Poverty and Exploitation in Festus Iyayi’s *Violence*

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Abstract
Some artists use literature as a medium through which they expose the evils committed against people in any given society. Such evils may be exploitation, deprivation, intimidation, suppression and even corruption in high places, which are committed against people of lower classes. This research work, therefore, x-rays Festus Iyayi’s *Violence*, and highlighted the political and economic pains African people of lower classes pass through as a result of exploitation and oppression by the ruling class. The poverty and subhuman standards of the lower class citizens as portrayed in the novel are as a result of the leadership styles of the ruling classes who were out to maintain the inequality that exists in the country through force, and also suppression of any form of protest from the people. The exploitation and poverty were so pronounced that the novelist created characters that suffer so much pain and humiliation because of the political and economic situation they find themselves in; hence they resorted to violence as a means of getting at their exploiters. To the novelist, the people need to come together to fight as a force to liberate themselves from the clutches of exploitation and poverty imposed on them by the ruling class.

Key Words: Poverty, Exploitation, Violence and Oppression
Introduction

The coming of the European colonialists, especially the division of the land of Africa during the Berlin conference of 1884 for the purpose of colonisation, brought a new era of political, social and economic enslavement to Africans. Africans were dispossessed of their fertile lands, exploited and humiliated in their fatherland. These led to series of struggles put up in order to retrieve their rightful, but stolen, heritage from the European overlords. In fact, Africans fought tirelessly hard against the deprivations and exploitation. These struggles later culminated into independence for many African countries whose people were happy and expectant that their new leaders will right the wrongs of colonialism and foreign denomination. As Emmanuel Obiechina states in Culture, Tradition and Society in Three West African Novels, that:

The following period was filled with the expectancy of a better situation where all the citizens would have equal opportunities through post-independence economic plans based on broad egalitarian precepts which were often an extension of the nationalist rhetoric of the independence struggle. (54)

It becomes a painful irony that in many African countries, the black leaders who were vocal in criticising the excesses of the colonialists have gone many steps ahead of the colonialists in exploiting the commoners in their countries after independence. Obiechina described them as “venal, corrupt, irresponsible, hypocritical and without vision of commonsense.” (56)

So the poverty and exploitation of Africans by their own brothers was vividly portrayed in Iyai’s Violence. Festus Iyai was born on the 29th of September 1947 at Ugbeugun in Esan Central Local Government Area of Edo State of Nigeria. Festus Iyayi was a novelist and a Professor of Business Administration at the University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. He died at the age of 66 following a fatal accident on November 12, 2013.

The study on Iyai’s Violence is considered significant because it will help us to know the humiliating situations of the poor, the deprived and the exploited as presented by the novelist in his effort to capture realism in the decadent society of Nigeria, especially during the military regimes. Therefore, the study will be of immense benefit to both students and scholars, as well as to the entire society who will come across it as the interpretation of the literary productions of the prominent novelist.

Some literature on poverty and exploitation in Africa

Literature review mirrors the opinions, thoughts or arguments of other scholars, authors or leaders of thought in a given area of knowledge. It is an effort to identify what has been said as regards the topic and works under study. So in this study, therefore, the researcher will make considerable effort to review the following available literature on the topic and works being studied:

Shatto A. Gakwandi pointed out that on attainment of political independence, both the nationalists and other citizens who suffered a lot of exploitation and dehumanising experiences during the colonial period were filled with hopes and expectation for a better tomorrow. But before long, both the peasants and workers who expected independence to ameliorate their conditions got disillusioned and disenchanted as the situation worsened. The people did not see any longer all they were promised. The people thought independence to mean that the people were to be responsible for management of their own affairs. The people saw independence as a pregnant woman about to give birth to triplets: economic freedom, social freedom and political emancipation. With all these hopes, the expectant masses
willingly gave their support to their leaders who promised to provide them with all those good things that colonialism denied them. At last all turned out to be lofty promises. All they said turned out to be blatant lies. The situation became so bad that the people preferred their situation when they were under the colonial rule. That was why Shatto, Gakwandi in The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa says that Achebe, Peter Abrahams, Ayi Kwei Armah and a host of African writers indict the post-independence Africa as the one that its “political machine has been so abused that whichever way you pressed it, it produced the same result.” (64)

African writers are aware that their leaders have made caricature of the African independence. They were there to see that nothing has really changed; rather things continue getting worse and worse by the day. This was what prompted some of the African writers to write against the political and social ills in their different societies. Even the speaker in Armah’s The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born echoes the same disillusionment when he cries out:

We were ready here for big and beautiful things but what we had was our black men hugging new punches, scrambling to ask the whiteman to welcome them unto our blocks. (80)

In effect, instead of realising their hopes, the Africans have had an enemy to contend with, a crop of leaders who have come in to plunder the leftover of their comrades in exploitation and plunder (the white men).

