable of disclosing the troubled postcolonial reality of change, exploitation, racism, aid, poverty and lack of social services. His writing also helps arouse readers' engagement with the horrific content through the activation of nostalgia and melancholy to make the traumatic experiences matter. I argue that the traumatic content of Rubadiri's poetry and its melancholic tone allows readers to appreciate and reflect on the lives of such African subjects in a traumatic moment in the continent's history as exhibited in the selected poems.

This reminds us of Dawes's (2009) argument that "human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of storytelling" (Dawes, 2009, p.394). Although Dawes is specifically concerned with storytelling (or prose fiction to be specific), his argument can be applied to poetry generally and Rubadiri's selected poems specifically given that Rubadiri uses his poetry to tell stories of pain and suffering in the postcolonial moment of the continent. The recurrence of dramatic/conversational and narrative tropes in Rubadiri's poetry enable him to construct samples of suffering that dovetail smoothly into his deployment of melancholic

stylistic tools that engage readers with postcolonial pain in interesting ways. This is because for readers, the poems offer a therapeutic dialogue with their context and pain as eloquently postulated by Leys (2000) in *Trauma a Genealogy*. She argues that “the central paradox of trauma: the traumatic event is etched in all its literality in the brain, but it is disassociated from the ordinary integration and thus unobtainable for conscious recollection” (Leys, 2000, p.239). The essence of Leys’ argument is that trauma defies normal forms of articulation. Here, Leys is perhaps in agreement with Scarry, Caruth and Whitehead, who variously argue that because trauma destroys the linguistic resources of both the victim and witness and is incapable of transmission in normal registers, it is only in literary language that it finds seamless expression. Granted, Whitehead, Caruth and Scarry foreground the narrative genre in their theorisation of the intersection between trauma and literature. However, it is plausible to extend their argument about prose fiction to poetry generally and Rubadiri’s verse specifically. This is because the subject matter of his poetry and the poetic devices of its execution simultaneously constitute the traumatic content and its articulation/representation in style that mimics pain.

The above point is particularly underlined by the melancholic disassociation of pensive reflection, forcefully jagged lineation and experientially experimental diction and imagery that surfaces a subject matter that defies normal linguistic tools of representation and the tendency towards erasure and silence. Therefore, it can be argued that Rubadiri’s personas and apostrophes in the selected poems speak in “a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound” (Caruth, 1996, p.2). Faced with the numbing pain and sadness of the postcolonial reality, Rubadiri uses poetry as a tool of shining light into, to quote Achebe, when the rain started beating the continent and its people. The sadness and pain of the continent that Rubadiri’s poetry carry remind us of Godbout’s (2016) argument about Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s poetry. He states that melancholic poetry “[recognises] that the interior of sadness and even madness, is a kernel of aesthetic, artistic and philosophical truth” (Godbout, 2016, p.i). Although Godbout’s (2016) concern above is the poetry of Baudelaire and Benjamin at a particular moment in the European literary tradition, his comment is applicable to Rubadiri’s poetry because

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the 'sadness' in Rubadiri's poetry showcases the pain of postcolonial Africa. Rubadiri is comparable to Baudelaire and Benjamin because their work mourns the pain of continents, albeit at different moments in history. I agree with Godbout (2016) that in sadness lies 'philosophical truth.' This is applicable to Rubadiri's poetry analysed in this article because it distils important philosophic gems about the misery of the postcolonial African condition.

The poetic truths about the postcolonial condition distilled in Rubadiri's poetry recalls Godbout's (2016) observation that melancholy is associated with an impossible desire. He notes that "the impossibility of desire, expressed as either the love for something that one cannot have or the reversal of an event that is irremediable, is essential to the construction of melancholic effect in its virtuous and pathological facets" (Godbout, 2016, p.4). The above passage underscores two major points as regards the intersection of trauma and melancholic tone in literary expression. First, is Godbout's (2016) point of an impossible desire or longing for something or someone that cannot be attained. The inherent sense of loss at the centre of melancholic poetry that Godbout (2016) outlines above runs through Rubadiri's poetry analysed in this article. Whether it is "A Negro Labourer in Liverpool" or "Kampala Beggar," the sense of irreversible loss is tangible in the texts. Second, is the double effect of melancholy. While Godbout (2016) argues that there is a benign and non-benevolent impact of melancholy, it can be argued that the sadness that seeps out of the selected poems leans towards virtuous melancholic effect. This is because the poetic intention in the selected poems is to uncover the pain and horror that the postcolonial moment envisages. The argument above reminds us of Onyango-Obbo's (2018) classification of Rubadiri's life and experiences on the continent as "typical of many African literary figures of the time, who, through a unique and now diminished openness combined with flight from murderous despots, traversed the continent recording what would become a uniquely pan-African story" (Onyango-Obbo, 2018, np). I agree with Onyango-Obbo (2018) that Rubadiri and his cohort of writers have produced a pan-African reality that showcases the betrayal of the continent and its people after the bright dreams of Uhuru. In the case of Rubadiri, this reality is the

