

From Ignorance to Experience: Protagonists of Dynamism In Festus Iyayi's Violence and Heroes

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Abstract: *This paper foregrounds the notion of dynamic protagonist in Festus Iyayi's two novels. Idemudia and Iyere are seen as protagonists of dynamism whose volte-face as the plots unfold is orchestrated by their new experience, knowledge and maturity. Idemudia who starts off as an idealist with rose tinted spectacles fashioned from the mill of inexperience later becomes a life-beaten but introspective realist who has come to appreciate that life's sacrifices come in different forms. Similarly, Osime Iyere who initially sees humanity in the federal troops and undiluted savagery on the Biafran side during the civil war later comes to see the two sides in the war as nothing but murderers and rapists of defenceless civilians. His contention, therefore, is that the war is actually a huge conspiracy of the blood-sucking bourgeoisie on both sides against the masses in general who can only be saved by a neutral third army with membership from both sides. In conclusion, the paper states that by artistically placing the two protagonists in the two novels where their experiences invest them with the correct education toward combating the oppressive alienating disorder in the society Iyayi's thesis is clear: the masses must be correctly educated about the nature of the society in order to wage a meaningful war against its crushing lopsidedness.*

Keywords: *protagonists, dynamism, plot, masses, bourgeoisie, society*

In her book *Understanding Fiction* (2005), Judith Roof describes the writer's craft as "black marks that lie silent on the page" (xix) Perhaps this is not new, for some years ago Dylan Thomas the hard drinking bohemian poet had insinuated that literature was nothing but an art characterized by dullness. As controversial and utterly contestable as these views are, it is no gain saying that within Roof's "silent marks" and Thomas' "dullness" are imaginary characters, the "word masses" that inhabit the world of the creative endeavour. According to E.M. Forster (1980:54).

The novelist, unlike many of his colleagues, makes up a number of word masses roughly describing himself, giving them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and perhaps to behave consistently. These word-masses are his characters.

The contention of Forster is that since the actors in a narrative are normally human, it is only logical and convenient to call them people, "Other animals", he says, "have been introduced with limited success, for we know too little so far about their psychology" (1980:54).

As seemingly unproblematic as Forster's position is, it does not imply that all literary critics are in agreement as to what the notion of a literary character should be. For example, the new critics and F.R. Leavis have long expressed reservation as to the way A.C. Bradley treated characters in Shakespeare's plays as if they were real people. To Wilson Knight, a character is regarded as a category for analysis, and according to Sinfeld (1992:56-7) Knight's view is attributed to his belief that "each play was a visionary whole and was close-knit in personification, atmospheric suggestion, and direct poetic-symbolism". The new attack on the literary character may not be unconnected with the anti-individualistic temper of much recent theory. Jean Francois Lyotard, a representative example states

A self does not amount to much but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at nodal points of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of message pass (1984:15)

In a similar vein, Paul Goring et al (2010:336) have averred that “theorists who have questioned the concept of character are following in the wake of those modernist and post-modernist writers whose works abandoned traditional forms of characterization”. The consequence of this approach is rigorous deconstruction of the literary character; Gerald Prince’s definition of the term character is instructive in this direction. According to him, a literary character is “an existent endowed with anthropomorphic traits and engaged in anthropomorphic action; an actor with anthropomorphic attitude” (1988:12). This anthropomorphic consideration of the literary character, Goring et al suggest, “is akin to talking to one’s cat”. But their clincher is even more literarily illuminating:

But just as people have gone on talking to their cats so too many theory-innocent critics and READERS have gone on treating literary characters as in certain ways equivalent to human individuals (2010:386)

If the above submission reminds us of Forster’s standpoint, then perhaps the literary umbilical cord linking us to him never really did snap. Whatever the case, characters are creations within a creation. All stories have characters. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle subordinates characters to action when he states that “the most important (element) is the structure of events, because tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of action and life” (26). In his classic essay “The Art of Fiction” (1884) however, Henry James considers action in a narrative as serving the gradual unfolding and development of character. Rhetorically he asks.

