

Interrogating Power Relations in Contemporary Nigeria: Protest and Social Relevance in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

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Abstract

Literature is a product of the social and historical circumstances of a particular society. This underscores Aristotelian position that society itself is political, since it involves the organization and the government of men. Festus Iyayi's Violence interrogates power relations in contemporary Nigeria, with the understanding that art must first seek to transform society's dehumanising conditions if it is to establish a system in which humanity can give free rein to its self-expression, self-fulfillment and maximum self-realization. This paper argues that when art runs counter to the interest of the dominant class in society, the attitude of that class to art changes. In conformity with the view of Irving Howe, Iyayi observes that protest and social relevance provide a particular severe test for the writer in confronting institutionalized social vices.

Keywords: interrogating power, relations, protest, violence and social relevance

INTRODUCTION

There can be no doubt that the relationship between literature and society is as close as to be virtually symbiotic. However, the notion of the significance of social relevance in literature is a debatable one. This is because it lends itself to a wide variety of definitions, ideological positions and sundry biases, many of which are diametrically opposed to one another. For religious bodies, for instance, social relevance in literature would be closely related to literature's positive moral outlook and its didactic elements; for those in positions of social and political dominance, social relevance in literature would basically mean the extent to which it upholds the stability of the existing socio-political order; for those who are committed to the radical change of existing political systems, social relevance in literature would relate to the way in which it delineates the flaws and shortcomings of current social and political processes, and explicitly advocates their replacement. Similarly, minorities and oppressed groups in any given society are very likely to base their notions of social relevance in literature upon the manner in which it is able to portray them and highlight issues which are germane to them.

At its most fundamental, therefore, social relevance in literature is said to refer to the complex ways in which the form, function and purpose of literature, however defined, are inextricably interwoven with the growth, progress and stability of society. The very phrase "social relevance" assumes that such a relationship is a default setting for any literature which deems itself worthy of the name, and by implication would condemn any literature in which

this relationship is absent, or even indirectly stated. Social relevance, from this perspective, would seem to imply that literature has a duty to make the progress of society a cardinal objective, regardless of whatever else it may seek to achieve. It is practically impossible to discuss literature without making reference to society. René Wellek and Austin Warren stress the very close relationship between the two: Literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation. Such traditional literary devices as symbolism and metre are social in their very nature. They are conventions and norms which could have arisen only in society. But, furthermore, literature 'represents' 'life'; and 'life' is, in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary 'imitation'. The poet himself is a member of society, possessed of a specific social status: he receives some degree of social recognition and reward; he addresses an audience however hypothetical. Indeed, literature has usually arisen in close connexion with particular social institutions; and in primitive society we may even be unable to distinguish poetry from ritual, magic, work, or play. Literature also has a social function, or 'use', which cannot be purely individual. (1982:94) This notion of literature has been vigorously defended in different literary eras in widely dispersed regions of the world: the overt morality of the satire-ridden Augustan Age in England, and the aggressive nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the Negritude movement in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean islands are obvious examples. Due to its repeatedly-tragic history, with its narrative of slavery,

colonialism and neo-colonialism, it is perhaps inevitable that modern African literature is highly attuned to the requirements of contemporary African society. S.E. Ogude argues that the history of contemporary African literature is the story of the black man's attempt to reassert his political rights and defend the integrity of his culture and re-assess his past relationship with Europe and the many political and social institutions which the white man has imposed on the African. (1991:3) Gareth Griffiths makes similar claims for the explicit utility of writing in contemporary Africa: Writing is an activity through which the African can define his identity and re-discover his historical roots. This self-defining function of the novel is, for obvious reasons, especially important to writers in a post-colonial situation, especially where their exposure to European culture has led to an undervaluing of the traditional values and practices (2000:68).

