



EXPLOITATION AND DEHUMANIZATION IN POST COLONIAL NIGERIA: A CRITIQUE OF IYAYI'S *VIOLENCE*

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ABSTRACT: *This study is a critique of Iyayi's Violence in its Marxist ideological posture. The study revealed that, in every social organization, conflict or class struggle is a function of mode of production and that economy is the ultimate determinant of all other aspects of life. The study concluded that, conflict of classes will continue to manifest in capitalist societies unless the masses organize and resist the exploitation through a radical revolution.*

KEYWORDS: Post-Colonial, Exploitation, Dehumanization, Class Conflict, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

This study evaluates Iyayi's artistic exploration of the trend of social, cultural, economic and political forces, as forces of underdevelopment in post-colonial Nigeria. Motivated by postulations of Marx and Fanon, Iyayi mobilises the workers to resist their oppressive and dehumanizing conditions with the aim of effecting change. In an interview with Kunle Jibade, Iyayi reiterates the nucleus of his ideological stance; "I write because I want to see changes that would transform the lives of the people. My writing is directed at and dedicated to those who are interested in bringing about a positive change in our society" (1).

Iyayi's fictional world in *Violence* shows two worlds; the world of the poor masses on the one hand-the Idemudias, the Osaros, the Omoifos, the Bernards and others, and the world of the rich few- the Obofuns, the Irisos, the Police Force, and the Hospital Management on the other, which overlap to form one world. It is through the juxtaposition of these worlds that Iyayi arouses our sympathy for the poor. His deep insights into the psychology of poverty and suffering give birth to his moral ideas which represent his artistic vision- a vision that is coached in the doctrine of "live and let live". Uwasomba maintains that, "*Violence* is an exploration in the contradictory class rifts, disunity and conflicts in the Nigerian system moving progressively towards the path of retrogression, degeneration, corruption and decadence" (138).

Conceptual Clarification

Literarily, the concept "**Post-colonial**" refers to a society which was previously controlled or exploited by external forces (countries) but has now gained independence from these forces. The colonizer has vacated the premises.

Exploitation on the other hand refers to the action or act of treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from his/her work. It is a social relationship based on a fundamental asymmetry in a power relationship between workers and their employers. Exploitation limits



an individual to realize himself. It impedes both individual and national growth and development. Exploitation leads to abject condition of the workers as they suffer material deprivation. The conditions of the workers Iyayi depicts in *Violence* are still prevalent in Nigeria today due to the continuous exploitation of the workers.

Dehumanization refers to a disposition towards others that debases the others individuality as either individual specie or an individual object. In other words, it is to act inhumanly towards humans. Dehumanization occurs when human characteristics are denied to an individual or group.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a Marxist revolutionary theory (dialectical materialist theory) propounded by Marx and Engels as its theoretical base. The fundamental principle of this theory is that the people's social being determines their social consciousness. Social being refers to the material relations of people to nature and one another which emerge together with the establishment of human society. Social consciousness on the other hand, refers to the views, ideas and theories and the psychology of classes that is material production ultimately determines the course of history, and in turn influences social structures, nations and other historically formed groups of people. Marx describes this view in terms of an architectural metaphor: the 'superstructure' rests upon 'base' (socio-economic relations) that is, the base determines the character of the superstructure. If the base undergoes a change, so does the superstructure. This base and superstructure metaphor portray the totality of social relations by which humans produce and reproduce their social existence. In other words, Marx theorized that, the mode of production fundamentally determines all aspects of social life and are interconnected. He argues that all mental (ideological) systems like morality, religion, philosophy and law are the reflexes and echoes of real-life process. Marx and Engels regard the economic aspect of society as the ultimate determinant of other aspects that reflect the interest of the dominant class in a particular historical period, and dismissed them as "phantoms formed in the brains of men" and that other forms of consciousness are relatively autonomous and possess an independent ability to alter men's existence. The aesthetic ideas of Marx and Engels on literature unlike Aristotle's, were not at all dogmatic and never put in a single book. Their ideas and comments about art and literature can be gleaned from their writings and various scattered anthologies. Their analysis of literature was from the historical materialist and dialectical spectrum. Marx and Engels' concept of literature is class-conscious. It de-emphasizes the metaphysical but lays emphasis on men and their ability to make history. The quintessence of Marxist aesthetics does not lie solely on its historical approach but in its revolutionary interpretations of history itself. Their ideas on literature try to define the relationship between art and ideology, the nature of class origin and the class character of art; the uneven development of art and society, the link between art and reality and several other issues.