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is not of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? (431)

Henry James position can be considered as a final word in the long standing controversy surrounding character and action. This is because technically speaking, plot is nothing but character in action. Christopher Bode (2010:99) could not have been more right:

The dispute however like the chicken and egg debate in some progressive circles about whether society or the individual must change first, is obviously moot. Character and action are mutually dependent, and obviously there are some novels that at first seem to emphasize the former, and others that seem to foreground the latter. Probably they have different intentions.

Forster’s celebrated division of the literary character into flat and round has become a touchstone of a sort for literary character analysts. According to him, flat characters who are sometimes called types or caricatures are “constructed around a single idea or quality and can be expressed in one sentence” while a round character “is complete in temperament and motivation and is presented with subtle particularity” (1980:73). A character’s motivation is a function of his temperament and moral nature. Novelists use more of the round characters because they help them to be realistic and to present characters with much individualizing detail that properly reflect the complexity of human beings who are capable of surprising the readers.

Protagonists are primary actors in a story whom the reader identifies and sympathizes with in the course of reading. The antagonist on the other hand is a character who opposes the protagonist. His actions often conflict with the protagonist’s aim, desire or interests. Protagonists are usually human beings while the antagonist can be natural forces, animals or even the protagonist divided against himself in stories. Protagonists and antagonists are often fully drawn in narratives with some detail and identification for the reader. A dynamic protagonist is the main character who exhibits some kind of change in his or her behaviour, attitude or purpose. This volte-face is often orchestrated by a new development in the character’s experience. This development or knowledge must be weighty enough to be able to set in motion the protagonist’s change in orientation. This paper explores protagonists of dynamism in Festus Iyayi’s *Violence* (1979) and *Heroes* (1986)

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Behaviour and attitude, whether human or animal, are resident in the field of psychology. Where stories are specifically concerned with understanding a character's motivation like the focus of this paper, character psychology becomes an important way of understanding how a story works. Psychological criticism deals with the critic's attempt to interpret a story on the basis of character motivation. The theoretical underpinning of this paper is, therefore, understandably psychological criticism since it attempts to unravel the reason for the change in attitude in the two main characters in the two novels in focus. Traced to the revolutionary psychology of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in which the notion of "unconscious" along with the psychological mechanism of "displacement", condensation, fixation and "manifest and latent" dream content take the pride of place, psychological critics see literary works as closely linked with their author's mental and emotional characteristics. They therefore, use the information they have about writers to explain their works. But many psychological critics "employ Freudian psychology to understand not only the writers themselves but the literary characters they create" (Di Yanni, 2002: 2085). It is in this light that this paper takes a critical look at Osime Iyere in *Heroes* and Idemudia in *Violence*, two protagonists whose dynamism forms the spine of our critical attention.

2. IDEMUDIA AND THE CRUCIBLE OF EXPERIENCE IN VIOLENCE

"A character may remain essentially stable", says M.H. Abrams (1981:20), "or he may undergo a radical change, either through a gradual development or as the result of an extreme crisis". As the protagonist of Iyayi's *Violence*, Idemudia's change can be said to be through a process of gradual development in the furnace of experience. At the beginning of the novel, he is nothing but a veritable greenhorn who is yet totally ignorant of the dynamics of society. He tells us how he had been driven away from school because of school fees three years earlier and how his father had remained totally uncompromising. Rather than look for ways and means to pay his school fees, the old man had simply asked him to go to his mother who would henceforth be responsible for his school fees. Since his mother could not afford his school fees, he had no choice but to become a school drop out at secondary class four. The following day government tax collectors and policemen had raided his village for those who had not paid their tax. Unable to arrest his father, they had arrested Idemudia and taken him to Ubiaja where he was to spend three nights in the cell. Because his mother had asked his father to go to Ubiaja to bail their son, his father had beaten the living day light out of his mother.