Emmanuel Ngara reveals how the absence of social relevance can impact negatively on the art of a poet as distinguished as Christopher Okigbo: The spiritual world dominated his artistic vision to the extent of negating the material world around him. Instead of basing his conception of the function of poetry on social reality, the real relations between people in society, he turned away from reality into the world of the spirit and the imagination. This gave rise to a romanticism which associated artistic creativity with imaginary things like watermaids and goddesses. (1990:45) Ngara contrasts Okigbo in this idealistic phase with the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek, who was concerned about the material world. His search for African forms was motivated by a desire to comment on the real conditions of existence of the African people, on how the African petty bourgeoisie related to African culture and that of western bourgeois society. (1990:45) Ngugi wa Thiong'o identifies the main achievement of Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* as its exemplary focus on society and its problems; the novel, in his words, has made it impossible for other African writers to do other than address themselves directly to their audiences in Africa – not in a comforting spirit – and tell them that such problems are their concern. The teacher no longer stands apart to contemplate. He has moved with a whip among the pupils, flagellating himself as well as them. He is now the true man of his people (1990:28). At face value, therefore, social relevance in literature essentially revolves around the following basic categories: The relationship between society and literature: This relates to the connections between literature and the society in whose context it is produced and whose members it is aimed at. The dynamics of this relationship are such that society compellingly impinges upon the thematic and stylistic choices open to the literary artist to the extent that it can actually determine the success or failure of a work.

The relationship between literature and society: This relates to a reversal of the polarities of the above-named category. It represents a shift in perspective, in which literature is seen to act upon society, rather than vice versa. It investigates the status of literature as being at the vanguard of social change, and a testing-ground for the dissemination of innovative and radical ideas that are likely to receive initial rejection in society, even though they are actually for its own good. The literary artist as a member of society: This relationship revolves around the status of the literary artist as a member of society, given the direct correlation between the esteem in which the writer is held and the socio-political influence of his work. It focuses upon the perceived importance of writers as members of society, and touches upon prevailing perceptions of their usefulness to the continued functioning and progress of society. Literature as a cultural artefact: This refers to the status of literature as one of the prized objects of the cultural production of a given society. It touches upon the regard in which books and other literary products are held, and their corresponding capacity to influence society, either for good or for bad. Such public esteem also helps to determine the extent and depth of the ancillary enterprises that coalesce around literature, especially publishing, the theatre industry, readers' clubs, and criticism (1990:281).

Changing notions of social relevance: Like similar phenomena, the idea of what constitutes social relevance has undergone radical reformulation as a result of profound shifts in social taste, political ideology and economic development. In the past, social relevance in literature was often a consequence of what constituted the canon of a society's most esteemed literary works, and thereby the main repository of its values. Notions of social relevance from this perspective were unsurprisingly conservative.

Contrasting the objectives of the propagandist and the literary artist, Njabulo S. Ndebele argues that, while the latter is as desirous of meaningful social change as the former, he is constrained by the fundamental characteristics of his art: the literary artist, he claims can never be entirely free from the rules of irony. Irony is the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction. Its fundamental law, for the literary arts in particular, is that everything involving human society is in a constant state of flux; that the dialectic between appearance and reality in the conduct of human affairs is always operative and constantly problematic, and that consequently, in the representation of human reality, nothing can be taken for granted (2004:128).

In other words, the demands of social relevance sometimes clash with the requirements of literature

and other arts. The dynamics of such a clash are important for a proper understanding of the manifestation of social relevance in literature, and they revolve around the relative significance of society, which is the overarching context of all social relevance, and art, which prescribes the *modus operandi* of literature. In this light, it is necessary to consider the question of whether social relevance is essentially a matter of art being subordinated to the requirements of society, or of society being subordinated to the requirements of art, or whether social relevance is actually the attainment of a golden mean between these two alternatives. Most notions of the first category point to social progress as the ultimate objective of all civilised human activity, including art, and argue that literature must reflect and advocate germane social causes and issues if it is to truly fulfil its calling. On the other hand, ideas of life's subordination to art often point to the way in which society is essentially the raw material of literature, to be shaped by the latter, rather than vice versa, and also stress the artistic integrity of literary practitioners as being crucially dependent on their freedom to choose between beauty and usefulness in their depiction of society. The notion of a golden mean balancing the ostensibly competing requirements of society and art is essentially a perspective which argues for a symbiosis between the two categories, in which they are mutually constitutive, shaping and being shaped by each other. It is also possible to see specific works of literature as being positioned at different points of the spectrum of involvement that lies between the poles of society and art. At one end of the spectrum would be found works that belong to the much-maligned art for art's sake school of thought. As Edward Quinn explains, "The argument was that art should be autonomous and not compelled to serve a specific social or moral purpose. The phrase was used in 19th century France and England as a slogan of aestheticism" (1999:25). The movement's authors included individuals like Algernon Swinburne and Oscar Wilde, and they defiantly refused to explicitly incorporate social concerns into their work, choosing instead to focus on intensely personal perspectives which had little meaning or relevance for anybody other than themselves.

