

Confronting Inequity in Nigerian Social Milieu: Apprehending Class Stratification in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

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This paper is preoccupied with the delineation of the dialectic of poverty and wealth in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*. The unbridled struggle between the bourgeois and the proletariat in the novel constitutes the onus of the dialectical materialism which underlies an axiomatic focus of societal superstructure. An application of Kenneth Boulding's theory of protest to the Nigerian social milieu, poignantly reveals that there is a potent foregrounding of the class stratification between the rich and the poor. The paper will further examine how this dichotomy between the highly placed and the down trodden in the novel has graphically accentuated the poverty index in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: confronting inequity, class stratification, violence, bourgeois, proletariat, social milieu, Nigeria, Festus Iyayi

Introduction

Iyayi's *Violence* (1979), focuses on the social context of contemporary Nigerian society, is the reminiscent of Fraser's analysis of Chinua Achebe's "The Novelist as Teacher" (1975), in which an African writer cannot but get deeply rooted in the social circumstances of his immediate environment: The African writer works against a background of often awesome social and material deprivation: hunger, displacement, and human stress. All these demand instant and sustained attention of the writer in his/her writing. As such, the committed writer, must constantly react to these social upheavals as his duty in different terms. Our concern in this paper is to examine the degree of class stratification in Iyayi's *Violence*. We shall further attempt an explication of the inherent complication in the relationship between the bourgeois and the proletariat in Nigeria, as to bring out the tension between the duo which often lead to mutual distrust.

The Protest Theory: A Societal Superstructure

Kenneth Boulding in his essay *Towards a Theory of Protest* (1967), identifies four movements towards the understanding of the protest theory and how the framework is applicable to societal superstructure. First, he observes that, protest arises when there is a strongly felt dissatisfaction with existing programmes and policies of government or other organizations, on the part of those who feel that they have been affected by these policies,

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but who are unable to express their discontent through regular and legitimate channels, and who feel unable to exercise the weight to which they think they are entitled in the decision-making process of their social environment. Second, Boulding (1967) opined that:

Protest is most likely to be successful where it represents a view which is in fact widespread in the society, but which has somehow not been called to people's attention. Societies, like solutions, supersaturated or super cooled; that is, they reach a situation in which their present state is intrinsically unstable, but does not change because of the absence of some kind of nucleus around which change can grow. Under these circumstances, protest is like the seed crystal or the silver iodide in the cloud. It precipitates the whole system toward a position which it really ought to be in anyway. We see this exemplified in the relative success of the protest movements in civil rights. Here we have a situation, as Myrdal saw very clearly in *The American Dilemma*, in which certain fundamental images of the American society were inconsistent with its practices, and where, therefore, the protesters could appeal to an ideal which was very widely held. Wherever there is hypocrisy, there is strong hope of change, for the hypocrite is terribly vulnerable to protest. On the other hand, in the absence of protest, the supersaturated society may go on for a long time without change, simply because of what physicists call the nucleation problem. (p. 50)

Third, where the society is not supersaturated, a protest movement has a much rougher time. It then has to move the society toward the new position, from which change can then crystallize out, and this is a much more difficult task than crystallizing change in a society that is ready for it. Furthermore, protest as a social form, which may be very effective and indeed necessary in crystallizing a supersaturated society, may be quite ineffective in moving a society which is not saturated for change toward a point where it is. That is, the technique for creating the pre-conditions of change may be very different from the techniques required for crystallizing it. Where a society is divided and ambivalent, a protest movement designed to push it in one direction may easily arouse movements of counter-protest designed to resist the movement or to push it in the other direction. This is something to which protesters rarely give sufficient attention. Because they are themselves emotionally aroused, they tend to think that almost everybody must be in a similar frame of mind, which may not be true at all. It is quite possible, for instance, for protest movements to arouse counter-protests much larger than the original protests, and, hence, the net result of the protest is to move the system away from the direction in which the protesters want it to move. The Goldwater campaign was a good example of this. Goldwater was nominated as a Republican candidate as a result of a protest movement among discontented conservatives. The result, however, was the arousal of a much larger movement of counter-protest among those who were frightened and dismayed by Goldwater, which resulted in a quite unprecedented defeat (Boulding, 1967, p. 55).

The fourth point is that, the dynamic process of social systems is not entirely random, and this means that any particular social system is more likely to go in some directions than it is in others. Obviously, a protest movement which is trying to push the social system in a direction in which it has a high probability of going anyway is more likely to be successful than one that is trying to push the social system in a direction that has a low probability. Unfortunately, it is by no means easy to assess the various probabilities of change; nevertheless, we can surely know something about it. At least we can be pretty sure, for instance, that movements toward absolute hereditary monarchies today have a pretty slim chance of success. We can identify certain cumulative processes in the history of social systems, such as the growth of knowledge, the widening of integrative systems, and so on, which have a certain long-run irreversibility about them, even if they may have short-run setbacks, systems move, however, painfully, toward payoffs (Boulding, 1967, p. 60).

