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FROM SOCIETY DEHUMANIZATION TO IDENTITY LOSS: STUDY CASE OF FESTUS IYAYI'S VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the dehumanization of the Nigerian society that is linked to a loss of identity. Through a postcolonial approach, it unveils how women's proteiform oppression makes them lose dignity and femininity. Bullied and humiliated, the working masses also end up losing all humanity and adopt new habits, such as blood selling. Dehumanization takes on more shocking forms with the adoption of new values by the government and some of its agents, who thus, turn away from their human dimension. At the heart of this decay, it is crucial to rebuild the pillars of this society and promote a fairer world.

Key words : dehumanization; identity; oppression; postcolonial; violence

RESUME

Cet article met en relief la déshumanisation de la société nigérienne qui est liée à une perte d'identité. Mené à travers une approche postcoloniale, il souligne comment l'oppression multiforme de la gent féminine lui fait perdre la dignité et la féminité. Les masses laborieuses brimées et humiliées finissent elles aussi à perdre toute humanité quand elles adoptent de mauvaises habitudes, telle que la vente de leur sang. La déshumanisation prend des allures plus effarantes avec la distorsion de la fonction première du rôle de certaines infrastructures étatiques. Au cœur de cette déchéance, il urge de rebâtir les piliers de cette société en promouvant un monde plus égalitaire.

Mots clés : déshumanisation; identité; oppression ; postcolonial; violence

INTRODUCTION

The socio-political situation of African countries has constantly worried African writers who have, in their vast majority, discussed it in their works. To this end, they emphasized the situation of their peers who were experiencing the harsh realities of independence. As a matter of fact, once independence achieved, a mismatch between the promises new leaders made and their management could be observed. At the triple political, economic and social level, some social values have greatly been undermined. Less solidarity could be seen among the people, rulers showed less interest in the welfare of their population, preferring to enrich themselves and their relatives. In addition to these misbehaviours, corruption and race for money are termed by Armah (1968, p.134): “*national sport*”, to mean the holistic dimension of this misbehaviour.

This despairing situation attracted the attention of some English-speaking African writers whose literary works echoed the plight of the oppressed masses in a post-independence era. This way of doing not only showed their keen interest for their people, but can be construed as their contribution to the eradication of the misbehaviours of the ruling elites. Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, to name but a few, set out to

highlight throughout their literary works the need to rethink African society and promote a fairer one. Doing so, these novelists were playing their role of teachers which consists to “*entertain and to educate*” Achebe (1981, p.126).

Like his predecessors, the nigerian novelist Festus Iyayi tried to contribute to the denunciation of the issues that plague Africa in general and his country in particular. His *Violence* appears indeed as a vitriolic criticism of a post-independence corrupt, poverty-stricken and oppressive society in which the ruling class is only interested in making money and trampling down social values. Ngũgĩ, (1986, p.97) highlights the confusion that dominates this world when he writes : “*everything is upside down*”. In such a context, the oppressed masses, have to fend for themselves for ensuring their survival and resort to some behaviours which reveals a social discomfort.

This paper takes a cursory look at the various ways the society is deprived of its humanity. It unveils, through a postcolonial approach, the extent to which some characters’ misbehaviour portrays the poor relationship between the members of a same society. This conception of dehumanization is backed up by M. Maiese (2003, p.34) when she posits that “*dehumanization is a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration.*”. Beyond the psychological aspect, one can see the contestary dimension of postcolonialism as it aims at deconstructing and criticizing the western ideology now epitomized by the ruling elites.

To better address the issue, the reflexion will be woven around three main axes. Thus, the first axis will chiefly deal with the proteiform ill treatment of women which accounts for their debasement, the deprivation of their feminity, what makes them women. The second part of the study discusses the ongoing dehumanization of the society which can be observed in the despair that lead some characters to accept a loss of dignity and identity. As for the last part it stresses the shaping of new paradigms through the misbehaviour of some state agents.

