

Social Issues in Nigerian Fiction: A Postcolonial Study of Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*

Doris, Paschal-Mbakwe

Department of English Language and Literature. Faculty of Arts.

Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria.

Phone: +2348032788838

Email: dn.paschal@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

This research examines and critiques social issues in postcolonial Nigerian fiction (1960-present) as depicted in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*. Social issues are problems that affect people in the society, such as poverty, inequality, environmental issues, crime, violence, corruption, lack of healthcare or basic needs, queer discrimination and prejudice, gender and sexuality, identity, mental health, trauma, migration amongst others. Through a close reading of the text, the researcher observed that some writers like Okoye are not just telling stories but challenging unfair systems, harmful environment and political corruption. The study critiques how socio-economic, political and cultural forces intersect. Using primary and secondary sources of data collection and adopting postcolonial and trauma theoretical frameworks, the paper examines how social issues are exercised, experienced and legitimized in the society and how the novelist engage with, reflect and critique the social issues in Nigeria. This research discovered that postcolonial Nigeria as explicated by the novelist is a failed one, marred by various themes of social issues. Okoye is an exemplary writer who saw what ought to be done and did it. Her narrative in *The Fourth World* contributes to a deeper understanding and improvement of social issues existent in the postcolonial Nigeria. The research will also continue to inspire various discourses on a deeper nuance of postcolonial Nigeria, regarding socio-economic, political issues and independent disillusionment. Emerging scholars, as well as the literary world will benefit immensely with this research.

Keywords: Social-Issues; Postcolonial; Nigeria; Inequality; Poverty; Oppression.

Introduction

Literature mirrors society and literary artists harness its potentials to x-ray and unveil various shades of realities in their given societies. Henry Levin rightly points out: “The relations between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes; it is also the cause of

social effects”. There is a complex relationship between literature and society. Literature reflects social values; the two are married and can never be divorced. As expected, literature has continued to fulfill its own unique function in national development. In the views of Roshni Duhan, he attests that:

Literature acts as a corrective agent because it reflects society in order to make society understands its errors and makes repairs. It portrays the characteristics or positive ideals that individuals should emulate in society. A literary artist is therefore a product of his society since his writing is a reaction to the life of his people both negatively and positively. He brings to light the strangeness and ugliness of his society's way of life. This is because to fully comprehend life, one must comprehend not only the bright side, but also the seamy and dark side. This is why literature's primary function is to instruct and entertain (60).

Nigerian literature is roughly defined as the literary writing by citizens of Nigeria for Nigerian readers, addressing issues peculiar to Nigeria within and outside the continent. Taiye Awoyemi defines Nigerian Literature as any creative work of fiction created by Nigerians, for Nigerians, that deals with Nigerian themes and has the same sensitivities, awareness, worldview, and other features of the Nigerian cultural experience. In a summary, “for the literature to be regarded as Nigerian, a writer must reflect the ideals and experiences of Nigerians” (318).

The first generation of Nigerian writers rank among Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Christopher Okigbo, T.M. Aluko, Cyprian Ekwensi, Onuoha Nzekwu, Elechi Amadi among a host of others, Taye Adoyemi contends that “with the publication of Tutuola’s novel, a landmark had been scored for Nigerian Literature” (23). He traced the

catalyst to this growth of the first generation of Nigerian writers to the establishment of the University College, Ibadan (UCI) in 1948 which produced the first Nigerian writers in the English Language. These writers, using the skill of the new language they had acquired, generated writings that addressed their own peculiar society. Taye Adoyemi further contends that “True, their writings were built on the patterns of the western ones, but they no doubt used their writings to bring home the point that Nigerians had a veritable way of life before the colonial masters eroded their culture. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a quintessential example”(23).

The second generation of Nigerian writers described by Awoyemi as ‘experimentalists’, emerged to occupy their place after the first generation writers. These writers include Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Niyi Osundare, Bode Sowande, Festus Iyayi, Ifeoma Okoye, Kole

Omotosho, and a host of others. In the views of Awoyemi, “these writers were born out of disillusionment of the gains of Nigerian independence. For them, the First Republic had failed in its bid to rid the Nigerian populace of the shackles of colonialism; in its stead was the new monster, neo-colonialism”(25). The old masters had not left; they had only metamorphosed into black-white masters...Similarly, on the Nigerian terrain, the impact of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 left its mark on the young minds of these writers, now known as the second generation of Nigerian writers. These writers protested against what they regarded as the pessimism of their precursors, as well as their thesis that Nigeria’s governance was the sole pre-occupation of an individual. For them, “social change was (and still is) the collective effort of all and sundry; this is irrespective of age, gender, class, religion, and ethnic leanings” (33).