Class Stratification and Violence in Iyayi's *Violence*

Iyayi's identification with the condition of the working classes buttresses protest that also partly reflects his own class position as a petit-bourgeois intellectual who is able to empathize effectively with the working classes through his writing. His portrayal of Obofun, Queen, Dala, and Iriso as exploiters of the working classes offers a helpful context in which we can assess Iyayi's commitment to the cause of the downtrodden. He courageously exposes the moral depravity of the Nigerian bourgeoisie, paradoxically a class to which he also belongs as a privileged individual. Iyayi decries the gluttonous attitude of the elite who assumed the leadership of their nation at the expiration of colonial rule in Africa and have since independence perpetrated the exploitation of their own people with a ruthlessness that was never seen during colonial rule. Such exploitation is seen in the rapacity of the elite: (1) sexual promiscuity as typified by the relationship between Iriso and Queen; (2) bribery and racketeering in the ministries and government establishments which Obofun was involved in before his premature dismissal; and (3) diversions of essential commodities like milk and eggs from the ministry of agriculture to Queen's supermarket. The employment of Idemudia by Queen to offload bags of cement with its attendant poor remuneration provides the needed political discourse for the analysis of the economic structures of the society, prevailing norms, injustice, exploitation, conflict, and revolt, as the variables of social exchange between the elite and the working classes in the novel.

The commodification of members of the working class by the elites in the novel recalls the observation of Solomon (1974):

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour, because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are of the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. (p. 40)

Solomon (1974) further emphasised that within the capitalist system as obtainable in Nigeria, all methods for raising the social productiveness of labor are brought about at the cost of the individual laborer:

All means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers: they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work, and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour-process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power... (p. 41)

The dialectics of the relationship between the rich and the poor in *Violence* is aptly illustrated by Fatunde (1985):

In Festus Iyayi's novel a balanced picture is given, both of the working people and of the exploiters. Neither social class is infallible. They both show a degree of human failing and human strength, although it is abundantly clear that Iyayi is on the side of the working people. As a radical writer he is not complacent towards the plight of those who have only their labour to sell. But he does not legitimize Idemudia's attempt at beating his wife; neither does he approve of the (understandable) "sexual methods" of Adisa, who searches for money to pay off Idemudia's hospital bill. (p. 114)

No doubt, the significance of labor ethos is given prominence in the novel. However, Iyayi (1979) did not hesitate to acknowledge the importance of the workers' contribution to national development, even if their efforts were not adequately rewarded:

Not far off were the houses which sweat and labour had already erected. Life there was ablaze where labour had left its positive mark, the labour of hundreds of thousands of workers, working in the blinding rain, piling the blocks higher and higher and wiping the salt and sweat from their eyes and their foreheads with the backs of their hands and all underpaid, treated no better than slaves. (pp. 255-256)

Protest in the novel derives its power largely from the author's outrage at the injustice of a system that reduces human beings to chattel and love to a commodity measured in terms of Naira and Kobo. The commodification of Idemudia, Osaro, Patrick, and Omoifo in the offloading of the bags of cement at Freedom Motel by Queen is a signifier of this outrage.

This outrage further reverberates in a scenario at the building site, when Queen had to treat some workers with indignation:

The other workers were already there and they gathered as soon as they saw Queen. Queen faced them, "I understand that some of you want more money," she said quietly. Idemudia was surprised at the hardness in her voice. "You there," and Queen pointed to a tall, shirtless man. "You have always made trouble, ever since you came here." She drew an envelope. "Here is your money." She spat at him. "You will find twenty-three Naira, seventy-seven kobo inside the envelope. Not one kobo more, not one kobo less." (Iyayi, 1979, p. 234)

The rhetoric of protest in *Violence* is mediated by Iyayi's Marxist inclinations. It is an inclination which is represented in a sustained disappointment and bitterness of the failure of Nigeria State to provide employment and basic social needs for her citizens. Iyayi in the novel posits social relationship as a continuous process of contestation inseparable from human development paradigms. Iyayi's interrogation of the social inequity in the novel is anchored on Karl Marx's theories of class stratification. This is done to enable him interpret Nigeria's social milieu. Iyayi's narrative of class stratification in *Violence* foregrounds the exploration rather than amelioration of social relationship of the elite and working classes. Iyayi's delineation of social classes in *Violence* underscores wa Thiong'o's examination of the typology of writers in post-colonial Africa as identified by Williams (1999):