The notion of art for art's sake has often been dismissed out of hand as unworthy of serious discussion. In the words of Mao Tse-tung: In all the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics (1999:25). In similar fashion, Jean-Paul Sartre argues if literature is not everything, it is worth nothing. That is what I mean by 'commitment'. It wilts if it is reduced to innocence, or to songs. If a written

sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society, then it makes no sense. What is the literature of an epoch but the epoch appropriated by the literature? Despite such strident rejections, the notion of art for art's sake is a perspective which raises noteworthy issues that are still relevant to a contemporary understanding of social relevance in literature. Its emphasis on the autonomy of art, for example, raises the vital question of exactly what the relationship between literature and society should be. If it is accepted as a given that literature must possess a certain degree of autonomy if it is to attain the artistic integrity that is vital to its status as literature, then the idea that literary artists should be free to choose whether or not they wish to write about issues that are ostensibly deemed socially relevant becomes a significant issue.

At the other end of the spectrum lie the products of socialist realism in ideologically-committed countries like the ex-communist nations of Eastern Europe, and particularly the former Soviet Union. Under this dispensation, writers were not just compelled to incorporate issues of public concern into their works; they were required to do it in specified ways. Socialist realism probably represents the extreme end of the social relevance spectrum. Its undeniable artificiality and the often-crude manner in which it forced literature to serve the ends of the state disguised as the needs of society are clearly seen in the following definition of it as "a form of realism designed to represent the superiority of socialism as a form of government" (Quinn 1999:305). As Clive Wake puts it, there exists "the very delicate problem of maintaining the right balance between commitment and creation. Commitment can be creative, in the literary sense, but it can also destroy creation" (1974:94). Such divergent levels of social relevance are indicative of the way in which the existing social, political and economic atmosphere play crucial roles in determining the extent of social relevance in literature. The paradox is that the more unsuitable the currently obtaining socio-economic and political context in a particular society is, the more amenable such a society is to the emergence of socially relevant literature. Perhaps the most famous examples of this contradictory phenomenon are to be found in 19th century England and Russia. Both countries underwent massive social, political and economic change at this period: England was the world's first modern industrial nation, and the scourge of uncontrolled urbanisation, mass unemployment and poverty were at their peak in this era; Russia suffered the strains of transition from a feudal to a modern state. With such difficulties, it is not surprising that during this time, the two countries produced writers whose work has since become a byword for notions of social relevance. They include Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The link between inclement

environments and social relevance in literature is particularly visible in Africa. As a continent whose misfortune it has been to suffer from the negative consequences of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, dictatorship and the associated problems of wars, insurrections and similar social crises, the continent has, unsurprisingly, produced a crop of writers from whom markedly socially relevant works have been the norm. Claude Wauthier points out that African poetry and novels do appear on the whole to be conditioned by the colonial situation: African poets and novelists have usually regarded their works, as Sartre did, as 'miraculous weapons' to defeat their 'omniscient and naive conquerors.' (1979:194).

In the early post-independence era, several poets, dramatists and novelists sought to solidify national unity and consciousness by producing works which celebrated the past as the harbinger of a glorious future. The most prominent example of this trend was the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who demonstrated this in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The celebration of the past was followed by critical analyses of the present, as other African writers produced unsentimental portrayals of the social and other problems which became manifest quite early after the attainment of independence. In Ghana, Ayi Kwei Armah wrote *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*; in *Season of Migration to the North*, the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih analysed the psychological and other ambiguities of the African encounter with Europe; Cyprian Ekwensi established himself as Africa's premier urban novelist with books like *Lokotown*, *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana*.

