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By Mohammed Attai Yakubu

Kogi State University, Nigeria

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Between Aestheticism and Marxist Literature: A Study of Foregrounding in Festus Iyayi's *Violence, Heroes, and the Contract*

Mohammed Attai Yakubu

Abstract- This study analysed foregrounding in Festus Iyayi's three novels: *Violence, Heroes, and The Contract*. The aim of the study was to discover the function of foregrounding in African literature. A number of passages were extracted from the three novels, beginning with *Violence* followed by *Heroes*, and *The Contract*. These extracts from the three novels were passages that contained foregrounding which revealed the ideological basis of these novels. Images and symbols that projected violence, death, destruction, exploitation, oppression, deprivation, class struggle, etc as well as the plight of the poor revealed Marxism as the ideology that underpinned the three novels. Among the findings are: foregrounding in Iyayi's novels depicts class struggle; the primary purpose of foregrounding in Iyayi's novels is not for aesthetic effect; it portrays the less privileged characters as victims of their society; and it contributes to the success of the three novels studied.

I. INTRODUCTION

Festus Iyayi is in the group of Nigerian novelists whom Osundare (1987:159) has described as "ideologically motivated writers whose aim is not just to be read, but to point out the dehumanizing contradictions in the present capitalist system in such a way that would make its overthrow inevitable." Therefore, the use of foregrounding by this group of writers goes beyond aestheticism to functionalism in order to produce utilitarian literature. Osundare as quoted above wants us to believe that Festus Iyayi is a Marxist writer and this study maintains that foregrounding is an aspect of style that reveals the writer's ideology. Thus, the study seeks to investigate Festus Iyayi's use of foregrounding in his novels: *Violence, Heroes, and The Contract* and how it contributes to the ideology that underpins these novels. Furthermore, the researcher is interested in investigating whether Iyayi's use of foregrounding is for aesthetic effect or for effective transmission of his message.

Abrams (2005:3) defines aesthetics as "the systematic study of all the fine arts, as well as of the nature of beauty in any object, whether natural or artificial." He adds that:

Aestheticism... had its chief headquarters in France... French writers developed the view that a work of art is

the supreme value among human products precisely because it is self-sufficient and has no use or moral aim outside its own being. The end of a work of art is simply to exist in its formal perfection; that is, to be beautiful and to be contemplated as an end in itself. A rallying cry of Aestheticism became the phrase "I art pour l'art" – art for art's sake (Abrams 3-4).

This study admits that words can be used in a literary work to induce pleasure but this aesthetic function is secondary. African or Nigerian literature is beyond art for art's sake therefore, the above view of the aesthetic school does not apply primarily to Festus Iyayi's novels. African literature is a utilitarian art.

According to Osundare (1987:140), "nobody says a certain thing in a certain way without a certain reason. A careful explication of purpose is crucial to the study of literature as a social product, and literary communication and style as social acts." The researcher will analyse Iyayi's use of foregrounding for an understanding of the purpose of his novels. Furthermore, Adejare (1992:12-13) has pointed out that "only mad men engage in a linguistic activity without a purpose... the function of form in a text is to transmit that message." This view is a rejection of art for art's sake philosophy. The analysis of foregrounding in this study is for an understanding of how it reinforces the writer's message or messages and reveals his ideology.

From the above premise, the definition of foregrounding as "to estrange or defamiliarize" (Abrams, 108) is not applicable to this study. Furthermore, the idea that the function of poetic language (foregrounding) is to surprise the reader with a fresh and dynamic awareness of its linguistic medium, to de-automatize what was normally taken for granted, to exploit language aesthetically (Wales, 1990:182) does not also apply to this study.

In its treatment of foregrounding, what this study will find suitable is the exposition that: "narratologically, one might argue that within passages which are predominantly narration, any lexical-sequential level of discourse-construction, those lexical selections which are least predictable and therefore, in a sense most distinctively informative are moments of foregrounding" (Toolan, Rpt. 2009:24). Moreover, the analysis of foregrounding of Iyayi's novels that will be

Author: Department of English and Literary Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria. e-mail: Attaimy@Gmail.Com

carried out in this study will be anchored on the proposition that: "we can also have foregrounding of imagery which draws attention to itself" (Yankson, 2008:33). This study will treat imagery that is "distinctively informative" as foregrounding of the act of expression that reveals the writer's ideology.