For Ngugi, social conditions mean that there are broadly two types of writers in any given historical period. The first group consists of those who believe in the status quo... The second group comprises those who have deliberately or instinctively acquired a more dialectical perspective on society, as well as belief in the possibility and necessity of change... (p. 156)

Such narrative betrays a discourse of class identities as they intersect new social formations. Iyayi decries the appropriation of societal wealth and opportunities by the elite class, typified by Obofun and Queen. This class is used by Iyayi to examine certain matrices of Nigerian society, the elite class is portrayed as an economic threat to the well-being of the nation. Iyayi nevertheless, evaluates the relationship between Queen and Idemudia to shape the negotiations over identity, society, and social boundaries. Consequently, the dehumanisation Idemudia suffers articulates the high-strung categories through which the novel's characters' imagine themselves as part of a socially-fragmented Nigeria. The importance of money as a signification of "social exchange" between the elite and working classes is given prominence in the novel. Money symbolises power for the elite, while it paradoxically symbolises a means of survival to the working class. Money serves as a potent tool for the construction of identities by the individuals from both social divides in the novel. As such, money is an effective symbol through which class identities are constructed. Ultimately, what gives coherence to the social relationship

between the elite and the working class is embedded in social exchange signified by money. This is appropriated by Iyayi as a political discourse which he uses to create frames of understanding of contemporary Nigerian society. Money serves as potent tool of social exchange in the novel.

The motif of money is used to construct Nigeria society, articulate a shared experience of oppression, and evaluate social consciousness through which Iyayi identifies himself artistically by making an emphatic case for the value of social justice in the idea of society. Through the depiction of money as a vehicle of social exchange, and especially by juxtaposing stupendous wealth with abject poverty, Iyayi evaluates the danger inherent in the misuse of money as derivations of corruption, injustice, greed, and oppression.

The depredation of the working class in *Violence* recalls the observation of Harris (1982):

We must remember that to deny someone control of their own lives is to offer them a most profound insult, not to mention the injury which the frustration of their wishes and the setting at naught of their own plans for themselves will add. (p. 35)

Iyayi protests the oppressive labor policies which hold an individual captive and makes him a gratuitous object of commodification. He further reiterates that all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation, and every extension of accumulation becomes again a means for the development of those methods. It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the laborer must grow worse. This subsequently becomes accumulation of misery, with its attendant accumulation of capital. Therefore, for Idemudia and his friends, their engagement by Queen which nets them five Naira individually at the end of the task, also comes with their acquisition of misery, toil, agony, and slavery. This degradation is manifested in Idemudia's illness. The existentialism of the members of the working classes is largely determined by the elite. Because the elite has the means of material production at its disposal, it also has control at the same time over the means of mental production. This privileged position of the elite allows it to ride roughshod over the collective existence of the members of the working classes.

The elite in *Violence* through its uncontrolled desire and insatiable greed crave the acquisition of material goods. By so doing, they have become slaves of their own creations and are consequently alienated from the humanness of society. The despoliation of the societal resources by the elite renders members of the working class dehumanised. Idemudia, Adisa, Osaro, Pa Jimoh, and a host of other poverty-stricken individuals in the novel are graphically presented by Iyayi as individuals who have suffered certain degree of estrangement from the economic well-being of society. They are forever consigned to that unfathomable abyss between what they are and what they would like to be, which is the fallout of social disequilibrium orchestrated by the likes of Obofun, Queen, Iriso, and Dala of the elite class.

Idemudia is a typification of a fragmented man whose social identity is ambivalent, as exemplified in the hospital play titled *Violence*. He is a representation of millions of individuals marooned in a cesspool of poverty, whose lives are crushed beneath the merciless and implacable wheels of economic manipulation of the elite. Idemudia is a product of the Foucauldian analysis of power play in the society:

The individual is no doubt the fictitious atoms of an "ideologist" representation of society: but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called "discipline." We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: It "excludes," it "represses," it "censors," it "abstracts," it "masks," it "conceals." In fact, power produces: it produces the reality: it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the

knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, 1995, p. 194)

Although the pauperisation of Idemudia, Osaro, Adisa, Pa Jimoh, and Mama Jimoh has its more remote sources in chequered post-colonial economic and political history, it was directly caused by the head-on collision of two different, indeed totally opposed circumstances: The social inequality orchestrated by the post-colonial apparatus, greed, avarice, and economic schism created and nurtured by the elite class. Subjected to this double trauma, the members of the working class in Nigeria are helplessly condemned to be the spectators of their degeneration into the state of dementia. The gap between them and the opportunistic members of the elite who enjoy the opulence and bliss of society becomes deeper at the emergence of every successive civilian and military administration in the country, and has become more and more difficult to bridge. The economic disempowerment of Idemudia and other members of the working class is thus by no means a physical one. The deprivation they experience is due to their exclusion from the economic largesse of society. They are not people crippled by physical disabilities but specific and well-defined individuals stranded in a socio-economic quagmire: poverty, hunger, disease, and loss of identity.

