
Discrimination and Class Oppression: An Example of Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*

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Abstract

*Discrimination is a social problem which has eaten deep into the social circles of different African societies. It is seen in public or private sectors; religious or traditional groups as individuals in a given society engage in endless class struggles in order to control socio-economic and political powers. In essence, discrimination divides humanity into different classes and thus encourages marginalization and oppression in many forms; hence leading to violent protests or demonstrations. This paper examines discriminatory actions in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World* in order to ascertain the causes of discrimination which divides the society into the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. In order to critically explore the different levels of discrimination and oppression in the selected novel, this research employs Marxism as the theoretical framework. In exploring the novel, the findings show massive exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie (government and rich individuals) who neglect a poverty stricken section of the society called the 'Fourth world' and thus cause untold hardship. This research therefore recommends that the government should bridge a gap between the rich and poor by providing basic social amenities in different areas of the society in order to enhance the living conditions of the poor. Government should also monitor sectors that manage government owned establishments for*

efficiency and accountability in order to protect the rights of poor citizens who are daily exploited.

Key words: Discrimination, Oppression, Marxism, Class struggle, Disillusionment

Introduction

Discrimination is a common issue in contemporary African societies today. It refers to a situation whereby certain existing individuals or social groups marginalize, exclude or neglect other groups in different spheres of human endeavours. Hence, discrimination occurs when a group of people is subjected to unequal treatment as a result of their political or socio-economic status. Therefore, any form of distinction, marginalization or exclusion based on social status, religion, tribe, ethnic group, or cultural background which denies basic human rights, employment opportunities or the provision of basic social amenities to a particular group of individuals is referred to as discrimination.

Discrimination as a social problem encourages class struggles and oppression in society. In Richard Gelles and Ann Levine view, “discrimination refers to the denial of rights and respect to individuals because they are members of a group” (125). James Henslin goes further to assert that “the unfair treatment can be based on almost anything such as age, race, sex, height, income...these are all common bases of discrimination”(251).

Discrimination and class oppression are common social problems faced by the citizens of many developed and developing countries now. Such social problems include: abject poverty, terrorism, discrimination/ class distinction, rape, domestic violence, human trafficking, prostitution, armed robbery, political struggles, corruption etc. Many literary artists, Human rights agencies, social

groups and marginalized society have contributed in diverse ways to help curb these problems but they continued unabated. Significant efforts have been made to promote equality and debase marginalization over the years in order to improve the living conditions of people; yet, selfish individuals in society have greatly undermined these efforts. As a result, writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Wole Soyinka, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Femi Osofian, Okot P’ Bitek, Peter Abrahams, Alex Laguma, Festus Iyayi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo , Ifeoma Okoye , Tanure Ojaide , Gabriel Okara and others have dedicated their writings to exposing this social menace. These radical writers and critics in Charles Nnolim’s view “engaged in discursive relations between classes in their theoretical constructs, and thus politicized the cultural basis on which the criticism of African criticism was hitherto based” (16-17).

Ifeoma Okoye, a prolific writer and core nationalist has dedicated her literary energy in depicting the discrimination, injustice, greed, abject poverty, corruption, insecurity, exploitation, bad leadership and disillusionment that have engulfed the Nigerian society using her fictional environment of Kasanga to paint her sordid pictures. Her selected novel for this research, *The Fourth World* published in 2013 x-rays an impoverished urban shantytown of Kasanga in Enugu. In exploring the Kasanga Avenue, the novelist exposes series of social discrimination, marginalization, oppression and squalor that characterize that social environment. Also in depicting the experiences of her major character, Chiralum, Okoye intrinsically explores the conscious marginalization that has impinged on the general well-being of Kasanga citizens. To explore the above stated views, this research adopts Marxism as its theoretical framework to examine how Okoye captured and addressed bourgeoisie impunities.

Theoretical framework

Marxist literary criticism views literature as an artistic construct with intrinsic socio-political and economic structures. Mortimer Adler explains that the social relationship according to Marx and Engels is a “ history of class struggles where oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition with one another...a fight that each timer ended either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes”(419).This simply means that a fictional work is a composition of literary consciousness inspired by historical facts, social, economic and political events which can influence the novelist’s narration and depiction of human experiences. Terry Eagleton explains that “it is the characteristic of Marxism that it refuses to on the one hand a retreat from social and political into ‘discourse’, while also refusing a cynical or defeatist complicity with social existence as we know it”(x).

