LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research 2021, 18 (4): 169-182
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LWATI: A Jour. of Contemp. Res.
ISSN: 1813-222 ©Dec. 2021
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FESTUS IYAYI'S FICTION AND THE REVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVE: A STUDY OF *VIOLENCE* AND *HEROES.*

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Abstract

Festus Iyayi is among African writers who believe that the novelist's responsibility does not stop at simply diagnosing and exposing the social and political evils that bedevil contemporary society and that the novelist should also proffer solutions to the predicaments which confound the masses. In *Violence* and *Heroes* Iyayi locates the root cause of the people's travails in the class structure of the contemporary Nigerian society. His protagonists not only become conscious of social injustice, capitalist exploitation and class antagonism; they also understand the need for a new order and that only a revolutionary confrontation of the capitalist establishment can redeem their class and enthrone justice in the society.

Keywords: Festus Iyayi, fiction, Capitalism, alienation, Marxism, aesthetics, violence, revolution, praxis.

Introduction

Festus Iyayi belongs to that extraction of African novelists who believe that art must go beyond fulfilling its traditional role and responsibility of exposing the ineptitude and corruption of the establishment, the class divisions and class contradictions that characterise and bedevil contemporary society. For this class of writers art must do more than just this exposition and criticism of social vices and economic injustice; it should proffer solutions to the existential dilemmas of modern man. In this respect the novel of socialist realism differs from the novel of social realism and the modernist novel.

The novel of social realism (also called critical realism) no doubt has an ethical vision; it aspires to reform society by exposing social reality and social vices with the hope of pricking the conscience of the

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ISSN: 1813-222 ©Dec. 2021
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establishment. In the modernist novel the plot exposes the psychological withdrawal of the protagonist as a result of the overwhelming socio-political pressures bearing on him; his vision and convictions are obstructed and thwarted by the pressures of a decadent and triumphant society. In socialist realism on the other hand, world experience converts the protagonist into a social being.

The Doctrine of Socialist Realism and the Idea of Praxis

In consultation with Josef Stalin, the doctrine of socialist realism was propounded by Maxim Gorky and was officially promulgated at the first Soviet Writers' Congress held in 1934 to inaugurate the Writers' Union. The official dogma of socialist realism was stated in the following terms:

> Socialist realism being the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism requires from the artist a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, truth and historical completeness of artistic representation must be combined with the task of ideological transformation and education of the working men in the spirit of socialism (Slonim 165).

Marxist theory of history—historical materialism—emphatically rejects the autonomy of thought over external reality that is commonly witnessed in modernist novels; it is, according to Fredric Jameson, "the doctrine of the unity of thinking and action or of the social determination of thought—which is irreducible to pure reason or to contemplation" (161). Georg Lukacs has also argued that in socialist realism

> The end is not resignation. On the contrary, the process begins with resignation and leads on to active participation in the life of the community. Nor does the hero end up in isolation as in so many of the later novels of critical realism. Rather, isolation gives way to an increasing involvement with the new social forces, a new and higher type of personality emerges (113).

One of the fundamental contributions of Marxism to the theory and practice of art is the revolutionary spirit, variously referred to as

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tendentiousness, engagement, political commitment, or praxis. Marxist philosophy and aesthetics condemn as psychopathological all attempts at spiritually transcending empirical reality as in the religious worldview that encourages submission to suffering, the primacy of the spiritual over the material, as well as attempts to provide ethical answers to socio-economic questions. Similarly, a work of art that dwells exclusively on outer reality and neglects the consciousness has not adopted the dialectical method of historical realism. Once outer reality and consciousness are seen as an organic totality, then we will have neither pure thought nor stark reality, but what Fredric Jameson calls a "union of thought and action that the Marxists call praxis" (188).

The Marxist concept of praxis is condemns the reliance on objective forces of capitalism to bring about the required social development. Orthodox Marxism actually expected the arrival of a socialist revolution through the evolutionary, mechanical breakdown of the capitalist economy, but, as Carl Boggs argues, the doctrine of praxis is impatient with this determinism of economic forces, and insists rather on the active interference of political agents to bring about the desired change (22). Proletarian consciousness must be seen negating and restructuring the oppressive socio-political situation and projecting towards the future. Praxis, which is the culmination of socialist realism, does not, like critical realism, believe that the solutions to social dilemma lie in moral reform and the elicitation of bourgeois sympathy for the suffering masses. Its priorities are class-consciousness, class struggle, and collective action. According to Innocent Chiluwa, "socialist realism does not only articulate economic exploitation but suggests to the exploited the way out. Its scrutiny of social realities is therefore for a cause—the unveiling of the capitalist mode of production and proposing a revolutionary alternative" (101).

