

HARDSHIP AND HUMAN RESILIENCE IN OTOVWE OGHENERHOR'S BASSEY, THE MECHANIC: A LITERARY STUDY OF SUFFERING AND SOCIAL DETERMINISM

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Abstract

This study examines hardship and human resilience in Olovwe Oghenerhor's *Bassey, the Mechanic*, with particular attention to the interplay between social determinism and individual agency in shaping the protagonist's life trajectory. The research explores how Bassey's experiences of suffering, deprivation, and systematic neglect from childhood reflect broader socio-economic realities that constrain human potential. Employing Marxist literary theory as the primary analytical framework, the study investigates how class structures, poverty, and social inequality function as determining forces that influence character development and life chances within the narrative. In addition, existentialist thought is used as a complementary lens to highlight the protagonist's capacity for endurance, self-definition, and moral perseverance despite oppressive conditions. Through a close ...reading of the text, the paper argues that Bassey's journey from adversity to eventual social and personal transformation illustrates the tension between structural oppression and individual resilience. The study further demonstrates that while societal conditions significantly shape human experience, the narrative also affirms the possibility of agency through perseverance, ethical labour and communal support. Ultimately, *Bassey, the Mechanic* presents hardship not simply as a condition of suffering but as a catalyst for growth, identity formation and social mobility. This research contributes to literary discussions on class struggle, resilience and character construction in contemporary narrative fiction.

Keywords: Suffering, Deprivation, Poverty, Perseverance, Transformation.

Introduction

Literature has long served as a mirror of human society, reflecting both its contradictions and its lived realities. In many contemporary narratives, particularly those emerging from socio-economically complex environments, themes of hardship, struggle and resilience dominate character development and plot progression. *Bassey, the Mechanic* is one such narrative that presents the life of a protagonist shaped by persistent suffering, social neglect and structural inequality. The story traces Bassey's

journey from a deprived childhood marked by adversity to eventual personal growth and social recognition, thereby foregrounding the relationship between human endurance and socio-economic conditions.

This study examines *Bassey, the Mechanic* through the angle of Marxist literary theory and existentialist thought in order to explore how class structures and individual agency interact within the narrative. Marxist criticism provides a useful framework for understanding how social and economic systems influence human experience. As Karl Marx famously asserts, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (2002:14). This statement underscores the idea that human existence is deeply shaped by ongoing tensions between dominant and subordinate social classes. In the context of *Bassey, the Mechanic*, Bassey's struggles can be read as a reflection of larger systemic inequalities that define access to opportunity, dignity and social mobility.

Building on this foundation, Marxist literary theory suggests that literature does not exist in isolation but is embedded within material conditions of production and social relations. Terry Eagleton emphasizes that literary texts often encode ideological structures that reflect and sometimes challenge dominant power systems (2008:5). From this perspective, Bassey's experiences of exploitation, poverty and hardship are not merely personal misfortunes but representations of structural oppression that shape working class existence. His occupation as a mechanic further situates him within a labor-intensive class system where survival is closely tied to physical work and economic instability.

However, while Marxist theory explains the external forces shaping Bassey's life, existentialist thought complements this reading by drawing attention to individual agency and personal meaning-making in the face of suffering. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, human beings are "condemned to be free" meaning that despite external limitations, individuals must continuously define themselves through choices and actions (2007:29). In *Bassey, the Mechanic*, the protagonist's tenacity, moral endurance and eventual transformation illustrate this existential dimension of human existence. Even within oppressive conditions, Bassey indicates endurance that affirms the possibility of self-determination.

Therefore, this study insists that *Bassey, the Mechanic* presents hardship not only as a condition imposed by society but also as a transformative force that shapes identity and character. The narrative reveals a complex interaction between structural determinism and human grit, suggesting that while socio-economic forces significantly hinder individual lives, they do not entirely erase the potential for growth and self-realization. Through a close textual analysis, this research highlights how the protagonist's journey

reflects far reaching themes of survival, dignity and social mobility within a stratified society.

Eventually, this paper contributes to literary discourse by demonstrating how *Bassey, the Mechanic* engages with enduring questions of class struggle, human suffering and fortitude, positioning the text within both Marxist and existentialist interpretive traditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted on a combination of New Historicism and Social Realism theory, both of which provide a robust interpretive foundation for examining how *Bassey, the Mechanic* represents social formation. While Marxist and existentialist readings focus on class struggle and individual agency respectively, these two frameworks extend the analysis by situating the text within more expansive historical, cultural and representational texts.

