

NATIONAL DISILLUSIONMENT AND THE QUEST FOR REORIENTATION IN FESTUS IYAYI'S *HEROES*: A STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIAN CRISIS

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Abstract

This paper examines social realities in Festus Iyayi's Heroes as means of reorientating the citizenry about the socio-political impediment confronting them. This researcher demonstrates with examples from the text, how the author has done this and to what extent he has succeeded. The theoretical framework used for this study is the Sociological Theory of analyzing literary works. The reason for using Sociological Theory is because of Festus Iyayi's belief in literature serving the needs of the people and the society. Primary and secondary sources were used in the collection and analysis of the data. While the novel, Heroes constitute the primary source of the data, journals, internet articles and literary texts comprise the secondary sources. This investigation employs the content analysis approach to qualitative sociocritical analysis.

Keywords: Reorientation, Sociological, Literature, People, Society.

Introduction

Literature depicts what is happening in the society. Therefore, it is the society that determines what literature shows and not the writer that determines what it shows to the society. Literature thus becomes a creation of the historical and social contexts. The assertion that literature assume form of reflecting the real society in the world of the writer and the people is true. In other words, a writer cannot manipulate what happens in the society but the writer can redirect the society. Literary works, therefore according to Milton Albrecht (1954:426) reflects, "the economic, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars (and) religion of the society that produced the text".

High percentage of African writers are producing literary works that are socially committed. These creative literary works tend to show postindependence disillusionment and perform the fundamental function of modern African literature which is mainly sociologically induced. In other words, the present-day African writer cannot isolate from the society. The African writer represents the experiences of the society in a creative way. Chinua Achebe (1975:78) assert, "the African writer cannot... be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which people suffer". Ngozi Chuma-Udeh (2007:131) emphasizes Chinua Achebe's point of view on the cornerstone of postindependence African literature, "This is an indication that the literature of postindependence Disillusionment was one strong voice of criticism and satire. They saw a lot of anomalies in a group of rulers who were mere exploitationists and opportunists". The proponents of socially motivated literature believe there is a relationship between literature and society. It is impossible to read postindependence African literary works without decoding the travesty of the sorry predicament of the people. Daniel Jordan Smith (2007:87) postulate:

Further, these discourses reflect a popular expectation that things could and should be different. Implicit in the intense collective concern with social morality is the awareness that some forms of corruption violate norm of kinship, community and the reciprocal obligations of patrons and clients. Yet also implicit in the collective self-criticism are growing expectations and new forms of morality and accountability associated with the ideals of democracy and development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is the sociological literary theory. Sociological literary theory view literature not as an aesthetic object but an object that performs sociological function in the society. To the sociological literary theorists, literature is made to view man as a social being, his activities, relationship to other individuals and the immediate society. Postindependence literature encompass history as seen through failing, endemic irresponsible rulership pervading the African societies. Echezona Ifejirika (2009:188) writes:

A sociological literary approach that views work of art as the product of historical cum political forces that can be analysed by

looking at the material condition in which it is produced studies literature, the writer's or artiste's representation in their works, of the struggle, the clash and the conflict between the rich and the poor, the colonizer and the colonized, the haves and the have-nots, the employers and the employees, the upper class and the lower class as hinged in the economic or material dialectics of a given society.

A Sociological Reading of Class Struggle, Corruption and National Identity in Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*

The idea of what a socially induced writer should be is evident in Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*. *Heroes* is a novel directed at the irresponsible rulership and failure of the Nigerian state. *Heroes* portray social realism, question prevailing circumstances and also offering revolutionary alternative. *Heroes* is design to show the futility of a war caused by the greed of few privileged classes. The masses are expose to the bloody war they knew nothing about.

Like his other novels, Festus Iyayi in *Heroes* depicts problems that plague Nigerian society. The novel recreates the terrible experiences of the people during Nigerian-Biafran war as well as exposing events that led to the war. With this novel, the novelist concern with the masses is seen clearly. Exploitation of the masses is prominent in Festus Iyayi's novels. To Festus Iyayi, exploitation of the masses by the privileged class resulted to the war, their actions and inactions instigated the bloodshed. It is this exploitation that Osime Iyere, the protagonist points out:

The people are never consulted The people are manipulated into the war because those at the helm have a monopoly over the means of indoctrination and information. They can misinform. They misinform the people; they trick the people into war. The people are manipulated into a war only to have their children killed, their houses destroyed by bombs and grenades. And all the time, the generals and politicians stand aside, away from the death and the destruction of the war and shout that it is indeed a great war. A great war for them because they lose nothing and yet gain everything (63).