If the above experience remains nightmarish to Idemudia the second terrible battering of his mother by his father when the former asks the latter for a goat to make sacrifice so that Idemudia can get a job is more catastrophic. This is because this eventually makes his father to drive him, his mother and siblings away from his house. Before leaving for the town to look for a job, Idemudia promises not only to pay back his father in his own coin but also to take care of his mother. "And because of his mother, he had sworn never to beat his wife, never to beat a woman for that matter"(10). Certainly, these are beautiful words capable of making many a feminist go rapturous with a thousand halleluyahs. How faithful Idemudia will be to his sworn oath is another matter. But truth, the Chinese sages say, is the daughter of time.

Idemudia goes to town to look for a job only to discover that there are countless able-bodied young men like himself who are jobless because they have no certificates and are not able to bribe their way to get jobs. Idemudia, Patrick, Osaro and Omoifo soon become job-hunting quartet who occasionally sell their blood when there is no menial job, ironically, to survive. Funny enough, Idemudia who can hardly feed himself is soon saddled with a wife, Adisa, from the village. Adisa, like himself, is a secondary school dropout. The more Idemudia struggles to survive the more he comes face to face with the ugly society where the structures are tailor-made to keep the masses perpetually subjugated to be at the mercy of the rich. He comes to discover to his chagrin that like Frantz Fanon (1983:38) put it years ago, "in these poor underdeveloped countries, the rule is that the greatest wealth is surrounded by the greatest poverty". In this stinking and morally degenerate society, the few wealthy ones like Mr. and Mrs. Obofun lord it over the countless poverty-stricken ones. In this kind of society, the poor have no choice but to succumb to the whims and caprices of the rich if they must just exist without really living. For example, when Queen grudgingly agrees to pay Idemudia and his friends a paltry sum of twenty naira (₦20) to offload fifteen hundred

bags of cement in the rain, the latter know that it is sheer injustice and exploitation but agree for lack of any promising alternative. The quartet's sad experience at Freedom Hotel where they see half-eaten morsel being dumped into a dustbin for chickens when they have not eaten their breakfast that day says much about the lopsided nature of the society.

The injustice in the society as seen in the case of Pa Jimoh, Idemudia's neighbour, who is detained for an offence he did not commit is certainly unnerving. Complicit in this injustice and lawlessness are the police officers who are forever on the side of the wealthy ones in society. The terminally sick patient at Ogbe Specialist Hospital says that he cannot get justice because the police are on the side of the rich man against him. Having failed to seduce Idemudia to call off the strike action of her workers at her construction site, Queen boastfully tells Idemudia not to think of going there anymore because the policemen will be there to arrest him. Olaniyan (1988:38) describes this kind of socio-political malaise-teleguided society as

alienation –ridden, is pillared by avarice and runs an unbridled rapine. It warps the ethical value of man and undermines his moral development ...it dehumanizes man and mortgages his human feeling for the venal needs of survival, it degrades human attributes such as love, honesty, fellow feeling. It is suicidal to attempt to be good in such a society.

Iyayi argues that the degeneration and dehumanization which deny the Idemudias of society the means of survival and self respect are caused by the bourgeoisie-teleguided leadership. The inability of the government to educate its citizens and cater for their welfare is nothing but naked violence.

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 properly. (185)

Having got his life denuded right from the village, wherever he goes in the town, Idemudia's lack of education stands out like a sore thumb. According to Ogbeide (2011:98), "Iyayi portrays him as a beaten and defeated individual and failure of a husband whose self respect has long kissed the hard soil of poverty". In this state, promises and sworn-oaths become like mere crusts of bread to Stalin, the Russian man of steel, meant to be broken. In the face of a starving wife and a riotous stomach, Idemudia does not even remember his promise to take care of his mother. In fact, he has even added to the old woman's woes in the village by sending his only son he cannot provide for to her. What is more, like his much hated father, Idemudia batters his wife unbelievably:

...he raised his hand and struck her violently on the side of her face ...he raised his hand to strike her again. She threw herself on the floor and began to scream wildly. Very slowly, the blood welled from the side of her nose and trickled down the corner of her mouth to her chin (14)

One by one, like a pack of dominoes, Idemudia's castles built on the foundation of ignorance crumble in the face of the oppressive reality of society. The unforgiving social circumstance can drive a man crazy to begin to think and act the unthinkable. He must have realized now that perhaps it is only the insane man who derives an uncanny pleasure in battering his wife. Like him, his father is a victim of the oppressive circumstance. Despite the fact that his father like many others in the village are the producers of cash crops that sustain the federal economy, they the farmers are denied the means to educate their children. During their quarrel over lack of food at home, Adisa threatens to find another man who can feed her unlike Idemudia who cannot. She may not have not meant it as exemplified by her blunt refusal to toe the path of prostitution suggested by Salome, her aunt; but that was enough to bring out the beast in Idemudia who threatens to strangle her outright the day she is found with another man. Toward the end of the novel when Adisa's unfortunate unfaithfulness comes to light, it is a life-beaten but more reflective, experienced and rashless Idemudia that confronts us. Iyayi tells us:

He would not ask why she had done it because he understood very clearly now. And because he understood, he realized how utterly rash and foolish and unreasonable he had been in his anger (307). His deeply reflective mood is a function of his maturity which age and experience have conferred on him. As childish rashness gives way to deep introspection, we have no choice but to follow him in his new logic borne of experience.

Hadn't he sold his blood so that they would not starve? And wasn't that a sacrifice, this frequent selling of pints of his own blood? Yes, he said to himself, a sacrifice as great as or perhaps even less than the one Adisa had made on his behalf. And how could he have been so blind as not to have seen that if she had done it, then she would have done it only for his sake? Only for my sake he thought, and that makes it a sacrifice more than anything else (307).

One certainly has no choice but to share in Idemudia's new sense of understanding which is inspired by his terrible experience. The sages were right when they averred, ages ago, that necessity is only blind when it is not understood.

3. OSIME IYERE: FROM A NIGERIAN LOYALIST TO A SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARY IN HEROES

Festus Iyayi's *Heroes* (1986) is one of the many literary works about the Nigerian civil war that took place between 1967 and 1970. Other works include Eddie Iroh's *Forty Eight Guns for the General*, Ekwensi's *Survive The Peace*, Ali Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, Elechi Amadi's *Sunset in Biafra* and Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*. The civil war has equally brought forth memoirs. Of these, Obasanjo's *My Command* (1999) and Achebe's *There was a Country* (2012) remain the most controversial on account of their content. According to Asoo (2000:251), "Obasanjo's book appropriately titled *My Command* appears to suggest rather plainly that while he may not have single handedly prosecuted the war, it would not have ended when and how it did without his present efforts". In an unflattering non-romantic assessment of *There was a Country*, Ibrahim Bello-Kano (2013:72) says, "Achebe is an overwhelmingly ethnic-nationalist, an Igbo-ophile (or a philo-igboanis, to coin a new term), and a Biafran apologist to boot". By their subjective nature, memoirs often expose the flanks of their writers to some unpretentious critical barbs.

The uniqueness of *Heroes* among other civil war novels lies in the fact that Iyayi here, examines the Nigerian civil war through the spectacle of the Marxist ideology. As has been pointed out by critics like Asoo (2000) and Da Sylva (2003), "Iyayi looks at the war from a class stand point" (Uwasomba, 2005:329) Although the protagonist, Osime Iyere, the political correspondent of the city *Daily News* becomes a socialist revolutionary reeking of conscientization, ideological logic and socialist sermonizing, he has not always been so. His dramatic volte-face is based on his harrowing personal experience of the mindless massacre of innocent civilians and the rank-and-file from both the Biafran and Nigerian sides during the crisis of the civil war.