New Historicism

New Historicism offers a critical approach that views literary texts as deeply integrated within the cultural and historical conditions of their production. Rather than treating literature as an autonomous artifact, it stresses the mutual influence between texts and the social structures that produce them. Like Stephen Greenblatt explains, New Historicism is concerned with "the circulation of social energy" within cultural texts, meaning that literature both reflects and participates in the production of power relations within society (1988:7).

From this viewpoint, *Bassey, the Mechanic* can be read as a narrative shaped by the lived realities of poverty, inequality and marginalization. Bassey's experiences are not isolated incidents but expressions of an extensive historical environment in which economic hardship and limited opportunity define working-class existence. Lois Tyson further clarifies this approach by noting that New Historicism examines how "literary and nonliterary texts circulate together in culture" and how meaning is produced through this interaction (2015:283). In relation to the text, Bassey's struggles are therefore understood as culturally situated experiences that reflect the socio-economic realities of his environment.

Social Realism Theory

Social Realism provides a complementary framework that focuses on the accurate and unembellished representation of everyday life, particularly the struggles ...of ordinary people. It prioritizes literature's responsibility to portray social realities such as poverty,

labour exploitation and inequality. George Lukács, one of the most influential theorists of realism, contends that "the essence of realism lies in its ability to depict life in its totality, revealing the underlying social relations that shape human experience" (1971:45).

In *Bassey, the Mechanic*, the depiction of hardship, manual labour and social neglect aligns closely with the principles of social realism. The narrative foregrounds the lived experiences of a working-class individual whose survival depends on labour and resilience. By presenting Bassey's environment without romanticization, the text exposes the structural challenges faced by individuals in similar socio-economic conditions. Raymond Williams also supports this view by asserting that realism in literature is concerned with "ordinary experience and the lived reality of social life" (1973:62). This reinforces the idea that Bassey's story functions as a representation of everyday struggles rather than an exceptional or isolated case.

Synthesis of Theoretical Frameworks

When combined, New Historicism and Social Realism provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing *Bassey, the Mechanic*. While New Historicism situates the narrative within its sweeping socio-historical context, Social Realism focuses on the faithful representation of lived experience. Together, they allow for a deeper understanding of how the text constructs meaning through the depiction of hardship, resilience and social mobility. Bassey's journey is thus interpreted not only as a personal narrative but also as a cultural text that reflects and criticizes the realities of his society.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on literature that portrays hardship and social mobility consistently feature the relationship between lived experience, class structure and narrative representation. Critics have long argued that literary texts do not exclusively tell stories but also reflect and interrogate the social conditions in which they are produced. This study builds on existing scholarship on hardship narratives, working-class representation and character development in fiction in order to situate *Bassey, the Mechanic* within comprehensive literary discourse.

A significant body of criticism on hardship narratives highlights the way literature gives voice to marginalized and economically disadvantaged characters. Chinua Achebe, in his reflection on African storytelling, stresses that literature must be attentive to social realities, arguing that "the writer cannot be excused from the task of re-educating and regenerating his society" (1990:45). This assertion underscores the idea that narratives of suffering are not only aesthetic but also socially instructive. In relation to *Bassey, the Mechanic*, Chinua Achebe's view supports the interpretation of Bassey's struggles as representative of wider societal conditions rather than isolated personal misfortune.

Similarly, Ngugi wa Thiong'o reinforces the political and economic dimensions of storytelling, noting that, "language and literature are always shaped by the material conditions of a people's existence" (1986:16). This declaration bolsters the idea that narratives of hardship are deeply connected to systems of inequality and historical experience. Within this framework, Bassey's life as a mechanic and his exposure to poverty and exploitation reflect the material realities that shape working-class identity in many postcolonial societies.

In addition to African literary thought, Western critical scholarship on character development and realism provides further insight into hardship narratives. E. M. Forster, in his discussion of narrative construction, distinguishes between flat and round characters, arguing that round characters are capable of development and complexity, stating that they are "capable of surprising in a convincing way" (1927:78). Bassey's transformation from a suffering child into a resilient adult aligns with this notion of character complexity, as his development is shaped by both internal perseverance and external hardship.

Further supporting this perspective, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "novel as a site of becoming" suggests that literary characters are never static but are continually shaped through interaction with social forces and lived experience (1981:19). This idea is particularly relevant to *Bassey, the Mechanic* where the protagonist's identity evolves through continuous confrontation with adversity. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory allows for an understanding of Bassey's journey as a process of formation rather than a fixed identity.

