
POVERTY, POWER, AND SEXUAL RESISTANCE IN FESTUS IYAYI'S VIOLENCE: A MARXIST-FANONIST READING OF HUNGER AND DESIRE

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Abstract: *This paper examines the relationship between poverty, power, and sexual resistance in Festus Iyayi's Violence, using Marxist-Fanonist theory. The study examines how Iyayi presents poverty not simply as an economic deficiency, but as a systemic form of oppression in postcolonial Nigeria, which functions to dehumanise, marginalise, and silence the underemployed lower class. Drawing from Karl Marx's theory of class struggle and Frantz Fanon's conception of the "wretched of the earth," the paper argues that poverty in Violence is a form of structural violence and a systemic means of control and exploitation imposed by both colonial legacies and post-independence capitalist elites. More importantly, the paper examines how sexual resistance becomes a crucial form of survival and agency, especially for the female characters. Through the characters of Queen and Adisa, Iyayi portrays the body (sex) as a contested site exploited by oppressive forces but also reclaimed as an instrument of resistance. These female characters deploy sexual agency not out of moral weakness, but as designed reactions to the social, political and economic disability they suffer. Within this framework, sex emerges as a subversive tool, a means to negotiate power and assert control within a society shaped by class stratification and political domination. Ultimately, the analysis highlights how hunger and desire, both literally and symbolically, foster a subtle revolutionary consciousness in the novel. By reading Violence through a Marxist-Fanonist perspective, this study demonstrates how literature can unmask the socio-political mechanisms of inequality, while also illuminating the nuanced forms of resistance that arise from within oppressed communities.*

Keywords: *Festus Iyayi, Marxist-Fanonist critique, poverty, sexual resistance, class struggle*

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INTRODUCTION

African writers over the years have been genuinely concerned with the social, economic and political realities of the African society. As such, they often portray these realities within the context of their works that cut across all genres of literature to include music and creative arts, thereby rejecting the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’. African cultural values, norms and even deficiencies are recorded and written in the first hand and plausible manner by the African writers. This long-time relationship between African literature and society is confirmed by Ogundokun (2015).

According to (Ogundokun, 2015, p. 84), “In scholarly studies over the years, the inter-relationship between literature and society has been strongly attested”. He posits that these writers in Africa often condemn oppression, immoralities, religious bigotry, and abuse of power, in a bid to bring sanity to the African society toward growth and development. Emphasising the commitment of these writers towards a genuine social-cultural struggle, (Agho, 2020, p. 24) Explains that “A literary work in Africa is expected to serve a social as well as a utilitarian purpose; it must mirror social problems and other reprehensible traits in the corridors of power or the larger society and show the way forward towards the redemption of the society” He maintains further that African literature deals with different themes and genre, however there is this persistent subject of protest that always resonate across the genres even when the writers are not revolutionary.

Largely, African literature is a protest literature; a protest against cultural invasion, against bad governance, against poverty and other social, political and economic realities peculiar to the African nation. African literature necessitates an act of resistance against the “justification of oppression” (Sepas, 2020, p. 75). Such Poverty is one major reality which is of concern to this paper as it relates to power and sex. Though discourse on poverty has taken on different dimensions, its relation to power and sex has not really been given a wider critique.

Poverty as a phenomenon is said to have been derived from the Middle English word “poverte”, the Anglo-French “poverte” gotten from the Latin pauper, “paupertat” or “paupertas”, which means lack (Abdullahi, 2023, p. 78). Poverty from this perspective means not having. Poverty is the inability of the individual to provide the daily needs for their sustainability. A poor individual struggles to feed himself and his family; he is often unemployed or underemployed.

Poverty, according to (Kehinde, 2021, p. 205), “is the lack of power to command resources”. Power, as used here by Kehinde, implies the totality of all social, political and economic enabling atmospheres that motivate a man towards autonomy. Experience has shown that “poverty is never by choice” This is because of the fact that there are various schemes and designs in the society intended to perpetually and continuously impoverish many to “penurious scavengers” (Eziafa & Nworah, 2015, p. 51). Hence, a poor man is not favoured by his environment as the social, political and economic atmosphere does not allow him to command the resources needed for his sustainability. (Adiele, 2023, p. 31) posits that “poverty and exploitation” are sincere explanations for having a class society. This means that the poor individual is often manipulated by the privileged class, who has the resources at their disposal. He further explains that a sincere investigation into these two phenomena will help in determining national growth and development. The privileged class, therefore, use resources at their disposal to wield power and hegemony and lord themselves over the lower class members of the society. This will of power characterises “the bureaucratisation and stratification of socio-political roles and power handed down by the colonial masters to Africans who, upon assuming governance, in mimicking their predecessors, bring to it the theatrical sense of



overdoing what those before them had done" (Egya 2022, 163). Poverty then becomes a structural violence committed by the upper class- the elites against ordinary citizens of the state.

