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## **Moral Idealism and Social Reality: a Textual Analysis of Festus Iyayi's *The Contract***

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### **Abstract**

*Physical decay and rot symbolize corruption and general decadence in any society. Those vested with authority and powers to oversee the affairs of the society are rather the agents of this decay. Everybody, especially the common masses, is affected negatively. One man, Ogie Obala, returns from abroad and tries to uphold moral values and even inculcate these values in others. Can he succeed? Did he succeed? This paper demonstrates the struggle between moral idealism and social reality in Festus Iyayi's *The Contract*.*

**Key Words:** Moral, Idealism, Social Reality

### **Introduction**

Many years ago, foremost African writer, Chinua Achebe (1975), noted that "The African writer cannot ... be unaware of, or indifferent to, the

monumental injustice which his people suffer” (p.78). In his second novel, *The Contract*, Festus Iyayi (1982) seems to adhere, somewhat strictly, to Achebe’s admonition above. Iyayi’s critical shafts are directed at the corruption, intrigue, and insincerity of the bourgeoisie and ruling classes. As in *Violence*, he exposes the sharp contrast in the living conditions of the dominant and the dominated, the rulers and the ruled, the rich and the poor in contemporary Nigeria.

### ***The Contract***

Ogie Obala returns from England and finds the physical and moral situation of his native Benin City disgusting. On his arrival at the airport he notices the “Hundreds of faces that crawled around the airport buildings, staring or asking for favours. They were all hard faces with wild eyes and bones that showed through the tightly drawn skins. None of the faces had any flesh in them” (p.15). He is also appalled at the streets that are “littered with all kinds of refuse – corn leaves, plantain peelings, bottles, cans and sewage” (p.7). Physical squalor and decadence are the hallmarks of the society, and the butts of Iyayi’s criticism.

As he drives Ogie home the driver sounds the keynote of the novel when he tells Ogie that:

Money is king in this country. Everybody wants money... armed robbers steal to make money. The politicians steal to make money, the police and the cream of the military and the establishment all steal to make money (p.19).

The Police, the army, and the politicians are engaged in getting rich through whatever means, and nobody cares that the common man is living in dilapidated mud-houses; or that the latter is starving and unemployed, or that his environment is squalid. There is a vivid contrast between the living conditions of the common man on one hand and the ruling classes, the army, politicians, and the bourgeoisie on the other hand. Chief Eweh Obala, Chairman of the Ogbe City Council, lives in the glory of his wealth and political authority. Chief Ekata is the wealthy owner of a construction company and other big business ventures. The State Administrator has reserved the good and clean roads – Celina Avenue and Erommonsele Avenue – for himself and his personal staff. All other road users must use the filthy streets. Luxury, privilege, and opulence characterise the life-style of the

ruling classes; and starvation and squalor are the lot of the ruled class. Ogie Obala's driver, again, is our mirror:

You ought to go to the markets. Even the prices there smell of the filth. And does the government care? Absolutely not at all. The people can rot for all they care. You go to the burial grounds and all you see are the bodies of babies, killed by the kwashiorkor or by the dysentery. The women are hungry, the men are hungry and we live in dirt. But what does the government do except reserve special roads for itself? (p. 8).

The physical squalor represents the general spiritual and moral decay in the society. For the physical putrefaction is an outward manifestation of an internalised decay. And that is why every agent meant to eradicate any form of decay in the society is the creator of the decay.

The politicians and top military Officials are busy inflating their salaries and awarding themselves spurious contracts. Their agents in this business of wealth accumulation are the business magnates and contractors. Mallam Mallam, for example, is responsible for cashing cheques signed by government officials; he explains the business to an astonished Ogie Obala:

There is a group of government officials in the services; in Forces...I supply them with various items. Each week I receive a cheque for One hundred thousand Naira. I go to the bank and cash it... Actually...I supply them with nothing. The money I cash, we share out again. I get my portion, the others get theirs (p.17).

There is thus an alliance between the army, the politicians, and the bourgeoisie, all engaged in a systematic thievery to the detriment and neglect of the common man. Even though Iyayi wrote this novel thirty years ago, the situation he described in the novel is reminiscent of the situation in Nigeria of today. The author has, therefore, tried to be as close as possible to everyday life of contemporary Nigeria; there is nothing, almost, improbable about the incidents and events of the novel.

*The Contract* is a realistic evocation of a society that has lost its moral values in its quest for wealth. The plutocrats would do anything to win contracts or to succeed in their business organisations. Mr. Oloru has no scruples sending his wife to sexually gratify the State Administrator and other top Officials in

order that they should “swing the contract in his favour” (p.119). Chief Ekata’s vast business organisation grows through the technique of using women employees as lures to win favours. He thus sends Eunice Agbon to seduce Ogie Obala into awarding him the contract. He also poisons and kills Mr. Oluru who seems to constitute an uncompromising business rival to him. Intrigue and faithlessness are the ingredients of business relations in a materialistic society. It is Mallam Mallam who underscores the essence of contemporary social values, when he tells his friend, Ogie Obala, that “you only talk about conscience when dealing with decent, moral people. You must never forget that” (pp. 18-19).