I. WOMEN’S DEBASEMENT AS IDENTITY LOSS

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007, p.403) defines the verb to debase as “*to make someone or something lose its value or people’s respect.* We can infer from this definition that debasement is the outcome of an unwilling situation. Once undergone, the oppressed person becomes underestimated after losing values ; in short, he is debased. This issue has been raised by many thinkers notably Spivak who analyse it both through the prism of labor division and an opposition between ruling elites and oppressed working masses. These relationships are essential to the masses whose debasement eventually make them lose their dignity after being tortured, humiliated and denied their rights.

African writers constantantly show a keen interest in female issues, and in the restoration of the image of African women. In Africa, women are very often denied the basic right of expressing their opinions, as revealed in the novel of Festus Iyayi. Indeed in his text, *Violence*, women undergo various predicaments which appear under many forms (psychological, moral and even physical). It makes them lose their feminity even their humanity as it offends and destabilizes them. Shedding light on this issue testifies that postcolonial societies still perpetuate a system which plagues newly independent societies like the one depicted by the corpus.

Violence opens with repeated cases of Adisa, epitomizing oppressed women and suffering thereby the physical oppression of her husband Idemudia. Her repeated beating portrays her humiliation and recalls the reader the type of society which is being built. It is a society where women are ill-treated. In clearer terms, the independence did not bring great change particularly to the lower class. On the contrary throughout the corpus, we come across the case of Adisa and Idemudia's mother whose squalor shows a social malaise and connotes with women's debasement. F. Iyayi (1979, p.7) lingers on the negative physical metamorphosis of the woman, subsequent to the violence she has just suffered : "*He was surprised to find his mother's face swollen, her limbs broken and one of her teeth broken. Shocked, he immediately asked what happened. 'It's your father. [...] He hit me on the face ! He used my own pestle on me !'*"

The use of a pestle testifies the violence that characterizes the man's deed. As if it was about killing a ferocious animal, he actually displays his goal which is to reduce into silence Adisa. His will is to debase her and prevent her from any attack against his dictatorship. As such, he shows his brutality and his evil side toward her. Love seems to have vanished between Adisa and her husband and has made room for hatred. In fact, how can a human being endowed with knowledge act so savagely if his intention is not to show his malice, the extent to which he has been dehumanized? In his attempt to destroy and silent her, Adisa's husband also misbehaves as an animal. This way, he doesn't find it difficult to keep on oppressing and debasing her until she bleeds. Iyayi (1979, p.8) lingers on this shadowy episode in these terms :

There in the early morning light, he found his mother in the mud and his father pounding away at her. Her whole face was muddy and twisted with pain. She just lay there writhing and struggling, unable to fight back, unable to defend herself, helplessly taking all the brutal punishment that his father was giving her.

The blood that sinks reveals the violent strokes she has previously received. Her situation is all the more pitiful that she is beaten all the day long and is incapable to withstand. This is actually an evidence of women's debasement epitomized by Idemudia's mother's lot. No one can help her and set her free from the violence exerted by her husband. Such a violence aims at recalling the woman her real identity, her inferiority and it confirms the assertion which posits that we are in a misogynist society. Beyond this ill-treatment, *Violence* accounts for women's debasement and seeks to dehumanize her.

Adisa's humiliation is a permanent one. It reaches its peak as her nakedness is revealed to the whole world. Thus, she is no more a human being but has taken on animal like aspect. She has been 'endowed' with a new identity, totally different from human one. It is hardly difficult to recognize her since she has been disfigured by her husband. Iyayi (1979, p. 9) illustrates her physical debasement in these words: "*Idemudia had bitten his lip, as he helped his mother up out of the mud. Her lower lip was cut and bleeding. On her forehead there was a long ugly gash from which blood gushed out. Her clothes were torn, her hair in complete disarray. Her eyes were too swollen.*"

Adisa is totally disfigured. Her face has changed and her swollen eyes prevent her from seeing neatly what surrounds her. According to Iyayi (1979, p.199), women's debasement can be viewed in their association to "*helpless preys*". By referring to them this way, not only does the author recognize their weakness, but he also confesses the way they are now recognized. Beyond this poor image we witness a commodification of women, their dehumanization since they are now similar to animals, deprived of their humanity. This exemplifies the fact that this

society erects principles which debase women by assimilating them to mere preys men are ready to devour.