Scholarship on social mobility in literature also provides an important point of view for interpreting the narrative. Literary critic Franco Moretti observes that modern narrative often centres on "the tension between individual aspiration and structural limitation" (2005:112). This tension is evident in Bassey's story, where personal ambition and moral strength are constantly challenged by socio-economic constraints. Such scholarship supports the view that hardship narratives often dramatize the struggle between human potential and structural barriers.

Collectively, these critical approaches demonstrate that literature dealing with hardship and resilience operates at the intersection of social critique, character formation and ideological reflection. The existing body of scholarship establishes that narratives like *Bassey, the Mechanic* are concerned with individual suffering but also with broader questions of class, identity, and mobility. However, there remains limited scholarly attention specifically focused on contemporary short stories that depict working-class resilience in localized socio-economic contexts. This gap justifies the present study, which seeks to contribute to literary discourse by offering a focused analysis of hardship and flexibility in *Bassey, the Mechanic*.

Hardship, Social Determinism and Identity Formation in *Bassey, the Mechanic*

Hardship as the Foundation of Bassey's Early Identity

The narrative of *Bassey, the Mechanic* opens with a sustained depiction of deprivation and suffering that defines the protagonist's early life. From childhood, Bassey is positioned within an environment marked by poverty, neglect and social indifference. These early experiences function not solely as background detail but as formative forces that shape his psychological and emotional development:

As soon as Bassey became aware that he was a living person, he began to have many wishes too. Most of his longings sprang from the fact that his parents had little to bestow on him. He was not fortunate to be born with a silver spoon in his mouth. As a child, there was hardly a time when he was not hungry; and to quench his immediate hunger, a meal meant for seven workmen would not have satisfied Bassey.

Most of the clothes he wore were the ones passed to him by his two older brothers, who actually had not been the first to be using them. These clothes, at this time, were already more than shabby and did not take long before they became ropy strands at mere touching them (123).

The text presents hardship as a persistent condition rather than a temporary phase, suggesting that suffering is structurally embedded in Bassey's social environment.

In several early episodes, Bassey is shown experiencing rejection and exploitation from individuals and institutions that should ideally offer protection or support. This repeated exposure to hardship constructs an identity grounded in endurance rather than comfort:

The only valuable things in the room were the tattered mats and clothes which were worn and re-worn yet were often denied the comfort of soap. Worst of all, Bassey and his siblings were given little attention by their parents. Bassey's parents were too worn out by despair to care if he had taken his bath or enquire how he had accidentally sustained an injury (123).

The narrative thereby emphasizes that identity formation is not spontaneous but shaped through continuous confrontation with adversity. His childhood suffering becomes the foundation upon which his later resilience is built.

Social Determinism and Structural Inequality

A dominant concern in the story is the influence of social structures on individual destiny. Bassey's life trajectory is heavily shaped by economic limitations and unequal access to opportunity. The narrative consistently highlights how poverty restricts choices and forces individuals into survival-oriented decisions. This aligns with the idea

of social determinism, where human behaviour and life outcomes are significantly influenced by surrounding social and economic conditions.

The depiction of Bassey entering mechanical work is not presented as a purely personal choice but as a necessity imposed by circumstance. The mechanics workshop becomes a symbolic space of working-class survival, where labour is both a means of livelihood and a marker of social position:

None of these things happened to Bassey before he was eighteen. It became obvious that the chance for his dream to come true was slim. He was nearly an adult and it was very unlikely for someone to adopt a boy his age. And so one day, the opportunity came to Bassey that a distant cousin, by the name Aniefiok, who was a Toyota mechanic, wanted a teenage boy whom he would train in his workshop. The boy to Uyo to live with his cousin and his cousin's wife and four children (123-124).

This reinforces the idea that Bassey's identity is socially produced rather than individually constructed in isolation.

Moreover, the attitudes of other societal actors toward Bassey further reinforce structural inequality. He is often treated as inferior or invisible, reflecting a hierarchy that privileges certain social groups over others. These interactions highlight how social systems perpetuate marginalization and limit upward mobility for individuals like Bassey:

At his cousin's, Bassey was requested to do the domestic work before going to the workshop in the mornings and to take up his uncompleted chores, such as filling the drums with water and helping with the cooking, on his return in the evenings. It became clear to Bassey that his cousin, Aniefiok, was actually looking for a houseboy and not an apprentice. He had picked on Bassey because he was the gentlest and soberest among the boys in the extended family (124).

Identity Formation through Labour and Experience

Despite the overwhelming presence of hardship, the narrative also emphasizes transformation through perseverance and labour. Bassey's work as a mechanic becomes central to his identity formation. The workshop is not only a site of economic survival but also a space of learning, discipline, and personal development:

It was thrilled that perhaps his dream was manifesting itself in reality. He moved. It was towards the sixth year, that he was able to save enough to buy his tools; and he decided to settle on his own. He broke the news to his cousin. Aniefiok

was not very delighted because Bassey was of enormous help to him. Besides that, he was very honest (125).