Poverty as a Phenomenon of Alienation in Iyayi's *Violence*

To the members of the working class in *Violence*, poverty presupposes non-existence, and non-existence culminates in a deep sense of alienation. This notion is clearly demonstrated in the submission of Yetiv (1976):

Alienation presupposes identity, just as Death presupposes life. It is in the final analysis, the loss of identity, be it individual or ethnic, and the effort to recapture this lost identity which constitutes the "identity crisis." Like life itself, identity is a dynamic phenomenon... (p. 87)

Virtually, all the working-class characters feel themselves estranged from their society. They are haunted by a sense of alienation borne out of hunger, lack, and want. Protest is deployed in the novel to articulate the palpable emptiness in the lives of working-class people. Idemudia's inability to secure a permanent job, Osaro, Omoifo, and Patrick's consistent existence on the fringes of life; Adisa's endless endurance of hunger, and Papa and Mama Jimoh's subsistence living in a rundown apartment are significations of the emptiness aptly mediated by Iyayi's dialectic of class stratification. *Violence* is a canvass crowded with alienated individuals and an alienated society of the wealthy and the poor. Idemudia serves as a metaphor of the alienated individuals trapped in an urban society. Idemudia, a school dropout who can not continue with his education, because his parents can not pay his fees, finds it remarkably difficult to secure a decent job and ends up as a casual laborer at the building site.

The thought of his failure to complete his education, which would have provided him an adequate meal ticket often fills him with resentment and bitterness. His preoccupation with charting a path of survival for himself and his wife Adisa also led him into selling his blood intermittently: Idemudia saw himself nodding and saying:

"Blood, sir!"

"Yes."

"How much will you pay?" Osaro asked.

"How much do you want?" the man replied. "I want as many as four pints."

"It is twenty-five naira a pint." Osaro said.

The man laughed. "Twenty-five naira! That is too expensive."

"Then how much can you pay?"

"Ten naira a pint, nothing more, nothing less"... (Iyayi, 1979, p. 155)

The overwhelming sense of economic marginality drives Idemudia to declare rue his almost existential sense of helplessness, "The things an empty stomach can drive a man to" he said to himself now, and shook his head. "The things hunger can make a man to do!" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 157). Idemudia is vehemently against the oppressive social system which arrests him in action or drives him to do the exact opposite of what he mostly desires. What troubles him is not so much existential anguish but the absence of fairness in the distribution of economic opportunities in Nigeria society. In spite of the social difficulties and economic marginality suffered by the novel's working-class characters, these individuals' refuse to succumb completely to the criminal existence to which they have been condemned. Idemudia's courage, untarnished by the misery around, and his equally uncorrupted love for Adisa are an assertion of human dignity in struggle. This is a central assertion which is imbibed by members of the working class, and significantly buoys their determination to survive against all odds. Most of these characters are not articulate about their marginality. Aside Idemudia, Osaro, and Omoifo, who are assertive and often confrontational, Papa and Mama Jimoh, Patrick, Adisa, and the other reactionary elements at the building site seem to have internalised their collective subjugation, they are crippled by the prevailing social conditions. Their inability to take on their oppressors is rendered in terms of the physical details of their daily activities which is mediated by outright passivity and subtle compromise. This tellingly recalls the feeble personality of Adisa, who could not live out her courage, but succumbs to intense pressure from Obofun. Pa Jimoh is also culpable of passivity, as can be seen in the incident where he is mistakenly detained by his employer for allegedly taking out the official car after working hours. One would have expected him to protest his illegal detention when it had been established that he was not guilty of the offence. But despite not being compensated, he complacently accepts his dehumanisation.