Sexual intercourses that are summoned in the text to illustrate women's debasement. Characters have sex for different reasons. If some do it for the sake of pleasure, others perform for financial need or are forced to do so. No matter what the reason may be, the repetition of the sexual relationships connotes a deep social malaise. This shows the extent to which the postcolonial society can be regarded as a society in crisis. In short, it is a corrupt society where sex come before everything. It is above all a society in which women are raped as revealed in the following passage :

Adisa did not hear any knocking. Her face was buried against the pillow and she was weeping. You must not cry. [...] he had conquered her [...] the woman had been impassive, he had felt at one stage as if he was making love to a dead woman. And so he had moved to hurt her. He became rough and harsh. [...] Adisa held the dress tightly to her body and with the other hand, she covered her face while the tears came out of her eyes and down her cheeks, slowly. Iyayi (1979, 170)

Through Adisa's rape, the novelist typically reveals the evil side of the nigerian society wherein women are « forced » to have sex. Love which is supposed to be made on the mutual agreement of both partners is now carried out without any consent. Here people behave like animals, consequently a man can go with a woman without necessarily mutual consent. In addition, sex has been deprived of its taboo dimension. It has been desanctified since Obofun has eventually succeeded in raping Adisa. For Paxton (1999, p. 37), he has therefore succeeded in “ *penetrating a virgin territory*”, a territory which is not his. Indeed it is a perpetuation of the colonial ideology with new actors, ruling class who oppress and humiliate the lower class citizens.

This part of the analysis has stressed women's debasement which ranges from their physical and moral oppression to their sexual harrasment which results in their rape. Adisa is at the heart of women's debasement which testifies the ill-treatment of women even in emancipated societies of violence. Women's debasement in any case ends in distorting their image, their identity. Still the loss of identity subsequent to dehumanization is not specific to women. Like Adisa, epitomizing oppressed women, working masses do not escape from dictatorship of the leaders.

II. WORKERS' OPPRESSION: BETWEEN DEHUMANIZATION AND IDENTITY NEGATION

The relationships between oppressors-oppressed people is a salient aspect of postcolonial literature. Such a literature underlines the permanent attempt of colonized people to get rid of oppressors' domination. Iyayi's *Violence* echoes this conflictual situation and gives a dark picture of the society. It is a society where working masses are constantly oppressed, what brings about the loss of their humanity, their genuine human nature and their dignity.

Queen, the well-to-do businesswoman epitomizes a soulless and money-minded nigerian society. Indeed, she is only interested in making more profit at the expense of the employees. Now, life consists in making money, nothing else. This distorted and dehumanizing perception

of life by new ruling class is recalled through her example. It is an evidence that in this society, being money-minded has nothing to do with gender: males and females are involved in it. But having a heartless woman who is interested in oppressing her likes is what poses problem in that women are generally defined as gentle and loving, sensitive to the misery of others. Still, in the novel, Queen is such a money-minded woman who blatantly declares : “*I must take on more people, but I must keep the wages down.*” Iyayi (1979, 203).

