



## **Re-assessing Contemporary Socio-Political Issues in Festus Iyayi's *Violence and The Contract***

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**Abstract.** African writers, particularly post-independence writers have always used their works to comment on current socio-political affairs and act as the mouthpiece of the downtrodden. Their works are steeped in social issues that affect the poor masses who are daily exploited by property owners and the government. This essay examines Festus Iyayi's engagement in contemporary affairs in Nigeria and his efforts in re-orientating the masses to come together and collectively confront their exploiters. The essay draws insights from two of Iyayi's novels: *Violence* and *The Contract*. Both novels dramatize various socio-political issues that have held the Nigerian nation on her knees. The study relies on the tenets of Marxism in interrogating Iyayi's commitment in galvanizing the masses against their oppressors. The paper exposes the fact that the oppressors are afraid of the masses and believe that someday, the masses will rise against them. Hence they put machineries of exploitation and dispossession in place to keep them in check.

**Keywords:** Re-assessing, socio-political, Festus Iyayi, commitment

### **1. Introduction**

African novelists and critics have come to a consensus and contended that the creative artist recreates society and its antecedents. He not only does this but also raises some salient questions that aimed at affecting positive changes in the society. It is against this background that Achebe (1975) avers that the African "writer cannot be expected to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front" (45). This idea is also supported by Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2000) in his review of "A Harvest from Tragedy:

Critical Perspective on Nigerian Civil War Literature” when he explains that: The writers have made literature to continue to function as the mirror of society. In the process of mirroring society and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for social redirection (14). What stems from the above idea is that while mirroring, African literature also strives to re-educate, re-generate as well as re-direct society for the betterment of all. It is perhaps in line with this notion of redirection that Abiola Irele (1981) remarks that the African writer is “groping implicitly through the imagination towards the recreation of a new order in Africa” (28). The writer therefore serves, not only as the voice of the voiceless but also the preserver of societal ethos. This is why Achebe insists that “art is, and was always, in the service of man”. According to him, “our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose” (19). In other words, the African writer tries as much as possible to capture the socio-political and cultural atmosphere of his society and record them like the historian does for his people.

The early African novelists used their works to correct some of the wrong perceptions about Africa created by European writers. The writers were engaged in re-telling the African stories from the eyes of the insider. Writers such as Achebe, Camara Laye, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, to mention a few, use their novels to tell the world that Africa has a very organised cultural set up before the coming of Europeans to her shore. The task was to restore the seemingly lost cultural dignity of the African people. Achebe, one of the leading voices of the group of African writers explain the creative vision around his early novels thus:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God’s behalf delivered them (45).

It is against this background that Asein S.O. and Ashaolu A.O. (1985) suggest that the first generation of African novelists recreate their themes “around colonial experience and the impact of the experience on the indigenous peoples and culture” (2).

However, the political climates that greeted the post-independence African countries made the writers of this period to have a rethink. The high expectations that heralded the attainment of independence by many African countries during the 1950s and 60s soon fade away as many African leaders turned out to become monsters that daily torment their people. This created new crops of African novelists with socialist orientation. These novelists expressed their disgust about the leadership challenges in various ways. They rooted for the masses and produced works that confronts the oppressive and exploitative tendencies of African political leadership. The result was such works as Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1965),

Ayi Kwe Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* (1968), Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Devil of the Cross* (1983), Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979), *The Contract* (1982), *Heroes* (1986), among others. These novels engaged the corrupt and insensitive tendencies of the new African leaders against their people. According to Jude Agho (1995), these novels "have often been appropriately characterised as novels of post-independence disillusionment" (5).

The writers of this period rooted for the Marxist ideology and created characters who try to question their class in the society. Marxism is a socio-political ideology which aims primarily at creating a society where everybody would be equal, a classless society sort of. To these writers, the masses must come together and confront their oppressors through an organised revolution which may affect all aspects of society; where the oppressed would come all out to seek to produce a society where there can be peace, equity and justice. This is because the writers believe that literature does not exist independent of the society. According to Ngugi (1972), literature gives "impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic force in a particular society"(xv).