As the euphoria of independence continued to wear off and the peculiar problems of many countries in the continent became increasingly intractable, many African writers felt they had no option other than to incorporate socially relevant issues into their texts by focusing on the shortcomings and challenges of their societies. Achebe himself looked at moral and political corruption, and the tension between traditional and modern modes of living in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*; Okot p'Bitek dealt with the growing scourge of prostitution in 'Malaya,' and the conflict between tradition and modernity in *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*; the negative effects of western religious incursion into Kenyan society were depicted by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *The River Between*, the trauma of the anti-colonial struggle and its immediate aftermath in *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, as well as the failure, incompetence and corruption of post-independence Kenya in *Devil on the Cross* and *Petals of Blood*. In his novels, poetry and drama, Wole Soyinka consistently castigated the incompetence and insensitivity of many influential groups in society,

including politicians (*Kongi's Harvest*), professionals (*The Interpreters*, *Season of Anomy*, *The Lion and the Jewel*), the religious hierarchy (*The Trials of Brother Jero*, *Jero's Metamorphosis*).

In addition to these writers, there was a group of politically committed literary artists whose radical ideological positions were explicit in their work. They were led by well-known figures like Sembene Ousmane, Alex La Guma, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nadine Gordimer. For authors like these, social relevance was not optional: it was the very basis of their work, and they brought a Marxist-oriented class analysis of society to bear upon their writing. In doing this, they conformed to Louis Althusser's notion of art as being "'to make us see', and what it allows us to see, what it forces us to see, is 'the ideology from which it is born'" (Bennet and Royle 2000:132). Thus, social issues were not looked at as being the result of chance and circumstance. Rather, they were seen as emerging from clearly discernible socio-political and economic factors whose workings could be subjected to detailed scrutiny and rigorous analysis. Issues were viewed from their long-term historical perspectives and were related to similar developments going on elsewhere in the world. Because of their adoption of a socialist outlook, many of these writers further entrenched their commitment to social relevance by actively proposing solutions to perceived problems within their works. Most of the answers they offered were predicated on the overthrow of the existing capitalist system and its replacement with socialism in which ownership of the means of production would be communal. Apart from political commitment, the manifestation of social relevance in literature can take other forms. These include a drive towards increased cultural authenticity, as seen in the Negritude movement in Africa, Europe and the Caribbean, Ngugi's famous advocacy of indigenous-language literature, the promotion of indigenous dramatic forms by playwrights like J.P. Clark-Bekeredemo, Femi Osofisan and Wole Soyinka, as well as the use of indigenous literary sources and styles, such as can be seen in the work of Leopold Sedar Senghor, p'Bitek and Armah.

Social relevance in literature has also resulted in the condemnation of social foibles, regardless of the particular ideology of the writer, especially those who do not espouse Marxist or socialist ideology. In some cases, it has involved the movement away from literary advocacy to outright activism, as was seen in Ngugi's work with community theatre, Okigbo's participation in the Nigerian Civil War, and Nawaal el Sadaawi's feminist advocacy. Another manifestation of such activism was the entry of literary figures like Senghor, Kofi Awoonor and Augustino Neto into the national politics of their respective countries.

Protest and Social Relevance

The relationship between protest and social relevance is an ostensibly obvious one, and would therefore seem not to require much attention, but the precise dimensions of their connections to each other are sometimes obscured by this very obviousness. At face value, the relationship between protest and social relevance seems to stem from their apparent conceptual complementarity: protest refers to the expression of dissent or (less often) of support for specific ideas, situations, actions, groups or individuals. Social relevance is the adoption of positions that display a belief in the imperatives of equity, social justice and fair play in all their ramifications in society. Both concepts are thus concerned with social issues, and by extension, with the promotion of those elements that would ensure that no member of a given society is unfairly treated or discriminated against. Protest therefore is one of the main ways in which social relevance is expressed, while social relevance is often the motivation for protest. This conceptual harmony is evident in almost any social sphere that might be considered. Almost all protest groups seek to establish social relevance by stressing the socially-centred importance of the issues they are protesting: regardless of whether it is civil rights, nuclear disarmament, or environmental protection, they always try to anchor the validity of their demands on the notion of a fairer, more equitable society. Also, the very public nature of the methods they choose to protest with – marches, rallies, civil disobedience – demonstrated how they were, in a fundamental sense, attempting to compel society and its institutions to see their causes as socially relevant.

