In Search of Egalitarian Society: A Sociological Reading of Class Consciousness in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

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Abstract

This study seeks to argue that African writers employ artistic works as a major tool in the struggle against social inequality, oppression, corruption and other post-colonial evils in the post-independence African society, bearing in mind the nexus between art and society. To achieve this the African novel, *Violence* by Festus Iyayi is selected for analysis. And in doing this, the sociological criticism is the best critical theory this study considers. To be able to explain the concept of sociological criticism, the divergent opinions of formalism and the practitioners of sociology of literature are summarily examined, while the textual analysis showing class consciousness in the novel followed. In the end, the study finds that literary works also, are tools used in the quest for an egalitarian society by writers and more specifically, African writers.

Keywords: Class Consciousness. Egalitarianism. Society. Sociological Criticism.

Introduction

On attainment of political independence in Africa the story seems to be the same or even grew worse. The issue of neo-colonialism sets into African political cum economic space. The African people rather than enjoy the gains of political independence, groan under the weight of economic deprivation perpetrated by the black imperialists. These social and political problems in Africa apparently form the subject matter for African creative writers. Hence, Achebe (cited in Amaechi 3) is quoted as saying "... an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant". And one of those problems so addressed by some writers like Festus Iyayi is the problem of social inequality.

Social inequality; which breeds exploitation, oppression, and dehumanization, is one of the many social problems of post-independence Africa. It is one of the post-colonial challenges African writers had to confront in their respective works. The deep desire to advocate social justice, equity and fairness resulted in its literary harvest. *Violence* by Festus Iyayi is one evidence of these postcolonial literary harvests. Kontein Trinya had argued that "in contemporary literature, whether modern, post-modern, or high modern, the engagement of art *with*, but more specifically *to*, social purpose has been increasingly inevitable"(13). This inevitability is underscored by the sociological features of literature which draws a nexus between literature and society. To Trinya, this "nexus between art and society seems less self-apologetic"(14). Consequently, Iyayi in his novel *Violence* reflected on the social issues of class divide in extant societies. Note that, in this study the issue of class consciousness (social inequality) is espoused using the novel named above. The scope of this work is within the sociological nuances of class consciousness in the novel *Violence*. Its significance is derived from the fact that readers and upcoming researchers will be shown the sociological relevance of art and would help readers and critics alike. The ultimate aim is to establish that literary artefacts are tools in the quest for an egalitarian society.

Literature Review

Festus Iyayi's novel *Violence* has attracted wide range of critical comments. Some which presents it as a revolutionary in the hand of the writer. This is so because, in the view of Udenta O. Udenta, "Iyayi's violence ....is fundamentally grounded

in the mechanics of revolutionary thought (21). He further argues that *Violence* is a revolutionary literature while contending that it is about "the exploitation, humiliation and degradation of transient or casual labourers in definite African countries, and the varying degrees of their struggle to better their lot". This argument strengthens the belief that African literature are traditionally sociological as they seek to reflect the society in which they are produced.

In his discourse on characterization as one of the aesthetic problems of Nigerian novel, Nwahunaya notes that Iyayi's characters in *Violence* ... "are a shift from the epic or messianic depiction of heroes like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* whose fame rested on 'solid personal achievements' and who orchestrates these achievements in order to emphasize his own importance and dispensability in his community" (Amaechi 16).

Analyzing these comments, it is apparent that Iyayi's portrayal of Idemudia is not based on the ground of "self" but rather "selflessness". Unlike Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart, Idemndia's fame or importance is not tied to his personal achievement but to his leadership of the peasant workers through whom 'violence' is redefined and the voice of the people heard. Amaechi to this when he agrees to this when he says "...in Violence...we see the emergence of heroes whose fame and importance are measured by their contribution to the collective struggles of a group" (16). In the words of Nwahunaya on this issue "we have in such novels (e.g. Iyayi's Violence...), a rejection of the heroic view of individuals as supermen and a portrayal of the limitations of individualism..." (Amaechi 17). What these scholars tend to establish is that in achieving his revolutionary intents, Iyayi's characterization is shifted from individualizing characters' achievement especially those of the working class (Idemudia and friends) to putting them in a collective perspective, hence, Nwalumaya rightly observes that, "the collectivity of individuals united by a common pursuit, becomes the center of this new focus' (Amaechi 17). This is exemplified in the characters of Idemudia, Osaro, Patrick and Omoifo who are working as a team and not as individuals. Another instance is the playlet exhibited at the hospital where Idemudia was admitted. The playlet serves as the masses' medium through which the excess of the elite are revealed. The interesting thing there is that the actors in the playlet work as a team not as individuals.

