

Festus Iyayi's *The Contracts* as a Replica of the Nigerian Society

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Abstract

The author examines Festus Iyayi's transformational vision of neocolonial Nigerian society vis-à-vis the economic and social conditions of the masses, using *The Contract* (1982) as a base. From the materialist perspective, the author views how Iyayi presents a remarkable artistic vision that captures or questions certain social constructs that breed incoherence in our politics. *The Contracts* shows Iyayi as a writer who is irrevocably committed to the plight of the masses as they grapple with the cut-throat exploitative attitude of the privileged few. The novel equally announces the battle that the masses must win in order to experience a genuine social justice in an increasingly morally degenerated society.

Key words: novel, *The Contracts*, Festus Iyayi, neocolonialism, social change, corruption

Introduction

With postcolonial experience as an embodiment of socio-political turmoil, this study examines how Iyayi employs *The Contracts* to reveal the socio-economic factors which have hindered effective nation-building in Nigeria. The ideals of nationalism and independence progressively degenerate as a result of bad leadership, endemic corruption, moral decadence, political instability and social insecurity. The plight of ordinary Nigerians worsens steadily as corruption and incompetent leadership despoil the country since the 1970s when Nigeria transformed into a major oil producer. Corruption has become one of the major antinomies that create a deepening crisis of kleptocracy; it engenders a scandalous wealth among the ruling class with growing poverty, misery and degradation among the masses. The aftermath of this negative situation is that all basic services - health, education and social security were disastrously run down. Nigeria might be rich in human and material resources but ordinary Nigerians are among the world's poorest. In this context, the novel is axiomatic of the poetics of nation-formation because it signifies the extent to which vested and elite interests have established a form of hegemony, which reduces the national space to a site for the enactment of clientalism and rentier economic practice.

In the face of appalling political mismanagement, corruption becomes an endemic monster that impoverishes and devastates the nation. Faced with this catastrophic situation, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and other literary writers of the 1960s and 1970s were the first to switch the focus of their creative writing towards such pressing "public political issues ruthlessly articulating a public and published resistance to the steady, often savage

erosion of freedom and justice taking place around them” (Delap 2007:5). In the 1980s, they were followed by a new set of politically aware writers among whom were Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan and Festus Iyayi, to mention but a few. Iyayi’s novel represents the most bilious indictment of Nigerian leaders for their corruption, which leaves the nation with no hope of salvation.

Literary critics and scholars who have critiqued the novels of Iyayi are almost endless. For instance, Sophia Ogwude (1996) examines how Iyayi takes one deep philosophical look at the neocolonial Nigerian society where money flows like water in the hand of the privileged few through contract inflation. Okafor (1998) equally argues that Iyayi’s novel reveals that the injustice being meted out to the poor is on the high level in Nigeria. The exploitation and oppression of the masses expose their pathetic circumstances as they struggle to survive in a marginalized economic and social setting. Other critics who have critiqued Iyayi’s works include Tejumola Olaniyan, Juliet Okonkwo, Tunde Fatunde, Udentia O. Udentia, Catherine Acholonu, Oguzie B.E.C. and Kingston O. Onyijen. In contrast to these scholars, this paper focuses on how aesthetically Iyayi ignites the spirit of nationalism and raise social consciousness with a view to neutralising the pervasive corruption in Nigeria. The essay demonstrates an exploiting economic structure and its fusion with ideological instrument.

Textual Analysis

In discussing Iyayi’s understanding of the problems militating against the development programme in Nigeria, *The Contract* stands out in its vision. The novel deepens its revelation and condemnation of corruption, rampant scarcity of personal integrity and failure of the state, thereby, fulfilling some of the challenges thrown at African novelists to be sensitive to the faintest nuances of injustice in human relation. Apparently, core to the building of national consciousness; as Frantz Fanon observes, is the building of national literature; a literature that echoes an ethos of combat and that is fully committed to the idea of national liberation. In Fanon’s thinking, writing of the negritude variety was an inadequate rendition of the liberation struggle, since it is unwittingly reinforced by the biases and stereotypes of the colonizers. (Nyairo 2005). It is perhaps with this knowledge of Fanon’s recipe of a literature that embodies and empowers the postcolonial struggle that Festus Iyayi writes *The Contract*.

Essentially, the novel, through a powerful use of imagery, depicts a nauseating social situation and presents a sustained sanitisation of the moral and socio-spiritual decadence of Nigerian leadership after the oil boom. It is a warning to society that the path of corruption leads to decadence, social rot and continued dependence on foreign values. It is a proposition, however

subtly, that social redemption can only come to society through uprightness and strong moral conduct. This is why Ogwude (1996) observes that the lesson of this novel is not contained in the epigrammatic message it gives but, rather, in the calm realisation in the mind, the truly tragic vision which the novelist presents to the society: inhumanity towards others may result in inhumanity towards oneself. The narrator says:

... everybody wants to be rich. So they steal from each other, and murder each other and plunder the nation's coffers and use the people carelessly and shamelessly. People are trampled upon, treated worse than slaves. Human life counts for nothing in this race for money and wealth.