In the treatment of imagery, Ogunsiiji's (2011:73) definition will be apt and applicable. He says:

Imagery as a term is difficult to describe with precision because of the way it is used loosely. In a broad sense, it can be used to describe any writing which is descriptive, and helps the reader to visualize a scene and so to experience the poet's experience. We have both, aural and visual imagery. Imagery depends on the emotive power of words for its success. The most condensed form of imagery can be found in figures of speech although not all figures of speech involve visual imagery... metaphor and simile, when they are well used, represent imagery of its most concise manner. Other figures of speech that can perform this function are hyperbole, euphemism, irony, personification, metonymy, synecdoche, etc. Another extreme form of imagery is in the use of language in which an image represents something visual.

Therefore, in this study, simile, metaphor, personification, symbolism, synecdoche, onomatopoeia, oxymoron, etc will be treated as foregrounding of imagery. These figures of speech produce visual, auditory, olfactory, or gustatory effect, so, they enhance an understanding of the novelist's message and

ideology. As, Terence Hawks states, "metaphor... is not fanciful embroidery of the facts. It is a way of experiencing the facts" (quoted in Leech and Short, 1981:25).

The analysis in the following sections is aimed at finding out how foregrounding reveals the author's Marxist ideology. Marxism, "according to Eagleton (1970:vii) is a scientific theory of human societies and transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggle of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression." In *Violence, Heroes, and The Contract*, words that denote or connote class struggle or struggle, exploitation, oppression and other elements of Marxism such as violence, "consciousness of men" (Fromm, 1961:217), collectivism, etc will be treated under foregrounding.

a) Foregrounding in Iyayi's *Violence*

The figures of speech that are deployed for visual, auditory, olfactory, or gustatory effect in *Violence* will be treated as foregrounding of imagery. Words that evoke the above effects are capable of conscientising people and also create Pathos to make them take action. In the novel, there are words that are associated with exploitation, oppression, violence, death, suffering, disease, neglect, suffocation, class struggle, deprivation, etc. suggesting unpleasant experience and dehumanizing condition and hence, the need for a change.

Below are words that are associated with violence and death:

1. There was muted anger on his father's face like clothed blood.
2. On her forehead there was a long ugly gash from which blood gushed out.
3. Adisa was shocked at the sight of so much blood.
4. The man is a butcher
5. It was like eating with the devil.
6. There was venom in her voice...
7. The memory of Obofun hung about her like a shroud.
8. ...a grudge as deep as an ulcer (Iyayi, 1979)

In the above passages, "blood," symbolizes violence. "the devil," "butcher," and "venom" also symbolize violence as well as death and destruction. Furthermore, the comparison with "shroud" and "ulcer" connote danger and death. The images and symbols in

the above passages reinforce the theme of violence and the novelist's Marxist ideology.

Moreover, there are words in the novel that are associated with suffering, exploitation, oppression and deprivation. Examples are:

1. And like any war, the work came to an end.
2. But he couldn't because the ache was back in his head and his body was hot, like a glowing piece of coal.
3. He was like a big tree which a gigantic storm had toyed with.
4. The children were mostly naked, and they were thin and had sores on their legs...
5. The ward itself was crowded, like a war camp.
6. The majority of the patients still shared beds many more slept on the floor. It was like a pigsty this ward, swarming with the sick as pit toilets swarm with flies.
7. ...inside him the cough gathered like a storm and soon it erupted like a volcano.
8. ...the sun fiercely striking at the nape of his neck, like one whose head is held down, waiting for the blades of the guillotine.