The Nigerian novelist was born in 1947 in Benin City, Edo State. He started his education at Annunciation Catholic College in the then Bendel State in 1966. In 1967 he proceeded to Government College Ughalli and graduated in 1968. He later left the shores of Nigeria for his post graduate course (Msc) in Industrial Economics and also Ph.D from the University of Bradford England in 1980.

Upon his return to Nigeria, he was employed as a lecturer with the University of Benin in the Department of Business Administration. A few years later he became the president of the local branch of Academic Staff Union (ASUU). He later rose to the position of national president of the organization in 1986 but in 1988 the Union was briefly banned and Iyayi was arrested and detained. In the same year he won the Common Wealth Prize for Literature for his book *Heroes.* Festus Iyayi was a member of different Nigerian literary organizations and works in the private sector as a consultant.

His works among others include: *Violence* (1979), *The Contract* (1982), *Heroes* (1986) and *Awaiting Court Marital* (1994).

Iyayi in his novel *Heroes* believes that "those who carry the cross for the society get crucified in the end". He is known as the foremost Nigeria's imperialist or marxist writer. His three novels, *Violence*, *The Contract* and *Heroes* as well as his collection of short stories, *Awaiting Court Martial* expose the abject penury and disenfranchisement that constitute the social reality of the majority of Nigerians. In language that is often vitriolic and stinging, Iyayi's protagonists potently display his contempt for the rampant corruption that strangles contemporary Nigeria. Business persons, politicians, and other officials hoard the working class. This base depravity of the ruling class manifests itself in various forms and ultimately trickles down to the masses. In each of Iyayi's novel those of the masses are either forced or coerced to absorb their oppressor's abuse. This is evidently so especially, in *Violence* through the suffering of Idemudia and his friends.

Theoretical Framework

This study seeks to argue that African writers employ artistic works as a major tool in the struggle against social inequality, oppression, corruption and other post-colonial evils in the African society. Therefore, the sociological criticism is the

best critical theory to achieve this. To be able to explain the concept of sociological criticism, it is important to consider the divergent opinions of formalism and the practitioners of sociology of literature.

Formalism as a literary critical theory rose to limelight through the works of a group of Russian literary theorists. They "made an extra-ordinarily vital and influential contribution to literary criticism during the decade or so after the October revolution of 1917" (Bennett 3). These theorists according to Bennett "suggest that formalism should be viewed more seriously and sympathetically by Marxist critics than has hitherto been the case" (3).

Among the wide range of concerns of this school of thought questions like: "What is literature? By what methods should it be studied? Or more radically: is the category of "literature" worth sustaining? If so, for what purpose? emerged. (Bennett; 3-4). What these questions and concerns simply suggest is that formalists believe that in literary criticism, literature should be studied independently.

The basic assumptions of formalism according to Worgu, among others state that:

There is a world of difference between the language of science, which is denotative and unimaginative, and the language of literature, which is imaginative, suggestive, evocative and connotative.

A work of art is a separate entity with its own language of being and design.

A work of art should not be approached from a biological or social studies. To do so is to establish a critical standard that leads ways from the work.

The content of literature is inseparable from its form. The form is meaning and the form is content.

The success of an author is relative to the wholeness of his work, a sort of standard that is relative to the aesthetics. (122-3).

Formalism, in the words of Abrams "views literature primarily as a specialized use of language, and proposes a fundamental opposition between the literary (or poetical) use of language, and the ordinary, 'practical' use of language" (139). Quoting Jakobson he says that "the objective of study in literary science is not literature but literariness, that is, what makes a given work a literary work" (139). In conclusion, the formalistic approach to literature is basically geared towards studying literary works according to their literariness which makes for the "wholeness of the work itself" (Worgu 123).