In return, though very poor, without power to revolt against the violence of the bourgeoisie, the poverty of the poor man becomes a serious means through which he negotiates himself out of poverty, usually for survival. Towards this, Eziafa & Nworah (2015) observe that there is no limit to what poverty can push people to do; it can push an otherwise faithful person into adultery" (p. 51). Sex, in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, is therefore read as a protest against poverty and a negotiation for sustainability and survival. We need to understand here that resistance against oppressive power comes in different forms and dimensions, including, but not limited to, armed struggle, protests, boycott, silence and passivity. So, sex compliance, in this context as used by the characters like Queen and Adisa, should not be mistaken for absolute submission or perversion; rather, it should be seen from the perspective of the writer as a strategic display and technique for survival against poverty and power

FESTUS IYAYI AND MARXIST FANONISM

African Literature emerges largely as a reaction against violent experiences at the hands of the colonists. Agho (2016) mentioned that:

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as well as Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, have drawn attention to the use of violence as a strategy employed by the Western colonisers to subjugate Africa and her people during the colonisation of the African continent. (p. 42)

As such, each writer's reaction corresponds with the level of oppression and exploitation witnessed or experienced both from European colonialism and from African self-imposed imperialism, forced on the Africans by their leaders. Kenya, for instance, faced a violent colonial rule before independence. Almost everything was taken away from the Kenyans, including their land. The native blacks who were the rightful owners of the land were used as labourers on their ancestral heritage by the whites. The exploitation in Kenya went beyond colonialism; rather, it tends toward slavery. The Kenyans cultivated their land for the economic benefit and gain of the white settlers. They were forced to work on sugar-cane plantations and other farms.

In Senegal, however, the French colonisation was more of assimilation and racial prejudice in terms of economic, political and social life. In Nigeria, British rule was more of cultural imperialism. Land, for instance, was not an issue in Nigeria. Besides, Nigerians were not forced into serious hard labour on their farms, unlike the Kenyans. However, Nigeria felt the impact of colonialism even more after the Europeans had left the country. The above are the grotesque situations that most African writers react against in their writings. As such, writers like Festus Iyayi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ousmane Sembene and others who are socialist realists prescribe revolutionary actions as the only panacea to oppressive governance towards the redemption of the oppressed.

Agho (2016) draws critical attention to categorising Festus Iyayi alongside some other African writers as socialist realists. Festus Iyayi is a Nigerian-born novelist and a leftist who advances his political philosophy through realist novels. His first novel and possibly the most popular, *Violence*, was written in 1979, followed by *The Contract* (1982), *Heroes* (1986) and *Awaiting Court Martial* (1996) – a short story.

POVERTY-INDUCED REDEMPTION IN IYAYI'S *VIOLENCE*



In this section, power and poverty are grappled with within the context of Festus Iyayi's *Violence* in order to justify the use of violence, which often brings succour to the ordinary man on the street, hence, redemption. Poverty has been a major instrument in the colonisation of the mind. Poverty is a powerful mechanism through which the capitalists hold strongly to power and control the economy of the state. Poverty in the context of this novel *Violence* exemplifies a "structural violence"-structural in the sense that poverty is a social phenomenon within a social structure that shelters injustices, inequality and oppression. This implies that poverty makes it very difficult for an individual to realise his potential. In any case, the social structure described here implies all social, cultural, economic and political relationships that shape, limit or extend an individual's actions and reactions to his environment.

This study, hence, argues that poverty is a primary source of violence; primary, in the sense that it seems to be the genesis and origin of violence, which in turn attracts other forms of violence in terms of oppression, which manifests itself at different levels. Hence, poverty can be described as violence – "the processes and mechanisms that prevent people from realising their potential" (Demmer, 2012, p. 5).