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horror of aid, poverty, change, collapsing social services, political persecution and violence that have become a lived reality for many in postcolonial Africa.

### **The Intersection of Trauma and Melancholy in Rubadiri's Poetry**

A close reading of four poems namely “An African Thunderstorm,” “Begging Aid,” “Kampala Beggar” and “A Negro Labourer in Liverpool” justifies the argument that Rubadiri's poetry engages with trauma and melancholy in the postcolonial moment in Africa. For example, in “An African Thunderstorm” Rubadiri fuses simple imagery with plain diction to draw a convincing picture of the disruption that comes with the storm that makes the persona nostalgically desire for the return of the tranquil moment before the thunderstorm. “An African Thunderstorm”, anchored on the trope of the pain of destruction brought about by the storm and the longing for a pristine peaceful moment before the rainstorm, underscores Das's (2007) argument that “every page of his poetry bristles with images of searing pain, spilling blood, contorting hearts and wrecking nerves” (Das, 2007, p.9). Although Das's (2007) comment generally applies to all African poets and it is true that a huge corpus of African poetry exhibits visceral pain and suffering, her words are a perfect description of Rubadiri's poetry explored in this article. The images of searing pain, contorting hearts and wrecking nerves that Das (2007) foregrounds in the above passage are variously reflected in Rubadiri's poetry.

“An African Thunderstorm” — a four-stanza poem that, on the surface seems to describe the peculiarities of an African storm — uses simple diction, common place imagery and irony to document the pain that comes with change. While the point that the poem is a description of a storm peculiar to Africa is gestured to by the title and the staggered and piling development of its subject matter, it can be argued that the four stanzas document the monstrosity of change that the storm symbolises. The central theme of the poem is the traumatic impact of change and transformation of the continent and its people. It is important to note that the poem has elicited various readings. One such reading is the claim that the poem is about the advent of colonialism in Africa. The evidence proffered to

justify this perspective is the phrase “From the west” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21) in the first stanza. Whether one reads the poem as an exploration of colonial incursion in Africa or as a description of the peculiarity of African weather, it is plausible to agree with Priya’s (2009) argument that in Rubadiri’s creations “melancholy is accompanied with irony and sarcasm” (Priya, 2009, p.1). This justifies the argument that this poem is about the trauma of change and transformation. In the poem, Rubadiri uses the attributes of a typical storm in an African context to debate the trauma of change in the postcolonial moment in Africa.

While rain is associated with blessing and good fortune in African cultures and traditions, the storm described in the poem is destructive. Besides the children who are happy at the approaching storm, the rest of the community, in the poem represented by women, are apprehensive. This is because the storm portends destruction and suffering as it is underlined by the images of pain that have been used to describe the storm. The case in point is the dystopic personifications and similes such as “pregnant clouds” that perch on “hills/like dark sinister wings” and the “wind [which] whistles furiously by/and trees bend to let it pass” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21). The clouds are also equated to a destructive “plague of locust” that it is “whirling/tossing up thing on its tail/hurrying/like a madman chasing nothing” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21). The cluster of personifications, similes, imagery and refrains cited above help unravel the chaos and destruction that the storm unleashes. Unlike the storm that symbolises blessings and fecundity in African culture, ironically, the thunderstorm in “An African Thunderstorm” is characterised by destructive forces. The poem summons images of destruction and dystopia such as locusts, powerful winds and a sinister pregnancy to underline the grisly pain of destruction that change has unleashed on the continent.