The socio-economic premise of *The Contract* depicts the oppressive state of the neo-colonial system and the contradiction inherent in its organization. The novel shows the various options individual have chosen in their attempt to survive in a society that is endemically unjust. The universe of *The Contract* is the accumulation of wealth, which has ruined society to the detriment of humanity. Iyayi captures this phenomenon thus:

All our people are now caught up in the intense craze for money; money and women. People are terribly mean to each other now. The old trust, the old handshake is gone. There is so much hatred now, a lot of hatred and a lot of bitterness and a lot of jealousy. In short, a lot of everything that is bad (p. 16).

The novel is a moral fable that centres on a modern man, Ogie Obala whose father, Eweh Obala, the Chairman of Ogbe City Council and representative of the bourgeoisie, calls from London to occupy the post of Principal Secretary in charge of awarding special contracts. When he arrives, Ogie Obala is keenly interested in addressing the prevalent corruption. He takes up the job after initial hesitation and rationalises his action by affirming that he will change the system from within". But Iyayi shows that:

Corruption is the great leprosy we all suffer from. We are nothing but a nation of lepers. We are the race that has diseased blood. And as long as society remains what it is, as long as the greed persists, we shall continue to have filth and the chaos and the refuse and the leprosy (p. 17).

From small acts of everyday existence to practices in the highest offices, from the law enforcement officers to the seat of final arbitration, graft paves the way and disorder is truly instrumentalised. This disorder has become national praxis to the extent that the nation seems to be bounded together

principally through its collective moral poverty. This is why Chabal and Daloz in Nyairo (1999:98) observe that "corruption is not just endemic but forms an integral part of the social fabric of life." Hence Iyayi depicts a soul-less and corrupt nation that worships wealth. The symbols and names reflect this endemic state of corruption. Malam Malam lives on fraud. He thrives on fake cheque. He makes money illegally from the establishment where people who award him contracts ask for percentages.

A similar episode is seen in Alufohai's novel, *Alien to Poverty* where a contractor, Alhaji Kudi expresses the view that the most important job is to win the contract; the execution of the contract is really not too important as those who awarded the contract do not actually expect the winner to spend all the money to execute the contract, since a substantial sum of the money invariable comes back to them under various guises (p. 173). Given the destructive and corrupting influence of the dubious contractors, Iyayi shows that Ogie Obala's ambition to purge the corrupt system is unrealistic. After initial attempts at introducing changes, such as organizing the documentation system, he faces stiff opposition from powerful men, including his father, who expects his son to inflate contracts in order to make him access a high percentage of the bribes. In the end, he succumbs to the pressure and accepts bribe from Chief Ekata, with whom he colludes in defrauding his father.

The novel progresses by narrating how Chief Obala, his son, Major Chop-Chop, Major Alafia, the Commissioner, the Chief of Police and the Administrator set to award the contract for the construction of the Ogbe City Council Low Cost Housing Estate. Here the selfishness of the bourgeoisie is given a clear insight when Chief Obala remarks that:

Important decisions concerning contracts will have to be taken very soon at the Ogbé city council. These contracts are worth hundreds of millions of naira. I need a man of my own there. Somebody outside the family will make a mess of things (p .2)

The contract actual estimate is inflated. The vampires agree to share the rest of the money. The loot shared from this unholy exercise is siphoned to the vaults of Swiss banks. The by-product of this corrupting influence is that the postcolonial nation becomes an abode of neglected infrastructure and severe underdevelopment. The narrator reveals that people "have no water, they have no road, they have no hospitals and no electricity either" (p .116). Iyayi shows the heartless behaviour of emerging capitalists who, irrespective of the slummy conditions of the nation, are only interested in illegal acquisition of wealth. No doubt, one of the greatest problems of the emergent African states, which still persists, is unlawful accumulation of wealth. This practice

of money laundering is highly pervasive, as equally seen, is Alien to poverty where General Mutu, like Chief Obala, believes that the stolen money is not safe until it is kept in the vault of Banks in London or Switzerland. General acquires a luxurious duplex in the Hyde Park area of the city of London. (p. 103). The practice of the bourgeois class is the accumulation of wealth. The members of the ruling class assume the mantle of power to suppress and oppress the toiling masses. Noticeable among the members of this class in the neo-colonial epoch are the politicians, government officers, the businessmen and religion leaders. All these privileged people, like the colonial masters, use their position to oppress the down trodden.