For the needs of this study, we want to state categorically that Marxism as a philosophy is dedicated to the struggle for the total liberation of humanity through the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist state by the working class. Art within the Marxist philosophy is conceived as a partner in arms in the struggle for the attainment of this noble objective. Eagleton explains that "the aim of Marxist literary criticism is to explain the literary work more fully and this means a sensitive attention to its form, style and meaning and as a product of a particular history" (108).



Marxist criticism has contributed immensely to our understanding of African literature. The Marxist theory is therefore relevant to this study because literary works are products of history which define the consciousness of a social class and being products of history can only be analyzed fully if the experience of the people, their political and economic relations and other social systems are all examined. More so, that Marxism explores human relations, behaviour, culture, and experiences in terms of relationship with one another becomes more vital as a correct tool for the analysis and interpretation of the complicated and contradictory issues within African social system. It is therefore, considered the key or reliable guide for studying reality or modern African literature which is essentially a reflection of the African society.

Our attempt in this theoretical framework is, to identify and discuss the revolutionary elements in African novel as exemplified in Iyayi's *Violence*. The discourse presupposes that there is a lot of affinity between ideology (Marxism in this case) and the African novel genre.

Exploitation and Dehumanization in Post-Colonial Nigeria

In *Violence*, Iyayi vividly explores the numerous problems associated with the capitalist system in post-colonial Nigeria-exploitation, oppression, suppression, and dehumanization amongst others. He explores the exploitation of the working class in such a way that, a grim picture of their abject condition of living is revealed. The extent to which the working class, the masses and the down-trodden are oppressed and exploited is made credible with vivid imagery. For example, the dialogue amongst the wretched of the Nigerian society attests to this view: "It is so unfair. One man has enough to eat, in fact, so much that he throws some away. Yet here we are hungry. Well, all fingers are not equal. Everything is God's work; Patrick said. Kai, it is not God's work, it's man-made...Omoifo disagreed" (20). The above quotation is a clear illustration that, Iyayi holds the capitalist system for the plights of the down-trodden. Thus, Iyayi identifies himself with the masses by trying to expose their suffering and aspiration from within.

Through his characters, Iyayi creates awareness of not only a different definition of violence but also gives an answer to this inequality, which is reformation in the society. In an interview with Adedeji in Benin, Iyayi maintains that;

Violence is central to what I was saying: that violence is not physical violence alone. In fact, the greatest form of violence is this question of injustice in the relations between people. People who have potentials that cannot be realized because of social conditions, because of conscious choices that, the ruling class elements have made which is making it impossible for people to fulfill themselves. So, that is the greatest form of violence (152).

That is violence does not mean only the physical use of force but the various inflictions on man by his fellow man which denies the inflicted the essence of life. Thus, the exploitation and oppression of the poor by the government and the rich constitute violence. Bearing this new concept of violence in mind, there is no denying the fact that the society, as portrayed by Iyayi, operates on violence. Iyayi, therefore maintains that, a civil and transformed society can be re-established in Nigeria through violence. Idemudia gets an answer to this act of violence which is a collective consciousness to overthrow the system. As such, he begins to educate the workers and mobilize them for a strike action.



Iyayi reflects different aspects of social violence by portraying both its negative and positive sides. The negative aspects are reflected in the abject condition of living of the working people. The positive aspect of violence is shown in the conscious efforts of the working people to organize themselves to effect some positive changes in their conditions of living. This is seen in the strike in Queen's building project.

Iyayi uses down-to-earth language in the novel in addressing these crucial issues. His style of contrastive juxtaposition and a-play-within-a-novel are further attempts to expose the degree or extent of the gulf between those who have and those who are merely surviving. An instance of this juxtaposition is in the affluent life styles of the bourgeois class; Obofun and Queen and those of abject condition of the working people: Idemudia, Adisa, Osaro and the Jimoh family. What Iyayi achieves with this style is perhaps the appeal to the conscience of the reader, to see the plights of the deprived masses in post-colonial Nigeria and by extension, Africa. In this study, the fundamental questions of corruption, exploitation, poverty, oppression unemployment/underemployment and violence are critically examined together since these social vices are interwoven.