The personification of the storm and the centring of its destructiveness that is underlined by “The wind whistles by/ Whilst trees bend to let it pass” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21) not only amplifies the chaos and destruction occasioned by the storm, but they also remind us of Hartman’s (2003) and Whitehead’s (2004) assertion that trauma fiction manifests as either content or form. While traumatic



content of the poem references the destruction that the storm unleashes on the society, Rubadiri's deployment of imagery, figurative language, irony, hyperbole and refrain constitutes the traumatic form. Here, it can be argued that the range of poetic devices that Rubadiri employs to bring to life the horror of the storm can be labelled traumatic form because they help the poem mimic and/or resemble the trauma of change. The Hartman-Whitehead template of trauma fiction as both content and form exposes the sense of helplessness that is captured in the passage: "women/babies clinging on their back dart about/in and out/madly/clothes wave like tattered flags" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21). The women's posture — holding the babies on their back — and the image of confused action underlined by the verb "dart," the prepositions "in and out" and adverb "madly" conjure a picture of utter vulnerability. This sense of helplessness is interestingly contrasted with "screams of delighted children" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.21). The differing responses by women and children to the tempest underline the irony of trauma. This helps to activate melancholy and nostalgia of the readers because the delight of children reminds us of the loss occasioned by change.

The fusion of traumatic content and melancholic tone espoused in "An African Thunderstorm" is also deployed in "A Negro Labourer in Liverpool." This poem expounds on the horror of the life of black people/Africans in the diaspora. In this poem, the setting of Liverpool offers an alternative node of exploring the pain black people are subjected to in the diaspora, which is comparable to the dystopia of the continent, namely, the inescapability of suffering by black people. The poem documents an encounter between the persona and a black person in a British city. The suffering of the diasporic African (Negro) is underlined by the pain of isolation and indifference suffered by the apostrophe of the poem. "A Negro Labourer in Liverpool," underlines the theme of trauma and the tone of melancholy that uncannily runs through all Rubadiri's poetry.

While the setting of Liverpool gestures to the diasporic thematic concern, the descriptor "negro" locates the suffering apostrophe in the long history of black pain and suffering. While I agree with Priya (2009) that the poem "exemplifies the

pathetic situation of the average negro,” (Priya, 2009, p.1) I contextualise this pain into the large imperial framework of exploitation and oppression of people of colour. The pain of the black race is signposted by the use of the indefinite article ‘a’ in the title and the location of the apostrophe in Liverpool. While the indefinite article suggests that the pain of the negro that the poem documents applies to any black person in the diaspora, Liverpool as a quintessential white location that is historically associated with British slavery underlines generational exploitation and oppression of black people since the advent of slave trade in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The articulation of the suffering and pain that the negro is subjected to in an English/European location “mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” (Whitehead, 2004, p. 86). The core argument that Whitehead (2004) makes above is the idea that poets deploy images, sounds, diction and poetic devices that imitate the pain and suffering that their personas are disclosing. This is true of “A Negro Labourer in Liverpool” because the one-word lines, the imperfect punctuations and the disjointedness of the structure of the poem mimic trauma.<sup>1</sup> For example, the poem opens with the description of the negro as “slouching in a dark backhouse pavement/head bowed [...] haggard/worn/a dark shadow/amidst dark shadows” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23). While the body postures “slouching”, “head bowed” and “haggard” simultaneously gesture to unending fatigue/pain probably because he is overworked, and resignation to his fate of suffering, the setting of the poem on a “backhouse pavement” and the atmosphere suggested by adverbs “dark” and “shadow” further accentuate the pain and suffering. Here, Rubadiri is pinging on the horrific symbolism associated with darkness and shadows to underline the pain of the negro. When the image of the shadow is read alongside a bowed head, haggard posture and a continuous verb ‘slouching’, then, the unending dehumanisation of the negro on account of the long years of oppression and exploitation is centred. The negro’s existence at the margins of white society is underlined by the connotation of a backhouse — a setting that in English industrial revolution register connotes societal exclusion symbolised by diabolically dehumanising activities such as prostitution and crime.