But the question of tendentiousness or ideology in Marxist aesthetics should not be taken as the only yardstick of artistic success. While the committed writer's art will of course reflect the social conditions and relationships that impinge on the consciousness of the protagonist, it must also demonstrate sufficient artistry to make it survive and endure as art. It is the writer's responsibility to guard against pitfalls of vulgar Marxism and strike a balance between art and politics, to observe, as

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Krylov points out, "the unity of idea and artistry" (26). What this means is that a work of art must, first and foremost, be judged by its achievements in form before evaluating it from the point of view of ideology and class relations. The artist must find a convenient meeting point between craft or form and idea, as Leon Trotsky has advised when he wrote that "a work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art" (178).

The Nigerian Novel in Perspective

Prior to the political debacle that launched Nigeria into civil war in 1967, the Nigerian literary scene witnessed the consolidation of the novel whose vision and form were directed towards restoring the cultural values of a past that had been bastardised and deconstructed by European colonialism. The Nigerian novelist, like his fellow-travellers all over black Africa, felt challenged to explode the absurd idea that Africa's past was characterised by infantile savagery and barbarism. For Achebe and others the African writer must first of all restore the integrity of African culture and the African personality before dwelling on socio-political themes, however legitimate (1964:175).

Against the background of capitalist contradictions, social injustice and class conflict, African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Sembene Ousmane, Ben Okri, Alex La Guma, and Festus Iyayi have adopted a combatant worldview in which the exploited masses are shown to revolt against a system that dehumanises and inferiorises them. Jude Agho argues that "this tilting towards a literature of praxis" has "radicalised the outlook" of these novelists because they "prescribe revolutionary solutions in the form of organised revolts and syndicalism to the problems of Africa" (96).

The post-colonial Nigerian novel exposes the disillusionment of the intellectuals and the disappointment of the masses. The new governments increasingly exhibited alarming rates of corruption, opportunism, exploitation, class snobbery, and social hypocrisy. And for the apostles of cultural affirmation the rude awakening was the political crisis that benighted the nation from 1967 to 1970. It then became imperative for Nigerian writers to concern themselves with the social

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and political exigencies of the nation. "If the artist is anything", Achebe writes later:

> If the artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensitivities; he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer (1975:79).

As economic exploitation of workers intensify and political irresponsibility becomes unbearable, as class divisions deepen and class antagonism becomes obvious, the creative imagination assumes the responsibility of exposing the political and social injustice in the society. More radical writers go beyond merely chronicling the disparities: having despaired of humanist reform, they call for revolutionary action as the only solution to the predicament of the masses. The worldview of the Nigerian novel of the post bellum years is therefore understandably socialist, revolutionary, and radical. Gradualist reformation and ethical resolutions of capitalist injustice are abandoned in favour of class consciousness and a revolutionary mobilization of the masses. It is against this background that Charles Nnolim exhorted African writers to embrace the Marxist approach to literature:

> As our writers move closer and closer to what we call "social art"—art that contemplates society—we expect art that is propagandist, art that tends towards proletarian concerns and inevitably, art that has Marxist overtones. It means that social relevance will also be the measuring stick of our criticism, which must be sensitive to the affective nature of social art as an arch ideologue (31).

Jude Agho has also pointed out that post-colonial Marxist novelists, besides concerning themselves with the predicament of the masses, also use their novels to "embody major revolutions, usually orchestrated by the working class against the oppression of its members by the oppressor or bourgeoisie class and work towards the redemption of the victims of the oppressor by granting them victory at the end of the struggles" (96).

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Festus Iyayi's Fiction and the Concept of Violence

In his crusade against colonialism, Frantz Fanon had repeatedly affirmed that if Africans were to triumph against the colonialist death-grip, then they had to "use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence" (1967: 28). Fanon found it expedient to use force and violence against the exploiters because, as he argues:

> The exploited man sees that his liberation implies the use of all means, and the use of force first and foremost. . . .Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence (1967: 48).