Therefore, the Marxist critic offers interpretation of a literary work by discussing and evaluating its ideology through the critical lens of Marxism. Marxist criticism is anchored on the economic and political ideologies of the radical German but London based thinkers, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1899), who chided vehemently the autocracy of the bourgeoisie class in a capitalist system. The above mentioned philosophers view capitalism as a new form of feudalism because the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ has become so polarized. This polarity is as a result of the exploitation of the proletariats by the economic class or the bourgeoisies who control the means of production and distribution. However, it is believed that the marginalization and oppression can be controlled by creating a revolutionary consciousness that gears towards replacing

an oppressive social structure with a more transparent one in the form of 'socialism'. M.A.R Habib goes further to explain that:

The influence of Marx's ideas on modern world history has been vast. Until the collapse in 1991, of the communist systems of USSR and Eastern Europe, one-third of the world's population had been living under political administrations claiming descent from Marx's idea. His impact on the world of thought has been equally extensive, embracing sociology, philosophy, economics, and cultural theory. Marxism has also generated a rich tradition of literary and cultural criticism. Many branches of modern criticism- Including historicism, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonial and cultural criticism-are indebted to the insights of Marxism, which often originated in the philosophy of Hegel. What distinguishes Marxism is that it is not only a political, economic, and social theory but also a form of practice in all of these domains. (208)

However, in the domain of Literature, writers and critics create their literary pieces by exploring the Marxist theory in their various interpretations of human experiences. Thus literary works become fictional pieces that contain or explore class distinction, oppression, exploitation, political/economic struggles and other forms of social problems inherent in a given society. In doing this, the literary artist have succeeded in making the literary text a thematically self contained work possessing intrinsic revolutionary structure. In essence, the writer in depicting human experiences in his/ her novel, draws attention to some capitalist elements and at the same time creates awareness about them in order to project a revolutionary stance. The understanding of literary texts through

the limelight of Marxism influenced a great number of African writers who were confronted with colonial and postcolonial challenges. Hence, many of these writers employed Marxist ideologies as a veritable tool for fighting oppression and class distinction.

Discrimination and Class Oppression in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*

Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World* captures the devastating effects of discrimination and class oppression in the mind, psyche and aspirations of many Nigerian citizens. For years, many Nigerian citizens are marginalized, neglected and discriminated against in different ways. They have been denied the basic essentials of life such as good environment, road, electricity, food, educational opportunities, functional hospitals and other fundamental human rights. This group of the society has been socially excluded, neglected, downtrodden and subjected to a life of endless abject poverty. On this note, Okoye craftily explores the experiences of these individuals in order to paint a picture of a people disillusioned by the activities of the rich and ruling class.

Okoye's *The Fourth World*, reflects her deepest concerns for the downtrodden of the Nigerian society who have been undergoing both colonialist and neocolonialist oppressions. Allwell-Abalagu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu opine that as a Nigerian writer, Okoye subscribes to "hypnotizing the Nigerian literary audience not with sordid sermons on the stark realities of socio-political and economic existence in the country, but through an inspired but carefully delivered tale which persuades with the subtlety of the exploration of deeply-felt individual experiences" (114-115). Okoye's novel depicts the tales of a society engulfed by injustice, corruption, class distinction, exploitation, greed, poverty

and bad leadership. Through the depiction of her heroine's experiences, the novelist projects class oppression as the foundation on which her thematic factors are explored. Chiralum, the heroine of *The Fourth World* is a beautiful, brilliant and ambitious eighteen year old girl who lives with her parents in a section of Enugu called 'The Fourth World'. In the 'Foreword' of the novel, Ernest Emenyonu explains that:

'The Fourth world' is peopled by the true 'wretched of the earth', who squat in shanties, slums, and unsightly makeshift abodes under bridges day and night in both the developed and developing worlds. They are the homeless who have no place to lay their heads in both the most affluent and the not so-affluent nations of the modern world. The inhabitants of the Fourth world wear a badge of common identity-poverty- which is their common denominator. (vi)

The Fourth World is set in the City of Enugu's shanty slum of Kasanga Avenue. In the selected novel, Okoye skillfully describes the Kasanga Avenue as an environment remarkable for its unending hardship and endless circle of poverty. It is also described as a place characterized by constant darkness where there is no hope of electricity because the poor residents could not bribe the electricity officials to repair their damaged transformers. According to Emenyonu, "the novel is set in Enugu in the Eastern region of Nigeria. But Enugu is only a microcosm of the universal world of the poor found everywhere on earth. It is the world of voiceless humanity, the ignored and despised found in rich as in poor countries, in the free world as in autocratic regimes, under democratic as in authoritarian governments. Wherever they are, poverty is their unmistakable identity. It is the badge they wear. It

defines, stigmatizes, and earns them derision as the ‘other world’ (vii).