Festus Iyayi's " *Violence* seems to say that 'Poverty' is the genesis of real oppression. He portrays Idemudia and the totality of his life as poverty-ridden. he and his wife, Adisa, were tenants in one of the low mud zinced houses, sweeping the badly cemented floor of the room. (Iyayi, 1979, p. 1) Poverty usually turns a man into an object of ridicule and makes him more vulnerable to insults, humiliation and other inhuman treatment. Instances abound in the novel where Idemudia is embarrassed and humiliated either by his wife Adisa, the police, the tax collectors, the chief and even the Queen, the wife of the chief. For instance, he has a confrontation with his wife, Adisa. Adisa challenges her husband and questions his manhood with an intriguing voice. "Her voice was bitter now, downright sarcastic. 'You go out each day and return each day, ' she said contemptuously, 'with what? Is the coming back any better than the going away?' (Iyayi, 1979, p. 3). He also had a face-off with Adisa when she tried to stop him from going out to fend for them (Iyayi, 1979, p. 15). In another instance, due to a lack of funds from his father to pay tax after Idemudia had been sent out of school for non-payment of fees, he was arrested in place of his father. "And so, Idemudia had been seized. They took him to Ubiaja, where he spent three nights in the cell. After the third day, he was released, according to the officer, for want of evidence (Iyayi, 1979, p. 6). It is evident from the above instances that the poverty of Idemudia attracts to him unnecessary insult and embarrassment.

(Hegel, 2008, p. 244) claims that poverty does not make an individual a 'rabble' and that poverty is just a kind of inner feeling of jealousy that the ordinary man has against the affluent and the state. He explains that the poverty of the ordinary man comes out of his awareness that he has no hope of a job and the fact that he cannot hold claim to what he does not have a stake in. However, the poverty of the character of Idemudia and his friends in *Violence* is not just resentment against the rich or the state. It is even far from that. Idemudia, in this case, is faced with a lack of honour not only to secure premises for his labour but also cannot, on any ground, lay claim to the reward of his labour. By implication, Idemudia finds it so difficult to secure a job. Even he goes around in search of menial jobs on an empty stomach. When confronted by his wife, he said: "But you see me going out each day. Do you think I go to Iyaro and First East Circular on an empty stomach for the mere fun of it?" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 2).

At a time when Idemudia, alongside his friends Asaro, secured a job to offload for Queen, his labour was subjected to the capitalist power of demand and supply. He is cheated of his labour. He stoops so low and accepts the Queen's ridiculous bargain of his labour. This situation often happens to the poor man on a daily basis. Idemudia is afraid of losing the opportunity to make dough, at least



to sustain himself and his family. "Queen stared at Patrick and drew up her black leather handbag. 'I'll pay you five naira each, nothing more. If you don't want it, you can go away' and she began to walk away. Idemudia and his friends stood in the rain while they debated whether or not to accept the five naira. (Iyayi, 1979, p. 21). The reality is that "if they refused, she would have to offer them more than five naira" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 22). Idemudia, with his friends, therefore, offloads a trailer of cement on an empty stomach. Iyayi observes that it's so unfair for one man to have enough to eat and throw away excess, while others go hungry. While Idemudia struggles to eat a meal for two days (Iyayi, 1979, p. 61) with his wife Adisa in a badly cemented floored room, Queen "already owned two modern story buildings in New Benin...when her husband was trying to expand the freedom Motel, she was setting up her hotel along Sakpoba road" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 23). The plight of the poor man is more than pathetic. "They are poor and ate anything next to grass. Last Christmas she had bought and prepared a chicken that had died from an illness. She had specially looked for it because there had been no money" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 67). The poor man is prone to diseases. Like Idemudia, who "caught the fever,... he had been off-loading heavy bags of cement the whole day under that heavy rain and without food" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 66).

(Ushie and Uta, 2012, p. 45) examine the *Descriptive Focus as a Semiotic Marker in Festus Iyayi's Violence*. They explain that in an attempt to speak for the socio-economically deprived and underprivileged class and deplorable life and corruption in Nigeria, Iyayi deploys his "evocative power of pictorial description". They are concerned with the ways Iyayi uses language to describe the deplorable condition of the poor and the corresponding economic injustice meted out to the masses by the privileged class. They cited, for example, Iyayi's appalling picture of Ogbe Hospital in comparison to the Sapele Road in *Violence*. They researched the use of iconic words and phrases, as well as words and expressions that create semiotic and symbolic portrayals of chaotic relationships that exist between the privileged class and the underprivileged class of society. They believe that the beauty and the aesthetics of words to create mock reality, which they equate with socialist realism, is the evocative use of language by Festus Iyayi that exposes and foregrounds the negative effects of capitalism in society. They conclude that the use of descriptive and symbolic language is enough to raise the consciousness of the people, as seen in *Violence*.