At the level of political economy of any society, the working people provide material goods in order to satisfy fundamental human needs—food, shelter and clothing. However, Iyayi argues that, if after having produced these material goods, the very producers cannot satisfy their fundamental needs but instead suffer material deprivation, then it follows logically that some people in the same society are enjoying what they have not produced and are therefore stealing, that is corruption. One can therefore rightly say that 'corruption' is an integral part of exploitation simply because the non-producers in position of power utilize their advantage to deprive producers and their family of their rights. It is therefore correct to assert that non-producers such as Obofun, Queen and Iriso who are in the upper class constitute a class of exploiters and the corrupt while the producers: Idemudia, Adisa, Osaro and the Jimoh family constitute the class of producers. Iyayi therefore takes side with the poor and powerless against the rich and powerful. He has faith in the ability of the underprivileged in the society to hold their own against evil and to unite in the struggle towards a desirable and functional social order for all.

The play-within-a-novel is another apt expose of the corrupt exploitative and dehumanizing tendencies of the bourgeois class in post-colonial Nigeria. In the course of the play, it is revealed that a labourer, who has a family to feed, earns only some meager amount monthly. This is fraudulent and exploitative when it is understood that such a worker devotes his time and energy in producing the wealth of the society. 'My client (labourer) is a good and conscientious worker. He works from the earliest hours of the morning to the latest hours of the day. There are hundreds of workers who like my client receive so little pay for just so much work done (175). This is a clear case of underemployment. The attitude of the judge in the play does not only reflect the wider society where the ruling class does not tolerate opposing views. It portrays vividly their uneasiness and hypocrisy in the society. The action proves that, the ruling class does not like to be told the realities of the society. The subsequent order of the judge to take the labourer out of the witness box and chain him is quite oppressive and demeaning of the masses in society.

Further in the same play-within-a-novel scene, a school teacher is arraigned for the same offence with the labourer. While the teacher is being accused of robbery, the bigger robbers like General Igeki (rtd) who was retired with full benefits after embezzling substantial



government funds and Azonze, a career civil servant, who was dismissed with ignominy are left untouched. The point here is that due to the corrupt and dehumanizing nature of the post-colonial Nigerian society, the oppressed and marginalized are being treated unjustly by the system while at the same time 'greater crimes lie unpunished' (179). The judge, being a member of the bourgeois class, is evidently being partial in the dispensation of justice as he does not allow adequate time for the Defence Counsel for the critical examination of the case at hand. The judge simply says, 'I cannot grant the time' (180). This is a conscious attempt by the judge to subvert the course of justice in the court and a clear evidence of encouraging the perpetuation of social injustice in the society. Iyayi uses the outburst of the Defence Counsel to show that, in a class society, there is justice for the rich but non for the poor. The submission for the counsel for the defence sums up the pathetic situation in post-colonial Nigeria: "I know that the whole society here stands on trial...that there are other people who you could say have greater justification to commit robbery with violence, people who you could say have enough reason, people who down burn the present edifice" (180). Generally, the picture that Iyayi paints of the world of the rich and powerful is that of corrupt, inept, heartless, shameless, and rotten class, who are responsible for the socio-economic and political problems in Nigeria.

The exploitative manner in which Queen uses Idemudia and his co-labourers in off-loading three-trailer-loads of cement for twenty naira draws the readers' sympathy towards the down-trodden in Nigeria. What we see later on when the same group of workers now slaving away at the low-cost houses Queen had the contract to build makes us sympathize with them:

They fell silence as they fed the concrete mixer. The men came again and again and each time they brought the wheel-barrow, the head pans and the buckets. Their chests glistened with sweat, their faces glistened with sweat, their backs were bathed with sweat. They worked in subdued silence like prisoners, coming and going in the intense heat of the sun (252).

This is a powerful evocation of suffering among the labourers for a pay not commensurate with their efforts. It could be noticed that, while Queen exploits Idemudia's physical labour, her husband Obofun exploits his wife sexually. Obofun cashed in on Idemudia's hospitalization and medical bill of twenty-three naira which must be paid before he is discharged, to seduce the wife, Adisa. Obofun is described during the act as a "vulture picking the flesh of a dead prey" (178).

At the worksite where the workers protested of the slave labour that their work is, Queen, who is morally bankrupt tries to break their solidarity, first by offering Idemudia cash gratification and later offering her body. The believe in the business world that you use what you have to get what you need seems to support this unethical behaviour of business men and women as frequently practised by Queen to win government contracts and Obofun's demand for sexual gratification before he can offer Adisa assistance as a justifiable means to an end.