In the novel, Okoye brings to limelight the horrific reality of the residents of Kasanga Avenue who are satiric portraits of Nigerian citizens living in poverty, hunger, fear and massive unemployment with no hope of surviving. These citizens are “the petty traders, artisans, scrap collectors, cleaners, labourers and beggars who left home at dawn and returned long after sunset” (*The Fourth World* 103). Okoye’s description suggests an atmosphere characterized by constant lack of food, money, comfort and other basic needs of life as occasioned by constant lending and borrowing. According to the narrator:

Borrowing was common among the residents of Kasanga Avenue. Their principle-that is the principle of most of them, as there were a few rogues among them- was that a borrower is better than a thief-Nothing was too little or too big to ask for. They borrowed food, cooked or raw. They borrowed items of clothing to wear to festive events. They borrowed money all the time. Borrowing did not make them go a-sorrowing as it did in other communities. (123-124)

Chira, a final year student of the Federal Girls Secondary School (FGSS), Owerri and her parents, Akalaka and Kodili represent the residents of Kasanga Avenue who live in abject poverty. Generally, Akalaka’s life has been a struggle. However, in describing Akalaka, Chira’s father, the narrator explains that:

Her father was a labourer on building sites. The job included mixing mortar and concrete and carrying head pans of the mixture to the mansions. He also moved cement blocks to wherever they were needed and dug excavations for house foundations. He did other menial jobs like cutting down trees, clearing drains and working in people's homes from Monday to Saturday. He left home at six in the morning in the company of other labourers living in Kasanga Avenue. Sometimes, he waited for labourers from morning until night for days before he got hired. He usually came home from work after dark and was often so tired he dropped off to sleep... (9)

The relationships between Chira and other characters in the novel further paint a vivid picture which exposes a clear case of social stratification and inequality that further depict Kasanga Avenue as the dirtiest, roughest and underdeveloped environment. The novel presents a society whose environment has been damaged, neglected and abandoned by the government. Chira's journey from Owerri to Enugu, her state of residence on holidays shows that the residents of Kasanga only depend on their personal struggles to survive various faces of hardship. "The early rain had filled the myriad potholes that littered the avenue with dirty flood water, which slowed Chira down on her trek. She gingerly stepped on the few patches of dry land, deftly avoiding the pools filthy brown water" (*The Fourth World* 103). Chira and her parents live in one of the rickety shanty slums of Kasanga Avenue. The shanties are connected to one another and to Kasanga Avenue by narrow and meandering footpaths. "The Kasanga Avenue, a main street of Kasanga settlement otherwise known as the Fourth world or Urban Jungle..." (*The Fourth World* 103) captures a vivid picture of

“hardship and continuous suffering. It is an environment of flooding, where there is no direct access to the public roads .The narrator explains that “residents had to walk for forty minutes on average to get to the Four O’Oclock Market, from where they could take a bus to any other part of town. The market was the residents’ only link to the rest of Enugu-and civilization...But the road to the market was narrow, steep, unpaved and risky for many types of vehicle” (*The Fourth World* 103). The buildings that exist in Kasanga Avenue are mostly dilapidated shanties. Rain passes slowly through the leaking roof of the shanty Chira and her mother occupied. “She had placed pots and pans and plates all around to collect the drips and stop the room from being flooded. It had been taxing, moving from one spot to another to empty each of the eleven containers in turn before they filled to the brim again” (146).The narrator further explains that:

Kasanga Avenue was a destroyer of people’s bodies and minds. Living there meant not being able to see a doctor because there is no money. It meant not having a good job or not having a job at all because of a lack of education or skill. It meant losing children to illnesses because of dearth of clean water, a filthy environment and insufficient proper food. Kasanga Avenue was a maximum security prison for people who had committed the crime of allowing them to be born into poverty. (95)