Like most African novelist, Festus Iyayi has distinguished himself as a committed artist, committed to the social, political and economic concerns of his people. He uses his novels to give voice to the oppressed peoples of Africa. Festus Iyayi in his novels has fashioned various techniques of exposing the socio-economic ills that constantly affect the mass in the society. He engaged in many of his novels, the problems of exploitation, political looting, unemployment/joblessness, military dictatorship, and in the process; he exposes the real enemy of the people as well as celebrate the true heroes of society. As a Marxist writer, he engages himself with the issues of corruption, political mismanagement, social injustice, poverty and unemployment. He believes by bringing these issues to the fore, society, particularly the oppressed can come together to confront their common enemy – the political oppressors and capitalist exploiters. This is what Achebe believes every true African writer must do to liberate their people from the shackles of ignorance and oppression. According to him, "...an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames" (78). These socio-economic and political issues will be interrogated in this essay. We shall use his novels: *Violence* and *The Contract* as our analytical texts. Efforts will also be made to explicate the indices of re-assessment on which the foundation of this essay is hinged.

## **2. Socio-Economic and Political Issues in *Violence* and *The Contract***

One of the major socio-economic and political issues explored in Iyayi's novels is economic exploitation. Exploitation can be described as a situation whereby an individual, a group or an organisation is used by another in a cruel manner for a selfish purpose. It can also be seen as an act whereby some human conditions are

taken advantage of by the privileged. This notion of exploitation resonates through the novel, *Violence*. In this novel, the services of Idemudia and his three friends are exploited by Mrs. Queen Obofun, the rich government contractor and owner of Freedom Motel. The four friends were asked to offload one thousand, five hundred bags of cements at a piteous rate of twenty naira. Queen knows that these poor friends needed the job and the money desperately because there are no other jobs in town. She senses that if they leave the job, there may not be other jobs readily available for them, especially since it was in the rainy season. Although she knows that for a difficult job of that nature, the money she offered to pay was too meagre, she coerced them to take up the job. She had thought privately: "If they refuse, she would obviously have to offer them more than five naira each" (*Violence*, 22). The work was so difficult that Idemudia fell sick. Unfortunately, the money from the arduous job was not enough to cure his illness.

Furthermore, at the building site for government low cost houses, we also witness the exploitative tendency of the privileged in the person of Mrs. Queen. Here, we are confronted with the horror of open exploitation of the people's labour. The labourers are made to work like animals but are paid peanuts. These workers are made to work under strenuous conditions. Their break time which was formally thirty minutes is reduced by fifteen minutes. Any worker who dares to request for higher wage is thrown out. One of the labourers laments thus: "we earn so little and yet we are worked harder than slaves" (*Violence*, 246). This exploitation is possible because there are no jobs in other places. This poignantly paints the picture of contemporary Nigerian society where those who are unemployed is almost twice the numbers of those who are employed. Thus anyone who eventually gets employed, no matter the treatment and exploitation by his employer, holds tenaciously to the job. Labourers have become slaves to their employers who hire and fire them out will. Idemudia, the protagonist in the novels laments this situation when he exclaims:

What kind of life is this? He asked himself a hundred times. A man gets a job and cannot protest. He cannot protest for higher wages, the period of his leisure is cut down arbitrarily and he must come to work when he is told. This is slavery... (*Violence*, 243).

This explains the helpless situation of the Nigerian workers who are daily exploited by their workers.

However, Ijayi does believe that the workers should continue not to make themselves cheap commodities for the exploiters. They must ask for better treatment and improve wages. In doing this, they must organise themselves and speak with one voice. If possible, they should resort to strike. To Ijayi, the exploiters are afraid of sabotage. They are always helpless when their businesses are grounded. Hence, they would not want to hear anything like industrial action.

So that when the people came together to speak with one voice, Mrs. Queen Ibofun quivered. In her desperation, she decided to woo Idemudia, the nominal foreman over to her side – even to the extent of offering him her body. However, when Idemudia refuses her advances, she resorts to cheap blackmails.

Similar instances of exploitation are also interrogated in *The Contract*. In *The Contract* for instance, the protagonist, Ogie Obala, a promising idealistic young man who just returned from abroad was exploited by his own father to double his loot from government confers. In this novel, Ogie's father, Chief Eweh Obala is the chairman of the Ogbe City Council, the body responsible for the award of contracts in the government establishment. Through his scheming, Chief Obala was able to make his son the permanent secretary to this council against his will. As the Chief Obala puts it, Ogie "has no choice". He must accept the job because he is his father. (*The Contract*, 13). The reason for the father's desperation is obvious. He hopes to use his son's share to double his share in the percentage cut from the multi-million naira contract to be awarded by the Ogbe City Council.