The upper class which constitutes the class of the affluent does all within its power to frustrate the lower class from attaining the good things of life while the lower class continues its endless struggle to transform the system. The existence of these various classes makes it necessary that the masses are subjected to different forms of violence in the society. The psychological and physical violence in the likes of Idemudia and Adisa amongst others are the reflections of this structural imbalance in the society.



Iyayi maintains that, the inability or refusal of the government to give priority attention to some key areas like agriculture, education, among others encourages this abysmal situation. Medical care for the urban poor as revealed by Iyayi is as bad as not getting it at all. Idemudia for example, falls sick after the tedious work of off-loading bags of cement under heavy rainfall. When he is eventually taken to the University Hospital, he is sent back to Ogbe (public) hospital for what the doctor claims as 'lack of bed in the male ward'. Meanwhile empty rooms are reserved for special people in the same hospital. This again shows the class distribution and inequality in the society. Here, Iyayi subtly indicts the government for their inefficiency and neglect of public infrastructure. Instead of maintaining this hospital or building new ones, the government concentrates on the building of hotels, hence Iyayi sees the government as vital agent among the collaborating agents in the exploitation and dehumanization of the masses.

Again, another picture of exploitation and dehumanization this time in active collaboration with foreign expatriate is revealed through Mr. Clerides, a Greek, who works in Queen's housing project. He informs the construction workers that, "these houses must go up faster. No standing about. Break reduced by thirty minutes. If you are not satisfied you go and we hire somebody else" (239). He also 'cooked up stories' to dismiss some of the labourers in the site for demanding for their legitimate pay increase. Even Idemudia and his co-labourers that replaced the dismissed workers are not told of the amount of money they would be paid until Queen informs the Greek; "It's one naira fifty kobo a day" (235). There is no room for negotiation of any kind. The rate is simply imposed on the workers. The reason for the poor wages is the unemployment. The employers capitalize on prevailing conditions like high unemployment/underemployment and poverty to impoverish the work force. A worker is paid so little and he accepts it because he must survive. If he refuses to accept the little pay offered, he will starve as there are many others who will be waiting to accept. In the same manner, Boss Kihara tells the workers in *Devil on the Cross* when they planned a strike that anybody who is tired of working can go home because there are plenty of unemployed men looking for work. This is a deliberate plan to subject the down-trodden to perpetual exploitation. Even the meager wage is exerted from the employer as Idemudia and his fellow workers had to make a fuss before the wage is paid.

Iyayi also attacks the policy where the ruling class uses both ideology (persuasion) and practical action (violence) to ensure the 'peace' and stability of the capitalist system. This is exemplified in Queen's persuasion of Idemudia to break strike on her building project and her ultimate resort to 'force'. This is captured in Queen's soliloquy: "Everyman has a price. I would buy him (Idemudia) over now. In the future, I could do away with him; discard him as rubbish into the dust bin" (252).

The exploitation of the mass's hampers both national development and the realization of the individual potentials. In the novel, Idemudia's inability to complete his education is attributed to poverty, poverty caused by exploitation. Ideally, he would have had other sources of revenue to continue his education but for the contradiction of an oppressive socio-economic and political system. Other individuals like Adisa, Patrick, and Osaro also find it difficult to realize their imperatives or true human potentials. And because they lack education, they are intellectually ill-equipped to confront the system of violence in the society. Incidentally, the psychological violence that an Idemudia experience leads him to almost a physical combat with his father. The system makes the survival of the ordinary man most impossible. An instance of this is reflected in the abject condition of living of Idemudia and his wife, Adisa, a



life characterized by poverty and hunger. Surprisingly, in the midst of all these traumatic experiences of the ordinary man, “the tax collectors and police men are in the village...arresting anybody who has not paid his tax” (5). It can be seen that; the ruling class has not provided the enabling environment for the ordinary man to earn income to pay these taxes. This is oppression and the encouragement of violence among the masses. Furthermore, in a society where the masses are hungry, helpless and hopeless, the doctor at Ogbe hospital, “couldn’t understand why in the midst of so much disease, the government concentrated on building hotels instead of hospitals and agro-allied industries that would provide food and job opportunities for the masses” (55). This is a clear case of misplacement of priorities by the Nigerian government.