The narrator goes further to state that “Kasanga Avenue residents always tried to ignore their symptoms as long as possible because of the cost of treatment” (4). Such becomes the case of Akalaka who is critically ill in the hospital. The ‘Main hospital’, government owned hospital where Akalaka, Chira’s father is admitted clearly depicts a poor and neglected environment. The

environment of the Main hospital is strikingly dirty. The drainages are blocked and thus breed mosquitoes which declare war on patients and people who take care of them. According to the narrator, “the mosquitoes hiding in the blocked drains in the hospital premises resurfaced in their hundreds in search of human blood. They declared war on Chira. She hated them. Their bites made her skin itch and if she dared scratch the spots, she ended up with tiny blisters that left black scars when they healed. She had been nicknamed ‘Patchy Legs’ at primary school because of the hundreds of mosquito-bite scars on her legs” (*The Fourth World* 34).

Frustration and disillusionment characterize Okoye’s description of the government owned hospital which records deaths on daily basis. The government of Kasanga claims to spend billions of naira in providing healthcare facilities and drugs; yet the masses have no access to them. According to Kodili, Chira’s mother: “the hospital provides nothing, my daughter,’...The patients provide everything they need. I have bought tablets, injections, plasters for your father’s treatment. I’ve bought everything. Everything, Chira, even cotton wool. The nurses always tell me that the medicines are not there in the hospital’s...uh...uh...” (*The Fourth World* 43).

The above quotation exposes the rot and decay in the nation’s health system. Hence, the nonchalant attitude of the health care givers and government has led to the death of many including Akalaka, Chira’s father who becomes a victim of the vicious circle of decay and hypocrisy. In the novel, government’s negligence (malfunctioning), poverty, environmental damage, discrimination and corruption become the major thematic factors explored. Chira, a final year student of Federal Girls Secondary School (FGSS), Owerri who is on holiday travelled from her school in Owerri to

Enugu, her state of residence to see her father who is critically ill and admitted at the Main hospital. At the government hospital, Chira is confronted with a certain nurse with screwed-up face and an unsympathetic matron. Chira is denied the same right to visit her dying father in the hospital by the nurse; while a man dressed in a traditional outfit of rich textured brocade who came after her is allowed to visit his brother when the visiting hour is over. This is a clear case of discrimination and class distinction between the rich and poor. Rich people are valued and respected while the poor are chided and insulted. The nurse tells the rich man “no problem, Sir. You can see him for as long as you wish. Matron knows you well and won’t mind” (2). However, the same nurse refuses Chira’s pleas to visit her sick dying father and threatens “if you walk into that ward, I’ll call the orderly to throw you out...I’m going to report the matter to Matron right away” (3). The above quotations show the inequality that exists between the two classes; poor and rich.

Again, *The Fourth World* deals with post-independence disillusionment about constant marginalization, environmental predation and oppression of the poor. It also raises the awareness of the masses towards changing an unjust order which violates human rights. After the death of Akalaka, Chiralum could no longer return to FGSS to continue her education because of lack of money. To survive, Chira and her mother, Kodili resort to doing menial jobs like plaiting of women’s hair under a tree near the market since they could not afford to rent a shop at the Four O’clock Market. Okoye raises a growing concern for the poor who find comfort and shield under a tree to eke out a living; the concern is however dominated with the problem of deliberate deforestation. In mama Egodi’s words to Chira, she says: “they razed everything to the ground. That tree under which you sit to plait women’s hair,

the mechanic shops nearby, the stalls, the kiosks, all were razed to the ground kpatakpata”(144). The destruction is done without considering the condition of the women who use the trees as umbrellas to protect themselves from the scorching sun or the environmental implication of cutting down trees. The reason given by the narrator according to the rumor at the market is that “a rich man bought the place and is going to build a big hotel or something there” (144).

Maks represents the rich class who torment poor citizens like Chira with their amassed wealth. Maks is a secondary school dropout who helps some highly placed people in government to sell crude oil. He also aids them to take public fund illegally out of the country, as a result; he gets huge money for working for them. In the novel, Maks pressurizes Chira to marry him in order to end the suffering that has crushed her family. Poor Chira refuses but later yields to the pressure as a result of her mother’s sickness since her meager salary at the Prime Computers owned by Dr. Ajali, a university teacher, could not pay for the expensive hypertensive drugs used by Kodili, her mother. The narrator explains that Maks often brags to Chira about his gardener’s salary: “My gardener must be earning more than what that woman (Dr. Ajali) pays you.” In this statement, Okoye moves the reader’s conscience, to empathy and tears for the suffering poor toiling masses of Nigeria.