However, having been neck-deep into the scheme, Ogie was determined to get his fare of the loot. As an idealist, he wants to invest his share here in Nigeria because he believes that it is a form of development to the economy. So that, when his father says, "all of it goes to Switzerland", Ogie replies: "I would want to invest my share of the money in business here" (*The Contract* 94-5). But since his father only needed him as a tool he could not stand against his father's scheming. He confessed to Eunice Agbon thus: "We are both the instruments of forces greater than ourselves. We are both being used and whatever choice we have is restricted (*The Contract* 80). However, in an attempt to undo his father, Ogie organises a robbery on his father to get his due of the money. Unfortunately for him, he is killed through a shot from the gun of his unsuspecting father. This is definitely a high form of exploitation. Chief Obala aim of making his son the permanent secretary of the Ogbe City Council was for his selfish interest. In all the scheming, the son had no voice. The moment he tries to fight back, he is killed.

These exploitative tendencies by those in authorities are still prevalent in our Nigeria of today. This is very relevant in contemporary Nigerian society where parents recruit their children into politics to increase their stake in political benefits. Instance are abound where parents and children are kept in prison custody for looting public funds. In the Nigeria of today, the poor are no longer seen as stakeholders in the country's project. Prices of commodities are hiked so that the masses are made to beg before they could eat. According to B.E.C. Oguzie (1986), the privilege few not only "defraud the government to amass their wealth, they also exploit the poor and thrive on it" (20).

Iyayi, however, believes that there must be a stop to this unholy act of sabotage to the collective sensibility of the masses. Hence he uses his novels not only to address the consciences of his readers but also to incite a revolt against the

exploiters. This is clearly demonstrated in *Violence* through the character of Idemudia as the head worker on Queen's building site where he organises his fellow workers and threatened a strike. Onise Ine and Oniha Obala are also revolutionary in their outlook in *The Contract*.

Another evils perpetrated by the privileged group against the downtrodden as presented in the novels of Iyayi is excessive looting of public funds. This is one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary Nigerian society where the quest for material gains is given premium by everyone aspiring for leadership position. Looting has to do with fraudulent acquisition of public funds for personal enrichment. It has become so rampant in contemporary African society that it is now a source for concern for the African writers. While the majority of the masses leave in squalor, a privilege few wallow in affluence at the expense of all. This issue is well ontologised in the two novels under examination in this essay.

In *Violence* for instance, Mr. Iriso, a Superintendent of the Food Production Department in the Ministry of Agriculture had to loot over two thousand tins of peak milk and three thousand eggs in his custody just to have the resources to satisfy his sexual urge with Mrs. Queen Obofun. He continuously engages in this unholy act until he gets to the moment of self-realisation. However, his moment of regrets only came when the selfish purpose for which he looted the items was not achieved. As the narrator tells us:

On the bed, Iriso remained sullen. 'Five hundred naira!' his mind cried. 'Three thousand eggs, two thousand tins of milk! Christ! What have I done? Given them away for nothing? He cursed himself (*Violence*, 102).

Similarly, Obofun, Queen's politician husband was also neck-deep in this act of looting public funds. He demonstrates his selfishness by looting public funds while serving in the Ministry of Works and Transport. Dala, his former colleague tells us that:

Then it was rumoured that Obofun had been loaned some money to build a personal house. According to the rumour, Obofun had built the house but instead of staying in it, had let it back to the Ministry at an extra-ordinary high price. Some put the figure at twenty thousand naira a year. Obofun, who neither confirmed nor condemned the rumours soon moved over to the Ministry of Land and Housing (*Violence*, 29).

This is an act of injustice to the collective psyche of the public who are so free-minded not to have noticed the evils that are committed against them by those in public places. As Oguzie contends, Iyayi “clearly shows that whereas the high-ups are prepared to steal, cheat, dupe and even murder in the name of government, the poor remain honest” (254).