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The horror and monstrosity of the life of the negro in a Whiteman's land extends into the second and third stanzas of the poem. For example, when the eyes of the persona meet those of the negro, the persona reports the absence of a "sunny smile/no hope/or a longing for hope promised" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23). The sense of disillusionment is further augmented in passage "that from his mother land/with new hope/sought for an identity/grappled/to crutch the fire of manhood/ in the land of the free" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23). What is striking about the above passage is the fact that the negro, overcome by fatigue and exhaustion, is presented as devoid of hope. This recalls Baker's (2011) observation that "melancholy is a hope at once always being reborn and endlessly disappointed: but less a true desire for a 'true life' than the lack of this desire for a real need to attain satisfaction" (Baker, 2011, p.84). Also evoked above is Ferber's theorisation that melancholy "has always been marked by acute contradictions in its depiction, invoking an expansive array of meaning; it encompasses positive, creative facets — such as depth, creativity, bursts of genius — as well as negative qualities — including gloominess, despondency and isolation" (qtd in Godbout, 2016, p.4). While Baker and Ferber's theorisation of melancholic poetry is to some extent diametrical, it is plausible to argue that their thinking intersects on the point of the paradoxical nature of this motif in poetry. While Baker foregrounds the tendency for melancholy to simultaneously gesture to hope and disappointment, Ferber centres synchronisation of positive and negative impulses in this type of literature. This brilliant paradox is embedded in "A Negro Labourer in Liverpool." In spite of the negro's pain and suffering in an indifferent and exploitative society that has numbed his humanity, he nonetheless seeks out human contact as exemplified in the passage "a longing for hope promised only/the quick covered dart of the eyes" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.23). The sense of sadness that the above lines evoke is the fact that the negro labourer still harbours or recalls the warmth of human contact that his current situation has deprived him of. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to materialise in an indifferent and racist society in which he exists.

The exhausted and lonely figure of the negro labourer in Liverpool has a foil in the beggar personified in "Kampala Beggar." In the five stanzas of the

poem, the persona describes the encounter between the beggar and society on the streets of the Ugandan capital city, Kampala. While stanza one provides the intimate details of the deformity of the beggar, the second stanza outlines how the beggar's penetrating gaze sees through society to its discomfort that is gestured to by a fumbling hand that drops a dollar. The last stanza connects the beggar's state to that of the continent that survives on begging. Onyango-Obbo (2018) argues that writers of Rubadiri's generation are "not about the past. They still offer us the best glimpse of what the soul of today's idealised pan-African future could feel like." Similarly, Wanjala (2018) argues that the influence of "Rubadiri's later poetry is characterised by quite distaste rather than strident fury" of the postcolonial reality in Africa. While the essence of Onyango-Obbo's (2018) argument is that Rubadiri's poetry offers us a unique glimpse into the future of Africa, Wanjala's (2018) observation suggests that his poetry attacks the dystopia of the African post colony. Both Onyango-Obbo and Wanjala's points are valid when applied to Rubadiri's poetry. His poetry offers us a glimpse in the future of Africa as it condemns the depths that the continent has slid into. This point is perfectly captured in "Kampala Beggar."

The poem is a true reflection of the monstrous deformity of the African polity in the postcolonial moment. It is a poem about the future as well as a critique of what is wrong with society in the present. The appalling condition of the beggar is a mockery of the promise of independence. This perhaps explains why the persona is startled when he comes face to face with the epitome of deprivation on the streets of the Ugandan capital. The sense of surprise by the persona that such misery still exists is announced in the third stanza of the poem: "A hawk's eye/Penetrates to the core/ On a hot afternoon/To prick the victims" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.34). One reading of the above lines is for their descriptive power, namely, Rubadiri's ability to capture the awkwardness of the persona's coming face to face with debilitating poverty and suffering.

Our appreciation of the persona's shock at the beggar's deplorable state is possible because of the poet's elegance of expression. If "trauma is the

confrontation with an event that in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed,” (Caruth, 1996, p.152) then, “Kampala Beggar” is Rubadiri’s attempt at narrativising trauma in order to raise awareness of this affliction. This is because the poem forces us to confront a horror whose “unexpectedness and horror” defies articulation (Caruth, 1996, p.152). The repulsion of the figure of the beggar is captured in the introductory stanza: “Dark twisted form/ Of shreds and cunning/Crawling with inward twinkle/At the agonies of Africa” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.34). In the above passage, Rubadiri is able to uncover the awful condition of the beggar through his expert use of paradox, contrast and imagery. This is revealed in the way each of the couplets above contrast with each other, painting a resonating picture of the beggar. While the first line deploys images of deformity “dark” and “twisted” to highlight the horror of the beggar’s corporeal appearance, the verb “cunning” unveils the agency of the beggar. Similarly, whereas the verb “crawling” underlines the horrific life and existence of the beggar, the adjective “twinkle” underlines the agency in the sense that the beggar is aware of this condition and deploys his/her condition to survive. Furthermore, it is ironic that the beggar who is normally a figure of pity instead pities the persona who is unaware that everyone in society exists as a beggar. This is seen in the discerning and piercing gaze of the beggar that makes the persona uncomfortable.