Dialectic of Protest in *Violence*

The reactionary attitude of these individuals in the working class succinctly foregrounds the dialectic of class stratification by wa Thiong'o (1981):

They would like to have a slave who not only accepts that he is a slave, but that he is a slave, because he is fated to be nothing else but a slave. Hence he must love and be grateful to the master for his magnanimity in enslaving him to a higher, nobler civilisation. (p. 12)

However, Idemudia, Osaro, and Omoifo frantically strive to restore self-worth and dignity to the image of the working class. Through hard and debilitating tasks, they are determined to assert themselves and their inalienable human identities. Their quest for social security and identity is encapsulated in the concrete and specific terms of a definite social struggle; their protest against inhuman social conditions foisted upon them by the elite in the form of poor remuneration at the building site. The workers' strike provides the much-needed opportunity to confront their social marginality headlong. Their triumph over social alienation comes when they succeeded in forcing Queen to negotiate over the condition of work and remuneration. But such meeting is marked by a pervasive cynicism, because it portends for the workers fear and humiliation symptomatic of a tyranny of fear that elite oppression creates. Negotiation between the laborers at the building site, and Queen should have normally promised something positive and realistic; an increase in the wages of the workers and

better conditions of service. But its circumvention by Queen, through her sexual blackmail of Idemudia, underscores a sign, not of disruption or change in the relationship between the elite and the working class, but of continuity in the unchanging dialectic of oppressor and oppressed. Iyayi uses the dialectic of the elite/working class to foreground empirical realities. *Violence*, for instance, uses the hospitalisation of Idemudia after offloading bags of cement from a truck for Queen and his inability to pay his medical bills as a springboard to criticise extortionist gambit of the elite. Idemudia's quest for employment got him a job that demeaned him and which subsequently made him sick, because he had to work in the rain amidst debilitating hunger. Consequently, he fell ill because he was cold and hungry. The point of scathing criticism against the elite class in *Violence* is that the elite economically emasculates the poor in order to perpetually gratify their gluttonous appetites.

Wealth as a Symbol and Disruption

Iyayi decries the unconscionable acquisition of wealth and moral decadence of the elite in the novel. Obofun is presented as a man suborned by his acquisitive wife, Queen, and his contemporaries in the ministries like Dala and Iriso. He pursues stupendous wealth through barefaced graft, and he is preoccupied with the use of his position in a government ministry to aid his crooked get-rich-quick schemes. Obofun typifies a metaphor of Nigerian urban elite which is steeped in social corruption and who craves insatiably after material possessions. His wife, Queen, is a satirical portrait of a pseudo-enterprising woman, whose business trajectory is motivated by sexual negotiations with powerful men in society as she voraciously pursues men who could facilitate her building contract bids and guarantee the supply of supplies to her hotel and supermarket. Queen's pervasive sexual indulgence is robustly criticized by Iyayi. Her life comprises a world in which men intervene only as passing characters: official or transitory lovers, suppliers, and weak husband. But beyond her momentary relationship with any of these men is her repulsion to any emotional attachment to males generally. Her relationship with the men in her life is played out in terms of power and domination. She is portrayed as heartless, cold, calculating, and exploitative. This is demonstrated in her encounter with Iriso at the rendezvous on Sakponba Road:

"Why do you think this will happen again?" she asked.

Irso looked at the ceiling. "Won't there be a next time?"

"The bitch," he thought. "As if she is not going to need any more milk, eggs and meat. If she won't need any of these, she will need other things, and if a man supplies them, she is going to use her body to pay for them. Harlot" he spat out towards the other side of the bed on the wall. (Iyayi, 1979, pp. 100-101)

The matrimony of Obofun and Queen epitomizes instability and collapse of a family structure among the elite, in which a wife pursues economic freedom so as to create an individuality and a separate personhood. Queen is presented as a typical urban woman of the elite class in a post-colonial African society where most socially pre-eminent women are pre-occupied with the zeal to be economically independent of their husbands, and many often worship money above principles and values. The elite in *Violence* are engaged in infidelity and drunkenness. The sanctions and taboos which shaped the traditional society and gave it its seeming stability, dignity, and respectability are completely subverted, as everything takes second place to the relentless drive for wealth. Obofun, Iriso, and Dala, who are supposed to be respectable husbands and fathers, plunge into decadence and immorality. The uncontrollable subscription to corrupt practices also signifies the fragmentation of the

hitherto secured family units as husbands and wives are neck deep in the feverish wealth-acquisition syndrome, thereby becoming vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Obofun does not care if Queen takes lovers and Queen in turn realises that Obofun has mistresses. Iyayi's knack for presenting the inner character of the elite class in the novel and for describing their extra-marital activities affords him the narrative space to build up polemics for the condemnation of the egoism, irrationality, and recklessness associated with them. Obofun and Queen are marooned in a lifeless matrimony devoid of a conjugal relationship. Whatever co-habitation there is merely a product of artificiality, as most outsiders do not have a glimpse of the sterility of their marriage.