In *The Contract*, Iyayi presents the act of looting public funds as a thing that has gained legality and it is committed with enthusiasm. Here, he satirises the Nigerian society where those who enrich themselves with public funds are celebrated while those who oppose them are vilified. In this novel, nothing seems to be wrong in indulging in the act of looting public funds. It is the fashion of the day and to be left lagging behind is to be unrealistic and to be termed a fool. Nobody wants to be branded a fool. Therefore, all, especially, those holding public offices are deeply involved. For instance, we are told in *The Contract* that Mallam Mallam “deals with cheques” in his business. Mallam Mallam is a tricky man, an easy-going fellow who connives with some staff in the top echelon of government establishments to transact dubious businesses. He is a “ghost” contractor who supplies no item but collects cheques for one hundred thousand naira each week in the guise of having supplied some goods. But he tells his childhood friend Ogie that:

I am a contractor. 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 (*The  
Contract*, 17).

Mallam Mallam however opens up to him on the true nature of his business with the government workers. He tells Ogie:

Actually...I supply them nothing. The money I cash  
we share out again. I get my portion, the others get  
theirs. It's easy cash, the sort I always wanted (*The  
Contract*, 17).

This explains the impunity with which the act of wickedness is carried out on the society. The loot is perpetuated without the slightest sense of guilt.

The highest form of looting in the novel is the contract involving the Ogebe City Council on which the novel's title is implicated. The council had proposed to award a contract tagged “Special Project”. Gradually, the value of the contract is raised from one hundred million to the staggering sum of five hundred million naira. Unfortunately, while the successful contractor gets just ten million naira for the said project, the balance four hundred and ninety million naira is shared among the few stakeholders as a percentage kickback. A brief dialogue between father and son will substantiate this. Chief Obala begins the conversation in this manner:

“The voting will be made by the government initially. Then it will pass into the authority of our council and it will be marked “Special Project”. ‘But how much of this money will actually represent the value of the contract – I mean, will all of it be awarded as a single contract?’ ‘Of course, of course,’ Chief Obala said expansively. ‘All of it will be awarded as a single contract. It is important that the man who gets it is entirely reliable. We will be writing down on paper five hundred million. But the contractor will not be getting more than ten million. ‘And what happens to the rest of the money?’ Ogie asked. ...‘Well the money will be shared out. Each person gets his share” (*The Contract*, 17).

In short, the extent of the loot is heart rending because “the scheming for the multi-million naira Ogbe City Council contract for low-cost houses knows no limit” (Tejumola Olaniyan, 1988:305).

Apart from the problem of political instability, the greatest challenge that faces many African countries today is unemployment and joblessness. This endemic problem has assumed a monstrous position. According to Olaniyan, the numbers of those who live in “squalor and poverty” constitute about “ninety-five percent of the [African] population” (305). As a committed writer, Iyayi has amply portrayed the causes as well as the adverse effects of joblessness in the two novels under consideration. He adopts various narrative techniques to impress the problems of joblessness on the reader. First of all, the various exploitative challenges witnessed by Idemudia and his friends in *Violence* were all occasioned by their joblessness. The problem of unemployment in the Nigeria society has given cause for concern for all stakeholders. A situation where graduate youths roam the streets in search of non-existent jobs while those who are unskilled daily go to various places to seek menial jobs is alarming. For instance, in *Violence*, Idemudia and his friends go to Iyaro on daily basis to look for one menial job or the other, sometimes without success. The situation so degenerates to the extent where Idemudia has to sell his blood in order to save his family from starvation. The state of joblessness is well explicated by Adisa, Idemudia’s wife when she was asked by Obofun about what her husband does for a living. She says: “My husband has been looking for a job for over three years. He has found none. There are no jobs anywhere (*Violence*, 73).

Indeed, there are no jobs. And because there are no jobs, the few menial jobs available are held onto tenaciously, even if it means one should lick the butt of his/her employer. This is the scenario we find in Queen’s low-cost building site. For instance, when Idemudia wanted to know more about the condition of service at the site, he is told by one of the senior labourers in Queen’s site that the poor

condition of service on which the labourers are employed as a result of lack of jobs in the society. Anyone who tries to complain is sacked without compensation.