The third generation of writers which Awoyemi tagged “The Contemporaries” (52), seemed to raise more questions than answers on their collective identity, tenets, and literary styles informed by a wide array of themes that informed their writers. As a result, Awoyemi recognizes that questions have been asked here and there whether there is a third- generation of Nigerian writers and he concludes that it seems however that the third generation of writers is yet to emerge. This opinion is aired considering the fact that there has been no distinct new genre on the Nigerian literary horizon. However, “one can see that contemporary issues have affected the turnout of themes and subject matters evident on the literary scene” (54). In reality, aware of what the Nigerian literary landscape has achieved at the turn of the twenty-first century– the passion with which they wrote on a varying array of concepts touching on certain aspects of the Nigerian

individual experience— it is right to accord the new generation of Nigerian writers, the like of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jude Dibia, Ben Okri, Helon Habila, Sefi Atta, Odili Ujubuonu, Chika Unaigwe, Chinelo Okpalanta, Akwaeke Emesi, among a host of other new writers, their deserving place in the hall of fame of Nigerian literature.

The postcolonial condition of Nigeria is one marked by neocolonial oppression, corruption, and systemic inequality. The nation's struggle for economic and political stability remains hindered by elite domination and mass disempowerment. This research examines social issues in postcolonial Nigerian fiction (1960-present) as depicted in Festus Iyayi's *Violence* and Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*. It examines different ways in which social issues are critiqued, exercised, experienced and legitimized, and how the novelists engage with, critique and reflect social issues in the postcolonial period. By

drawing on postcolonial and Trauma theories, the paper explores how various social, economic, political and cultural forces intersect to form social issues in Nigeria. The importance of unity, political awareness, and collective responsibility in overcoming social challenges. However, for better assimilation of this work, the term post-colonialism will be examined further in this research.

Conceptualizing Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism as a branch of literary discourse is a product of colonialism and to fully underscore its tenets, one need to recourse to issues revolving around colonialism and its impact on the modern world. This is in consonance with James Anthony's argument that “the postcolonial debates are born from the historical experience of colonialism”(11). The postcolonial writers assert that “their countries had a prestigious history, culture,

heritage, government, politics, and tradition and they also depict the past from which they have got the raw materials for their works. This discourse has ceased to be mere adaptations of the West”(12). Therefore, to fully underscore Post-colonialism, ImohImoh-Itah et al opine that “variables and values of colonialism are important connections in re-evaluating the post-colonial state” (10).

Post-colonialism examines the lingering effects of colonial rule, including economic dependency, cultural alienation, and political instability. In Nigeria, colonial structures were replaced by a ruling class that often mirrors the exploitative tendencies of former colonial masters. The unequal distribution of resources, systemic corruption, and ethnic tensions hinder national progress. In *Violence* and *The Fourth World*, Iyayi and Okoye portray these social issues through the struggles of marginalized individuals, exploited,

oppressed poor masses and exposing the broader socio-economic and political structures that sustain poverty and oppression, with the hope of critiquing these social issues in order to achieve a better society.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the Postcolonial and Trauma criticism as a theoretical approach for the analysis of the texts. The Postcolonial critical theory is propounded by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in their canonical work on postcolonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* published in 1989. They define postcolonial as “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2).

The Postcolonial critical theory deals with the postcolonial literary works that are produced as a reaction to colonial

domination from the time of colonialism to the present day. This literary theory investigates the outcomes of the oppression of European colonialism on the oppressed indigenous people of those countries which were once under the control of the British Empire. It looks into issues of past experiences with the intention of avoiding or forestalling a new phase of distasteful experiences by ways of correcting, criticizing, and sometimes bringing to the limelight, deeper understanding and solutions. These ideas inherent in postcolonial theory will be apt in discussing exploitation, corruption, oppression, dehumanization, class, gender, ethnicity and post-independence disillusionment as gleaned from the selected novels.