Fanon believed that a people who are alienated from their land and from the products of their labour, a people who are systematically bestialised and dehumanised have no choice but to resort to violence in order to reclaim its dignity: "A society that drives its members to desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society to be replaced" (1964: 53). And Jean-Paul Sartre, in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth,* endorses this view when he writes: "For violence, like Achilles' lance, can heal the wounds that it has inflicted (25). Sani and Mani agree that "in a colonial and neo-colonial situation one cannot but give credence to a Fanonian view of violence. This school of thought regards violence as inextricably bound to counter-violence" (40).

Festus Iyayi's first novel, *Violence,* adopts and illustrates this concept of violence. Economic exploitation, psychological insecurity, and social inequality are shown to be various forms of capitalist violence against the helpless masses. Set in Benin City of contemporary Nigeria, the novel's plot revolves around two sharply divided classes: the proletariat or working class and the bourgeoisie or propertied class. The common workers are represented by Idemudia and his wife Adisa, as well as Idemudia's friends and co-workers. Living in dilapidated houses and with no regular jobs, they are perpetually harassed by floods, mosquitos, and hunger. They are over-worked and underpaid by the capitalists who offer them casual jobs, and they are often driven by existential

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contingencies to the extremity of selling their blood for token sums money.

On the other side of the class divide is the representative bourgeois family of Obofun and his wife Queen. In their mental attitude and life-style the couple typify the callousness and crass materialism that attend the relentless pursuit of wealth in a capitalist society. For them human relations are only meaningful according as they translate to material benefit. It is noteworthy that love has long gone out of their marriage, and that what sustains the relationship is the fact that Obofun, a public service man, has had property and businesses invested in Queen's name, Divorcing her would mean losing all his dubious investments. Queen on her part has grown wealthy by sleeping with Obofun's friends in return for contract awards and money. When her workers agitate for higher wages she tries to seduce their leader Idemudia to sleep with her and so compromise the workers' solidarity and agitations. When Idemudia falls ill from hard work and stress, he cannot afford the hospital bills and his wife Adisa is tempted to yield to Obofun's insistent sexual advances to enable her pay her husband's bills. Obofun justifies his carnal exploitation of Adisa on the grounds that "a woman is not married when her husband cannot take care of her" (165). Reification characterises the value system of the bourgeoisie, just as alienation typifies the experiences of the working class.

Festus Iyayi does not rest content with class-profiling the society, he also exposes the miscarriage of social institutions, government's irresponsibility and its misplaced priorities. The University Hospital cannot admit the sick Idemudia because there are no vacant beds and the stricken doctor "couldn't understand why in the midst of so much disease, the government concentrated on building hotels instead of hospitals" (55). The Ogbe Hospital too cannot admit Idemudia—the staff are reserving the vacant beds for people of the upper class who can afford the high bills.

According to Ujowundo, Iyayi's *Violence* "presents desperate men and women caught up in physical, social, economic and psychological violence. The violence is embedded in the power which very few individuals have over the economic life of the entire citizenry" (309).

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The novel resounds with the theme of capitalist violence against the common man. In the play acted at the Ogbe Hospital to entertain the visiting Health Commissioner, the Counsel for Defence is obviously encapsulating Iyayi's idea of violence when he speaks in defence of the petty thief:

> In my understanding acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the opportunity of being educated, of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly. We often do not realise that it is the society, the type of economic and hence the political system which we operate in our country today that brutalises the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realise that when such men of poor and limited opportunities react, they are only in a certain measure, answering violence with violence (185).

It is remarkable that after watching this play and listening to this interpretation of violence that Idemudia begins to think of his entire life experiences in terms of capitalist violence: "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 a slow and gradual debasement of himself, his pride as a man" (243).