Hence, John Ekwere as cited in G.M.C.’s Socio-Political Thought in African Literature, laments thus:

Now no more the pale-faced strangers with unhallowed feet. The heritage of our fathers, profane. No more missioned benevolent despite an alien chicken pay but we on us. (12)

In commenting on some of the works of the period, Eustace Palmer in An Introduction to the African Novel interprets A Man of the People as “a scathing denunciation of the cynicism of the masses” (72). According to him, “the novel denounces the ministerial incompetence and corruption, social inequality, rigged elections, thuggery, poverty, mass indifference and cynicism and intellectual bankruptcy which characterise post-colonial African life.” (72)

Festus Iyayi, one of the greatest authors in Nigeria, uses interesting and peculiar techniques in his novels which make his novels to depict reality and to condemn the oppression of the masses which is rampant in the capitalist state of Nigeria. According to Amuta,

The heroic challenge implies in addition a readiness to galvanise the collective will of the downtrodden, the peasantry worker and students, progressive intellectuals in revolutionary language. This is the basis of Iyayi’s novel, Violence. For instance, Idemudia in Iyayi’s Violence tries to rise above his material limitation to mobilise his co-labourers against the exploitative employers. (88)

In Helon Habila’s Waiting for an Angel, according to The Times:

The culture of poverty, vengeance and fear is so skilfully and quietly evoked that it is almost palpable. The story is peopled with sharply drawn idiosyncratic characters. It is also deeply. Mooing and memorable. (49)

In his own contribution, the novelist in the blurb of the novel says that Habila is a
young journalist living in Lagos under Nigeria’s brutal military regime. His mind is full of soul music and girls. And the novel he is writing. Yet when his roommate goes mad and is beaten up by soldiers, his first love is forced to marry a man she does not want, and his neighbours decide to hold a demo that is bound to lead to a riot, Lumba realises that he can no longer bury his head in the sand. He realises that its time to write the truth about this reign of terror.

In summary, most of the literature reviewed pointed out that poverty and exploitation which marked the colonial rule in Africa, continued during neo-colonialism, especially during military rules.

**Poverty and Exploitation in Iyayi’s Violence**

Violence, Iyayi’s first novel, takes on deep philosophical look at a neo-colonial setup like Nigeria and announces violence vis-à-vis Marxism as against capitalism, as its guiding principle. In Violence, Iyayi presents human societies and the practice of transforming the society through struggles to free the masses from certain forms of poverty, class consciousness, exploitation and oppression. Marxism is, therefore, an expression of hope or promise of salvation through struggle in order to ensure peace, freedom and prosperity.

Violence is organised in the form of an ideological treatise in fiction and represents Iyayi’s blueprint for social transformation resulting from a series of planned revolutionary actions. His concern here is Marxist realism which is oriented towards the building of a happy, successful and Marxist society. Iyayi is calling for a revolution that will wipe out capitalism, oppression and dehumanisation. This is why in the novel, he employs a collective mobilisation of people to end the decadent society.

Violence delineates the social ills that characterise the society. Such ills include social disparity and class struggle, corruption and poverty, oppression, exploitation, sexual abuse, etc. Thus, the struggle in the novel, therefore, is polarised: the exploited class versus the exploitative class and as represented in the novel, while the protagonist and his wife, Adisa, their neighbour Pa Jimoh and their friends Omoifo, Osaro and Patrick represent the masses, the working class (proletariat), in contrast is the ruling class or the bourgeoisie, those that own the means of production, as represented by Obofun, Queen and their colleagues.

It is this typical condition we find as portrayed in Violence an exploitative system and, as Iyayi posits through the counsel for the accused in the mock play presented in the hospital, it constitutes violence indeed:

In my understanding, violence is 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 and quickly. It is the society, the type of economic and hence political system which we operate today that brutalise the individual, repress his manhood. (185)

In a desperate attempt to restore their essence of humanity, the oppressed are said to be acting with violence. In this sense, the individual is only responding to violence when he resorts to violence.