Another interesting theoretical anchor to guide this research is the Trauma Theory. The theory originates from the exposition and explanation of Sigmund Freud on traumatic experiences in *Beyond*

the Pleasure Principle, Moses and Monotheism. Trauma theory was first documented and explained in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. She states that "Trauma theory is an active, interdisciplinary western field of study which has been developed since 1980s through the mutual exchange of ideas and concepts in humanities and psychology" (32). The incorporation of trauma theory into exploration of literary studies is realized in relation to the influence of psychoanalysis, it has also helped in exploration, critiquing and deeper understanding of the complexities of relationships and experiences in the society especially the various pervasive social issues in the postcolonial Nigeria.

The concept of trauma, its source of critique, is generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional

organization and perception of the external world. Trauma studies analyze the complex psychological and social factors that influence the self's comprehension of a traumatic experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped, and the intersections that occur between society, culture, experience, memory and place. Iyayi and Okoye texts no doubt represented the postcolonial and traumatic experiences of their characters in different perspectives.

Social Issues in Postcolonial Nigerian Fiction in Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*

This study shows Okoye as postcolonial writers whose sensibility has been awakened by inequalities and injustices in the Nigerian society. Essentially, they have been able to reflect on the socio-economic and political milieus that characterize the post-colonial Nigeria. She reveals the inherent structural contradictions

in Nigeria vis-à-vis the ruler's inherent weaknesses. The picture the novelist "paint of the working people and masses touch the reader making him sympathize with these wretched of the Nigerian society. She equally paint a critical picture of "the bourgeois where they hold them responsible for the exploitation, oppression, marginalization and dehumanization of the poor masses in postcolonial Nigeria" (37).

The novel depicts individuals who, despite their sufferings, recognize the need for a revolutionary action. It requires active participation from all citizens—workers, intellectuals, women, and political leaders—who must unite to dismantle oppressive structures. This collective effort should manifest in various forms such as Political Engagement— Citizens must hold leaders accountable and demand good governance. Economic Equity— Wealth redistribution and fair labour practices are necessary for sustainable development. Education and

Awareness— Raising political and social consciousness is crucial for national progress. Gender Inclusion— Addressing gender disparities strengthens national progress and security.

Gender, Class and Ethnicity in the Novel

Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World* explores the prevalent issues such as gender, class and ethnicity that have occupied the contemporary Nigerian society. The novel has also depicted different degenerating problems which have plagued the ordinary citizens since independence, especially the female gender. It also paints a sordid picture of the postcolonial African society with many imperfections. Okoye in depicting the experiences of her characters reveals that poverty, oppression, maltreatment, corruption, exploitation and discrimination have eaten deep into the fabrics of the society; hence, disillusionment, death and frustration have become so rampant. Okoye has presented an artistic construct with

intrinsic socio-political and economic structures or social relationships. Mortimer Adler quoted in Odinye, explains that the social relationship according to Marx and Engels is a "history of class struggles where oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition with one another...a fight that each timer ended either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes"(5). Ernest Emenyonu, in the "Foreword" of the novel – *The Fourth World*, supports the above assertions by stating that:

Our mundane world has concocted a division of humanity into three convenient categories of First, Second and Third worlds that seem mutually exclusive, but in

reality, this classification is simply a contraption that groups the world according to levels of industrial technological development; another way of dividing the human world

into ‘haves’ and ‘haves-not’s. But there is a Fourth world whose

citizenship is not defined by race, colour, geographical location, tongue or creed (vi).

The above quotation thus summarizes the novel’s themes of class distinction, marginalization, corruption and leadership gap.

The novel depicts the painful experiences of the poor masses; people who have been neglected, battered and impoverished in a postcolonial society. Okoye expresses a deep sense of dismay over the activities of the African leaders and their failure to provide the basic needs of the citizens. Hence, in the novel, she skillfully confronts pertinent thematic factors that have negatively affected the living conditions of people in Nigeria. Emenyonu asserts the novel is set in Enugu in the Eastern region of Nigeria. But Enugu is only a microcosm of the universal world of the

poor found everywhere on earth. It is the world of voiceless humanity, the ignored and despised found in rich as in poor countries, in the free world as in autocratic regimes, under democratic as in authoritarian governments. Wherever they are, poverty is their unmistakable identity. “It is the badge they wear. It defines, stigmatizes, and earns them derision as the other world (vii).