Uncle Suralo also explains to Ogie that society no longer expects ideals. He tries to make Ogie accept the ruling ideology of materialism as inevitable in contemporary society, to make him discard his illusions about reformed humanity:

It is the way that society functions and there is nothing that can be done about it... The way the society works is quite different from the way you people see it at college. Never make yourself laws... Always go with the wind... Life isn't a lot of New Year Eves. At least not in your country... there is no need to be disgusted because a contractor brings you a carton of whisky or even offers you his wife... And you will be happier if only you will learn to separate your dream from what is real (pp. 37-39).

What this shows is that there is a complete breakdown of moral order in contemporary society. The only laudable values are material acquisitiveness and exploitativeness.

In a novel, wrote Norman Carrington (1976), it is not the story that gives the main interest but the characters. Festus Iyayi is a competent interpreter of character, as is evident in this novel. Ogie Obala dominates the story. Like Obi Okonkwo in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, and Banko in Armah’s *Fragments*, Ogie Obala typifies the sensitive and humane conscience of an educated young man returning from overseas. He is full of high idealism, is inspired by a positive vision, and is repulsed by the callous materialism and greed of his fellow countrymen.

Right from the moment he arrives from abroad, Ogie is disgusted at the rowdiness and chaos that characterize the Benin airport; he is disgusted at the

desperate and hungry faces moving around the airport buildings in search of casual work:

The excitement that had surged within him – the excitement of coming home – now died... He was ashamed when he looked around, at the vast hall with its dirt and filth and desperate angry people. He was ashamed and bitter and depressed. (p.6)

He is angry at the fact that the clean and spacious streets in the town are closed to all road users except the state Administrator and his personal relations. Social injustice and social inequality move him to shame. He tells his uncle: “I have told my father to connect the electricity supply to the servants’ quarters but he simply won’t do it... It is a shame for us to have electricity in the main house and for the servants to use kerosene lamps in their quarters” (p.36). Ogie’s sympathies therefore are with the underdogs of the society – the poor, faceless masses who are sidelined and pigeon – holed into oblivion by the ruling classes. He is revolted by the fact that the politicians, the bourgeoisie and top military Officials are busy accumulating wealth without trying to alleviate the harsh living conditions of the poor.

The pervasive idea that material wealth counts above morality and conscience does not hold true for Ogie Obala, who thinks that ten thousand Naira is too much as the wage of the Principal Secretary of the Ogie City Council. He hesitates to hold the office because he thinks it will make him an accomplice to the nationwide crime of exploitation and embezzlement. He feels disappointed that everyday seems to have concluded that “the black man was born corrupt, that it is in his blood and that nothing can be done about it” (p.27).

However, the current against which Ogie swims eventually proves too strong for him and he is washed downstream like the rest. By accepting the job of the Principal Secretary of the Ogie city Council he makes himself, in principle, part of the establishment he so stridently condemns. At the onset of his accepting the job however, he is determined that he is going to be a shining example of human decency and incorruptible. “I am going to be an example .... I am going to be decent and straightforward and clear-headed about money” (p.21). Only fifteen weeks after taking office as Principal Secretary, a petition signed by seven senior officials against him is sent to the State Administrator. The petitioners demand the removal of Ogie from the post of Principal Secretary, ostensibly because they think Ogie’s

qualifications were forged. But the real reason for the petition is explained by chief Eweh Obala to his son: "...the men complain that you have made it impossible for them to operate... They say you keep records of everything, you call in auditors to check the accounts and you want to know how each Kobo is spent" (p.63). What this shows is Ogie's determination to instill sanity into the corrupt Public Service. He is determined that he will only award contracts to deserving bidders, and convinced that the ten percent cut from the value of the contract is immoral. His moral prompting makes him to refuse cartons of whisky, parcels of money, and women from bidders for the multimillion Naira contracts for the construction of low-cost housings. But as these attempts to influence Ogie become insistent, his mind becomes the battleground of opposing forces – of material expediency and moral restraint, of social status and individual integrity, of illusion and reality.

Eventually, the pressure of social reality and material exigency prove overwhelming, and his idealism becomes diluted. The turn-about in his existential philosophy becomes obvious, as can be seen in his stream of thoughts:

A man had to enjoy himself, had to make sure he was doing something, always in the active living process... A man had to consume money, woman, food, people, all the resources at his disposal for the sole aim, for the purpose of active living (p.14).

