

## Class Stratification and Poverty in Nigerian Literature: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

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### ABSTRACT

*The concepts of class stratification and poverty are not new in any society especially the African society. Many Africans presently live below the poverty line and this is further exacerbated by high level class inequality. Right from the creation of man, there has been class while poverty gradually crept into the society as the supply of the people was not meeting their demands, thus only those who have what it takes were able to survive and stay above-board. There is the classification between good and evil, male and female, white and black, poor and rich, influential and non-influential, educated and uneducated and so on. The class stratification being looked at in this research however has to do with the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and how this has contributed to the advancement of poverty in society. The two Nigerian novels purposively selected are Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Festus Iyayi's *Violence*. The choice of these texts is due to the fact that they belong to different generations of Nigerian writings, thus we considered the views of the two generations on the subjects of discourse. The method of investigation adopted is the critical textual analysis using the Marxist literary theory. The research considered the speeches, actions and events that portray class and poverty. The authors' intentions and views on these concepts were equally established with the hope of an end goal of finding solutions that will take Africa out of the shackles of poverty and inequality.*

**Keywords:** *Class stratification, Poverty, Nigerian Literature, Chinua Achebe, Festus Iyayi*

### INTRODUCTION

Two major concepts presently bedeviling Nigeria are class stratification and corruption. These two concepts though independent of one another, seem to always generate conflict in any society. These concepts will be looked at independently, and then in relation with one another. Stratification has been evident in human history since its dawn. Looking at the biblical creation story, God firstly created man from dust and later created woman from a rib from the man. While the creation of man is first level, the woman's creation is second level. The man is also said to be in charge of all other creatures (bourgeoisie) created while the woman will only assist the man (proletariat) (Genesis Chapters 1 & 2).

This is a confirmation of the class division as far back as the creation of man. Class stratification is one of the most inquisitive social factors which are caused by the economic status of the people. This economic factor unmasks class divisions which form and transform the

characters in any society. The most famous and interesting discussion of class stratification in society within traditional setting is that of Weber (1968). Weber posits that stratification refers to the differences in social groups in terms of income or prestige or some other indicator. He goes further to define class as:

...a number of people with almost the same economic opportunity in life and with similar economic interests in income, products and the labour movement. Therefore, "property" and "lack of property" are the basic categories of all situations. Weber, (1986: 262)

From this definition, the determining factor for social stratification is simply the ability of some category of people to amass property more than the others despite the fact that they live within the same space and time.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Black (1993) defines class stratification as "a joint function of social closeness to one side and social remoteness from the other". He says that:

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Status or class status is the analogue of mass in the physical world. Like the mass of an object, status creates its own gravitational field. Wealthier or otherwise more prominent adversaries therefore attract partisanship especially from their inferiors. The greater the differences, the greater the effects. (p. 27)

Class stratification is so old, persistent, transcendental and unimpeded that it appears as natural though it is artificial and a cognizant creation; it is as old as the most ancient of human civilizations. It is the constant struggle among the social classes that exists.

According to history, the ancient Roman society was graded into social ranks - the patricians, knights, plebeians and slaves. In the Middle-ages, they have the Feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices and serfs. The emergence of capitalism presents two broad classes the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Capitalism makes use of the class subservience and manipulates it through over determinations to support the class discrimination and psychological makeup of the common people of society. Class stratification is the tenacious form of social inequity in a society and it is perpetuated by the way wealth, power, and prestige are distributed and passed on from one generation to the next generation as part of their essence. Social Status or position in a social hierarchy is ascribed part of consciousness. According to Horney;

There is ongoing tension between the drives of our instincts and the demands of the society around us. Who we are as children and later as adults is largely determined by how we handle this tension. To the extent that our instincts and the expectations of society can coexist, we are content. To the extent that they cannot, we are anxious, frustrated, angry, or unhappy (Horney, 1947).