This attitude differentiates Ogie Obale from the rest of the vampires. Equipped with a British liberal education, Ogie hopes that his liberal views will enhance the quality of life in his country when he comes home. He dissociates himself from the corrupt practices inherent in the society, especially the ten percent. But the evil society like an octopus obsesses him. He joins in the filth associated with money and women. He rationalizes his action by arguing that if he makes enough money, he will invest it in a business in the city and thus provides labour for the people. He thinks differently from his father and other bourgeois who bank their stolen money in foreign banks and the fund utilizes for developing foreign economies (Fatunde 1985). Thus, Ogie gets involved in corruption, what he calls 'corruption with human face' (12). His spectacular opposition to the hoarding of stolen money in the vaults of Swiss Banks leads to his untimely death. He remarks:

How could people continue to spirit so much money out of the country when there are so many things that could be done with it right here in the country? (p. 67)

Iyayi reveals that Ogie:

had deplored the filth and vomit what he had found on the streets. He had deplored them without fully understanding that these were merely the outward manifestations of an inward decay and shamelessness in the people. Inwardly the people were as rotting garbage, full of worms, beetles and mice (p. 66).

Though, Ogie shows some degree of patriotism, he exhibits the selfish tendency of the exploiter. The narrator says:

Corruption never had a human face and never would have: neither did the percentage have a conscience (p. 12)

Ogie's attempt to justify corruption is meaningless. He exploits women for selfish ends and deserts them at will. He frustrates the efforts of Rose Idabale, his girlfriend, to improve herself educationally by impregnating her. He also engages in sexual relationship with Eunice, her father's secretary, but rejects his responsibility when she gets her impregnated. Through this experience, Iyayi conveys the sordid society he portrays.

The Social Categories: Types and Imports

Iyayi presents characters that run parallel to one another. Characters like Rose, Oniha Obala and Eunice are collectively presented as an alternative to others who are corrupt. For instance, Rose detests the endemic system and refrains from corruption. This is why she believes that Ogie's action of joining the corrupt system to effect a change is unrealistic. She affirms that Ogie cannot single-handedly fight a vast organization. (p. 28). While Ogie yields to pressure, she sustains the will-power and upholds righteous principle. Rose laments:

Hadn't he promised he would never take any of the percentages? Hadn't he promised he would never be one of them? What was he doing now but scheming with others to steal money? Certainly Ogie had changed. (p. 155)

Though Rose is poor, she refuses to give her body as a bribe for economic advantage. She chooses education as the means of self-empowerment. She fails to carry Ogie along in her anti establishment campaign but she is able to convince Eunice to detest corruption. Eunice resigns from the job that requires her to subject herself to sexual exploitation by customers in order to boost her employer's business. Like Rose, Oniha Obala, Ogie's brother opposes the system. The novel reveals that:

There is a man who has been alternatively wooed and who has been offered money, positions and then imprisoned again and again but who has refused to stoop, who has refused to bend. Onise Ine has been harassed and then offered huge bribes to make him change in his condemnation of our society but he has not changed. He has remained true to his faith in what he calls the coming revolution (p. 156).

Oniha is dynamic and intelligent and tries to assert his uniqueness in Obala's family. Iyayi employs Oniha as a varied social character to dialectically show his vision of society. The novelist shows that corruption contains the seed of its destruction. He condemns Chief Obala who embezzles money for onward shipment to foreign banks. When Chief Obala

discovers his son's duplicity in the business deal, he kills him. Thus, Obala loses the money and his son. Iyayi laments the breakdown of order in the postcolonial African state and sees the connivance and greed of comprador bourgeoisie as a critical link in the movement from kleptocratic to felonious states characterized by proliferation of illicit international trade in money laundering. The inclusion of corruption as a major dynamic in the evolution of postcolonial African states enriches Iyayi's aesthetics in ways that are extremely beneficial to unraveling the conundrum of African postcolonial politics. It is precisely the interplay of these factors that seems to intrude on and disrupt the realization of the national ideal that was the objective of all decolonization projects.

Having detailed the many acts of corrupt practices that accompany everyday existence such as bribes paid out to secure contracts, Iyayi asserts that corrupt Nigerians are retarding development in our republic. Corruption is viewed not so much as an act that benefits individuals, but as an omission that abandons the nation to neglect and decay. Metaphors such as the 'national cake', which was coined in the independence years to graphically, mirror the concepts of power sharing, development (distribution of infrastructure) and self-determination has over the years, grown into tired and vulgarized cliché. Presently, it is only understood in literal and practical terms as harbingers of corruption; a corruption that thrives on the avaricious exploitation of the state and its resources for the primitive accumulation of wealth by a few individuals. Ogwude (1996: 58) rightly observes that:

The Contracts is an angry novel. Anger smeared by patriotism and love for a nation caught in abysmal corruption at the leadership/administrative level. It shows indices that range from misappropriation and the mismanagement of public funds to outright fraud and treasonable economic sabotage.