However, it can be a mistake to regard the relationship between protest and social relevance as linear and unproblematic. Not all protest is socially relevant; social relevance is not always expressed through protest. Indeed, because of the seemingly strong connections between the two, it is easy to subvert such a relationship by manipulating those ties to the extent that they achieve contradictory goals. History has shown that appeals to social relevance via the medium of protest have led to the emergence of demagogues whose aspirations run counter to their proclaimed intentions. Africa is replete with hitherto-popular nationalists and freedom-fighters who spearheaded protests against colonial rule, and in so doing demonstrated social relevance, only for them to become oppressive dictators upon assuming power. Many established religions can be seen to have emerged through the genuine piety and forbearance of their founders, only for those same qualities to become non-existent when the religion becomes entrenched in society. The very idea of social relevance may be reconfigured in ways that cause it to contradict its own implicit principles. For example, social relevance could become synonymous with the

unquestioning acceptance of existing social situations, no matter how unjust or inequitable they may be. It could be interpreted to mean the adoption of negative perspectives rather than positive ones, such as ethnic chauvinism, racial bigotry or religious intolerance. The distortion of social relevance in this manner has correspondingly negative effects on protest because it can be cynically manipulated to achieve selfish ends as opposed to the positive ones espoused by social relevance.

For example, groups and individuals can be induced to undertake protests on behalf of oppressive policies with a view to showing that they actually enjoy wide support, and should therefore be maintained or implemented. The so-called Million Man March held in Abuja, Nigeria to express support for the-then Head of State, General Sani Abacha to transform himself into a civilian president is a case in point. Indeed, many demonstrations in support of progressive social, political and economic policies throughout history have been confronted with counter-demonstrations whose participants sought a continuation of the *status quo*. Thus, the civil rights marchers were opposed by rallies and marches organised by the Ku Klux Klan white supremacist movement; in the matter of abortion and reproductive rights, pro-choice protests are countered by pro-life protests; immigrants' rights protests are matched by anti-immigration protests.

Protest as Dialogue in Violence

Of all the issues which can trigger protest, none is arguably more endemic than the inequitable relationship between the wealthy and the poor in a given society. It is, indeed, the prototype of protest because most of the issues that provoke protest are related to the question of what the relationship between different social classes is, and how it can be made to function on a more equitable level. Thus, industrial action may ostensibly be about increased pay and improved working conditions, but at a fundamental level, it really is just another conversation between social classes; when students disrupt classes to protest the perceived poor quality of education they are getting, their actions can actually be said to constitute a discussion in a dialogue between those who do not have power and those who do. Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979) takes a critical look at the nature of this relationship. Focusing on the city of Benin in mid-western Nigeria, the novel sets out to understand the nature of the interaction between those of its citizens who possess power, wealth and influence, and those who lack them. *Violence* identifies the major participants, catalogues the moral imperatives that drive them, charts the consequences and effects of their actions upon themselves and upon others, and examines its long-term prospects. In undertaking these functions, Iyayi avoids the temptation of lapsing into a conventional