9. His neck and throat were wiry, askew and twisted like the neck of a tortoise.
10. It was rough, almost like the carpenter's paper.
11. I was like a vulture picking at the flesh of a dead prey.
12. ...dark tunnel of numberless sick
13. ...bigger market of patients
14. ...people who had been engaged by life in a terrible and fierce struggle and that they had come out of each bout worse... (Iyayi, 1979)

The images and symbols employed in the above extracts show the plight of the less privileged. They show clearly the picture of the suffering masses. The comparisons with "glowing piece of coal," "a big tree which the gigantic storm," "pigsty," "a volcano," "one whose head is held down waiting for the blades of the guillotine," "the neck of a tortoise," "the carpenter's paper," "bigger market," "dark tunnel," "engaged by life in a... struggle... and come out of each bout", etc. give the picture of people who are suffering. Furthermore, "sores" goes beyond physical pain to suggest dehumanizing condition of the poor, pointing out masochism on the part of the government as the order of the day, hence the need for a change.

Moreover, the comparisons with "war," "war camp," and "vulture" project the exploitative and oppressive tendencies of the rich who prey on the

1. The pellets of rain hit the window panes like bullets.
2. The wind acted as a butcher
3. Isn't the whole world a slaughter house
4. ... and the blood still fresh, running out of their mouths and ears or chests.
5. Osime's hands could feel the blood as it soaked through the man's shirt.
6. The river is a death trap.
7. No man should trust his life with this crowd of butchers
8. He carries his grudge like an ulcer
9. The lie has coiled up like a snake and stung its owner.
10. ...we are all caught up in the fight between elephants.
11. What we have on this bridge are the flowers of our motherland, torn rudely from their stems, petals dripping blood.
12. ...guns loaded with certain death
13. The war is the great furnace...
14. The war is like a fire with a lot of dry logs in it.
15. They are beasts. Black beasts (Iyayi, 1986).

The imagery in the above extracts project the poor as victims of their society. The above passages project the gory experiences of the poor. "Blood" symbolizes violence, death, and destruction. All through the novel, connotatively or denotatively, the word "blood" passes across the messages of destruction, death, massacre, violence, torture, etc. Furthermore, the

1. The commanders are busy drinking the blood of the nation, the blood of soldiers...
2. He should get the stench of his parasitism and treachery firmly in his nose and eyes.
3. The whole market was like vomit and the people like vermin feeding on it. The market grounds, the stands, the ware, were nothing but vomit and night soil simultaneously thrown into a pool of muddy red water. The people were the maggots in the night soil or the vermin that fed on the vomit, the wares and the stands were the undigested lumps of food in the slimy vomit.
4. The other vampires will get together and eliminate you. But I am going to kill not one but several generals.
5. They hand over to each other the baton of misery, treachery and parasitism (Iyayi, 1986).

masses. The use of imagery in the novel projects the less privileged members of society as victims.

Iyayi uses foregrounding in the novel to create his characters with emotional attachment so that as we read, we sympathise with them in their plight. This is one of the techniques he has adopted to mobilize his audience to participate in the overthrow of the economic and political system which, Iyayi has described as oppressive and brutalizes the individual and rapes his manhood.

b) Foregrounding in *Heroes*?

In Iyayi's *Heroes*, there are words that are associated with violence, death and destruction thereby reinforcing Marxist ideological basis of the novel. Some of these are:

images of "loaded with certain death," "furnace," "grave," "bullets," "butcher," "death trap," "ulcer," "snake," "elephants," "fire," "beasts," etc. project death, violence and destruction.

Exploitation, oppression, class struggle, and deprivation as elements of Marxism are projected through the following images:

Members of the ruling class are compared to parasites suggesting that they should be eliminated from society. They perpetrate death, violence and destruction described earlier on that cause gory experience of the poor. Iyayi's comparison of the ruling class with parasites is similar to Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's description of this group of people in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Nigerian leaders are compared to "parasites" and "vampires." They are drinkers of human blood. Members of the upper class feed on the poor. They prey on the masses and deprive them of their means of livelihood. Connotatively and denotatively the above passages depict class struggle.