This critical approach to literary study is evidently opposed to the sociological approach. Practitioners of this school of thought tend to associate literature with culture. In the words of Worgu (91), they believe that "literature is caused by something and the cause is socio-cultural". Whereas the formalists see literature for its literariness, sociological critics examine literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received (Kennedy & Gioia 2194). This approach, simply put, tends to consider the dialectical relationship between literature society. Here, the social and cultural era in which the writer lives and writes, the segment of the society that his fiction represents and the audience such literary work seeks to address are requisite issues in the critical analysis (literary criticism). This is true base on another basic assumption of this approach "which begins on the premise that authors do not write in an economic vacuum but are conditioned by the society, time and place in which they live" (Worgu 92). Iyayi's work here appears to have fulfiled this premise as it reflects on the social disparity between the haves and the haves not. The Obofuns and the Idemudia's in the novel demonstrate this social reality.

On the divergence of Formalism and Sociological criticism, Kontein Trinya writes extensively that "Critics of art across time and space have savoured several perspectives on the utility or otherwise of the artefact; they have debated whether art was sufficient to itself, or if its practitioners and patrons could employ it to other purposes beyond mere aesthetics"(10). He moves to comment that "Whereas that debate has generally subsided, less in the favour of pure aesthetics, "the peculiar relationships between art and life continue to attract attentions that have carried various critical labels between the polar points of beauty and purpose"(10).

To further show the undeniable relationship between literature and the human society, Trinya exclaimed "art, ... has made no 'aesthetic' pretences about its prominent engagement with social issues" (13/4)

Here, the social issues engaged in *Violence* are the brazing inequality between the oppressors and the oppressed, corruption, and the general social decay of the post independent African society as reflected in the novel.

Class Struggle in Iyayi's *Violence*

In every capitalist system or society, one is usually bound to face an economic structure of the "the eaten and the eaters". This has been the post-independence experience of African societies of which Nigeria is one. Consequently, in modern African literature, the major issues that tend to be our dominating subject matter are the questions of social inequalities that bread exploitation, oppression, and dehumanization.

Iyayi is one of those writers whose yearnings, albeit, implicitly, is specifically geared towards creating a more stable economy that will guarantee egalitarianism. Like he did in his other works, *The Contract* and *Heroes,* Iyayi gives us a picture of an underdeveloped society that is made up of the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. *Violence* presents to us the recklessness of government officials in managing public funds and property. It also portrays the helplessness of the poor masses in the face of economic highhandedness, whose only alternative is revolution.

In *Violence,* Iyayi presents to us two classes of people who are socially unequal - the oppressive class and the oppressed class. The oppressive class here are represented by government officials and business men and women, whereas the oppressed refers to the peasant workers who work daily on the site but get little or no pay. This is a situation that breeds the class divide in the novel. In this paper, attempt is therefore made to examine the social inequality through theme and characterization respectively.

Theme

Festus Iyayi is one of the African writers who, through their artistic works advocate radical social change. In this novel, an extremely helpless economic

situation is created, with two categories of characters representing the two social classes in the society. *Violence* is one of the post-independence works that particularly seek to address the unabated rate of socio-political ills such as corruption, exploitation, oppression, dehumanization and the likes. In *Violence*, Iyayi carefully addresses these issues. However, the theme of this novel that reveals it social disparity, in the view of this study, is 'exploitation and dehumanization'. In addressing this, Iyayi presents characters and events which we shall examine copiously.

The novel opens with a vivid description of a street that is a replica of a slum which is inhabited by people of lower class (people that are economically disadvantaged). Idemudia and Adisa who also live in this street, are awake and the thought of what to eat visits them just. This couple lives in abject poverty as portrayed in the kind of house they live in. Idemudia, who is the leading character of the oppressed, works so hard but has nothing absolutely to show for it consequent upon the highhandedness of the parasitic compradors represented by Queen and Obofun. At the beginning of this novel, we see a couple that is psychological destabilized because of the economic crunch which they face. Idemudia at this point is seen as a man who does not know the root cause of his poverty hence, he resorts to beating his wife at the slightest provocation. This is a case of psychological imbalance emanating from poverty which could be blamed on the corrupt practices of government functionaries who are supposed to make the economy better and conducive for all.