analysis of the relationship between divergent social classes. In particular, he does not seek to bestow innocence or guilt on the basis of social class. What he does is to carefully construct prevailing social conditions and show how it is designed to perpetuate inequity and injustice. Ultimately, he argues, no single individual is really at fault; it is the system that makes extremes of wealth and poverty possible that is to blame. More specifically, the prevailing system of social relations is so distorted that the only way in which the rich and the poor can co-exist is through a state of perpetual aggression, or violence. The privileged class or elite can only maintain its grip on the benefits it has only by ensuring that the poor, who wish to share them, are denied the opportunity to do so. The poor, on the other hand, quickly realise that they have a narrow choice between a dehumanizing marginality or the forceful assertion of themselves in the articulation of their desires. Protest, therefore, comes into this equation at two levels: the overarching protest of the author, whose use of the omniscient point of view enables him to discern the true motivations of his characters regardless of what they say to others, and the myriad protests that occur within the novel, as individual characters, agitate against the near-intolerable conditions an inequitable social structure has placed them in. Protest, in this regard, emerges as the only reasonable response to the exploitativeness and inhumanity of society. It is a clear signal that the system of social relations which makes it impossible for the poor to get any justice against the rich can no longer continue. It is the unmistakable sign that the masses of the people will no longer accept the diminution of their humanity because they do not have money. Ultimately, it portends the self-correction of a society and the propagation of the principles of true civilization. Violence is thus both an instrument and an outcome. It is the former because it represents the means by which the masses and their working-class vanguard will seek to interrogate existing power relations; it is the latter because it is what unremitting injustice and exploitation inevitably lead to. As the title of Iyayi's book, violence becomes the purest form of protest, the natural way for a mass of dispossessed people to resist the dehumanizing oppression that is their lot.

Violence (1979) is a novel whose deceptive subtlety is belied by its somewhat forceful title. It does not really portray acts of sustained violence, other than the instinctive lashing out of the working class against those who oppress them, or the coercive actions of the elite designed to maintain their grip on their privileges. It certainly does not portray a bloody class war in which workers, peasants and rural dwellers violently overthrow the prevailing system. What the novel actually does is to provide a portrayal of the social, political and economic conditions under which violence can become the only way in which wrongs can be righted. Violence is not a means of

achieving vengeance; it is a form of protest. *Violence* objectifies oppression as an endemic social and political problem generally in Africa and particularly in Nigeria's contemporary social context. In the novel is inscribed a visible disruption in social relationships between the elite and the less-privileged. This disruption in the novel serves as an indicator of the injustices created by post-colonial power structures that oppress the underclass.

The intentions of *Violence* are clearly visible in the way in which it conducts a class analysis of Nigerian society, reveals the way in which it fails to provide succour for its most vulnerable members, and shows how this failure is the basis for protest. This text also seeks to contest conventional interpretations of history by offering the often-ignored perspectives of the urban poor and by showing how the greed and covetousness of the elite is the direct cause of suffering and oppression. Apart from the way in which the issues are treated, protest is seen in the novel's sustained use of irony to draw a stark contrast between the ideal and the reality. Iyayi's identification with the plight of the urban poor in the novel, and his subsequent objectification of their social conditions is done in conformity with Mao Tse-Tung's position on literature: Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward Writers and artists concentrate such everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment (1969:25).

The narrative of social disequilibrium in *Violence* focuses on the tenuous social relationship between the elite class typified by Obofun and Queen his wife, and the peasant class represented by Idemudia and his wife Adisa. The novel is a parody of a post-colonial African nation which fails to provide a meaningful means of livelihood for its teeming population, thereby making members of the underclass vulnerable to the harsh socio-economic dictations of hunger, disease and social marginality. Idemudia's narrative of social dislocation recalls the collective traumas of post-colonial nationhood that are implicated in wrong socio-economic prioritization and stupendous economic mismanagement usually orchestrated by the elite class in most post-colonial Third World countries. Idemudia's narrative betrays the paradoxes and tragic repercussions of the lopsided post-colonial social relationship which places the elite in the control of the nation's economic opportunities and renders the less privileged in economic difficulty. This is vividly captured by Osaro, a co-traveller of Idemudia in the trajectory of social displacement: "It's so unfair," Osaro added. "One man has enough to eat, in fact so

much that he throws some away. Yet here we are, hungry, with nothing to eat.” (1979:20).