Oppression and Abject Poverty in the Novel

In order to clearly depict a humiliating world of poverty and oppression, Okoye craftily presents the structural inequalities which have deepened impoverishment and exploitation in her fictional environment of Kasanga. In the novel, the residents of Kasanga Avenue are satiric portraits of Nigerian citizens living in poverty, sickness, hunger, fear and massive unemployment with no hope of surviving. In the novel, “mostly women with new-born

babies or sick children, and adults too sick to leave their beds are exempted from daily struggles” (104). The relationships between different characters further paints a vivid picture which exposes the disparity between the privileged, the political class and the ordinary residents of the avenue who were mainly “petty traders, artisans, barrow pushers, scrap collectors, cleaners, labourers and beggars who left home at dawn and returned long after sunset” (103).

Akalaka, the father of Chira is depicted as one of the victims of the vicious cycle of poverty. Her father was a labourer on building sites; his job included mixing mortar and concrete and carrying head pans of the mixture to the mansions. He also moved cement blocks to wherever they were needed and dug excavations for house foundations. In her words:

Her father did other menial jobs like cutting down trees, clearing drains and working in people's

homes from Monday to Saturday. He left home at six in the

morning in the company of other labourers living in Kasanaga Avenue.

Sometimes, he waited for labourers from morning until night for days before he got hired (9).

The novel portrays an environmentally polluted society exposing citizens to sickness and hazard. The Main hospital, government owned hospital, where Akalaka, Chira's father was admitted clearly depicts the picture of environmental pollution. The surroundings of the main hospital are depicted as strikingly dirty. The gutters are blocked and thus breed mosquitoes which declare war on patients and people who take care of them.

Post-independence Disillusionment

Disillusionment and Frustration characterize Okoye's description of the

government owned hospital which records deaths on daily basis. The government of Kasanga claims to spend billions of naira in providing healthcare facilities and drugs; yet the masses have no access to them. According to Kodili, Chira's mother:

The hospital provides nothing, my daughter, ...The patients provide everything they need. I have bought tablets, injections, plasters for your father's treatment.

I've bought everything. Everything, Chira, even cotton wool. The nurses always tell me that the medicines are not there in the hospital...uh...uh... (43).

The above quotation exposes the rot and decay in the nation's health system. Hence, the nonchalant attitude of the health care givers and government has led to the death of many, including Akalaka, Chira's

father who later becomes a victim of the vicious circle of decay and hypocrisy.

The Fourth World deals with post-independence disillusionment as seen in the marginalization of individuals, environmental degradation and oppression of the poor. Women like Kodili, Egodi and Chira see marriage as way of adding value to their lives in the midst of uncertainty. Chira, nearly succumbs to Maks pressure of marriage because of poverty and her inability to raise money for her mother's medical treatment. Maks and the Governor represent the rich class who torment poor citizens like Chira with their amassed wealth. Maks is a secondary school dropout who becomes rich by helping some people in government to sell crude oil and take illegally embezzled public funds out of the country. The Governor neglects the suffering masses but lives in luxury to the detriment of the poor citizens. According to the narrator, "The Governor was very rich.

He had many investments overseas and had houses in all the state capitals” (271). Chira’s visit with Maks to the Governor’s house, to attend the governor’s birthday party exposes the luxury and excessive waste displayed by the Governor in the novel. The narrator explains that “the food on the long stretch of tables would feed all the residents of Kasanga Avenue for two months. She saw fried chicken drumsticks that looked as big as new-born baby’s thighs”(272).

The novelist therefore condemns and attacks the oppressive ruling class and their stooge like Maks who embezzle public funds. The oppressive activities of the ruling elite led to Kasanga rebellion. Characters in the Avenue such as Chira, the heroine, Jude Pebble (Kasanga doctor) and Omume Uche (Mirror Head) are all nationalists and activists spreading radical consciousness amongst Kasanga residents. This captures Okoye’s deepest concern for the

downtrodden of Kasanga Avenue. The novel therefore raises a major concern for the masses to fight for revolutionary reconstruction against any unjust order which violates human rights in order to gain social change for a better Nigeria.

Conclusion

In Ifeoma Okoye’s *The Fourth World*, we see “a novel that addresses the major problems bedeviling the Nigerian cum African societies” (3). Okoye in depicting the experiences of her characters reveals that “poverty, oppression, maltreatment, corruption, exploitation and discrimination have eaten deep into the fabrics of the society; hence, disillusionment, frustration and death have become so rampant” (4). Okoye leave a message that the hope for a viable postcolonial state will remain a mirage if proactive measures are not taken to redirect the ship of the nation, protect the citizens and institute socio-political and

economic measures to better their lots and make the nation habitable irrespective of gender, religion and ethnic affiliations.

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