Iyayi's creative account of the crisis which is filtered through Osime Iyere, his mouth piece, is based on the happenings of a few weeks prior to the end of the war. For two years running, he has reported the war with its terrible happenings. All this while he has swallowed hook, line and sinker the ruling class notion that the war was being fought to stem the tide of ethnic jingoism being peddled by Odumegwu Ojukwu who has told the world that the war was started in order to avenge the pogrom against the southerners especially the Igbo. One is not surprised at this stage that his sympathy is with the federal troops who appear to him humane and set to dislodge the invading Biafran rebels. Hear him:

The federal troops will come and drive the Biafran away and then everything will be different. There will be no more cruelty. The beating and the maltreatment of people will stop ... The Biafrans call themselves liberators! Ha, liberators my foot! How can they be liberated when they treat the people like prisoners? The young man that they took away this afternoon and then shoot afterwards? Was that liberation, or murder? (2).

In his unwavering belief in the humanity of the federal troops he has even told his landlord, Mr. Ohiali, an Igboman, to go and register himself with them for protection. And since the song on everybody's lips right now is how to keep Nigeria one, Ojukwu's divisive bid must be seen for what it is –sheer secession that must be resisted by every right thinking Nigerian. He tells the cynical Ade.

All I know is that I believe in having one country and those who seem bent on keeping it one at the moment are the federal troops. So, whats wrong with being on their side? (15).

Osime Iyere's support for the federal troops is so unflinchingly solid that even when Ade tells him that they are murderers of innocent civilians as seen in the brutal murder of the defenceless Bini man and the Igbo civilians who have come to take refuge in his house, he is hardly convinced. He simply tells the bemused Ade that he "can't be serious... The federal soldiers wouldn't shoot people like that" (16) As far as he is concerned, the federal troops are fighting a just war, and on the strength of this seemingly unassailable logic victory is already on their side.

But soon, it will be over and done with; Yes, the Biafran leader must surrender and then the country will be one and the war will be over and forgotten (23)

First impressions are often not the only impressions especially in the face of new and insightful realities that come to make a mincemeat of the earlier impression. In deed, as celebrated in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), first impressions are often subject to revision in the face of new experiences. Little wonder, therefore, that Osime Iyere soon calls to question his loyalty to and sympathy with the federal troops whom he has called humane and preservers of the unity of the country. Three instances motivate him to question his earlier stance. First is the story of how a Bini man and the Biafran soldiers have been brutally murdered by the federal troops as narrated by Ade, his journalist friend. Second is the senseless and merciless beating he received from the supposed humane federal troops during a cultural display. Third is the brutal murder of his landlord, Mr. Ohiali, who is the father of his girl friend, by the federal troops. This last incident is so shattering that Osime Iyere decides to conduct an objective investigation of the war rather than report its horrors from a distance as he has been doing.

What Osime Iyere discovers in the process of investigation is as revealing as it is shocking. The further he goes in his investigation the more he comes face to face with the ugly realities of the war. While the rank-and-file soldiers on either side are being slain daily at the war front, their officers satiate themselves in unbelievable luxury with women of easy virtue at their posh officers' mess. The material condition of the rank-and-file before joining the war has not changed as they now sleep on stinking beds without mattresses in secondary school dormitories without water and other conveniences. Iyayi tells us that "The soldiers stank as they slept in their uniform and boots ... the dormitorious stank ...the solders were tired, so they slept" (108). While the commander's quarters has two anti-aircraft guns, there is not even one to protect the dormitories from enemy attack. The so-called Generals in the federal army often abandon the troops under their command at the mercy of the enemy on the pretext of going for reinforcements. Brigadier Otunshi, for example, with some officers, abandons his troops at the bridge for the Head of State's wedding in far away Lagos. He returns from the wedding a General. This is why sergent Audu laments that "after the war, many generals will write to show that they were the heroes of the war" (80).