‘You have just come,’ the man reminded him, ‘and because of you another four were told to go. That’s what the woman does all the time. You can’t ask for higher wages. Go to the site nearby. It is also bad there...’ So if we complain we get kicked out?’ Osaro asked. The man picked up the shovel again, ‘The best thing to do is to keep your mouths shut. Personally I have children to feed and jobs don’t come easy.’ He brushed the sweat off his face and smiled bitterly. ‘The day she came for us at Iyaro I remember that two people fell off the truck. I nearly broke my arm. Such was the rush!’ (*Violence*, 237).

The labourers are exploited because the numbers of those seeking the few available jobs far outweighed the ones engaged. Hence, the Obofuns of the Nigerian society will continue to exploit the masses who are too poor to have a voice to confront them.

In *The Contract*, the problem of joblessness is also well entrenched. Chief Ekata only employs a worker if he has something to offer, particularly his female secretaries. As the narrator tells us,

He always told women what he expected of them when he employed them. Some accepted it [because of their dire need for means of livelihood]. Others did not. Some of those who accepted it changed their minds later and he fired them or they left of their own accord. Some of them stayed for a time until he felt they had out-lived their usefulness; then he fired them. He had no second thought whatsoever about how he treated people. People were to be used. People were building blocks in the great house he wanted to build. All else counted for nothing (*The Contract*, 70).

This is the case of Eunice Agbon who he used as if she was nobody. Aside being a secretary and a receptionist, she also serves as bait used to entice and woo male business partners who would award contracts to her boss. To Chief Ekata and his cohorts, poor people are like merchandise to be used when necessary and when their usefulness is no longer needed, they are discarded at will. The workers, on the other hand, are helpless because if they leave, they may likely not find another job. This is the situation Eunice Agbon finds herself. In one of her reflections, she laments thus: “The man uses me as he would use any other instrument”. The narrator also tells us that:

She couldn't go right away. She has to put in three months' notice. And then there were her parents to consider. Her parents were unemployed, uneducated, and poor. Since she had found this job, things had become easier all around (*The Contract*, 70).

The problem of joblessness in the society is occasioned by the greed of a privilege few who survive by dispossessing the poor. For instance, in *The Contract*, Mallam Mallam and his cohorts are greedy and would love to possess everything that belongs to the people. Their consciences are dead as they see nothing wrong with their rapacious appetites. It is clear from the novel that Mallam Mallam collects cheques from his men in government offices without delivering anything in return. Other major contractors in the novel are also greedy. They would go the extra lent to see that they win a contract. For instance, Chief Ekata had to lure Chief Oloru, his greatest rival to the Wayo Hotel where he poisoned him to death in order to win a contract alone. Chief Oloru had earlier planned to double cross and out-smart Chief Ekata of his fair share of the profit they intend to make from the multi-million-naira contract. Unfortunately, Chief Ekata struck first. Chief Ekata had assured himself thus:

I am going to get this contract and nothing is going to stop me. Time was when I had conscience and worried myself sick after I had cheated people. But I soon learned that to have scruples in business is suicidal. The only ethic in business is to climb upon the shoulders of the other man. There should be no mercy, no consideration for the feeling of the other man (*The Contract*, 73).

Here Iyayi aptly tells us that the Nigerian contractor is not only dishonest but will go the extra mile to achieve their ambition. Chief Ekata's encounter with Chief Oloru at the Wayo Hotel is very revealing. For instance, when Chief Oloru remarks that he is not dishonest, Chief Ekata rhetorically asks:

Good talk, but who ever heard of an honest businessman? All contractors, at least as far as I know and you know too, are dishonest (*The Contract*, 119)

This is quite revealing. It shows Iyayi's grasps with the realities of the Nigerian contemporary socio-economic and political challenges.

One of the things Iyayi has achieved in these novels is the re-education of the people, especially the masses. For the masses to come out of the shackles of oppression and exploitation is for them to identify who the enemy is. This is the

first phase of self-realisation, the stage where the oppressed is alive to his problems physically and psychologically. This is thus the creative mission of Festus Iyayi. This is why F.N. Chrechain (1991) observes that Iyayi's

novel is capable of bringing about a psychological transformation that goes deeper than the mere theoretical grasp of a historical situation, for it can help equip the Nigerians to resist the daily onslaughts of the dominant ideology while encouraging them to transcend tribal attitude (45).