In establishing the relationship between the two worlds depicted in one, Iyayi vividly presents the predicament of the world of the poor and affluent life of the rich. Idemudia, a representative of the poor, is forced to discontinue secondary education in class four because of poverty and come to live in the city in an endless search for a job. He and his wife Adisa reside in a slum area of the city. This is presented clearly for us:

He and his wife Adisa were tenants in one of the low mud zinced
houses along Owode Street. Adisa who had been sweeping the badly cemented floor of the room dropped the broom and stretched her hand across the table which stood against the window. The broom was so short she had to stoop substantially to sweep clean. (1)

Idemudia on one occasion was pestered by his wife Adisa. He helplessly cried out:

God knows I try. What else can a man do that I haven’t done? He had even sold his blood for as little as fifteen naira a pint. Sold his blood so that Adisa and him could not starve so that they could survive. (22)

Life in the area is not safe because of the poor condition of the area: “Owode Street, like its father Ekenwa Road, was always overflooded any time rain fell. “Two days before, two houses had collapsed on the street. A small child had been trapped in one of the buildings under the fallen mud walls.” (1)

The working class in this exploitative system are worse hit. They suffer and live in abject poverty. It is dehumanising and denigrating to see that their basic requirements are not met rather, they are more and more exploited. Queen, the rich and affluent wife of Obofun, complain bitterly that five naira (N5) each is too much for Idemudia and his friends after they have offloaded three trailers of cement, each containing 500 bags. (21)

The disgusting predicament of the “have-nots” contrasts with the opulence and luxurious life of the “haves.” Obofun’s exploitative tendency is quite selfish. He has accumulated wealth by fraudulent and corrupt practices. He resigned from government services to avoid being prosecuted for his crimes but uses his connections to acquire contracts for his wife. He owns a fleet of cars and chains of houses and hotels. Aside that, he constitutes an economic abuse to Adisa because of her state of penury. The already imposed physical exploitation which unavoidably placed Idemudia and his entire household into penury and destitution, inadvertently pushed Adisa to have sex outside her marital home for the household’s survival.

The bourgeoisie look on the poor as if they are mere beasts of burden. This is highly manifested in Queen’s building site where great exploitation is at its peak, too much sacking and endless hours of work as if humans are robots.

Not far off were the houses which sweat and labour had erected. The property owners live in them already. The labour of hundreds of workers working in either intense sunlight or in the biting cold, in the blinding rain, piling the blocks higher and higher and wiping salt and sweat from their eyes and their foreheads and all underfed, underpaid and treated no better than slaves. The highest form of violence maintained and jealously guarded by great money makers, conservative and reactionary public officials who in the end took all the credit for the achievement of the slaves. (256)

The working conditions of the labourers further deteriorate to the extreme: break period is reduced to fifteen minutes; the appointment of foreman is on daily basis so as to prevent them from uniting to check their exploited condition. This is heightened when the author takes us to the hospital scene where we find Idemudia seriously ill after the tedious job of off-loading cement for Queen. Reaching the University Teaching Hospital, Adisa realises that she had no money to register and there was the problem of lack of beds. Because of the latter reason, Idemudia is referred to Ogbe Hospital. The writer uses this episode to emphasise the helpless predicament of the masses. It is ironical that in both hospitals, the general wards are so congested that patients either share beds or sleep on the floor, whereas the senior service wards are empty.
Some patients lying in the corridor... the rain drive at them. There was nowhere else for them to go. The ward itself was overcrowded like a camp. Most of the patients were sharing the narrow beds. Some slept on the floor between the beds. It was terrible the way patients were kept almost like criminals. (76)

Thus, violence is consciously maintained, whetted and intensified by those who operate the system. There is no greater indictment of violence. Violence was historically acquired and equally problematic and it is at its worst stage. It is in consonance with the Marxist idea—following this untold conditions the proletariat must wake up from their doldrums and collectively stage a vehement struggle that will usher in a better society (for them), an Utopian society freed from oppression and exploitation. Idemudia receives awareness. It was at Queen’s work site that he became fully conscious of his oppressed and exploited state, and asked:

What kind of life is this? He asked himself a hundred times. A man gets a job and he cannot protest. He cannot ask for higher wages. The period of his leisure is cut down arbitrary and he must come out to work when he is told. This was slavery this was... Yes, he remembered. It came to him slowly. This was violence. And now that his mind had established an essential link, found an apt description of the conditions of life. (243)