Iyayi, however, in *Violence*, does not significantly stress the oppression of one gender by the other. He creates a balance of judgment in the relationship between men and women, especially among the elites. The portrait of men as harsh, dictatorial, and inconsiderate has its match in the portrait of women as callous, selfish, and vindictive. While Obofun's sexual predation ensnares Adisa in its web, Queen successfully seduces Iriso, with Idemudia only narrowly escaping her snare. Queen is financially independent of Obofun. She is privileged to enter into sexual relations with any man without other motives than that of emotional and sexual gratification. Adultery, for Queen, is the ultimate possibility of exploring a relation devoid of utilitarian ethos. For Obofun and other male members of the elite, adultery provides the sexual benefits of flaunting their wealth and success in society. Since wealth is relatively concentrated in the hands of men, a woman needs a financial lift in order to have a chance at a decent standard of living. But unfortunately, the elite males prey on the hapless wives of the working class, as demonstrated in the amorous affair between Obofun and Adisa, Idemudia's wife. Unlike Queen, Adisa is not acting out of a sense of disillusionment with the institution of marriage, but Adisa's vulnerable position essentially derives from the fact that Idemudia does not adequately provide for her. She has an affair with Obofun to raise the much-needed money for Idemudia's hospital bills. Here, Iyayi sees the city as a site of corruption where sex is commodified. Material wealth is seen as a weapon effectively deployed for the benefit of prosperous men, and all women are placed in a position of powerlessness. But Iyayi does not seem to agree with the notion that women have to adapt to their subordination in order to survive. Such subordination smacks of oppressive, exploitative, and alienating arrangements that serve to further social control of the working class by the elite in its entirety. Adisa is presented as the epitome of semi-literate, vulnerable, and poverty-ravaged working class woman trapped in the throes of the cities of Nigeria, and whose social and economic survival is determined by the urban elite.

The social and economic subjugation of the working class by the elite reflects a complex situation of gender oppression intertwined with the rhetoric of class oppression. This remarkably posits how different forms of exploitation are made possible within these structures of power relations in *Violence*. This reading further places the novel within the limitations of a system where the working class' prescribed roles as laborers and mistresses constitute their entire sphere of action. Their actions, needs, and aspirations can thus be understood only in relation to complacent subordination and so paradoxically turns those who benefit most from their oppression, the elite, into their only benefactors. Iyayi appropriates the social gulf between the elite and working classes to articulate the suffocating misery which broadly pervades the milieu of the novel. The theme of misery and its effects are sharpened against the backdrop of wanton desolation as given attestation on the opening page of the novel:

Outside, the flood built up steadily and gradually. Owode Street, like its father, Ekenwan Road, was always over-flooded any time the 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. Fortunately, rescuers, including Idemudia, had dug the child out in time. For the people who lived in the mud houses on Owode Street, there was now another major preoccupation: which house would be the next to fall? (Iyayi, 1979, pp. 1-2)

This precarious habitation of the downtrodden in the novel is conceived as a metaphorical abyss where human lives are cheap and fragmented. In a fundamental social sense, the run-down habitation of the working class dramatises an aberration highlighted in elite opulence against working class despair and hopelessness.

Marxist Ideology and Social Consciousness in Iyayi's *Violence*

Iyayi's ideological disposition, as mediated in Marxist dialectics, is discernible in his interrogation of power structures in the post-colonial Nigerian society, with its attendant variables of dominance, control, exploitation, subjugation, and victimisation. In the view of Ngara, the ideological preoccupation of a writer "will in part depend on his or her level of political consciousness". Consequently, "whatever stance the writer takes constitutes his or her authorial ideology". Ngara (1990) defined further the concept of ideology:

Ideology refers to that aspect of the human condition under which people operate as conscious actors. Ideology is the medium through which human consciousness works. Our conception of religion, politics, morality, art and science is deeply influenced by our ideology. In other words, what we see and believe largely depends on our ideology, ideology being the medium through which we comprehend and interpret reality... (p. 11)

The exploration of social relationship between the indigenous entrepreneurs and casual laborers in *Violence* foregrounds Iyayi's determination to expose the ideological bias of the Nigerian elite against the perspective of the exploited majority to interrogate the class interests as significantly inscribed in the novel. The collective plight of the underprivileged in ruthlessly competitive Nigerian urban cities sharpens the social consciousness of Iyayi, and develops into truculent protest against the inhumanity of the elite. By so doing, his voice typifies the voice of the oppressed. This is inscribed in the thematic preoccupation of *Violence*, the social background of Idemudia, and the evocative style which is replete with ironic overtones. The novel's title, *Violence*, articulates the callous exploitation of the surplus labor of the working class in the novel without a commensurate remuneration. This exploitation is vividly captured in the novel:

The Greek leaned back in his chair, relaxed. "He says what they send him to say. That they work very hard for too little pay. Too many hours of work and too many sackings. Every day. Every hour. He says," and the Greek paused, "he puts it grandly," the Greek continued: "He says it is violence!"