For instance, at the beginning of *Violence*, Idemudia has concluded that his parents were the people responsible for his hardship. He therefore sees them as his enemies. However, his encounter at the hospital after he over-worked himself in off-loading Mrs. Obofun's cement changed his orientation. At the hospital, he watches a melodrama that is well crafted into the plot of the novel. The title of the "mock drama", *Violence* happens to be the title of the novel. The drama was so entertaining to him. But at his quiet moment, he was able to relate the incidence in the drama to his present condition. He reviews his life at Queen's building site and discovers that the wealthy woman was only using him for her selfish gains. He works hard enough, yet he has nothing to show for it. When this becomes apparent, he asks himself some rhetorical questions:

'What kind of life is this?' he asked himself a hundred times. A man gets a job and he cannot protest. He cannot ask for higher wages, the period of his leisure is cut down arbitrarily and he must come to work when he is told. This was slavery, this was..yes, he remembered, it comes to him slowly, this was violence. And now that his mind has established an essential link, found an apt description of the conditions of his life, he began to fill in the actual content of that violence, what it consisted of (*Violence*, 243).

This is the moment of realisation – the moment when it dawned on him that his poverty-induced life, was not fashioned by his parents, but is the handiwork of forces higher and greater than him. As we further acknowledge, he becomes mature in thought and rationale because he grows up psychologically to know that "His unfinished education, his joblessness, his hunger, his poverty, all these he found were different forms of violence" (*Violence*, 243).

The big question is 'what and who brought about this violence?' For a clearer view and answer, we may visit the mock drama and visualise the Defence Counsel in action. As he puts it:

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

Idemudia has been schooled on whom the real enemy is. It is no longer his father or mother. But the “present oppressive system” of the society and the likes of the Obofuns. Herein lies Iyayi’s message in the novels. He uses the Defence Counsel to act as the projector of the peoples’ voices and duties. The oppressed must come together and rise above petty obeisance to the oppressors. The Defence Counsel therefore submits that: “all the oppressed section of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. ...the system has already proved that it operates through violence...” (*Violence*, 185).

Another issue that is raised by Iyayi in the two novels is that those who engage in evil activities in the society are always living in perpetual fear. Therefore, any attempt to confront them will bring about change in their attitude to society. For instance, in the *Violence*, Adisa, Idemudia wife became afraid to get close to her husband after having affair with Obofun. Her fear heightens on the day her husband returns from the hospital. That night Idemudia had wanted a lively and romantic welcome on bed from his wife. But Adisa became jittery. Her extra-marital escapades with Obofun begin to torment and hunt her. Even with the resolve to use Aunt Salome as an excuse, she could hardly stand the penetrating looks from her husband. Hence the atmosphere in the room became tensed. As the narrator tells us:

Inside her, Adisa was frightened. How could she sleep with her husband without giving herself away? She didn’t want to sleep with him, at least, not this night. She was too conscious of herself. The memory of Obofun hung about her like a shroud (*Violence*, 233).

*The Contract* dramatizes the idea of fear in the characters of the oppressors. The oppressors are afraid of the masses and believe that someday, the masses will rise against them. Hence they believe the only way to secure their wealth is to stash

them in foreign bank accounts. For instance, Chief Obala whom from his calculations has built a good financial empire for himself and members of his family is not comfortable his loot should remain in Nigeria. So that when his son, Ogie decides to invest the share of his money in Nigeria, he was furious and later kills him. Chief Obala reflects thus:

I have struggled to build up what I have, struggled and suffered setbacks but this is going to be the greatest setback of all. My own son turning against me. But it will never be. Not while I am alive. His hand trembled and there was sweat on his face (*The Contract*, 95-96).

Chief Obala fears that they might be a revolution “that would destroy the basis of the present system” hence it is “important he should not keep his money in the country” (*The Contract*, 102). All Chief Obala thinks about is the security of his loot. He would do everything humanly possibly possible to make money. But he will do worse to secure it. Hence, he is persistently afraid of the envisaged revolution. The narrator reveals dilemma of the turn of events in the country thus:

He must get all his money out. From the way things were happening, it was a wonder that the country had survived without daily revolutions. The word revolution frightened him (*The Contract*, 102).

Hence he “was not afraid of the present. Only the future worried him, Ogie and the future” (*The Contract*, 103).