On one occasion while Idemudia goes out to look for job so that he can feed his family, he runs into Queen- a business woman, who he helps push her car out of the gutter. Then, Queen, in a way of showing gratitude offers Idemudia a job of unloading three truckloads of cement. Accepting this offer, Idemudia contacts his other friends - Osaro, Omoifo and Patrick. On getting to Queen's motel, she offers them five naira each, ie, twenty naira to unload the three trucks. These men, out of desperation are so blind to see this act of exploitation, and so they accept the offer. This is a case of those who control the means of production exploiting those who offer ordinary labour. It is indeed an event of exploitation. It should be noted that Queen gets contract from the government to build low-cost houses, where they both make gains out of the public funds. To further buttress the heartlessness of

these capitalists agents, Queen hesitates to pay these workers (Idemudia, Osaro, Omifo and Patrick) except that they out rightly refused.

Iyayi's concern in this novel centers on the level of suffering that greets the poor masses in spite of their gallant efforts to make both ends meet as exemplified in the character of Idemudia. Whereas the privileged few gets even richer, the poor like Idemudia, gets poorer. This disheartening situation, in the opinion of the writer as portrayed in the book, is consequent upon government ineptitude and insensitivity to the people's welfare. This act of negligence on the part of government paves way for the capitalists like Queen, Obofun and others to perpetrate more evils on the society. Therefore, it would not be so wrong to say that Iyayi's *Violence* tends to mirror specifically the inadequacies of Nigerian government even in the wake of political cum economic freedom.

Some of those issues portrayed to further establish the theme of exploitation and dehumanization is, the selling of blood in the order to survive. Idemudia and other labourers while at work will go to sell some pints of their blood in order to take some money home. In spite of the hard day labour of these peasant workers, some men (the bourgeois) will drive down in their big cars to feed on their blood in the guise of buying. This is drawing a similitude with the story of the orgaress and the peasant farmer in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross.* While the peasant farmer keeps working all day, the orgaress keeps feeding on him and gets fatter leaving the farmer thinner. The men who buy this blood here can be likened to the orgaress and the labourers to the peasant farmer. This is an apex of exploitation and dehumanization in the story. These are situations that are capable of breeding revolution, hence the novel's revolutionary import.

The issue of exploitation in this novel goes beyond exploiting only the sweat of the peasant worker; it also brings to mind sexual exploitation which Adisa suffers. One day Idemudia returns home and falls under the spell of fever resulting from the heavy work he did. When he was taken to the hospital, he has no money to pay his bills and so Adisa sets out to look for money. In this bid she meets Obofun whom she thinks will be compassionate about Idemudia's condition. Ironically, Obofun seeks and takes advantage of Adisa thereby exploiting her sexually.

During his (Idemudia's) stay in the hospital, his consciousness was awakened through a playlet acted on Florence Nightingale's Day. It is at this point that the revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed class emerges. Iyayi, at this point redefines 'violence' and tends to sum up all the exploitative tendencies of the government as acts of violence. To him; "…acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the opportunity of being educated, of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly" (*Violence:* 185).

He further notes that;
When in one public hospital, in the same society, one patient can sleep in a large air - conditioner room where as other ordinary patients- men, women and children-have to sleep in corridors, on mats, on the hard, cold and roughly cemented floor or share beds, this is violence... (*Violence* 186).

These expressions seem to summarize the evils perpetrated by the capitalists which include the government officials, contractors and business men and women; and also suggests the writer's advocacy for social equality.

On arrival from the hospital, Idemudia's orientation about his economic condition and the job he is been made to do changed. It is at this point that he begins to see Queen's indiscriminate act of sacking workers, who demand better pay as unacceptable. Hence, Idemudia forms pressure group out of the workers. He tells his friends; 'something ought to be done' (241). Finally, he succeeds in convincing the workers who confront Queen to increase their pay else they would go on strike. This is apparently a revolutionary measure that is geared towards curtailing the excesses of Queen - the capitalist agent. The playlet performed in the hospital is also a gallant effort of the oppressed to bring under control the excesses of the oppressors. Revolution here is seen as an alternative to the oppression, exploitation and dehumanization perpetrated by the oppressors. Hence the counsel for the defense affirms:

"I feel and think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to over throw the present oppressive system..." (*Violence 185).*

Characterization: - In an attempt to copiously portrays events of exploitation, oppression, dehumanization and its attendant revolutionary pressure, Iyayi presents to us two categories of characters with one group exploiting the other. The first group is the oppressive class among whom are Queen, Obofun, Iriso, the commissioner of Health and others. The second group (the oppressed) is represented by Idemudia, Adisa, Osaro, Patrick, Omoifo, Mr. and Mrs. Jimoh among others.