With his girl-friend, Rose, pregnant, Ogie begins to look forward to a future of wealth and big business. His ambition now is to buy a supermarket. He is now one with the establishment, but the difference between him and the rest is that he is determined that his own share of embezzled money will be invested in his own nation, not taken abroad to foreign banks. In the attempt to steal his own share of the money from his father, who is entrusted with banking all of it aboard, he is shot dead by his own father.

Ogie Obala is a realistically individualized character. He has names of Bendel (Edo and Delta) origin. He constitutes, especially before becoming Principal Secretary, the object of family concern and anxiety as he evinces a non-conformist attitude towards material values. He is seen in his love affairs, some romantic, some disappointing. Above all, he is seen in his heroic struggle to keep his illusions and idealism against the inexorable forces of materialism and corruption. Besides, his portraiture, though being an individual experience, typifies the disturbed conscience of the bourgeoisie

and the dilemma of an idealist in a capitalist society. Ogie, therefore, embodies the social challenges of contemporary times. Discussing the question of typology as the hallmark of realistic fiction, Georg Lukacs (1972) argues that a character is typical “when his inner most being is determined by the objective forces at work in society” (p. 122); and this one finds in Ogie Obala.

This realistic portrayal of character is also evident in the portrait of Chief Eweh Obala. From the point of individual details, family and social relations, Chief Obala is a credible character. A native of the ancient city of Benin, he is both identified and recognized as a Chief and Chairman of the Ogbe City Council, where decisions on multi-million Naira contracts are being taken. He therefore belongs to the inner circle of the traditional and political bodies of the State. Compared with his son Ogie, he has a radically different view of the social and political situation of his country. He does not scruple to use his political influence to appoint his son as Principal Secretary in charge of special projects at the Ogbe City Council. He is annoyed that his son is hesitant to accept such a lucrative job just because he wants to have honest money. For him education and morality do not count for anything in contemporary society. All that matters is material wealth, got by whatever devious means. He emphasizes this conviction to his wife:

It's not the kind or even the number of degrees that a person has that matters these days, it's the amount of money he has in his pocket, how many houses, what kind of cars he has. And nobody cares how you get these things. It's the result, the end result that matters, not the means (p. 13).

Chief Ewah Obala is a shrewd capitalist. He is apprehensive that the persistent exploitation of the working class by the ruling class will eventually result in a violent revolution, and that he and others may be called upon to account for the national wealth they have misappropriated. He thus makes sure that his money is safely put away in Swiss banks. If the revolutionary wind begins to gather momentum, he would escape to Paris or London and enjoy his stolen money. He therefore does not think it prudent of Ogie Obala to invest his money in business within Nigeria. Chief Ewah Obala's characterization amplifies the theme of political corruption and exploitation. He is the foremost of government agents whose duty is to help transfer oil wealth to foreign countries, and the viciousness with which he performs his

task is ironically underscored by the fact that he unknowingly shoots his son who tries to steal from him. His personality symbolises capitalism's ability to blight and scorch the growth of idealism.

The minor characters like the major ones serve to elucidate the themes of moral degradation and political corruption. Rose Isabelle is Ogie Obala's old-time girl friend through whose eyes we see the plight of young girls in contemporary society. She is a strong-minded young woman who sees, with bitterness, the collapse of human values and the triumph of material norms in today's society: "I mean for those of us at the bottom of the ladder", she explains to Ogie, "one scratches and scratches until the fingers are broken and the head is broken. But the spirit remains" (p. 23). She complains that employers demand sexual gratification from young female applicants as a pre-condition for employment. She is outraged by the fact that the masses are being trampled upon in the mad rush for money. An idealist herself, she is determined to go into the university and get education, at least it will give her an enlightened view of life. As a character, Rose Idebale also typifies the predicament of young women in a society that has lost the traditional regard and respect for womanhood.

The essence of type characters in realistic literature, according to David Lodge, is that "the public and the private are blended together in a very stable mixture", thus rendering a situation "whereby we share the intimate thoughts of a single character while at the same time being aware of a reality, a history, that is larger and more complex than the individual in the midst of it can comprehend" (p. 38). It is evident that almost all the characters, especially the major ones, are centred on or are members of the same family. This could be a deliberate portrayal. For just as the characters are types, the Obala family is a symbolic representation of the whole society. The different family members reflect the different outlook of/to the society.

If the characters of Ogie and his father usher us into the luxurious life-style of the bourgeoisie, Rose Idebale's portrait opens a window into the filth and indigence that characterise the lives of the masses. Like in **Violence**, a sharp contrast is drawn between these two classes of people through vivid characterisation, which becomes a vehicle for the themes of social injustice, moral decadence, and the exploitation of one class by another. There is a wide difference in the values of the capitalist class whose conscience has become callous, and in those of the masses who struggle to retain the humanness of their spirit, as Rose tells Ogie, that "One scratches and



scratches...But the spirit remains". While Chief Ewah Obala looks at education as inconsequential in contemporary society, Rose still looks up to it as the only way to having an enlightened, philosophical grasp of life.