Exploiting her workers is her motto, the guiding principle of her life. Acting this way, Queen both dehumanizes herself but above all her poor workers. Her case recalls the one depicted by Ngũgĩ (1980, p. 56) when he declares through the mouth of Robin Mwaura : “*Business is my temple, and money is my God.*” Capitalism has then corroded humanism. Henceforth no human values can be praised and cherished. As she becomes tough in her business management, losing then her mind, she stops being a person. On the other side, by denying workers better living conditions, she also shows that the society she lives in has become a heartless one, deprived of any humanity. Iyayi, (1979, p. 216) points out Queen’s greediness which runs in couple with her insensitivity to her employees’ painful working conditions :

The work on the site had to be speeded up. She would deal severely with all those men whom the site engineer had reported were making trouble, asking for more money when they ought to be working ! She told herself that she had to keep the wages down. That way, she could also save money and God knew she would need every kobo now.

In the above passage, Queen is a poor manager whose sole objective is to increase her wealth, irrespective of the workers well being. She does not care about it. This is the reason why she makes them work hard without giving them reasonable wages. Iyayi (1979, p. 250) denounces the employees’ poor working conditions when he writes : “*They work very hard for too little pay. [...] Too many hours of work and too many sackings*”. Beyond workers poor wages, Queen regularly fires anyone who dares make corporatist demands. Queen is actually a wicked character, a poor queen who fails to take care of her subjects. Her way of doing goes hand in hand with Mbembe’s understanding of dehumanization which consists in “*being together but not existing together.* Mbembe (2001, p.27). She is on the work place with her employees but they have different aims while being there.

Queen belongs to the category of African businessmen and businesswomen who only consider their personal interests, denying the workers the right to happiness. There is a kind of paradox prevailing in her misbehaviour. In fact, how can workers be denied the right of freedom, the right of emancipation in a newly independent country ? There lies a hiatus between the attitude of ruling elites epitomized by Queen and Obofun her husband and the socio-political context. Oppressors’ interests are different from those of the oppressed people. But in this case oppression has taken on a new face. Those who, yesterday, hailed the advent of independence are the same who, today, fail to implement one of its salient principles: freedom. This gap actually accounts for the manifestation of postcolonial perception of life where people preach some values and virtues and fail to apply them.

The epiphany of masses oppression and a subsequent dehumanization is perceptible in the selling of blood. As a matter of fact, a huge part of the people has to sell their blood to make money and ensure their survival. This is the proof of a dehumanized society, a soulless one, in short “*a rotten place*” Iyayi (1979, p. 241) in that people are forced to sell their blood, the substance of their life. Such a vampiric society feeds on people’s blood. Instead of providing

food and shelter, it eats its people's life by taking away their priceless belongings, their blood without which any food or wealth would be useless.

This loss of identity is shown by Iyayi (1979, p.154) through Idemudia and Osaro's decision : *"Always, after they had decided to sell their blood, they would stand in the shadow of the tower, away from the main body of the other labourers and as they waited, their faces hard and set, they would be hungry, frustrated and silent. Always."* Blood selling has then become a habit for the oppressed people of this society who views it as a way of making money. However, the frustration they felt and the silence they observed actually express their humiliation. In this way, Iyayi (1979, p.156) asserts :

Momentarily, he had shut his eyes and shivered from the sudden pain when the woman broke the surface of his skin with the sharp end of the big needle before planning it further into his vein and then as she removed the small brown rubber tube from his arm and attached the narrow but long transparent tube to the needle, he had watched his blood gradually flowing through the tube into the bottle below and his eyes had become dilated, his breathing quick and sharp, his mouth open, his throat dry [...] he had watched his life flowing into the bottle and he had tried hard not to think about what the small boy had said to the man to the car. (Iyayi, 1979 :156)

Through the description of Idemudia's blood withdrawal, one can see how afflicted he is. The penetration of the needle in his flesh causes him a great pain and suffering that is seen in the way his body reacts to this operation. This one can be compared to a loss of his life, his humanity and his dignity, *"his pride as a man"* Iyayi (1979, p. 243). Depriving workers of their humanity has become the major principle of the rulers in the postcolonial society of the text. Doing so, they are also denied their identity, what makes them human beings. This can be viewed through recurrent sackings, poor wages that are paid as well as blood selling that is the climax of this deprivation. Once deprived of their identity, these masses witness a new kind of dehumanization operated by agents are the government and some institutions epitomizing it.