The significance of this succinctly demonstrates that most post-colonial nations, especially African nations, are not nations in the true sense of the word, but fragile collective projects that may not always be protective of its citizens’ social and economic needs. This depersonalises the less-privileged members of society by causing them loss of identity, and this in turn leads to a pronounced lack of patriotism for the nation-state. This circumstance is elaborately presented in the words of Apparadurai (1996): The incapacity of many deterritorialised groups to think in their way out of the imaginary of the nation-state is itself the cause of much global violence because many movements of emancipation and identity are forced, in their struggles against existing nation-states to become anti-national or anti-state and thus to inspire the very state power that forces them to respond in the language of counter nationalism. (1996:166) *Violence* provides a vivid account of contemporary Nigeria, enmeshed in socio-economic disequilibrium. The disparity between rich and poor is so extensive that the devastating effect of poverty in the lives of the poor has rendered them virtually sub-human. Iyayi’s graphic presentation of the economic schism between the rich and the poor seeks to capture the particularity and intensity of the psychological dehumanisation the poor suffer in contemporary Nigeria. Idemudia, the hero of the novel, is a stereotypical poverty-ridden Nigerian, whose disrupted family life and chequered personal history cause him to experience repeated humiliation meted out to him and his wife, Adisa, by Obofun and Queen. Festus Iyayi and other second-generation Nigerian writers like Kole Omotosho and Femi Osofisan have consistently discussed the theme of social inequality which had opened up a vast gulf between the rich and the poor in Nigeria shortly after independence. Such gaps could no longer be blamed outright on colonial history, but largely on the greed of a new elite class typified by Obofun and Queen (Griffith, 2000:192).

Iyayi foregrounds the dialectic of materialism and social stratification on the manipulation of Idemudia by Queen, who exploits his labour and refuses to pay him his meagre wages on time. Iyayi methodically presents the poor health of Idemudia triggered by unremitting labour; his selling of his blood to survive, his subsequent hospitalisation and his eventual confinement to the hospital because his bills have not been paid. While Idemudia is marooned in hospital, Obofun exploits the situation by having a sexual relationship with Adisa in return for money which she would use for paying her husband’s medical bills. Queen had also attempted to lure Idemudia to her bedroom, but Idemudia resists the entrapment.

Violence (1979) articulates the failure of post-independence regimes in Nigeria to ensure a fair society, and the growing inequalities of wealth and opportunity between rich and poor. Iyayi uses social realities in contemporary Nigeria as a platform of protest but also as means to create an artistic work. The main action of the novel takes place in Benin City and focuses on the lives of labourers who usually gather at Iyaso Motor Park. Most often, they are employed on a daily basis.

Dialectic as Form in Violence

Violence’s protest of the Nigerian social system is characterised by dialectical materialism which sees human society as being in a constant state of motion, progressing from lower to higher levels. Iyayi’s style exemplifies a perception of the class struggle which does not betray any sense of self-pity of the working class in the novel. Instead, it encourages them to sustain a refusal to accept subjugation and domination by the elite which controls economic power. The thematic of *Violence* foregrounds the dialectic of economic manipulation and resistance, the contest between the emasculation characteristic of the Nigerian social system and the struggle of the majority to break that system. The delineation of the characters into two significant classes, elite and working class, bespeak the struggle against social and economic dehumanisation perpetrated by the elite class. The protest against this dehumanization is mediated by Iyayi’s social consciousness and artistic commitment. The polarisation of his characters into two dialectically-opposed groups thrusts upon Iyayi the need to accentuate his role as a Marxist who has to conscientise the working class on the significance of struggle for liberation from the yoke of economic exploitation foisted upon them by the elite.

This *conscientisation* gambit is reiterated in his pedagogy of the working class concerning who is primarily responsible for the inequity in the distribution of economic opportunities in Nigerian society. Rather than resorting to conventional didacticism and propagandist sloganeering, Iyayi adopts satire as an implicit tool of dialectical *conscientisation*. This is demonstrated in the rhetoric of the defence counsel in the hospital play. The play is a motif of protest adopted by Iyayi in the novel in order to avoid lapsing into outright Marxist propaganda which would have compromised his artistic commitment. The narrative violence evinces a contestation of meanings between the elite and the working class. However, Iyayi’s protest against the domination of the social system which triggers off conflict between the two classes is succinctly foregrounded in the narrative of working-class dehumanisation by the defence counsel. This incontrovertibly represents Iyayi’s dialectical analysis of the Nigerian social system: The judge smiled sarcastically. “Is that then your own understanding of

violence? Counsel for the defense nodded his head. "Yes," he said. "In my understanding 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. We often do not realise that it is the society, the type of economic and hence the political system which we are operating in our country today that brutalises the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realise that when such men of poor and limited opportunities react, they are only in a certain measure, answering violence with violence (1979:185).