It is important to state here that the masses are manipulated by the elite with lies, propaganda threat. For instance, Osime Iyere laments, "children of sixteen

and seventeen wearing black canvas shoes and carrying dane guns". From this assertion, it is glaring the innocent Biafran children soldiers are not the cause of the war. Rather, exploitative tendencies of the upper echelon of the society are responsible for the war. B.E.C. Oguzie (1986:250) notes the privileged class not only "defraud the government to amass their wealth, they also exploit the poor and thrive on it". However, Festus Iyayi believes exploitation of the people should not continue. Hence his social reorientation of the masses, believing that the people should organize themselves, resist and revolt against the exploiters. In *Heroes*, Osime Iyere's revolutionary ideology is seen in Asaba Camp of the Federal Troops as he inspires the soldiers assigned to train him to revolt.

Economic policies of the rulers make the people suffer and negative economic policies contribute to their exploitation. In traditional African societies, the convergence of poverty and bad governance creates space for exploitation. Nowhere is this intersection more evident than in the poor living conditions of the people where poverty through various means forms the cornerstone of their subjugation as noted by Abdullahi Haruna (2019:4):

Economic poverty and paucity of social awareness are depicted in *Heroes* as the main factors that had rendered the masses vulnerable to social exploitation. In the novel, we come across several fighting soldiers like Patrick, Olu, and Kokobi, Sergeants Kesh Kesh, Musa and Audu who admit that they had enlisted into the army during the war either as a result of unemployment and poverty or due to the strength of war propaganda and less sold to the masses by the ruling class.

Unemployment and Underemployment is another issue in Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*. This problem is monstrous and is responsible in the words of Tejumola Olaniyan (1988:305) for, "Squalor and poverty of our ninety five percent of the (African) population". According to Abdullahi Haruna (2019:4):

Patrick, Olu, and Kokobi say that they had enlisted into the army because they were not employed and the war provides them with employment. For Sergeants Kesh Kesh, Musa and Audu, enlisted into the army to fight the Biafrans because they were informed by their political leaders that Ibo people from the east wanted to deny their northern region access to petroleum resources discovered in that part of the country.

As a son of a peasant farmer who suffered unemployment and underemployment, Festus Iyayi in *Heroes* is outrightly admonishing the highly-placed individuals to provide quality jobs for the people. Festus Iyayi early years is dominated by fear of unemployment and underemployment. During the unfortunate Nigerian-Biafran civil war, high percentage of people were displaced, leading to job loss while many persons were forcefully conscripted into the army, others especially from Biafra joined the army as route of getting food, drugs, shelter. Patrick, Olu and Kokobi attest to this fact. Patrick confessed to Osime Iyere that, "I had no job.... I joined the army because I had no job" "And I had no job either", Olu admitted. "Me too". Kokobi said (130). Unemployment and underemployment can pressurize people go against their wishes. The military involvement in governance of Nigeria contributed to debasement of the people and country. During military rule, the military rulers abuse rights and privileges of the people. Military ruler is usually offshoot of military coup. Because of this, there is no rule of law. Civilian ruler is guided by the rule of law, while military rulers govern through decrees and edicts. The people cannot interrogate military rulers since military ruler disregard constitution and promulgate decrees, opposition to the policies of military rule is strictly prohibited.

In *Heroes*, Festus Iyayi confront the evils associated with military rule. Nigerian-Biafran Civil War resulted from the handiwork of military officers in collaboration with greedy politicians. Tejumola Olaniyan (1988:306) observation is timely, "The colonels, generals and politicians on both sides benefit from this game and in fact, it is caused by their greed and corner cutting". Hence, it is objective to state that military rule is evil and Festus Iyayi is supportive of F.N. Chreachain (1991:45) affirmation, "There is nothing "corrective" per se about military regime as long as they continue to perpetuate existing class structure". Understanding these features of military rule is crucial not only for appreciating the complexity of military rulership. For instance, what is needed is an army that is responsive to the people, occupying rulership positions in merely an integral component of mismanaging the wealth of the people, the military also constitute bad governance which Nigeria is infamously noted for. Etta Julius Ndifon (2021:180) posits, "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 interests of the masses".

Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* has been seen in the words of Ernest Emennyonu (1991:247), as a recreation of, "myth of the greatness of General Murtala Mohammed". It is recalled that General Murtala Mohammed military rule in Nigeria was responsive to the people, he showed concern for the masses. Festus Iyayi is suggesting a third force that will free the masses from the grip of oppressors which late General Murtala Mohammed could not realize before his brutal death, his novel is fashion at imbuing the people with revolutionary ideas. Through this research, the researcher contributes to the foregoing that the third force is necessary to carve out a responsive society. This study thus offers support to Festus Iyayi's insight into a specific understanding of the problems prevailing in Nigeria.

In *Heroes*, the ignorant concept of the "enemy" by both the Nigerian and Biafran actors is quite erroneous. Osime Iyere, the protagonist of the novel is equally ignorant like the war victims and masses. In the early stage of the novel, Osime Iyere sees the Biafrans as greedy and tribalistic enemies, he hated the Biafrans with passion but his perception changed after he was molested by the Nigerian soldiers. This reorientation is further elevated where he witnessed vicious murder of innocent persons. These incidents became soul searching for him. Osime Iyere discover new things about the war and equally wrote about his discovery. With this discovery, Osime Iyere becomes fully developed character psychologically like Idemudia in *Violence*. Osime Iyere's discovery is helpful, he becomes aware of remote and immediate cause of the Nigerian-Biafra war, "I am not going to sleep anymore. It is time the soldiers understood that this is not their war, that they are fighting the wrong enemy. The generals, the politicians and the businessmen are their enemies.... These are the people they should be fighting" (113). To Osime Iyere, the predator of the people is those who caused the war, "Those who caused the war are the real enemy The real enemy are the top army officers; they caused the war". (130). Osime Iyere with his reorientation campaign assume the prototype of Festus Iyayi by conscientizing the people, he devised means through which the enemies of the people can be destroyed. This means is the "Third Army" for which he makes himself the first recruit.

A revolution is therefore inevitable to uproot the prevailing prejudice. The means of routing out the decadence is fast approaching. The relationship between socially committed writers has long intrigues scholars of African literature, yet the long-awaited revolution through which the society will be

cleansed is yet to materialize. This researcher is confident that the passionate reorientation of Festus Iyayi will be fruitful:

The incited us to kill each other. And where are they now? Either giving the order or selling food and weapons to the armies to make profits. The generals, the politicians and the businessmen are your real enemies. The generals and the traditional rulers, the church leaders who prayed for each group of rulers are the enemies and when we are dead, or tired of killing each other, then they will come back (131).

There is no doubt that Festus Iyayi in *Heroes* provide ideas to the people by admonishing them to be critical before making decisions:

The Federal troops do not know that the Biafran soldiers are not their real enemies and the Biafrans are ignorant of this fact as well. So, you kill each other. You rape each other's women. You kill each other's children and destroy each other's homes and farms. That's the real tragedy of the war-those who get killed in it. If you ask the generals where their children and families are you will find out that they are out of the country. The rich have sent their children out of the country while the children of working people on whom the war was imposed are trapped and killed in it (132).

The third force which Osime Iyere craves for is exemplified with Sergeant Kesh who experienced change at the end. This is seen during the last battle of recapturing Oganza and Nkesio. Sergeant Kesh's command to his troops is noteworthy, "Remember from now on that the Biafran soldiers are not your enemies really. We go to those villages not to kill them but persuade them to lay down their arms" (243). Osime Iyere originally an admirer of the Nigerian troops experienced the brutal murder of Mr Ohali in the hands of the Nigerians; soldiers changed his orientation. Mr Ohali who is his landlord and in-law got killed when he went to register at the army garrison. Osime Iyere became disillusioned and instead shifted his sympathy to the Biafran troops who themselves are also guilty of the massacre. Osime Iyere disapproves of the carnage. Both Nigeria and Biafra troops are to blame. He wants a better country but he opposes bloodshed:

A change is needed, but not the way I wanted it here. The idea was right, but in the circumstances, it would have been pure anarchy. I therefore have a responsibility to survive this war (237).

One hundred and eighty-seven Biafrans, dead, shot down like dogs. And forty-two Nigerians, murdered in cold blood. And hundreds of soldiers, slaughtered on the bridge. There is enough blood for a river, enough blood to float a ship. Life doesn't matter anymore. So, why did I attempt to run? Why did I go and hide myself in the jeep? What was one more death in the orgy that was going on? (241).