The Novel and Social Change

Iyayi's Marxist bent is equally captured in *The Contracts*. Like Marx and Engels, he sees revolution as:

...a natural sequence of development that every country, whether it liked it or not, undergoes and that revolutions were the natural consequences of exploitation (p.102)

The revolution will inevitably cut down all those who had lived through and profited by the present decay and exploitation. It is corruption that breeds revolution and this is giving a boost through news in the papers. The government intends to build a presidential residence at the cost of eighty million Naira. The citizens react sharply to this wastage of tax payer's

money in a society where many less-privileged individuals wallow in abject poverty. People criticise the government and remark that those in power are worse than armed robber. The narrator says:

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

People inevitably see the naked injustice and thus agitate for revolution. They are not surprised when it is circulated that Oniha Ine has been arrested for distributing offensive anti-establishment leaflet in the city (p. 21) Oniha eventually leads other students of Omani university to fight the corrupt system typified by his father. The students are invested with revolutionary vigour as they are seen smashing the council office, a symbolic action revealing a crack of the corrupt machinery.

Fanon recommends dialectically the use of violence as an instrument of liberation. The violence of liberation is not violence for violence's sake, but a physically and spiritually redeeming counter-violence. (Fatunde:1985: 111). Oniha Ine is in the forefront of the liberation struggle. When his father tries to disown him, he shouts:

You should be ashamed of yourself, you rob the people blind.
You are thieves. You are armed robbers. You are slave traders.
You trade in misery. You profit from the misery of the people.
You are like dogs and the vultures. You scavenger in the refuse,
in vomit of the people's misery (p. 212)

This outburst is a clear indication of emerging awareness of the need to reform the corrupt system typified by Chief Obala. The narration also portends a strong hope for redemption. In addition, Rose's pregnancy that she cannot abort, as earlier planned for the weekend, on the account of Ogie's death, is also a sign of hope because, just as Ogie is better than his father, it is expected that his child will be an improvement on him (Benneth. 1998). The child symbolizes a hope for future that combines Rose's purity and Ogie's little patriotism.

The Contracts shows the extent of travesty in Nigerian politics. The novel is an epitome of the political and moral decay fragmenting efforts toward nation building. Beyond projecting a brutal society and relating the pain of the dispossessed, the tension in the novel is an echo of Iyayi's formulation of a nation still in the throes of formation. Its ugly side speaks of the failures of independence and its hope for the future is ironically embedded in

revolution. At present, Nigeria is weighed down by the burden of moral ineptitude and misdirected political will. The focus of this novel is on the way official practices vitiate national morality and engender near anarchy and economic decline. It is at the same time the critique of a dangerous imitative populace, one that is badly in need of a reawakening to its duties to bring to halt poor governance. The novel reveals that:

Inside every seemingly decent man or woman, a criminal waits to break out. The criminal in him would break out at the right moment, but not before then, nor before the moment had reached its own crisis. After all, hadn't his father with great passion said the same thing (p. 141).

There is a criminal tendency in the mind of every seemingly upright individual. People exhibit social deviance as they struggle to acquire money and improve their condition in life. Most of the evils of the city derive from varied lifestyle. *Iyayi* juxtaposes characters and situations to illustrate the apparent contradictions. The narrator reveals that:

Outside the Luna club there was an artificial fountain, its tongues of water rose dome like, criss-crossed and the crashed back to their origin. At the base of the fountain, it was nothing but foam and bubbles. Huge bubbles as big as swans floated across the water, glittering, brilliant (p. 143)

This passage is significant for two reasons. It contrasts the scene of the hotel with prevalent filth, flies and disease in major parts of the city. The fountain at the Luna club juxtaposes the dirt of the area where common men live, a sort of comparison that gives credence to the novel's theme that wealth accumulates and men decay. The narration is also important for the light it throws on the affluence that Ogie lives before his death. *Iyayi's* novel is symbolically significant for understanding his reflections of people's sentiments. His language captures situations and paints apt pictures of oppression. The apt similes and metaphors that dot the pages contribute to understanding the main thrust of *Iyayi's* fiction. The novel is a depiction of the oppressive tendencies of the national bourgeoisie. It portrays the oppression of the ordinary people by the ruling class. There is a clearcut polarisation between the different social classes. This polarisation leads to class stratification which is bastardised by neo-colonialism. The ruling class lives a privileged, affluent, oppressive, protected and comfortable life. The class lives off the fruits of the labour of the masses. It derives its wealth by cheating common masses.

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