Poverty, as portrayed by Festus Iyayi in *Violence*, is not just about not having enough means to satisfy one's needs or desires. Poverty also means that the ordinary man can be unjustifiably punished even while legally engaging his labour to feed himself. This happens to Idemudia, who is wrongly accused of stealing a bag of cement. Papa Jimoh, in the same vein, is wrongly accused and harassed by the police and is put in jail for an offence he never committed. And the company he worked for "does nothing to compensate him for the three nights he spends in the cell" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 84). The poor masses faced a lot of iconic difficulties and challenges, especially in the hands of capitalists like Queen, who controls even the government agencies like Iriso. Outside their home, even in the hospital, the poor man is not free. He faced more complicated problems. Iyayi, while describing the Nigerian hospital, sees it as a similitude of a police station.

Iyayi makes it clear in *Violence* that the poverty of the poor man is perpetuated continuously because the rich capitalists continue to amass more wealth at the expense of the poor masses. As such, in one way or another, the rich few like Obofun, Queen, and others fatten themselves on the sweat of the working class or the labourers. However, along the line, the poor man understands and identifies his plight with that of the capitalist. "I understand that the man making all this trouble is a rich man" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 109). Soon enough, he knows that his trouble would never cease until he fights the sustainer of his poverty, for it is not the rich man who makes the poor man poor; rather, he makes him poorer in the long run.



The concert in the evening to celebrate Florence Nightingale in the hospital, featuring the court proceeding, speaks volumes about this study and the justification of violence that results in redemption. Or how else can violence be explained to a poor man who sells his blood to feed himself and his wife? Sincerely, without any bias or prejudice to law or moral stands, "the things an empty stomach can drive a man to, the things hunger can make a man do" are beyond imagination (Iyayi, 1979, p. 157). Hence, the poor man stops running away from his fear. He stands to fight and continues to struggle, making violence his tool for stepping out of poverty. As such, the poor man, like Idemudia and other workers, uses force, brutalisation and absolute violence to demand improved human welfare. Iyayi, in *Violence*, therefore described poverty as the real violence that must be understood.

Acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the opportunity of being educated, of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly. We often do not realise that it is the society, the type of economic and political system in which we are operating in our country today, that brutalises the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realise that when such men of poor and limited opportunity react, they are only in a certain measure answering violence with violence (Iyayi, 1979, p. 185)

Iyayi, however, warned the masses not to throw caution to the wind by robbing the individual instead of the state and its capitalist apparatuses, which have kept the masses perpetually poor for long. It is not just for a handful of men to take up arms to rob one individual. I feel and think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 185).

Ujowundu (2013), while examining one of the novels written by Festu Iyayi, redefines the concept of violence against its propagandist perception. He hinges on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' social, economic, and political interpretation of life. In his work, Ujowundu is concerned with the role of the artist as well as his art in redefining life as it relates to social, economic and political insecurity that the society finds itself in the midst of plenty. Traditionally, violence to the people in the corridor of power and even to the majority of people is the one that is carried out by the poor masses against the injustices meted out to them. To Ujowundu (2013), the above is but a propagandist definition of violence. He, therefore emphasizes the real definition of violence as pictured by Iyayi in his social realistic novels as the excessive exploitation, inequality, lack of patriotism, corruption, avarice, nepotism, graft, inefficiency, on the part of the bourgeoisie against the masses that resulted in inevitable reactions in term of revolt which he sees as simple revolutionary consciousness on the part of the poor.

SEXISM: A TROPE OF VIOLENCE IN IYAYI'S *VIOLENCE*

Iboroma (2020) posits in his paper titled "Female Representation and Festus Iyayi's Vision of African Womanhood in *Violence* and *The Contract*" that "Iyayi denies his (female characters) women positive identity by foisting on them the image of sexually loose women in their pursuit of economic existence" (Iboroma, 2020, p. 207). This view is in total contrast to Osmane Sembene and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's portrayal of female characters in most of their novels. Iboroma examines female characters such as Queen Obofun, Adisa, Salome, Eunice Agbon and Mrs Olorun in Iyayi's *Violence* and *The Contract*, and concludes that "sexual immorality forms the parameter for the



1/2025

definition of womanhood in Iyayi's novels" and that Iyayi's "Marxist orientation does not in any way influence his (Iyayi's) sexual politics" (Iboroma, 2020, p. 213). She states that Iyayi's "portraiture of women "debases the image of the African woman and that it does not "play any role model function".