"Violence?"

"Yes, violence." (Iyayi, 1979, pp. 250-251)

Iyayi protests the exploitation and inhumanity to which the workers are subjected with characteristic power and intensity of feeling. The poor pay and constant dismissal of the workers is nothing but calculated violence on their social wellbeing. The narrative of *Violence* is that when a worker loses his job, he suffers certain degree of social disruption and discontinuity. Such disruption is analogous to marginality. When this happens, such an individual may take to armed robbery or other social vices. This has an undercurrent in the satiric play titled *Violence* which is staged at the hospital. In the play, violence is used by both the elite class and the working class as narratives for the evaluation of their respective class positions. The elite class appropriates violence as

hegemonic narrative to examine the disruption of their social status by the activities of the working class, which if not controlled could irreparably destroy their power base. Thus, social disruptions like armed robbery, mob action, rioting, kidnapping, and assassination of members of the elite class are frowned upon. Codes in the name of laws and legislations are therefore established to curtail such working-class interrogations. The working class on its own part approves violence as a counter-narrative to decry their frustration, exploitation, and dehumanisation by the elite. It also creates its own codes of reaction through the use of tactics like armed robbery, kidnapping, drug-peddling, and prostitution to subvert the elite's hegemonic narrative. The narrative and counternarrative of violence of both classes is clearly captured by Freire (1972):

Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognise others as people—not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognised. It is not the unloved who cause disaffection, but those who cannot love because they love only themselves. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate terror, but the violent, who with their power create the concrete situation which begets the “rejects of life”. (p. 32)

Iyayi's identification with the oppressed is given prominence in the mobilisation of the laborers, led by Idemudia, for a showdown with Queen. Such mobilisation is designed to champion the cause of the oppressed members of the working class and also to project Marxist ideology as the only viable ideology which can question and challenge class inequity in contemporary Nigeria. Thus, the laborers' confrontation of Queen and Mr. Clerides, the site engineer, is presented in Fanonian mode, in the form of a fearless and aggressive attitude, which represents the new determination of the laborers to liberate themselves as prescribed by Fanon (1967), “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (p. 74). The confrontation of Queen by the laborers strikes a chord of optimism in the trajectory of social struggle in the novel. The confrontation imbues the laborers with the zeal of social consciousness, which doggedly pursued, could signal the eventual victory of the oppressed over the oppressor. Iyayi's advocacy of social change in Nigeria echoes Ebong's (1986) call for economic, political, and attitudinal change in Africa:

Africa is ripe for a revolution. It is not the promiscuous violent, bloody revolution of permissive wantonness to life and property, not is it the cultural revivalism of black humanity asserting itself in protest against the indifference of the West. The revolution for contemporary Africa presupposes the reorganisation and the restructuring of the African mind and psyche. (p. 71)

Protest as invested in the laborers' confrontation of Queen, the epitome of oppression orchestrated by the elite, betrays Iyayi's attempt to move beyond the ostensibly passive critical attitudes characteristic of first-generation Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, J. P. Clark, and Chris Okigbo, whose reactions to social issues in Nigeria are often perceived as reactionary by many second-generation Nigerian writers. Iyayi as a representation of second-generation Nigerian writers clearly and confidently articulates the dialectical relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed in *Violence*. Such articulation has its undercurrent in Nigeria's social, political, and economic problems which have become more pronounced in recent years. Instead of merely portraying these inadequacies and shortcomings, Iyayi has stridently advocated radical social change as a viable alternative to the situations depicted in the novel.

Iyayi is one of the few Nigerian writers who specifically extol the virtues of the working class in their works. His concern with socio-political circumstances delineates the social structure and is mediated by a class analysis

of post-colonial Nigeria. The trajectory of Marxist consciousness has been successfully traversed by African literary icons like Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o to evaluate the social, economic, and political problems in their respective countries. While wa Thiong'o's depiction of the working class as a leading force in revolution is exemplified in *Petals of Blood* (1977), Ousmane presents the working class as a force that has the capability to enforce socialist change in *God's Bits of Wood* (1960). Iyayi not only adopts a class analysis approach to Nigerian society but also indirectly advocates a complete alteration of existing social, economic, and political systems. Prima facie, Ousmane, and wa Thiong'o unequivocally call for the inauguration of Marxist society in their novels, but Iyayi does not explicitly advocate the emergence of a Marxist society in *Violence*.