For the oppressive class, Queen has played significant roles. She is Obofun's wife yet, that matters very little to her as she sells herself to top government officials in order to get what she wants. She is portrayed as a desperate woman who goes to any length to achieve what she wants including offering her body sexually to her husband's friends and people of lower class. She is the leading character especially on the part of the oppressive class. She is an epitome of capitalism in the novel. She is the one who perpetrates greater parts of the exploitative acts recorded in the novel.

Queen is a contractor and also a business woman. She gets a contract to build low-cost houses for the government and employ labourers whom she pays very little so that she can make greater benefit. She is the madam of Richard, Idemudia, the Greek and all other peasant workers both in her motel and building site. Her 'freedom motel' ironically turns an avenue for enslavement instead of freedom for the workers. She believes in using what she has (her body) to get what she wants. This is exemplified in the way she sexually harassed Idemudia when the workers plan to go on the strike.

Obofun is another significant character on the oppressive class. He is a top government official who takes that advantage to steal government property and funds to enrich himself. He opens different business in his wife's name. He believes that his wife's (Queen) success in the business is as a result of his connection with other government officials. Obofun represents those government functionaries whose primary concern is their selfish interest. Instead of rendering assistance he takes advantage of Adisa.

Iriso is also a character in this category, who lavishes government properties and funds on Queen having slept with her, without taking into consideration the welfare of the masses.

For the oppressed, Idemudia is the leading character. Generally, he is the protagonist of the novel around whom events revolve and revolutionary pressure is typified. Idemudia could not obtain a good job because he has no good education and the required certificate. Also, he has no education because his parents could not afford it. He faced a lot of challenges very early in his life resulting from his family's economic and social crises. This forced Idemudia to leave the village for the city in search of greener pastures. However, his move to the city avails him the opportunity to see the abounding evils of capitalism that perhaps might be responsible for his poor condition as well as that of him parents. Idemudia along with others sells his blood in a bid to survive. He works under the pressure of Queen and yet, receives very meager pay. The extremely poor remuneration receives by Idemudia almost sets him and his wife, Adisa at war. Iyayi portrays Idemudia as the leader of the oppressed (the peasant workers) who appears to have borne greatly the brunt of capitalism and government's recklessness recorded so far in the novel. It is idemudia who suggests to the workers the need to strike in order to better their lot even though some of the worker questions his integrity and credibility. Queen tries so hard to bribe him but he demonstrates the quality of a good leader by turning down her offers.

For Patrick, Omoifo and Osaro much is not said about them except that they also suffer alongside Idemudia, Queen's incessant acts of exploitation. They work collaboratively as a team to fight exploitation and oppression by agreeing with Idemudia to embark on strike. These three characters are employed in the novel as Idemudia's last resort. They take care of Idemudia and his hospital bills when the latter was sick. They are there for Idemudia to consult mostly when he is in a fix. Therefore, these characters are equally significant in the revolutionary imaginations of the writer.

Generally, Iyayi in this novel is particularly interested in the welfare of the masses, hence, he artistically reveals the excesses of the elite and government's inefficiencies. This he achieves by demonstrating various exploitative acts of the

upper class. In this regard also Iyayi firmly condemns these acts while blaming the government for everything that goes wrong in the society. He portrays this in the playlet shown on stage in the hospital where Idemudia is admitted.

The style of Iyayi in doing this is unique. At the beginning of the story, characters like Idemudia appear very unconscious or unaware of the evils done against them by the elite. Suddenly, the revolutionary consciousness dawns on him immediately he leaves the hospital where he witnessed the dramatization of the evils in the society.

It is therefore my opinion that the revolutionary pressure in this novel is imbued in the theme and characterization. Iyayi carefully creates situations that tends to favour the oppressors *ab initio*, and creates, on the other hand, characters who generally are not comfortable with the economic situation thereby seeing revolution as the only alternative to securing an egalitarian society. It should be noted that social inequality is an integral feature of capitalism. This constitutes a major focus of many writers as well as the revolutionary characters they create in their respective works. This is the case with Iyayi in his book *Violence.*

Conclusion

The social issues of class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in this novel further straightens the sociological aesthetics of art which draws a nexus between it and the extant society. In this work, it is hereby established that art has contributed in themes and characterizations, to the overall struggle for the emancipation of an egalitarian society following the revolutionary and sociological aesthetics of the novel *Violence*

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