At the beginning of the novel Idemudia had neither class nor political consciousness. He had considered his predicament as an individual misfortune, unrelated to the socio-economic system in which he found himself. Towards the end of the novel Idemudia develops into a positive revolutionary hero, his consciousness has been sharpened by his experiences and he becomes ready to protect the interest of his fellow workers, to protest against low wages and poor working conditions. He speaks for his class, he organises them, he bargains for them, he calls for strike action. More importantly, Idemudia resists all attempts by Queen to seduce and bribe him into compromising the class struggle. By this heroic gesture he rejects the bourgeois tendency to reify, to reduce human values to base materialistic terms.

Violence not only contains the ingredients of class and social consciousness, it also adopts the aesthetics of dialectical materialism: the

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harsh realities of a capitalist system impinge on the consciousness of the characters who, having learnt the root cause of their predicament, resolve to influence and change their working and living conditions. Commenting on this dialectical relationship between characterisation and reality, Udenta O. Udenta notes that at the beginning of the novel we see a man who is not politically or socially conscious, but who later graduates to an agitator along with his friends, all of them determined "to stand together, and fight for their rights, and if possible help in the establishment of a new socio-economic order where institutionalised violence and barbarity will have no place" (72).

Workers' solidarity in fiction is a salutary step towards a socialist re-structuring of the system because, as Trotsky argues, "only that literature which promotes the consolidation of the workers in their struggle against the exploiters is necessary and progressive" (230).

In *Violence* Festus Iyayi adopts and projects the Fanonian idea that the exploitation and dehumanisation of man, either by colonialism or by capitalism, constitutes an insidious and sinister kind of violence; and that such institutions of violence can only be dismantled by decisive counter-violence on the part of the exploited masses.

In *Heroes* Iyayi revisits and recreates the nightmarish and agonizing experiences of the Nigerian civil war as a platform for exposing the real motives behind the war. The author's recurrent concern with the plight of the masses is evident—the soldiers and civilians upon whom were foisted a senseless war and its concomitant travails. His contention is that in-fighting among the ruling and dominant classes—the politicians, the army and businessmen—is the major, but veiled cause of the war, and his resentment is that rather than fight it out among themselves, these classes of people manipulate the masses into a war that was actually orchestrated to protect the interest of people other than the actual victims. It is greed and lust for power among the ruling classes that has threatened the unity of the country, but these classes have used their monopoly over the mass media to whip up tribal sentiments and hatred among the gullible masses as a reason for the war. Festus Iyayi identifies the generals, the politicians and businessmen as the real enemies of the people (not the Ibo farmers and Ibo workers), just as

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Soyinka had identified and accused them as power profiteers "from the common disaster and mutual sacrifice of war" (15). Ogbeide O. Victor has remarked that "the uniqueness of *Heroes* among other civil war novels lies in the fact that Iyayi here examines the Nigerian civil war through the spectacle of the Marxist ideology" by adopting a "class standpoint" in his assessment of the conflict (75).

The narrative opens at the closing phase of the Nigerian civil war. Benin City is still occupied by the Biafran troops, but it is expected that the Federal troops will soon redeem the city. Osime Iyere, a political correspondent with the newspaper, is of the common opinion that the occupying Biafran troops are inhuman and brutish. He entertains the illusion that the federal troops, when they come, will be the humane liberators of the people: "The federal troops will come and drive these Biafrans away and then everything will be different. There will be no more cruelty. The beating and maltreatment of the people will stop" (2). Ten days after the Biafran troops have been evacuated from the city, Iyere has witnessed enough inhumanity from the federal troops to kill his romantic illusions about their good intentions. He is revolted by the fact that they have had to strip the defeated and helpless Biafran soldiers to their pants before shooting them, instead of taking them prisoners. When his landlord and father to his girlfriend, an Ibo man, is shot and killed before his eyes Iyere's disillusion with the federal troops is complete. He begins to think there is more to this war than just fighting to keep the nation one, that there is sadism, fascism, the lust for money and power, all woven into the ostensible reason of the war. He comes to the conclusion that neither of the warring factions has a positive agenda or vision for the common man. One faction is just as inhuman, selfish, rapacious, corrupt and vindictive as the other. He finds no justification for the atrocities committed against people who have practically no stake in this unprincipled war:

> The people are manipulated into a war only to have their children killed, their houses destroyed . . . . The generals and the politicians and the religious leaders and business men send their children away from the country to make sure that they do not suffer from the war. But the workers and the farmers and the poor people remain and yield up their children to the war (63).