This use of contrast is also evident in Iyayi's handling of space or place. Through attention to minute particulars of place, the reader is impressed with the squalid environments that the poor live in. Their streets are particularly depressing:

They were littered with all kinds of refuse – corn leaves plantain peelings, bottles, cans and sewage. Gigantic heaps of dirt were left at the roadsides....Each squalid house vomited rubbish from its entrance, which then overflowed into the road (p. 7).

In contrast to the above, the description of Chief Ewah Obala's house brings to mind a kind of luxury and opulence typical of his class:

Chief Ewah Obala's house was painted white and it was a storey building...On the left of these steps were the massive doors of the huge garage. You climbed the three steps and you came to the front door and you opened it and there was a passage, on the time immediate right of which stood a door that opened into the luxurious, sitting room (p. 11).

The attention to minute particulars in the description of scenes and environment, Ian Watt (1957) has opined, is very like the close-up technique in cinematography in that it adds "a new dimension to the representation of reality" (p. 27). It gives the impression that we are beholding actuality.

Although mainstream realists condemn the use of the stream of consciousness in fiction, contemporary novelists employ this technique as a means of portraying the individual's subjective responses to objective reality, and reflecting the spiritual depth of the characters. Thus in **The Contract** there are moments that Ogie Obala is engrossed in introspections as he grapples with the social forces of his society. After accepting the job of a Principal Secretary, Ogie is continually worried about the dilemma of how to be part of the establishment and yet remain incorrupt:

I must find a way out of this trap if I am to keep my sanity... Three people have used the word 'trap' to me already... And all have advised me to separate my dreams

from what is real, to acknowledge the trap for what it is and to live within it instead of attempting to fight it... I must be a hunchback to acknowledge that all ways of walking are upright (p. 40-41).

Introspective self-explorations enable the novelist to picture not only the cognitive but also the emotive aspects of the characters. Although such “dramatizing of the mind actually dissolves outer reality”, as Wellek (1963, p. 251) argues, it portrays, how social reality impinges on the character’s consciousness.

The story is told by an omniscient narrator, but what is explored is the sensibility of an idealist in an exploitative and corrupt society. It is through his perspective and experiences that a window is opened into the inner chambers of the bourgeoisie and ruling classes. Ogie’s fight is an attempt to be unlike members of his exploitative and callous class. When his ideals crumble, we draw the conclusion that it is impossible to belong with the oppressive class and still remain morally committed to the cause of the masses. The tasks of social mobilization and moral regeneration demand a radical break-away from the contaminating grip of the dominating class.

Festus Iyayi’s obsession with the plight of the proletariat, however, makes him to occasionally intrude into his narrative. When the newspapers report that the government plans to spend eighty million Naira on the construction of a Presidential palace, the novelist describes the workers’ reaction thus:

They were all angry that their government should have planned to spend so much money in building a living house for one single person when there were millions of others suffering, millions without jobs, with children who were starving and dying of kwashiorkor (p. 154).

The above passage is obviously the novelist’s ideology that has intruded into the narrative; it is Iyayi’s personal voice of condemnation speaking a bit too loudly.

The plot of the novel is a tragic exposition of the overwhelming influences of a capitalist system. It shows how an idealist hero loses his illusions and falls victim to the vicious forces of exploitation and corruption. What is obvious in this plot development is its undialectical structure: the protagonist’s relationship with objective reality is one-sided. Reality acts on Ogie, crushing his resistance to the establishment, but Ogie does not act positively to effect

changes on the society. In spite of the novel's criticism of social reality, it remains structurally a critical realist novel because of its unilinear development, its lack of a dynamic response to socio-economic reality. Novels of critical realism begin and end with a note of despair and pessimism. Udentia has underscored this point about the novel:

What we see at the beginning of the novel is what we see at the end. The misery, squalor, poverty, shanty-town dwelling...are all processes that are repeated, cyclically and enduringly. The characters' naïve and innocent acceptance of the status-quo and their incapacity to contribute to social progress are....products of this static outlook (p. 70).

*The Contract*, nevertheless, should be applauded for its unabashed dissection of the ruling classes, its exposition of their intrigues and corruption. In content and form, the novel is another triumph of realistic fiction in contemporary times. It has given us a vivid picture of social reality, just as it has observed the basic laws of art. By its probability it suspends disbelief and ensures verisimilitude; and it is this element of probability that Chidi Amuta (1986) has applauded in the novel of social reality:

The distinctiveness of the novel resides in its implicit adoption of a realist epistemology. The essence of realism is the fictional representation of a slice of social experience in a manner that reminds us through the laws of probability and causality, of everyday existence (p. 83).

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