Furthermore, "vermin" and "maggots" symbolize the influential Nigerians who prey on the poor represented by "vomit," "stand," and "wares" in the novel. The above extracts further reveal the plight of the poor.

c) **Foregrounding in Iyayi's *The Contract***

On Iyayi's *The Contract*, Ayinde has observed that:

Literary critics and scholars who have critiqued the novels of Iyayi are almost endless. For instance,

Below are words in the novel that are associated with revolution:

1. The gun probably helped, though, I waved the gun at him...
2. It was a big stone... Chief Ekata saw it and ducked in time and the stone missed him and hit the glass door of the council building.
3. ...it will be like a flood
4. Chief Obala suddenly exploded
5. ...they were cutting down the trees now. It bore a certain resemblance to what he expected the revolution would do, cut down all of them, cut down all those who had lived through and profited by the present decay. (Iyayi, 1982)

"Gun" and "stone" are instruments of violence and hence revolution. Moreover, gun serves several purposes: it is an instrument of liberation and oppression. Workers use it for liberation while the bourgeoisie use it for oppression. Referring to a pistol, Muturi in Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's *Petals of Blood* says: "you can be trusted with a worker's secret... Muturi gave Wariinga the gun and turned away" (Wa Thiong'O, Rpt. 1985:211). "The gun" is referred to as the worker's secret. It is what workers need to overthrow the oppressive system. It is the gun that Wariinga uses at the end of the novel to eliminate Hispandora Greenway

Sophia Ogwude (1996) examines how Iyayi takes one deep philosophical look at the neocolonial Nigerian society where money flows like water in the hand of the privileged few through contract inflation. Okafor (1998) equally argues that Iyayi's novel reveals that the injustice being meted out to the poor is on the high level in Nigeria. The exploitation and oppression of the masses expose their pathetic circumstances as they struggle to survive in a marginalized economic and social setting. (Ayinde, 2011:111)

While Ogunde focuses on corruption, Okafor delves into the themes of injustice, exploitation, and corruption. Ayinde himself says that his paper focuses "on how aesthetically Iyayi ignites the spirit of nationalism and raise (sic) social consciousness with a view to neutralizing the pervasive corruption in Nigeria" (Ayinde, 2011:111). Others whose articles on *The Contract* are also theme based are Tunde Fatunde, Udentia O. Udentia, Catherine Acholonu, Kingston O. Onyijen, among others. This present study that treats the communicative function of foregrounding in *The Contract* represents a paradigm shift.

Ghitahy (Rich Old Man from Ngorika), who is described as "a jigger, a louse, a weevil, a flea, a bedbug!... a mistletoe, a parasite that lives on the trees of other people's lives!" (Wa Thiong'O, Rpt. 1985:254). The killing of the Rich Old Man from Ngorika marks the beginning of the struggle to overthrow the bourgeois class.

In the novel, *The Contract*, the connotation of "gun," "blood," "stone," "flood," "exploded," "cut down," etc. is violence, destruction and death which are the scenario in a social revolution.

Exploitation as an element of Marxism is enunciated in the following images:

1. "You are like the dogs and the vultures. You scavenge in the refuse, in the vomit of the people's misery. You are scavengers."
2. Chief Ekata is a dangerous man. He is like a vulture.
3. No, active living was not merely consumption of resources – not unless you were a parasite (Iyayi, 1982).

The images of "vultures", "scavengers," and "a parasite" project exploitation. Vulture is a bird of prey. A scavenger lives on other creatures and a parasite survives by sucking the blood of an animal or a human being. The characters described in the above passages are members of the upper class who, in the view of the

novelist are undesirable elements of society and so should be flushed out. Therefore, in the above images there is Marxist ideology. From all the discussions so far, we should agree with Osundare that Festus Iyayi is a Marxist.

II. CONCLUSION/FINDINGS

The functions of foregrounding as treated in this study go beyond aestheticism to functionalism. Foregrounding has aesthetic significance but its primary function in Iyayi's novels as this study has shown is to effectively express the author's feeling, pass his message successfully across to the audience, and reveal his ideology. Some of the findings of this study are:

- Foregrounding in Iyayi's novels depicts class struggle.
- Foregrounding reveals the Marxist ideological basis of the novels treated, therefore, its primary purpose is not for aesthetic effect.
- Foregrounding in the novel expresses the themes of exploitation, oppression, and deprivation.
- It reveals the plight of the less privileged.
- It effectively describes the dehumanizing condition of the poor.
- It is key to the conscientisation and mobilization of the masses.
- It portrays the less privileged characters as victims of their society.
- It contributes significantly to the success of the novels studied.

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