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Iyere is determined to discover the true motives behind the war as well as the manner and principles of its execution. His experiences at the Asaba front convince him not only of the heroic sacrifices of the soldiers, but also of the corruption, injustice, and nepotism among the top military officers. Sergeant Kaolawole, for instance, disagreed with a major on matters of strategy and got demoted to the rank of a Corporal. The battalion lost three hundred men on account of the major's strategy. Colonel Otunshi is promoted to the rank of Brigadier immediately after shooting a Major who dared to look with admiration at his wife. Brigadier Otunshi is now the epitome of war profiteering. He is known to have sold federal arms to the Biafrans who later used them to fight the federal troops. He is also known to send his battalion to battle a few days before their pay-day: the higher the casualty the richer he becomes because he and the paymaster, Major Dantari, eventually share the wages of soldiers killed in action. Like all top military officers in this war, the first thing Brigadier Otunshi does on capturing a town is to sack it, break into the banks and blow the safes open. Relief materials donated by international agencies are sold by the military officers to big businessmen.

Having thus experienced the war first-hand and understood the principles on which it was fought, Iyere comes to the conclusion that

> It was in the expectation of profit that the business community fanned the flames of war, why the politicians offered canned meat to the dogs of war, why the bishops offered prayers for the war, why the professors rationalised the war, why the generals gave the signal for the killings. The greed for power and profit lies at the bottom of this war (148).

Iyere blames the war on the ruling classes of the Nigerian society, and feels the need for a third army, "a people's army to fight the people's war" against the politicians, the businessmen, and top military officers (44). If the soldiers now fighting each other knew that they were both victims of a class interest, then Ojukwu and Gowon would be on the run because they would be on the same side; while the ordinary Yoruba man, Ibo man, and Hausa man would constitute the third, revolutionary army against exploitation. Convinced that there is a criminal complicity

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by the ruling classes against the masses, Iyere feels an urgent need for a third army:

> What is needed . . . is a third army. An army to ask questions about the purpose of this war, about the reasons behind this war. The third army will sit among the soldiers, Biafrans and Nigerians alike, and tell them that this is not their war, that they are shooting at the wrong enemies. The real enemies are the politicians who robbed the country blind . . . . The third army will turn their guns on generals, line them up and shoot them one by one, the generals of both armies (90).

Iyere begins to indoctrinate the soldiers at the war front on the class basis of the war, with the aim of recruiting a revolutionary third force, a dissident and insurgent third army that will turn against their cowardly and hedonistic commanders, an army that will protest against the war and protect the interest of the masses.

Iyere's characterisation typifies the emotional, psychological, and intellectual changes that occur in a sensitive individual as he experiences the social and political situation of his country. It is to his perceptive and analytical mind that we owe much insight into the truth and nature of the war. It is through his eyes that we see the corruption and profiteering among the top military officers, their criminal connivance with the politicians and businessmen, and the falsehood, hypocrisy and graft that inform the cause and execution of the war.

The novel's dialectical structure is therefore the making of a revolutionary vision— Iyere's conversion from a pro-establishment stance to an apostle of a people's force. He experiences the war situation first-hand and gains knowledge of the true class origins of the war. He becomes the mouthpiece of the exploited and manipulated masses. As a social product of the historical forces operating in his country, Iyere in turn attempts to arrest and transform those forces. Pointing out the dynamic nature of Iyere's character Ogbeide O. Victor argues that:

> From being a Nigerian loyalist, Iyere becomes not even a Biafran sympathiser but a socialist revolutionary who now

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> sees the salvation of the masses only in a class war that will be fought by a third army of which he is the first recruit. . . . Osime Iyere's overriding thesis is that the masses, the innocent and inexperienced rank-and-file on either side of the two warring factions (Biafra and Federal) should come together to defeat the oppressive ruling class in order to live meaningful lives (77).

Conclusion

Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* and *Violence* illustrate the idea of praxis in its exploration of a revolutionary consciousness that explodes into action. In both novels the writer is not content with the exposition of mere surface reality, but shows the psychological transformation that takes in individuals who are caught in the capitalist web. The characters' response to their socio-political dilemma is not existential withdrawal or resignation, but a resolve to revolt against the oppressive establishment, to change it, and thereby restore their human dignity.

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