Additionally, the persona hints at the fact that the beggar is a symbol of the continent. This is indicated by the lines “Agonies of Africa” and “In the orbit of our experience/Our beggariness meet [...] Beggarly we understand/As naturally we both know” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.34). The double self-awareness of beggarhood as a shared attribute between the beggar and the continent reminds us of Nance’s (2006) observation that “the goal of testimonial narratives is not only to educate readers about injustice, but to persuade those readers to act” (Nance, 2006, p.19). I read Nance’s observation above as equating trauma literature to an act of activism in the sense that the poet is not only exposing the evil in society, but that s/he is also educating society about what brings about the current state of affairs as well as provoking the reading public to act to end the status quo. This is true of “Kampala Beggar” because the sadness at the core of this poem serves to

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expose the suffering that the continent and its people find themselves in. Using the beggar as a microcosm of the continent, Rubadiri's poem seeks to create awareness about the deplorable state of affairs on the continent. This argument reminds us of Nazareth's (1976) comment that Rubadiri "writes about prostitutes to draw attention to the real exploiters" (Nazareth, 1976, p.259). We are also reminded of Nigerian writer, Cyprian Ekwensi's point that writers are "like the bird in the folktale that always appears on the wall and pipes a particular tune. When you hear that tune, you know that there is a tragedy somewhere" (qtd in Nazareth, 1976, p.256). I agree with Nazareth (1976) that by writing about a Kampala beggar, Rubadiri is exposing the beggarly reality of African countries and that indeed his poem is comparable to Ekwensi's bird in the folktale because it draws our attention to the tragedy of Africa as a begging continent.

The theme of Africa as a begging continent is further sketched out in the poem "Begging Aid" whose subject matter is the vagaries of aid on the African continent. The assortment of metaphors and personification central to the meaning of this poem gesture to turbulence and anarchy brought about by aid on the continent. For example, while the opening stanza foregrounds the dystopia of aid as reflected in the image of children "smaller than guns" and elders who have become "circus lions," the dystopia and monstrosity of aid continues in the rest of poem as highlighted by a continent that has been reduced to "markets for leftovers" as its leaders submit to "toys of death" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.37).

My reading of "Begging Aid" is anchored on Nazareth's postulation that Rubadiri's poetry is embedded with "poetic puzzles, full of symbols, metaphors and questions that the reader must work out" (Nazareth, 1976, p.259). The above description of Rubadiri's poetry is true to "Begging Aid" with its metaphors of dystopia and monstrosity which underline post-independence disillusionment. My postulation above is cognisant of Tal's (1996) argument that the "literature of trauma holds at its centre the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience" (Tal, 1996, p.17). The essence of Tal's argument is the fact that trauma literature like Rubadiri's "Begging Aid" deconstructs the post-independence reality

of many African countries on account of their dependence on aid. The sense of dystopia that the poem eloquently articulates by its paradoxical and hyperbolic title eloquently signposts the negative impact of aid on Africa. Given that aid is inherently a form of begging by African countries from rich European and North American countries, it is an ingenious literary presentation on the part of Rubadiri to pair aid with begging. This pairing accentuates the suffocating and debilitating nature of aid on Africa and its people.

The debilitating impact of aid on Africa is further articulated by the numerous diabolic images that the poem employs. For example, while in the opening stanza, the persona underlines the contrast between the size of the leaders and those of the children (“[...] children/Become smaller than guns, / Elders become big/Circus lions” [Rubadiri, 2004, p.37]), in the second stanza the image of the size of the children is repeated in the lines “Guns are taller/Than our children” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.37). The visual images in the two passages quoted above underline the monstrous impact of aid on the continent. By highlighting the monstrosity of both children and the postcolonial leaders the poet underlines the negative transformation of the African society by aid in three important ways. First, the focus on the deformity of the children embedded in the image of “smaller than guns” and “guns are taller” underlines how aid and its various activities have deformed the next generation of Africa. While the physical deformation might be accounted for by famine, war and dismal social services because of the intervention of aid, the symbolic significance of the poem perhaps lies in its spotlighting of how aid distorts the incentive of society to hold politicians and leaders to account. Second, the contrast between the deformity of the children with that of the ruling class gestures to the exploitation of the postcolonial African polity. The leaders have sold out and in return amassed wealth at the expense of their own people. This is further underlined by the line “The whip of the Ringmaster” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.37). While the whip is a symbol of the violence meted out to the people in protection of the aid industry, the personified adjective “Ringmaster” is a descriptor of perhaps the imperial powers that have reduced Africa to a “beggardhood” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.37). Third is the repetition of the image of the lion in reference

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to leaders to underline exploitation and violence meted unto the continent and its people. This is because like the lion, the king of the jungle, the aid industry and African leaders prey on the weak in the postcolonial society.