Through consistent effort and exposure to skilled labour, Bassey gradually acquires competence, confidence and social recognition.

This process reflects a gradual shift from victimhood to agency. While his early identity is shaped by suffering, his later identity emerges through resilience and commitment to work. The narrative suggests that labour, even under oppressive conditions, can serve as a pathway to dignity and self-definition. In this sense, Bassey's identity is neither entirely imposed by society nor entirely self-created but emerges through the interaction of both forces.

The benevolence of certain individuals in his environment also plays a critical role in his transformation. Acts of kindness and mentorship provide moments of support and counterbalance the harshness of his environment:

The vulcaniser smiled. He knew the young man was frustrated by the struggles of life and its harsh demands for survival. This certainly was written all over the face and frame of the man. "Well, I am not a mechanic. But would you manage with me for a while, maybe till you find a place?" (128).

From Suffering to Social Recognition

By the conclusion of the narrative, Bassey's journey reflects a movement from marginalization toward recognition. His persistence and skill development enable him to attain a more stable and respected social position:

Bassey lived in the house for more than two years. Even the Agbamus' children got to like him too. During this period he saved a lot of money from his work. One evening, Mr. Agbamu returned from a trip and he said "Bassey will you be able to manage a mechanic workshop completely on your own?" Bassey was surprised at this abrupt question. "Yes Oga". "Alright, write your list" (134).

However, this transformation does not erase the memory of hardship; rather, it redefines it as part of his identity formation process.

The story ultimately presents a complex relationship between suffering and success. Hardship is not merely an obstacle but a formative experience that shapes resilience and moral strength. Bassey's final position in society therefore represents both personal achievement and the outcome of prolonged struggle against structural limitations:

Good. For some time now I have been thinking of setting up a mechanic workshop that you would help me manage it," said Mr. Agbamu. Looked at Bassey, and asked "Bassey, are you sure you can?" "Yes Oga, I can! I can!" Bassey shouted with glee (135).

Few days later, Bassey was about, looking for an area of land by the road to set up a shop. He finally found one at Mile 2 Diobu. The money he had saved during these months he had stayed with the Agbamus, he used to rent a room near the shop and furnished it to the taste of a single man starting a new life. The workshop was much bigger than what he had expected. Apart from the spare parts sold in the shop, Bassey also made available to buyers engine oil, tubes of tyres, wheels, and a few odds and ends of vehicles (135–136).

After two years, Bassey decided to support one of his elder brothers by taking one of his children to live with him in Port Harcourt. Few months after that, he got married and when his first child was born to him, Bassey promised himself that he would endeavour that his child never have any cause to wish he were born by some other parents (136).

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how *Bassey, the Mechanic* constructs a narrative of hardship and resilience within a socially determined environment, with particular attention to the formation of identity under conditions of material deprivation and limited opportunity.

The analysis has shown that the protagonist's life journey is shaped by a continuous interaction between external pressures and internal endurance, resulting in a character trajectory that reflects both constraint and transformation.

Rather than presenting development as a linear progression toward success, the narrative depicts growth as a negotiated process marked by struggle, adaptation and incremental self-realization. Bassey's experiences demonstrate that identity is not fixed but continuously reshaped through lived experience, particularly through engagement with labour, social relations and survival-oriented decisions. His eventual recognition within society emerges not as an isolated achievement but as the outcome of prolonged engagement with adversity and responsibility.

The study further reveals that the text does not simply simplify hardship as merely destructive; instead, it frames difficult experiences as formative elements that

contribute to moral endurance, discipline and self-definition. In doing so, the narrative challenges the notion that suffering only limits human potential, suggesting instead that it can also generate forms of strength that enable mobility and reinvention.

In the final analysis, *Bassey, the Mechanic* presents a nuanced portrayal of human development within constrained social conditions, where personal determination intersects with structural realities. The story contributes to literary discussions on character formation and social experience by illustrating how individuals navigate complex environments to construct meaning and identity. This makes the text a valuable site for understanding how contemporary narratives represent the relationship between struggle, resilience and social transformation.

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⁵Daniel O. Abonyi & Eucharia A. Eze, "Developing the mental and worldview of the Igbo child through Igbo epic poetry," *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* Vol 25 (2016), 23.

⁶Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 41-42.

⁷Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 44-45.

⁸Abonyi & Eze, *Developing the mental and worldview of the Igbo*, 24.

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