

Literary Artist As The Focal Lens Of The Society: A Contextual Analysis Of Festus Iyayi's *The Contract*

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Abstract: It is a reality that no one can be an island, entire of his own. Whatever one chooses to be or eventually becomes is informed by the tune of the drum. The paper portrays two players of the same origin in the novel but with different perceptions of what the society should be, based on the old order and the new order respectively, with a cue taken from the past and the present states of the society. The old order in Ogiefavours a society of fair share and responsibility while Eweh Obala of the new order opts for a capitalist society dominated by avarice. The two of them entered into deals, with Ogie hoping to effect a positive change from within while EwehObala vows to outplay Ogie with the instrumentalities of power and number. None of them is eventually able to achieve his goal, thereby living the possibility of a bleaking future for the contemporary society.

Keywords: Reality, Perception, Bleaking Future, Contemporary Society.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals in the community are capable of being sensitive to the direction of societal waves. Generations had lived, some are currently living and more will have their own shares in times to come as long as the world exists. Different people with diverse ways of life spread all over the planet earth. Each of the group of people or race is given its own grace of sufficiency in terms of material needs and governance. At certain times and places those at the helm of affairs have been responsible and moderate and at some other times they have been irresponsible and gluttonous. In each of these categories of societies exist those people whose duties are to watch and raise alarms where things go or are going astray. Such watch-dogs function as mirrors of the society.

The literary writers are always uncomfortable when there is a state of neglect and financial recklessness. Oftentimes they are seen as the focal lens of the society. They are known to remain vocal when there are traces of political and economic impropriety in the individuals that are saddled with the responsibility of piloting the ship of the nation or country. A typical example of such writers is Festus Iyayi [3].

FESTUS IYAYI [2]

Festus Iyayi was born in 1947 in Ugbegun, Esan land of Edo State. He was a writer noted for his realistic and radical stances in addressing issues which

bother on social, economic and political wellbeing of the common people in the society.

He finished at Annunciation Catholic Church in old Bendel State in 1966. He graduated from Government College, Ughelli in 1968. He obtained M.Sc in Industrial Economics from Kiev Institute of Economics in the former USSR. He had his Ph.D from the University of Bradford, England in 1980. Among other places, he worked at the University of Benin as a lecturer in the Department of Business Administration. He was at a time the branch President of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), University of Benin branch and he later became the national president of the union in 1986.

His awards include:

1. Zonal winner in Kennedy Essay competition organized by the United States Embassy in Nigeria in 1968.
2. Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize in 1987.
3. The commonwealth writers prize in 1988 with his novel.

Heroes

Apart from his interest and impacts in various other academic areas, he had the following literary works to his credit:

- a. *Violence*, published by Longman in 1979.

- b. *The Contract*, published by Longman in 1982.
- c. *Heroes*, published by Longman in 1986.
- d. *Awaiting Court Martial*, published by Malthouse Press, Ikeja, Lagos in 1996.

He died in a motor accident on November 12, 2013 on his way to Kano to attend Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) National Executive meeting.

CONTEXTUAL ISSUES IN THE TEXT

The lead character in the novel is Ogie Obala, who incidentally is the son to one Chief Eweh Obala, the chairman of Ogbe City Council in the town, Benin. Ogie had been out of the country for four years. On his arrival he was bemused with the deplorable state of his town which he left in just four years past. The societal values have so changed that he had started noticing the decadence right from his arrival at the airport. On his arrival there, the custom officials were surprised to the point of suspicion because they could not find anything incriminating on him after giving him a thorough search. The discovery turned out to be contrary to the 'usual' occurrences where new arrivals are usually found with one contraband or the other. Consider:

... they (customs officials) asked why he had not brought any shoes with him and when he could not answer them, they told him he would have to wait; apparently they were suspicious of him (5).

There are evidences of poverty in the land. On his arrival to the Benin city airport, he quickly noticed hundreds of hard faces crawling desperately around the airport road buildings begging for one favour or the other. Consider the statement:

They were all hard faces with wild eyes and bones that showed through the tightly drawn skins. None of the faces had any fat in them. (5)

The airport operations are marred with confusion. Disorderliness and commotion rend the whole atmosphere. The city roads are dirty:

... all kinds of refuse-corn leaves, plantain peelings, bottles, cans and sewage. Gigantic heaps of dirt were left at the roadsides (7).