To Osime Iyere, the true heroes are the soldiers on the Nigerian side who fought bravely for unity of Nigeria and soldiers on the Biafran side who fought equally to secede from Nigeria. These were junior soldiers from Nigerian and Biafran side, not the high-ranking military officers. As told by Sergeant Audu, Biafran soldiers ambushed sixteen Nigerian soldiers. While the junior military fought gallantly to free themselves from the Biafrans, their commander "was driven to safety from the ambush leading to fierce battle resulting to the death of ten soldiers out of the sixteen ambushed soldiers. Otun had to use his body as shield to enable the other soldiers to escape. Emmanuel, Ikeshi and Yemi were among the escaped soldiers. The captain who abandoned his troops and ran away to safety was promoted to the rank of Major "in recognition of his bravery" whereas the junior soldiers who fought hard to escape death were not promoted. Brigadier Otunshi, the commanding officer in charge of Asaba sector of the war who promised the Head of State the town of Onitsha as wedding gift. Although he was never seen on the battlefield and was not punished for abandoning his troops, he was subsequently promoted to the rank of Military General.

Note the insensitivity of the Head of State who choose the period of the civil war to get married. This is replica of present rulers in Nigeria who Festus Iyayi refers to as, "They are the vagabonds of the earth, the bastard of the earth" (133) and "They are animals ... Wild animals and this wildness they always had. They are beasts. Black beasts. Wild beasts" (245). Brigadier Otunshi in particular like rulers in Nigeria is a daredevil. He sells arms to the Biafran troops and send his troops (Nigerian soldiers) to the war front ill-equipped thereby risking their lives. Brigadier and later General Otunshi executed forty-two soldiers and five

military officers for deserting the battlefield whereas he was seen attending a party in Lagos. This is true picture of Nigeria. This shows the type of leadership in Nigeria after independence from the colonial rulers. The author x-ray totality of the Nigerian rulers as seen with the characters of Brigadier Otunshi and Head of State. Infact the Head of State decision to organize his marriage amidst the carnage of the war supports the viewpoint he is a prototype of Nigerian rulers whose stock in trade is their personal interests. The attitude of these rulers angers post-colonial writers who satirically highlight the demonic nature of the rulers. Festus Iyayi gives graphic details of the problems Africans experienced with their rulers after they gain independence from colonial rulers:

After the war, many generals will write their account in which they will attempt to show that they were the heroes of this war, that it was grand strategies that won the war. They will tell the world that they single-handedly fought and won the war. The names of soldiers like Otun, Emmanuel, Ikeshi and Yemi will never be mentioned. The soldiers take the dirt and ambushes and the bullets with their lives and yet, what happens? Always the officers are the heroes. Always the generals, the officers take the credit. Always the general gets the praise. Always they are the heroes. Always. (86).

Festus Iyayi engaged himself with: to counter the notion that the true heroes of the war are the high-ranking officers, not the junior soldiers who fought during the war. For this reason, Osime Iyere vowed to redirect tide of history to favour the junior soldiers:

It will not always be like that even if the generals on both sides conspire to make it appear so. It will not always be like that because a movement is bound to emerge from this war and if not from this war, then after this war. A movement which will write the history of this war and give each man and woman his or her proper due. You Sergeant Kesh Kesh, and your comrades will never be forgotten. Never. (247).

Festus Iyayi presentation of the battle on the Niger Bridge in conjunction with the bloodshed represents one of the most fundamental examples of the futility of war. The Federal troops have intended to take possession of Onitsha. Tragically, for them, the Biafrans ambushed them, a survivor of the ambush laments, "We lost more than a thousand men, the river is full of the bodies of

our dead and many of them are afloat. It is a horrible sight" (216). During the thirty months Nigeria-Biafra civil war, brutal killing, raping, torture are as presented in *Heroes*. This synchronization is not merely a coincidence but a deliberate effort that enhances Festus Iyayi disagreement against the war. The presentation of the bloody encounter of the Nigerian and Biafran troops serves as a tangible reminder of horrors of war, while the physical confrontation of the opposing sides connotes brutality, this savagery can be avoided if the contender will work together to defeat their enemies. Andrew Ibeawuchi Nwagbara (2010:112-113) supports this view:

In his prose narrative, the writer details the radical disposition to the parasitic existence of the leadership of the Nigerian nation. He uses Osime, the protagonist, to voice out his desire for a revolution that will make the poor confront the thieves of the common treasure. Is it coincidence that Osime is a native of Ugbegun in present day Edo State where late Festus Iyayi came from? In as much as *Heroes* cannot be referred to as an autobiographical exposition, it certainly bears some resemblance to an author's expression of his radical views in a work of fiction with a central character who is his alter ego. Therefore, the socialist temperament of Osime in this novel serves as the author's way of ventilation. In doing this, the novelist draws on a correlation between the pitiable state of the soldiers and by extension the common people Therefore, as a group, they must be educated and mobilized to understand the need for "an organized third army" (242), a metaphorical aggregate of all the oppressed people in the Nigerian nation who should confront their collective exploitation with gusto.