Poverty and Protest

Iyayi employs the motif of poverty to protest the desperate living conditions in which the working class is mired. Lack, want, and dire need provide the undertone for the lampoon of inequity in social distribution in the novel. The critical evaluation of the manifestation of poverty from the Marxist point of view locates the narrative of economic subjugation within the locale of dialectical materialism. It is a subjugation which could have attracted criticism from other literary tropes, be their humanist or feminist. Nevertheless, it is imperative to state that it is not the type of trope employed in the depiction of the appalling situation of poverty in the novel that matters so much as its vivid depiction, which is reminiscent of the material poverty of the downtrodden in the contemporary Nigeria. Such depiction is a reaction to the quintessential question by Spivak (1991):

What is very much a question for me at the moment is that if you are construed in one particular kind of language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first. (p. 66)

In *Violence*, the exploration of the living condition of the urban poor in contemporary Nigeria provides the locus of the narrative of social condition, woven around Idemudia and Adisa's attempt at coming to terms with their society. The novel opens with the portrayal of the squalor and deprivation of Idemudia and Adisa which underlie the vivid detail of the deprivation and destitution of the lives of the urban poor in Benin city, an urban settlement in Nigeria. Motifs of lack and want are used as a signification to protest malignant poverty and its devastating effects on Idemudia and Adisa who cannot afford the luxury of a wall clock but have to monitor the time broadcast from the radiogram of their neighbors:

Open the window wider so that we can hear what the time it is. He and his wife, Adisa, were tenants in one of the low mud but zinc 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 window screeched on its hinges as it went wider. Adisa bent down to pick up the broom. Then she resumed her sweeping. The broom was so short that she had to stoop substantially to sweep clean. (Iyayi, 1979, p. 1)

The desolation presented in this opening page foregrounds the semiotic of lack which permeates the lives of the working class throughout the novel. Idemudia and Adisa are too poor to afford wristwatches or a wall clock. They are quarantined in a rundown mud house that is vulnerable to flooding. The cemented floor of the dingy solitary room is cracked, the broom is decrepit and the rusty window hinges underscore their level of impoverishment. This graphic presentation of the decrepitude provides a counterpoint to the splendour of the vast opulence of the chalet in Obofun's guest house in the novel, "Again Adisa looked round the room. She noticed

the polished floor again, then the walls and the high ceiling painted white where the air-conditioner softly blew cold air into the room" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 123).

This description is further complemented by the aesthetics of landscaping, which further accentuate the glamour of the elite's neighborhood:

Then there was the low window with its white curtains, drawn aside to let in some of the fading light of the day. Each window had a mosquito net proofing directly attached to the wooden window frame. Outside the window the grass grew and the hibiscus flowers stood in red and green splendour. And interwoven with the flowers were the pine trees against which the wind blew, producing a whistling in their higher branches. (Iyayi, 1979, p. 122)

The comparison of the squalid habitation of Idemudia and the sumptuousness abode of Obofun encapsulate the dialectical tragedy of the social, economic and political disequilibrium of post-colonial Nigeria. Iyayi engages the motif of extreme poverty to protest the economic strangulation of the poor in the novel. The comparison of the habitations further concretizes Iyayi's protest against the corrupt practices of the elite in Nigeria, who divest public funds meant to provide infrastructure for society to their own use. The juxtaposition of the two habitations constitutes a repudiation of the economic emasculation of the poor by the elite in the novel. The poor in turn are helpless and are engaged in their own struggle with an oppressive social system and a frustrating economic system. The dynamics of social relationship in the novel are dictated by elite that is unsympathetic to the condition of the poor.

Conclusions

The paper has examined class stratification in Iyayi's *Violence*. It has been observed in the paper that the squalid living of the poor reiterates the basic problem of economic insecurity which is transformed into class struggle in the novel. For the poor whose lives are consigned to transcendental hopelessness, they are marooned in their economic deprivation. Their awareness of this deprivation leads Idemudia, Omoifo, and Osaro to protest against inhuman working conditions at the building site. The workers' confrontation of Queen and the subsequent threat to embark on strike if their demands are not met urgently is strongly endorsed by Iyayi. *Violence* is thus a protest novel of class reconstruction, portraying and justifying the proletariat's struggle for social and economic liberation. The exemplary virtues of Idemudia, who led the protest against the elite class, are also given resounding acknowledgment. His social and political consciousness make the workers aware of their exploitation and inspires them to plunge into the protest against inhuman working conditions at the building site.

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