Social stratification is defined as a system by which society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy. There are four fundamental ideologies of stratification:

- Social stratification is a characteristic of society -- not just due to individual differences
- Social stratification persists over generations, yet most societies allow some sort of social mobility or changes in people's position in a

system of social stratification. Social mobility may be upward, downward, or horizontal

- Social stratification is universal but variable (it changes from time to time and place to place)
- Social stratification involves both inequality and beliefs

Social Stratification is *patterned social inequality*. It is also the unequal distribution of societal resources. Saying that inequality is patterned indicates that the differences occur on a wide-scale basis with regularity and along lines of certain specific, identifiable characteristics (race, class, and gender).

Karl Marx wrote to Friedrich Engels in 1882: "you know very well where we found our idea of class struggle; we found it in the work of the French historians who talked about the race struggle". Class struggle predates Karl Marx; one may boldly say that it describes the history of all existing human civilizations. Social equity has been challenged in recent years through increasing income inequality. The widening gap between the rich and the poor contributes to economic segregation among regions and neighborhoods and has a direct impact on public service delivery. In a class system, social stratification is based on individual achievement as people who can be considered peers in society because of their similar life chances, similar life circumstances, and similar opportunities, constitute a social class. One of Karl Marx's famous quotes is: "the ruling ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class because they control *the mental means of production*". Thus, the elite have many weapons at their disposal in order to keep society and the lower classes under control. All ruling elite uses their position at the top of society to create an ideology. This is a complex set of beliefs, values, and norms, which rationalize and support the elite's power and privileges.

According to James-Baba (2011):

A safe explanation for the existence of social classes is to simply agree that it was all part of the cosmic experimentation that produce the human race, to simply assert that men by default are created unequally. But as close to common sense as this may sound, it negates the very tenets of human rights which suggest that

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all men are born equal irrespective of race, color, gender, religion and creed.

Class struggle in Africa is inextricably linked to corruption, poverty and injustice.

Poverty is the second concept under review. This concept is not as old as stratification but emerged much later into the existence of man. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010: 1146) says poverty is: The state of being poor: conditions of abject/extreme poverty; a lack of something; poor quality. Drubbel (2003: 898) states that poverty is: Shortage of income or resource necessary for minimum standard of living in a particular society... poverty consists more of the physical deprivation, but even in the third world the economic expectations of the poor have been substantially raised by exposure of the mass media. Poverty is a social condition which is inappropriate for living. In every man's life, he dreams to be comfortable.

No one dreams of living his life as a pauper. A poor man is not able to achieve the good things of life like education and other social amenities. Even the three primary necessities of life (food, shelter and clothing) are in most cases very hard to get. A poor person lives his life like physically challenged who relies on the help of others to carry out almost everything he wants to do in life. However, because of the level of poverty in the world especially the third world countries and the developing countries the mass media had taking the initiative to expose to the entire world, the sufferings of the poor, prompting help which is being rendered in various ways by the developed countries.

The new Webster's Dictionary (2004: 448) gives a similar definition of poverty. It states that poverty is: The condition that relates to the absence or scarcity of requisite substance or elements... poverty denotes a condition below that of easy, comfortable life. In every statement on poverty, the question of lack is central. When a person lacks, he is unable to live a comfortable life. He is uncomfortable and is driven to do all sorts of crazy things in order to get himself out of the realm of poverty. The poor are been stratified in the presence of scarcity of the basic necessities, not because those things are actually scarce but because the capitalists are unjust in their means of acquiring wealth. Therefore, it is expected that they should be well compensated for their long hours of work and even the risk that is sometimes involved.

As a result of the state of things and the astronomical rise of poverty and the gradual gap between the rich and the poor especially the socio-political and economic problems in the society which affects the masses who are the proletarians, the oppressed, the exploited and the marginalized, Nigerian writers now portray in their works, the need for total condemnation of social stratification and poverty while advocating for the total overhauling of society. These writers focus on exposing the ills of society as exemplified in the selected novels being studied. Due to the exposure of these writers to the atrocities being committed by the capitalists against the poor, their focus is now on the ordinary people with whom they seek to liberate from all forms of social injustice. Balogun (2007: 203) observes that: "The interest of Marxist literature is to defend the cause of the oppressed. The Marxist critics believe in an egalitarian society where this ideal is stressed.