III. DISTORTED IDENTITIES, DEHUMANIZING IDENTITIES

An identity is generally viewed as a set of features whereby a specific group of people can be recognized as such. It ranges from race to language covering items such as culture, education, food, behaviours etc. Peter Burke (2020, p. 63) asserts that : *"Identities tell us who we are and they announce to others who we are."* From then on we can say that identities are highly informative. As important sources of information for people and even for people surrounding them, identities cannot be neglected. What is termed here 'dehumanized identities' is actually values and principles whose poor implementation results in a social chaos either with individuals or with groups.

Violence portrays cases of distorted identities that is to say identities which unveil a social malaise. The crisis is all the more serious that it affects the sound manhood of those who undergo the crisis. Beyond the depiction of cases of distorted and dehumanizing identities, the novelist lays bare the ugliness of postcolonial societies. We could infer that such societies no more care about collectiveness but uniqueness. They have discarded solidarity but promote selfishness. Love has vanished and made room for hatred and injustice has replaced truth and justice.

In *Violence*, we are presented misbehaviours which account for the mismanagement state of public affairs by the ruling elites. In this context, lawyers lie, citizens are unfairly imprisoned and policemen fail to ensure the security of ordinary citizens. The specific case of moral decadence and dehumanization that attracted the novelist attention is the one of overcrowded hospitals which are modern postcolonial prisons. In such areas, medical doctors are reluctant to provide assistance to the sick people. This episode where violence has taken on a new face is presented by Iyayi (1979, p.186) in shocking and revolting terms as followed :

When in one public hospital, in the same society, one patient can sleep in a large air-conditioned room whereas other ordinary patients- men, women and children- have to sleep in corridors, on mats, on the hard, cold and roughly cemented floors or share beds, this is violence.

Thus, public hospitals where people are supposed to be fairly treated and given appropriate assistance if need be, irrespective of their social position, origin, sex, religious belief or race, are poorly managed. Here, in the postcolonial context, there is a kind of “health apartheid” which paves the way for a segregation. This system offers some, excellent hospitalisation conditions and others, very dire ones. The writer considers this as a violence ; It is a the new form of violence. The physical violence which can be termed traditional violence has vanished and a new one has emerged. This is actually the way postcolonial violence works. It is a violence that seems to be bearable but which is indeed harmful and destructive since it erodes the pillars of the identity and the values of those who undergo it in order to dehumanize them.

The decay of the health system is organized by doctors who no more care about patients but are only interested in making money. Instead of trying to cure them, they implement a system whereby they make money. Iyayi (1979, p.225) clearly disagrees with this misbehaviour which contrasts with the oath doctors usually take before starting their job : “*He takes money privately from the patients he treats in the hospital and if yours is a bad disease and you must have an operation, then you must pay him the money before he will perform an operation.*”

Lies and government eulogies also partake in the shaping of dehumanizing identities. Instead of using public funds for building hospitals, the new rulers use these funds to build hotels. Consequently patients have to go to overcrowded hospitals which are in a poor state. This means that the government has nothing to do with the welfare of the masses. The ruling class prefers embezzling the public resources and investing in private businesses. The government has therefore diverted from its primary target which is to take care of the people. Indeed it has changed its identity. In *Violence*, the ceremony organised is rather a pretext to tell lies and celebrate the government. Iyayi (1979, p. 162) gives an account of the eulogistic speech made by a nurse :

It was the nurse reading the address of welcome, thanking the government for all it had done to provide health facilities for the people, praising the government for building new hospitals. The address did not mention that in the same government hospital, some people slept on the hard floor or shared beds while others had single rooms to themselves which were almost invariably never occupied. The address said nothing about the fees, about the congestion in the mortuary. No, it rather thanked and praised the government again and again.