Sexual promiscuity is no doubt a sign of moral decay in society and indeed dehumanising. However, in a critical situation when violence threatens humanity, such immorality becomes the only means to confront violence caused by poverty. (Michel, 2024, p. 545) argues against the belief "that the loss of moral status is constitutive of dehumanisation, and that dehumanisation (as loss of moral status) is necessary for mass violence to take place". This paper argues that this mass violence is redemptive in its approach as "essential, necessary, and redeemable" (Beaumont, 2020, p. 185). And that Redemptive violence is the collective roles of individuals in the society. This individual breaks societal rules and norms to achieve independence and freedom. Although Michael, in his paper, refers to mass violence, this study, however, posits that individual consciousness often leads to mass violence in society.

Queen, as portrayed by Iyayi, is a goal-getter, not only as an irresponsible housewife. Of course, sex used in this text is another form of cohesion, a force against poverty and hegemony (the government)- the state. Sex in this context is another powerful tool used by the female folks, like Queen, to extract and get favour from the men-folks. For instance, Queen has sex with Iriso in return for supplies (milk, eggs and meat) for her hotel. She always uses her body to pay for services rendered to her. Queen is always more than willing to submit herself to any man for gratification. She willingly submits herself to Iriso.

The queen got up from the bed and began to undress very slowly. First, she removed her lace buba. Next, the lace wrap went. On the bed, Iriso struggled with his tie. Then he kicked off his shoes before undoing the button of his trousers. They slept together for an hour, then, exhausted, both fell apart (Iyayi, 1979, p. 100)

Iyayi describes her as a harlot, such that she becomes an expert in the act of making love to a man in such a way that he keeps coming back for more. Sex becomes a strong force that makes a man decide against his wishes. For instance, it is later that Iriso becomes aware that he has given away a huge sum of money. "What have I done? Given them away for nothing? He cursed himself" (Iyayi, 1979, p. 102). It is so bad to the extent that men often speak their inner minds out, usually without reservation, especially when they are about to have sex with or after having sex with women. Just like Queen, Adisa uses her body too to get what she wants, however, unwillingly. Idemudia 's husband is sick, and she needs to pay for his medical bills. However, the option left for her as a source of funds is Obofun, Queen's husband. She was to be paid one hundred naira for sleeping with him. Adisa rejected Obofun's sexual gratification on their first visit to the motel, but could not resist the temptation of the financial support offered by Obofun the second time. "She struggled once more and attempted to break free, but it was no use. Obofun weighed down heavily on her, and her fight was nothing but the last spasmodic movement of a dying animal. She gritted her teeth and her body was tensed (Iyayi, 1979, p. 170). She is not willing to have sex with Obofun as she makes love, as if she were a dead body.

Contrary, however, to Iboroma's feminist view of Festus Iyayi's *Violence* and *The Contract*, this present research work argues that Iyayi's sexist portrayal of female characters in *Violence* foregrounds the extent of revolutionary reaction or otherwise another form of violent revolt against the violent exploitation of their total being. According to (Ujowundu, 2013, p. 309), perhaps Iyayi's use of sexism to represent the woman in the novels points towards the "major conflict in the novels (which) is human dignity versus money and which is the case in all class societies".



1/2025

CONCLUSION

Festus Iyayi's *Violence*, exposes the terrible connection of poverty, power, and sexual resistance in postcolonial Nigeria, using literature as a revolutionary lens to confront structural injustice. Using Marxist-Fanonist framework, this study demonstrates how the material deprivation of the working class is not merely economic, but a serious ideological tool wielded by the elite to sustain exploitation and silence dissent. The novel portrays poverty not just as a background to suffering, but as the very engine of societal dysfunction and class-based exploitation. Hunger, in this context, becomes literal and symbolic condition, a mechanism of control and a source of rage.

The study reveals how sexual resistance becomes a means of survival and subversion, particularly for female characters like Queen and Adisa. Iyayi does not merely present these women as morally compromised, but as agents navigating a predatory system through the limited means available to them. Their sexuality becomes both a site of oppression and a weapon of negotiation, reflecting Fanon's notion of reclaiming dignity amidst dehumanisation.

Iyayi's *Violence* insists that hunger and desire—both literal and metaphorical—are catalysts for revolutionary awakening. The poor, embodied in characters like Idemudia, eventually realise that systemic violence must be met with resistance. Whether through overt revolt or the reclaiming of one's body, the novel suggests that liberation is possible only through consciousness and struggle.



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