The few manageable motor roads are closed to all road users or reserved for the 'important' state bigwigs. In fact everything is in disarray as far as the city structures and the roads are concerned:

Chaos was there in the way the houses stood in the way the refuse spilled into the roads, in the way the drivers used whatever parts of the road were usable. They drove on the wrong side of

roads, blocked each other's way. And there was nothing but abuse and curses and the blarring of horns and the screeching of brakes and then more abuse and finally, swift physical violence and the death. (7)

The text portrays a society that is so bedeviled with corruption and avarice. Chief Obala and his cohorts' pre-occupation is to acquire wealth at all cost not minding what happens to the lots of others in the community. He, the Administrator, Chief of Police, Major Alafia, the Commissioner and others in the helm of affairs are only interested in making themselves and households comfortable. Chief Obala who is the Chairman of the city council, also schemes his son Ogie to the position of Principal Secretary of the same council. Even when his wife wants Ogie to seek for job elsewhere, chief Obala insists that his son will work with the council so that the trend of wealth acquisition can continue in his household. He tries to convince the wife (Madam Obala) by saying:

It's not the kind or even the number of degrees that a person has that matters these days, it's the amount of money he has in his pocket, how many houses, what kind of cars he has. And nobody cares how you get these things (13).

No wonder in many of the human societies of today, the highly intellectual ones are not recognized as those who have acquired wealth through hook and crook means.

Ogie becomes agape when he discovers the stock in trade of his friend, Mallam Mallam. Mallam Mallam's business is to cash cheques on behalf of government officials. He symbolizes the agents of those in authority who siphoned money from government coffers through issuance of cheques to cover (contract) projects they never execute. When he queries the moral in it, Mallam Mallam replies:

The first thing is to rule out morals. There are no morals in this country. If you realize this and accept it, then you have the potential to succeed. Either you are a fool, or you are a coward. You must be a realist because only realists have the potential to succeed in this country. We are indecent, immoral people. You must not forget that. (18 – 19).

When Ogie insists on taking up job where he is to earn Ten Thousand Naira a year, his friend bugs him, 'congratulations on wasting your time.' Ogie remarks that Mallam Mallam has changed as 'he has experienced in the ways of the Nigerian, not in the ways of the world. The ways of the Nigerian are indecent,

chaotic and without conscience now.’ (21) This statement is corroborated by Rose Idebale (Ogie’s girlfriend) when she says:

I simply want you (Ogie) to understand that things are really different now. The people were much better six months ago. (24).

The ugly incident of bribery or greasing of palms rears its ugly head in the novel. It is a herculean task to get services for what you paid for. You have to pay for “unofficial” charges before you are attended to. References are made to electricity and telephone services that are not easily come by. The unofficial charges are usually higher. As Ogie hears all these he becomes disgusted but Uncle Suralo replies that such situations are ‘normal’ in the society.

On contracts and their modes of awards, Suralo asked whether Ogie had been approached by the contractors and he replies:

Oh, several of them. In fact all of them. Some of them even brought cartons of whisky to my office ... but it is disgusting ... and I refuse ever to be part of it. (37)

But Suralo sees this as the way that the society functions and that nothing can be done about it. To this Ogie remarks, “we are sick’ (37) then Suralo frankly remarks:

Not at all, ... The way the society works is quite different from the way you people see it at college. Never make yourself laws. Do not say to yourself, “I will never do this or that.” Always go with the wind. That way you end up in the Niger, drowned and very wet. Never make resolutions. In your kind of work it never works. (37).

From the last statement of Suralo above, he is trying to let Ogierealise that the position he occupies is such that he cannot but dance to the tune of the music and swim along the tide waves. When it becomes obvious that Ogie is becoming stubborn, a petition was written against him, accusing the father of favouring his child. This development creates disaffection between him and the staffers of the council.

The moment Ogie accepts Mr. Oloru’s invitation to meet at the WayoHotel, it becomes obvious that his indoctrination to the ‘new order’ begins. The invitation is for Mr. Oloru to discuss the contract for the low cost houses which he has already bid for. There and then Ogie is offered ten percent of the contract sum and a shelter if he wins the contract. At this juncture, he becomes apprehensive of the whole

situation, but Rose is quick and realistic to tell him (Ogie) that he has to join them as she says:

You cannot beat them when you have not joined them ... from the time you accepted you joined them ... (57).

To this, Ogie remarks “so I have already joined them. Joined them, one of them.” (58).