Injustice is also an aspect of a society dehumanization. Lies are presented as a truth and can be openly told and accepted by everyone without any opposition. In such a context, lawyers as

well as policemen fail to do their job. The example of the judge who is to make a decision about a prosecuted worker shows how profound the social unease is. In fact, the judge's requisition which condones at the evils that plague the society is presented by Iyayi (1979, p.184):

Here is a society that offers limitless opportunities to its citizens and the accused here make use of such opportunities by committing acts of hooliganism, terrorism, totally irresponsible and barbaric acts [...] they carry firearms about and threaten the lives and property of people.

This society is a soulless one, a dehumanized one since in it only money matters. Even places such as hospitals take part, through their agents in the shaping a dehumanizing identity. To some extent it falls in line with Mbembe's conception of dehumanization for whom it is: "*When biologically human subjects are socially constructed as any one of a range of nonhuman beings: threatening animals (lions, hippopotami, ants, gorillas, even zombies or tribal masks.*" (Mbembe, 2011 : 32) Indeed the way the society is being constructed looks like the way animals behave, deprived of their humanity, their nature of human beings.

In so doing, he shapes a new identity, and promotes injustice and unfair imprisonment which tends to dehumanize the prosecuted. This is an identity which is likely to deprive people of their state of human beings, their genuine identity. The role of the police in the shaping of this dehumanizing society is recalled by Iyayi (1979, p. 161) as he tends to blame it :

If anybody is to blame, it is the police who arrested my father in the first place. Those unfeeling people. The police who locked me up for being my father's son. Those policemen. If only thunder could get at them and wipe them out. [...] The police were to blame. Those unfeeling and hard hearted-people. But the police have their instructions from the government. Our government'.

The collusion between the police and the government is the evidence that a new order has emerged. Both entities unite to better oppress the population. The nagging resentment of the population exemplifies its disappointment and anger against these state entities. People are so hungry that they pray for the death of the heartless policemen who have caused their suffering, martyrdom and destroyed their manhood and their identity.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the role of artists consists in delivering a message to the community surrounding them. Such a communicative perception is shared by African novelists whose works are either used to recall the past of their land or to denounce the plight of their era. Iyayi's *Violence* falls in line with the second tendency of literature as he depicts, in this novel, the image of the decay that plagues the nigerian society in a post independence era. The despairing image that he presents actually unveils the extent to which the nigerian society is being dehumanized and this dehumanization can be seen at various levels.

As a matter of fact, the ruling class imposes his perception of the world to the dominated one. Women epitomized by Adisa are so under considered and ill-treated that one could conclude that this society has no respect for women. This ill treatment is also experienced by petty workers who are paid poor wages, constantly fired from the factories where they are denied the

right to claim better working conditions. This moral oppression is pregnant with consequences in that it is likely to destabilize families and consequently the whole society.

This new type of oppression accounts for the shaping of a new paradigm specific to the postcolonial ideology. In fact, it is no more about bullying or beating the lower class citizen but rather making them undergo harsh living conditions which may result in their dehumanization organized by government bodies like hospitals of the judiciary system. The incapacity of government entities to address health and justice concerns can be viewed as the failure of new leaders to offer their people efficient management policies.

Dehumanization reaches its peak when petty workers resort to blood selling as an answer to their misery. By accepting to sell them blood to get money in return, one can see that for their survival, human beings are now ready to do inhumane things, irrational ones. This also reveals that dehumanization which runs in couple with a social malaise has extended its tentacles in the whole society. Blood selling can also be analysed as the incapacity of new leaders to address unemployment issues and to design strategies for promoting people's welfare.

From this point of view, *Violence* can be read as Iyayi's outcry for a renewal of the Nigerian society and consequently Africa. As a protest writer, he actually pleads for the restoration of lost or trampled values. For him, it is high time the Nigerian society positively changed, gave up any kind of violence and adopted positive values that could favour the emancipation and the well being of the whole society. Still, can such an objective be achieved through literature ?

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