The war brought lot of brutality to the people. Many persons were killed, raped and maimed. Hunger, starvation was weapon of war against the masses. Through the war, Festus Iyayi sees a demonic society, he exposes his disillusionment. *Heroes* is a satire laced with damning criticism of a war that should have been avoided. Incidentally, despite the horrors of the war, the Head of State was impassive. An example of brutality in the novel is the gruesome murder of Mr Ohali, Osime Iyere's landlord by the Federal troops. Upon their arrival in Benin City, the Federal Troops mandated persons of Igbo origin register to avoid arrest over support for Biafra rebellion. Sadly, Mr Ohali was killed by

the same Federal troops. Another example of brutality in the novel is execution of the prisoners of war for the defeat suffered by Federal troops on Niger Bridge. Also, there was the slaughtering of thirty-seven soldiers and two officers by Brigadier Otunshi. Finally, there is the repeated raping of Ndudi by soldiers.

Moreso, the brutality and oppression melted out to the Biafran soldiers is also committed by the Biafran soldiers against the Federal troops and the people, Victor O. Ogbeide (2014:76) says:

.... The Biafran soldiers are as guilty as the federal forces in their embrace of corruption, injustice, burning and raping While in control of Midwest, the Biafran soldiers destroy building, schools, hospitals and other public utilities. They sadistically took the women, raped them in front of their children and husbands and then as if that was not enough, drove those long sticks through their vaginas into their wombs. Then they cut the throats of their men and children. Cut them and severe their heads from their bodies. And all these are civilians.

As an instrument of social change, Festus Iyayi brought to attention the decadence of a failing Nigeria state and advocate for reformation of the country and provision of responsive leadership to the masses. Festus Iyayi showed Nigeria reeking in degeneration leading to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. Instances of brutality, oppression, exploitation, cruelty, suppression, corruption, intimidation resonate across the novel.

Characters in Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* live in constant fear. Their agonizing situation is result of fear of the unknown. The novel explicitly show horrors observed during the war of 1967 to 1970. The people are afraid of losing their lives especially during military raids. The masses are also scared of soldiers actions and inactions. Soldiers are afraid of enemy attack. For instance, while conveying remains of Mr Ohali to Oganza, Osime and his entourage came across several military checkpoints. As the soldiers, "searched the car, they asked questions and it was obvious they were nervous as they carried the automatic AK 47 Kolashnikov rifles" (66). Osime Iyere equally stated "fear is the constant companion of soldiers" (81). This statement reinforces the fact that death is inevitable in war. Soldiers like the citizens live in never-ending fear. For this reason, Sergeant Kesh Kesh begged Osime Iyere to visit his (Sergeant Kesh Kesh) family if he is killed in the war. The journalist Jato is also victim of fear. He begs

Osime Iyere, “that whichever one of us survives this night will get in touch with the families of the others. Let us all give the pledge” (204).

Conclusion

It is obvious literature of post-independence Nigeria nay Africa is actuated by disillusionment of the citizens including writers. High percentage of postindependence African literature are protest literature. Writers of such postindependence literature are virulent in their attack against man made tragedy of African societies.

To this extent, *Heroes* exposes the nature of failing Nigeria state induce by irresponsible corrupt rulership. Precisely, the decay of leadership in Nigeria is presented in the characters of Head of State and Brigadier Otunshi. Leaders who are insensitive to the masses. Festus Iyayi satirizes senior military officers who are dictatorial to the anguish-stricken people. Festus Iyayi exhibit a society on the brink of total collapse. People languish in hunger and disease amidst huge human and material resources; the rulers are callous. Festus Iyayi succeeded in galvanising the people to resist, revolt and overthrow the oppressive system. To the novelist, there is bound to be a bloody revolution by the oppressed people. He postulates a new society that will bring expected change, a revolutionary change that will crush the oppressors:

We have had good men, men with ambition for the entire people, but they were confronted by a wall of men who were without ambition, men who had come first and therefore had settled first into the positions of power available. The men without ambition used their positions of power to render irrelevant the few men with ambitions they had fought among themselves instead of fighting the men without ambition (224).

We need a third army (231).

It will not always be like that even if the generals on both sides conspire to make it appear so. It will not always be like that because a movement is bound to emerge from this war and if not from this war, then after this war (247).

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