Ogie, like his father is also afraid at the situation of things. He suspects that there is likely going to be a coup or a revolution. A moment which would restructure things in the society. He asks Mallam Mallam, are “you not afraid of the future?”

As a writer, Iyayi has adhered to some creative conventions and at the same time fashioned new ones in re-assessing these contemporary socio-economic and political issues in his novels. In the novels under examination, he has adopted the third person omniscient narrative technique. With this, the author assumes the position of a troubadour, who traverses the entire Nigerian society and beyond. Apart from taking us through various incidents – the atrocities committed by those in authorities, as well as the deprivations suffered by the common man, Iyayi has also brought to light the psychological built of his major characters. Through this technique, we know the inner tumult and indecision that plague the minds of the characters, especially when important decisions are to be taken. This is evident in the character of Ogie Obala in *The Contract*.

Iyayi's characterisation is one-sided. This is because all his major characters are type – they represent one segment of the society or the other. His major characters are also developed to the fullest. This is evident in the characters of Idemudia in *Violence* and Ogie Obala in *The Contract* who grow from the earlier state of naivety to that of maturity and full realisation.

Simplicity is also a style explored by Iyayi in the two novels. This is typical of the Marxist writers who believe that literature must serve the purpose of the masses. In his simple and lucid narration, he is able to portray the deplorable conditions as well as the helplessness of his major characters in a picturesque manner. For example, in the *Violence*, he successfully juxtaposes the living condition of Idemudia, Osaro, Omifo and Patrick with those of the Obofuns. In this juxtaposition, one witnesses how these friends are hungry while at the same moment the Obofuns are throwing sumptuous food away into the waste basket

...Idemudia and three other friends of his stood at the entrance of the Freedom Motel. Two hefty waiters were busy emptying unfinished meals into the large dustbin. 'What do they do with that?' Osaro asked. 'I think they sell it to poultries and also to pig farms,' Patrick answered. As Idemudia watched the unfinished jollof rice, *dodo*, meat and beans being emptied into the dustbin, the sweat broke out on his forehead. Very quickly, he turned his eyes away, biting his lips sharply (*Violence*,18).

This technique of contrast is also evident in the mock drama at the hospital. For instance, the scenes that evoke laughter from the commissioner do not elicit laughter from the audience and vice versa. However, when serious societal issues were raised by the lawyer in the mock drama, the commissioner became uncomfortable. He ordered the play to be stopped:

The commissioner half rose from his seat. 'The play must be stopped!' he cried, but in a suppressed voice. 'Stopped! It must cease immediately! This is not a comedy! It is a tragedy, a calculated attempt to ridicule the government!'... 'The bastards are using this forum to preach...' (*Violence*, 185-6).

In form, Iyayi is a Marxist. He imbues his characters with Marxist praxis and concretely demonstrates how Marxism works. He creates his major characters as revolutionaries who stand out in critical situations to confront their oppressors. For him, the oppressed should organise themselves in order to have a force to uproot

the various structures that stand on their way and in the process enthrone a classless society.

### 3. Conclusion

From the foregoing therefore, we can say that Festus Iyayi is a committed writer who uses his art to comment on various societal ills in a manner that the consciences of individuals who engage in activities that inimical to societal progress are pricked. He imbues in his characters, Marxist ideology and radicality. In this regard, he forces scenes into his narrative that not only persuade the readers but incite them to quest for a radical change in the status-quo. It is against this backdrop that Niyi Osundare (1986) contends that

the artist has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression. Like the prophet of the Old Testament, he is the guilty conscience of the society, his words the nagging, unremitting images in his mind, his words are an incitement to revolt, to disrupt the deathly equilibrium, the mendacious “peace and stability” of a truly violent system (4).

Thus, Iyayi’s protagonists are invested with the task of re-assessing the socio-economic and political indices of the Nigerian state and suggesting the way forward – through revolution. Such characters like Idemudia in *Violence* and Onise Ine and Oniha Obala in *The Contract* are characters, that even in their failures, represent the revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed masses. This is because Iyayi’s artistry is directed towards the enlightenment and liberation of the oppressed from the shackles of oppression. As Iyayi puts it: “one day, national coups would come, a revolutionary one that would destroy the basis of the present system (*The Contract*, 102). Iyayi has therefore, through his novels, succeeded in revolutionising the minds of the readers towards a total change in the society.

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