At the end of it all, his ‘inner self’ speaks:

It is useless thinking about it. It is useless wondering why it happens. The thing is not to get involved in it. But if I do not do it, I become odd. I become an outcast. (60 – 61).

This is a clear cut case of the societal web which, as a matter of necessity, has trapped so many hitherto innocent citizens of the country or society.

The case of Miss Eunice Agbon is not different from Ogie’s. They are both trapped by the societal fishing net. Eunice finds herself doing what she would have ordinarily abhor but because she has to make ends meet, coupled with the societal decay, she becomes instrument for negotiating and winning contracts for the boss, Chief Ekata; A replica of this situation is the use of young, and perhaps innocent girls by bank managements in Nigeria to attract and woo depositors.

This scenario is buttressed by Ogie when he says:

We are both in the same trap. We are both instruments of forces greater than ourselves. We are both being used, and whatever choice we have is restricted. (80).

Ogie becomes caught in the web of corruption. He now agrees to inflation or arbitrary increase in the worth of contracts because there is nothing he can do to singlehandedly stop it. An initial contract sum of one hundred million Naira (for the low cost housing project) was astronomically increased to five hundred million naira the following day. On further probe Ogie was made to know that ‘the money will be shared out. Each person gets his share.’ (93). The beneficiaries include the administrator, Major Alafia, the commissioner, the chief of police, chief Obala and Ogie his son. The caliber of those involved in the chains of contract deals explains why investigations into corruption, bribery and all sorts of financial improprieties (when alleged) do not usually bring the desired/truthful results. Commissioners steal money and give the Governor his own ‘fair’ share of it yet you are still expecting punitive treatment for the commissioner’, who calls or who will call for the probe?

The contract scams revealed in the novel elicit disgust among the common people. The reactions of Rose's co-workers when they read about the presidential palace to be constructed at a cost of Eighty Million Naira is revealing:

The thieves. Yes they are thieves. They are more than armed robbers. These government officials run no risk at all. They just sit in their offices and steal Eighty Million Naira! My God! How many scholarships, how many jobs, hospitals, schools, roads? My God! (153).

The contractor who wins the Five Hundred Million Naira low cost housing project is to be given only Ten Million Naira officially to execute the project. The rest is to be shared by those in government in percentages. At the end of the 'sharing committee' meeting, Major Alaafia (popularly called Major Chop-chop) addresses Ogie, the Principal Secretary:

I am sure you can handle that with your father. But remember that on paper the contract will be worth Five Hundred Million Naira. The contractor you select must therefore be extremely reliable and trustworthy, since he will be getting only Ten Million Naira. You must not make a mistake there. (182).

Chief Eweh Obala and his son Ogie's preference with regards to the proceeds of the contract loot runs counter to each other. The father vows to launder the whole money in a private account abroad, the son subscribes to investing his own share on businesses in the home country. Having realized that the father is hell bent on transferring the whole money abroad, he arranges to secretly steal or take his own share from where the father keeps the money at night. Alas, tragedy struck! Chief Obala shot at a suspected thief in his compound that night and to his sorrowful amazement, it is Ogie his son that is killed.

CONCLUSION

The fictionality of the novel unfolds to a reality going by the vivid descriptions of the individual players in the events that unroll. At the end, Chief Obala could not see joy and happiness while Rose Idebale died of the complications of abortion. All these arise because of the complications of the society

brought by covetousness and greed of individuals in place of affairs in the society. Ogie could not live to achieve his ambition of investing his own share of corrupt money in the country. The law of retribution worked on Chief Eweh Obala and killed his son because of his (Obala) avarice. Rose Idebale suffered loss of life due to the abortion of late Ogie's expectant child.

The Contract portrays a society resembling that which Egbuwalo (2010) in the poem titled "Corruption" in Akinkurolere and Abuya (ed) [4] describes as:

Where the major thread on the law with impunity and the minor groan under the law with reckless abandon. (20).

It is a vicious cycle of corruption. Authorities at high places in the country are involved in contract awards. The materials for execution of these contracts re procured from the same people in authority, their wives, cronies or relatives. This confirms the validity of the statement of the driver conveying Ogie from the airport on arrival from overseas when he says:

... So sir, if you want to spit, you will need all the saliva you can find because there is neither a beginning nor an end to the vomit and the filth and the callousness. (8).

If *The Contract* symbolizes the mirror of the society (as literature is often being referred to) then the future of the contemporary society, in terms of enhancing fair treatment, social emancipation, equal distribution of economic gains, provision of infrastructures among others, is still very bleak.

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