The brutal antics of the federal army do not necessarily sway Iyere's loyalty to the Biafran troops. This is because as his investigation reveals, the Biafran soldiers are as guilty as the federal forces in their embrace of corruption, injustice, burning and raping. For example, the same wretched condition that applies to the rank-and-file in the federal army also applies to their counterparts in the Biafran army as seen in the naked Biafran soldier clutching a boiled piece of yam to take care of the warring enzymes in his stomach. 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 the children. Cut them and severe their heads from their bodies. And all these are civilians (61)

As horrifying as these images are, the federal forces are no less sadistically horrifying in their savagery. After overrunning the rebel soldiers, they continue the looting and shooting of defenceless civilians who have taken refuge in the houses of their neighbours. Even the Igbo who have gone to register with the federal army for protection later get their throats cut.

After a careful analysis of the activities of the war, Iyere discovers that at each point it is the ordinary people who are murdered, raped, robbed, humiliated and brutalized. In an uncanny sort of way, the federal troops and the Biafran soldiers seem to derive sadistic pleasure in the raping

and killing of innocent citizens and burning their property. The civil war, he concludes, is nothing but an opportunity for the ruling class to perfect their greed and robbery. Their method, he says, is simple:

Capture a town and the first place you make for are the banks and blow the safes open with grenades and steal the money (148).

According to Iyere, Iyayi's mouthpiece, the civil war being fought in this context is simply an avenue for the elite to extend the frontiers of their ill-gotten wealth. He says:

It was in the expectation of profit that the business community fanned the flames of the war, why the politicians fed canned meat to the dogs of war, why the professors rationalized the war, why the general gave the signal for the killing, the greed for profit and power is at the bottom of this war and manifests itself. every where in the conduct of this war (148)

From being a Nigerian loyalist, Iyere becomes not even a Biafran sympathizer but a socialist revolutionary who now sees salvation of the masses only in a class war that will be fought by a third army of which he is the first recruit. The real war which is presently suppressed is the lopsidedness in the society where the ruling class lord it over the working class. What is badly needed, therefore, is not a redefinition of land boundaries but of the quality of life of the people living within these boundaries. Properly understood, therefore, Osime Iyere's overriding thesis is that the masses, the innocent and inexperienced rank-and-file on either side of the two warring factions (Biafra and Federal) should come together to defeat the oppressive ruling class in order to live meaningful lives.

4. CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, a dynamic character is one who undergoes some changes as the plot of the narrative develops. The growth and development of the character bring him face to face with new realities which change his perception of things. Toundi the protagonist in Oyono's *Houseboy* (1977), for example, initially sees the French colonialists as represented by reverend fathers Gilbert and Vandermyer as the archetypal messiahs who have come to the Cameroons to save the people from cannibalism and other barbaric practices. He is very happy to be associated with them. At the end of the novel however, having lived with these colonialists with their atrocities, Toundi tells us that he is happy to be dying away from them for they are the real cannibals.

In *Violence*, Idemudia who starts off as an idealist with rose-tinted spectacles later transforms into an experienced realist who rather than strangle his wife decides to see her adultery as nothing but a sacrifice like his constant selling of his blood to sustain the family. His new sense of understanding is a function of his coming to terms with the dynamics of the society which put the ruling class on a higher pedestal to the detriment of the masses. The lopsided nature of the society therefore, forces the masses to do what they hate if they must eke out a living for themselves. In *Heroes* the narrative is given from the point of view of Iyayi's main character, Osime Iyere. The advantage of this is that it helps the character's development as the narrative unfolds. Osime Iyere is projected to a vantage position where he can see first hand the Biafran and federal troops at close quarters. Having been exposed to the brutalities of the war Iyere tells the reader that no fundamental difference exists between the two sides in the war. This is why he advocates a third force as a way-out. By artistically placing the main characters where their experiences of the society invest them with the correct education towards combating the alienating disorder, Iyayi's message is clear: the masses must be correctly educated about the nature of the oppressive society in order to be able to wage a meaningful war against it.

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