Chief Ayika, a stupendously rich man and father of Ogom who “lived in independent layout, a wealthy area of Enugu where buses were neither needed nor welcomed” (107) also represents the rich that exploit the poor. The novelist in exploring the novel raises a thematic concern of child abuse. Chief Ayika employs a small boy, a minor who is supposed to be in school as his steward simply because he has a poor background. The Governor also belongs to

the rich class who amass public funds to enrich himself to the detriment of the poor citizens. According to the narrator, “The Governor was very rich. He had many investments overseas and had houses in all the state capital” (271). Chira’s visit with Maks to the Governor’s house, to attend the governor’s birthday exposes the luxury and excessive waste displayed by the rich Governor in the novel. The narrator explains that “the food on the long stretch of tables would feed all the residents of Kasanga Avenue for two months. She saw fried chicken drumsticks that looked as big as new-born baby’s thighs” (272). Okoye condemn and attacks the oppressive ruling class elites and their stooge like Maks who embezzle public funds on personal occasions like birthday celebrations, burials and other forms of partying thereby plunging the citizens into abject poverty and penury.

The oppressive activities of the ruling elite culminated into Kasanga rebellion. Characters in the Avenue such as Chira, the heroine, Jude Pebble (Kasanga doctor) and ‘Mirror Head’ whose real name is ‘Omume Uche’, are all nationalists and activists who dedicated themselves to spreading radical consciousness amongst Kasanga residents. Therefore, there is no doubt that Okoye reflects her deepest concerns for the downtrodden citizens of Kasanga Avenue. It is important to note that the damaging consequences of the dreadful flood that tormented the residents caused great pain when a small girl and an elderly woman perished in the flood. Confronted with these endless challenges, the press becomes so vocal about the incident. Also, some youth residents of Kasanga staged a peaceful protest about their poor condition of living in other parts of Enugu which resulted into fight and looting by hoodlums; as a result, two protesters are killed by the police. The death of Egodi and Donatus, two kids who lived at Kasanga Avenue after being knocked down by a speeding lorry while

hawking bananas becomes a tragedy which created more panics in the poor community. In depicting these experiences, Okoye appears to be shattered by the frustration that characterizes Kasanga Avenue; she becomes disillusioned and her disillusionment seems so nightmarish as a result of the social problems that have engulfed the society. As a patriotic writer, she has no other option but to opt for a Kasanga uprising; a new consciousness for quick revolutionary action which must be carried out through the literary documentation of people's experiences.

Conclusion

From a Marxist point of view, the experiences of the residents of Kasanga Avenue represent the human conditions in most developed and developing societies. The novel reflects the pathetic culture of corruption and oppression which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society. As a result, *The Fourth World* can be said to be a metaphor for or a satire of a sacrosanct oppressive system in Nigeria. In all, the novel is a wake up call; a clarion call for a social revolution in order to curb or end discrimination, oppression, corruption, negligence and the abuse of fundamental human rights .

All of the above social problems give rise to the uprising that aroused revolutionary actions. However, Patrick Naagbantun also agrees with the above assertion that “Okoye’s story evokes tears from our eyes with her solidarity and empathy of the poor. Okoye can no longer pretend and chant the escapist religious slogan of “It is well”. The problems of unemployment, inflation, meager earnings from sickness – inducing menial labour, hunger, disease, unhealthy environment, lack of infrastructure and poor housing are her affliction. She opts for a Kasangan uprising” (8). Ifeoma Okoye whose novel has been studied has not just depicted

various forms of oppression and class distinction, but has exposed the consequences and ways of curbing the menace. The problem of oppression and class distinction is a serious threat to the survival of individuals in any society as well as the peace, progress and development of a given cultural milieu. Hence, the precursors of crises are as a result of the continuous emergence of injustice, partiality, oppression and class distinction. In essence, the provision and equitable distribution of infrastructural facilities and basic social amenities such as good roads, equipped hospitals, homes, good drainage system, schools in poverty striking communities is the key to achieving peace and order. This is the major concern of Karl Marx and Engel as explored in their theory of Marxism. The paper therefore recommends that political leaders should protect and respect the rights of the citizens by providing their basic fundamental needs in order to shun aggression or sudden uprising which comes with enormous consequences.

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