Iyayi is convinced that this type of system will only produce under development and would further prolong the suffering of the working people. Queen should, as a business woman promote industrial growth and provide jobs for the unemployed. However, what she does is to concentrate her attention and efforts in considerably engaging in reckless and unproductive consumption of the nation’s wealth that has been fraudulently acquired. This is the picture of the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed which runs through Iyayi’s novels. However, the cumulative effect of this is shown in the conscious efforts of the working people to organize themselves to effect some positive changes in their conditions of living. Idemudia, Bernard, Osaro and other labourers driven to the extreme of hunger and suffering rise in a spontaneous revolt through strike action against the oppressors represented by Queen at her Sakpoba road worksite. This strike symbolizes the struggle and the latent strength of the oppressed group. The strike symbolizes Iyayi’s call for all the oppressed of our society to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive and corrupt capitalist system which undermines security and national development. This is the climax of the revolutionary consciousness of the novel.

The apparent disillusionment of the ordinary man with the political elite in Nigeria is another issue which Iyayi vividly explores in the novel. The joys and enthusiasm that heralded the political independence of Nigeria is soon replaced with a feeling of betrayal and hopelessness. The political leaders that ‘fought’ the colonialists soon indulge in the vices of the colonialists, in some cases, even worse. Their primary concern is how to enhance their personal comfort instead of the collective welfare of the people. Disillusionment in the novel is also seen in Idemudia’s expression when he reflects rhetorically on his situation and blames his suffering on societal violence: “What kind of life is this? A man gets a job and cannot protest. He cannot ask for higher wages, the period of his leisure is cut down arbitrarily and he must come out to work when he is told. This was slavery, this was violence” (51). His unfinished education, his hunger and poverty, all these he found out to be different forms of violence. It consisted not of physical, brutal assault but of a slow and gradual debasement of himself, his pride as a man. The above quotation reveals Idemudia’s total disillusionment with the bourgeois class in a capitalist society. It shows too, the abject conditions of living of the ordinary people in post-colonial Nigeria. It is not surprising that such a reflective and thoughtful Idemudia emerges as the leader of the workers’ group, their spokesman, chief bargainer and chief motivator when they contemplate a strike action. Bernard, an old worker at the site, sees in Idemudia a true leader, a resourceful and determined man who may eventually pull them all together hence his assertion that “you are new here...but one could have said...we need to work together” (255). Bernard’s contentions eventually come true for, Idemudia’s own commitment is assured in his rejecting a bribe and



the tempting offer to sleep with Queen, their employer. Even when he learns of his wife's adultery ... because she is desperately looking for money for their food and his hospital bills, his first murderous impulse gives way to compassionate understanding and love.

It is the opinion of Iyayi that until there is a fundamental restructuring of the socio-economic and political bases in Nigeria, the numerous problems of the working people will not be effectively tackled. He contends too, that the production, distribution and consumption patterns in Nigeria are grossly faulty; hence, many people are poor, sick, hungry and disillusioned while a handful of exploiters are rich.

It is on this premise that Iyayi advocates for an alternative. The alternative is a society where the cause of the working people, the apparent human degradation of the working people would be ultimate concern of the ruling class. It is only then that the working people can avoid the situation where 'the over-cleverness on the part of the ruling class would be checked so that, in the end, the working-class people can retain enough sense of justice and fair play, and optimism possible to resolve man's conflicts and share the common resources equitably and humanely. These are the ideas which Iyayi, a proletarian writer has for Nigeria, in the context of the novel.

Revolutionary art is clearly aesthetic of combat and solution. It is never pessimistic, for it knows that no matter how bad the present order is, no matter the degree of anomie, and social dysfunctionality, a ray of hope is still held out in the coming struggle of the broad mass of the people for a different socio-economic order. *Violence* is an example of this aesthetics. It harshly criticizes the existing state of affairs; it condemns the trickery, exploitative quests and appropriative desires of Queen and her husband Obofun, but it sees in Idemudia, Osaro, Bernard and the other toiling masses, the beginning of a new dawn, the dawning of a new era. Though they toil in the heat, rain and sun of the housing site, they never lose hope, knowing that eventually they will win out. Then the solution presented at the end of the novel is that, it is only in the class consciousness and readiness of the workers to fight for a new system that the salvation of all the debased exploiters lies.

CONCLUSION

This study shows Iyayi as a writer whose sensibility has been awakened by inequalities and injustices in the society. Essentially, he has been able to reflect on the socio-economic and political milieus that characterize the post-colonial Nigeria. He has also been able to reveal the inherent structural contradictions in Nigeria vis-à-vis the ruler's inherent weaknesses. The picture Iyayi paints of the working people touches the reader making him sympathize with these wretched of the Nigerian society. He equally paints a critical picture of the bourgeois class where he holds them responsible for the inherent exploitation, oppression and dehumanization of the poor masses in post-colonial Nigeria.

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