He picks the word “violence” and applied it to his own life situation:

His unfinished education, his joblessness, his hunger, his poverty. All these he found out were 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. (243)

He becomes the spokesman of the labourers who worked very hard for pittance. He, therefore, organised the labourers to stage a revolutionary act through solidarity and unity. Osaro made them to realise that “by standing together, by showing her that we can stand together... those four men she dismissed this week should be brought back.” (246)

Thus, Iyayi opined that through unity and a vehement collective struggle by the masses, they could successfully plan, execute and thus overthrow the oppressors. He further proposes that the wretched of the earth must indicate significantly that they no longer want to be the doormats. This is amply demonstrated by the preaching of a solidarity uprising by Idemudia. At this juncture, violence becomes an instrument of liberation, a strong instrument for the total denunciation of oppression. In the words of the counsel of the defence, he said:

I feel and think it is necessary that all 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. (185)

This is a radical posture. Indeed, violence which pervades the novel is an objective reality which is paramount to African history and is depicted in its corresponding literature. Iyayi completely responded with his total personality to his social environment which changes all the time. For him, living is shaped by history and cannot in any way be divorced from it. It is this total involvement that is responsible for the social conscience and authoritarian sympathy we find manifested in his works. Iyayi, being a Marxist and as such a radical writer, does not sympathise but has
effectively aligned with the oppressed and espoused their cause.

True as this may be, he, Iyayi, is poised and determined to fight the masses cause. This he has done in the novel by tasking himself to indicate and sensitise the masses into knowing the significance of unity as this singular instrument will go along in destabilising the evil machinations of the bourgeoisie. The author is determined to fight the cause of the oppressed. In the words of Iyayi, he said: “My own escape from this kind of life has not blinded me but has provided me with the opportunity of exposing the appalling conditions in which my roots are still strapped.” (67)

In the process of exposing these untold conditions, Iyayi demonstrates a greater understanding of human nature and reveals in the course of portraying characters like Idemudia, Adisa, etc, a sympathy for their untold vicissitudes and also the callous attitude of the bourgeoisie class. Iyayi has taken a very radical posture and it is a dedication to a cause indeed.

In summary, it can be said that Iyayi has achieved a tremendous success in Violence. He has been able to dramatise his Marxist ideology of how a vehement collective struggle, perhaps through acts of violence, could unseat the bourgeoisie in order to reorder the society along the Marxists socialist principles and practice.

Conclusion
This study dealt with the theme of poverty and exploitation Festus Iyayi’s Violence. This study shows how creative the writer is in handling these themes of contemporary nature in his work. Essentially, this study discovers that poverty and exploitation are rampant in the society as consequences of the era neo-colonialism, a condition occasioned by the ineptitude of the nation’s leaders who have, instead of stamping on the much craved independence, revel under the shadows of the colonial masters, and even made things worse for their own people.

Also, this study has discovered the negative effects of military government in Africa. Iyayi portrays that the worst civilian government is better than the best military government. The poor performance of military in government has proved them a square peg in a round hole. They usually end up being much more corrupt and brutal than the civilian government they ousted. In fact, the so-called military intervention has done Africa more harm than good, that is, if they did any good at all.

Through his satiric work, the writer under study, just like other serious African creative writers, voiced the debased condition to which the African societies have been reduced as a result of the corrupt tendencies, economic miss-governance and political immaturity of the ruling class. Thus, Iyayi has effectively and successfully exposed as well as condemned those disquieting social, political, economic and moral problems that affect the society and its development. This he achieve by being courageous enough to present real-life pictures of his country during the military era.

The novelist is an artist who has deep concern for the state of man in the society. He feels for the poor, exploited, the oppressed and the underprivileged. He is touched by the trauma experienced by the less privileged in the society. He portrays people’s frustrations, disappointments, anger, sufferings and cries over unfulfilled expectations. The social struggle, oppression, humiliation and bloodshed in the society consciously or unconsciously forced Iyayi to stand out as town criers to awaken their people to action against the evils in the society.

This study observes that the writer, while allocating the roots of corruption to our political leaders, show that even the poor masses are also corrupt and therefore, should help in reforming the nation by avoiding
corruption. The writer would therefore stopped apportioning blames to the white colonists for the problems in Africa. They now blame African leaders and the masses as well.

References
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