In the complexity of the satiric play, the judge represents the elite, presented in the play as oppressive and exploitative, while the accused persons alongside the defence counsel are presented as members of the working class. By extension, Obofun, Queen, Iriso and Dala, all belong to the elite, while Idemudia, Adisa, Omoifo, Patrick, Osaro, Papa and Mama Jimoh are all members of the working class. Iyayi's adoption of a satiric play as a vignette in *Violence* provides a mode of *conscientization* aimed at galvanizing the working class into confronting their oppressors in *Violence*. This fittingly confirms Daniel P. Kunene's recommendation on the choice of a suitable linguistic medium for African writers who need to address volatile social and political issues in their countries: When the struggle has progressed to a certain point, the demon of fear is conquered. The politics of fear are replaced by the politics of confrontation, for the oppressed can now speak to his oppressor from a position of equality. This stage was reached quite decisively in the late sixties and early seventies. For the writer, the problem of choosing a suitable linguistic medium then becomes more complex. The use of a satiric play, *Violence* serves in the novel as an objective medium for the articulation of protest against elite subjugation of the working class. It provides the much-needed irony required in deciphering the signification of violence as appropriated by both classes in the novel. *Violence* (1979) derives its title largely from the satiric play, and it points to the centrality of the symbolism in the dialectical relationship between the elite and the working classes in the novel. The title of the novel underscores the incontrovertible dialectic of oppressor/oppressed, elite/working classes, haves and have nots. Violence constitutes a vibrant dialogic motif in *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon with which Iyayi prefixes the novel. It suggests brutality, dehumanisation, emasculation and mental castration of a person or group by another person or. Violence recalls an imagery of domination, subjugation and outright devaluation of an individual, group, institution or society by another individual or group. The aftermath of this brutality brings about conflict, mayhem and disorder in society. Iyayi in *Violence*

has appropriated the phenomenology of violence in the *Fanonian* dialectics of the social relationship between colonial authorities and the natives of colonial territories to protest the wide gulf in terms of material well-being between the rich and the poor in post-colonial Nigeria. Violence in the novel has acquired an expansive vocabulary for the description of the economic exploitation of the surplus labour of the working class by the elite. The misery, poor housing, unemployment and constant hunger of the working class are perceived as collective violation of their physical and psychological essence by the elite in *Violence*. Iyayi does not just gleefully present the dialectic of oppressor and oppressed with its attendant narrative of violence and counter-violence in the novel. He also proposes the resolution of the social impasse within the purview of the Hegelian dialectic of thesis and antithesis in the oppressor-oppressed matrix. The proposal for such resolution betrays a materialist, dialectic vision stridently amplified by Iyayi through the defence counsel in the hospital play: What I would like to see, however is not just for a handful of men to take up arms to rob one individual. I feel and think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1967:185).

The proposal for the resolution of the oppressive social system through armed struggle in the novel, underscores the climax of the self-liberation of the oppressed class as dictated by the Hegelian dialectic materialism which has been elaborately articulated by Marx and Fanon, and overtly subscribed to by Ousmane and Ngugi in their work. The inevitability of revolutionary confrontation in Nigerian society underlies the narrative of violence in the novel. However, Iyayi counsels that such confrontation must be subsumed within the trajectory of dialectical struggle: exploitation of the surplus labour of the working class by the elite; the conscientisation of the workers towards the apprehension of their exploitation; protesting their perceived economic and political exploitation and finally, the inauguration of revolution to subvert and displace the oppressive social system.

CONCLUSION

In *Violence*, Iyayi attempts to interrogate the epistemology of power relations between the elite and the working class. He contends that power concerns human relationships and the perception of such relationships by the persons or institutions involved in them. Protest in the novel is mediated by the portrayal of a balanced picture of both classes as regards their strengths and failures within the ethos of the creative role of labour. Consequently, Marxist ideology is significantly employed as a critical tool

for analysing the dialectic of class and social stratification in the novel.

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