The theme of the negative impact of aid unto the African continent and its people reminds us of Nazareth's (1976) observation about the intersection between politics and writing in the period after independence. He notes that "at independence, there appeared a convergence between what was said by the political leaders, the people and the writers. The writers have used those early ideals to express on behalf of the people a feeling of betrayal over what had happened" (Nazareth, 1976, p.252). Nazareth underlines one of the recurrent tropes is postcolonial African writing, namely the critique of the betrayal of the ideals of independence. It may be argued that the first crop of African leaders was naïve and idealistic to promise a bright future for their people and that this idealism crumbled when it came face to face with the realpolitik of international relations in the era of the cold war. Nonetheless, as "Begging Aid" demonstrates, the continent and its people feel that they have been betrayed and aid is perhaps the most obnoxious example of that betrayal and its unintended consequences. The deformity of the current and future generations that portends the worst for the continent is traceable to aid that is debunked in Rubadiri's poem. This is perhaps why Rubadiri's poetry that deals with the theme of betrayal generally and aid as a symbol of the impact of this betrayal on the continent and its people reeks of melancholy. Rubadiri's mourning for Africa's lost generations reminds us of Raymond Klibansky's argument that melancholic literature espouses a "temporary state of mind, sometimes painful and depressing, sometimes merely mildly pensive and nostalgic" (qtd in Godbout, 2016, p.2). In many ways "Begging Aid" espouses the qualities of melancholy literature that Klibansky outlines above. The oscillation between anger because of betrayal and resignation gestured to by a recall of a better past is perhaps what makes the poem in question resonate with the reading public in Africa.



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## Conclusion

In this article, my central thesis has been that Rubadiri, like many of his contemporaries who lived through the euphoria of independence and the disillusionment of the post-independence African society, use his craftsmanship to engage with important issues of his times. The poetic techniques that Rubadiri uses to discuss suffering because of the betrayal of the post-independence dreams of many Africans has prompted commentators like Mulera K Muniini to argue that Rubadiri “is best known for his accessible poetry” (Muniini, 2018, n.p.). The accessibility that Muniini foregrounds in the above passage for the popularity of Rubadiri’s poem is a product of his fusion of the trauma theme, melancholy tone and accessible poetic devices to discuss postcolonial African disillusionment. Here, my reading is cognisant of Douglas’s (2008) argument that trauma literature forces us to “bear witness” to and “face the horror” (Douglas, 2008, p.149) and Anne Whitehead’s (2004) observation that “trauma can be presented [...] in a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (Whitehead, 2004, p.6). Douglas’s conceptualisation of trauma fiction as witnessing evil and Whitehead’s argument that trauma can only be expressed in a literary form perfectly describes Rubadiri’s poetry. The trauma of change in “An African Thunderstorm,” diasporic suffering in “A Negro Labourer in Liverpool,” and suffering and pain of betrayal by the postcolonial leaders that has turned people and the society into beggars in “Kampala Beggar” and “Begging Aid” spotlight the pain of postcolonial Africa. The traumatic theme in Rubadiri’s poetry foregrounds melancholy and nostalgia because the poetry problematises an African postcolonial reality with subtlety and grace. His traumatic poetry seeps a melancholy that arises from the double need to share the pain of African postcolonial suffering by telling and retelling the story of the traumatic experience, in order to make it real to the readers (Tal, 1996, p.137). The need to engage with a difficult subject and the stylistic grace to execute the disclosure of this trauma with sublimity that oozes from Rubadiri’s poetry perhaps attests to Nazareth’s (1976) argument that “there is always a deep sense of social responsibility to African [writing] as a whole” (Nazareth, 1976, p.250). In reference to Rubadiri, the social responsibility of the African writer is underscored

by his commitment to engage with a difficult subject matter of the continent's postcolonial moment. While it is true that many African writers have engaged with this theme variously in their oeuvre, it can be argued that Rubadiri's poetry stands out because of his fusion of traumatic content with melancholic modes of expression in a manner that provides us with profound insights into the sadness of a continent when we ask: what does it mean to be an African living in the troubled times of the post colony?

## Notes

1 It is important to note that while most of Rubadiri's poems are consistently well punctuated (the lines start with a capital letter), "A Negro Labourer in Liverpool" is different because it starts with lower case lettering. It can be argued that this mimics the traumatic content of the poem.

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