### DISCUSSION

#### Portrayal of Class Stratification by Achebe and Iyayi in Selected Texts

Chinua Achebe belongs to Nigeria's first generation writers and his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, tells the story of an Igbo village in the late 1800'. The novel revolves around the life of the main character, Okonkwo who is a champion wrestler, a wealthy farmer, and a husband of three wives. Okonkwo's life is dominated by fear of failure. He does not want his life to be similar to that of his father. He is most especially scared of losing his social status. He knows that the coming of the white men was a big challenge to social stratification in the Igbo community as one more factor is created on the ladder of class. He is unable to adapt the changes that accompany colonialism. In frustration, he kills a white man and then commits suicide.

This article uses a Marxist perspective proposed by Georg Lukacs. Marxist is a philosophy of history and economics. It is a theory about the basic explanation of how the society goes to change. Marxism appeared as a response to the European industrial revolution in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is set in a particular situation where colonial occupation becomes the main concern of the society.

The novel, right from the very first page, establishes the visibility of class stratification

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even in the old Igbo community long before the coming of the colonizers. He starts this by revealing the popularity of Okonkwo, the main character. Okonkwo's fame is said to rest 'on solid personal achievements' (TFA: pg. 3) having fought and thrown Amalinze the cat who was a great wrestler. This feat is said to have brought honour to his village. Achebe reveals that Okonkwo's major fear in life was ending up like Unoka, his father. Unoka in his days was said to be 'lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow' (pg. 3). These two characters visibly represent two classes – upper and lower. While Okonkwo is of the upper class, Unoka is of the lower. This class struggle ruled Okonkwo's entire life as he struggles to remain on top all through life. This desire not to fail and lose is social standing was his driving force and he succeeded as a rich man.

Achebe reveals the presence of some of the principles of stratification as mentioned above in *Things Fall Apart*. He confirmed that *Social stratification is a characteristic of society - not just due to individual differences*. The society had laid down rules, for you to be a successful male in the Igbo society, you are expected to have many wives and children, have a large farm and large barns of yam, hold chieftaincy titles and be willing to fight in wars. Men who do not meet these set parameters are said to have failed as men. This is evident in the novel as Unoka is said to be lazy and incapable of catering to the needs of his family. He also held no titles:

Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back (Pg 3-4)

Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood (5)

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt (7)

Achebe immediately contrasts Unoka with his friend Okoye in the same chapter as he visits:

Okoye was also a musician. He played on the *ogene*. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third

highest in the land. It was a very expensive ceremony and he was gathering all his resources together. That was in fact the reason he had come to see Unoka (pg 5-6)

Both men are friends and are both musicians. The significant difference between these two men however is that while one is lazy, the other is not. Thus it can be assumed that the society has created an even playing ground for all, what now determines the difference is the individual attitude and reaction.

Achebe again contrasts Okonkwo with Unoka to reveal the visible difference between two categories of men:

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all...Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among the people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and he had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered (Pg 7).

Here again, Achebe affirms that *Social stratification persists over generations* as Unoka and Okonkwo are of different generations, yet stratifications still persists. He also affirms that most societies allow some sort of social mobility or changes in people's position in a system of social stratification as Okonkwo, despite being born of poor parents, moves into the upper class of society. He simply proves here that irrespective of age or link, a successful person gets better respect among the Igbo people of Nigeria. This is the case in almost all parts of Nigeria. The social class of an individual can far out weight age or family link. Despite the fact that society has already set parameters for a class structure, the individuals simply plays out the script written by the society. This explains why Okonkwo was able to break-away from his family's failure and become revered in his society.



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Even among the upper class, there can be a further stratification. This was visible in the case of Okonkwo and Nwakibie:

There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. It was for this man that Okonkwo worked to earn his first seed yams (p. 15)

This class stratification among the rich and poor is one as there are other forms of stratification visible in the text. Gender stratification is another form of social stratification visible in *Things Fall Apart*. Women are totally relegated to the background in the Igbo society of the time as they are merely second class citizens who must adhere strictly to the dictates of the male dominated society. Some men who are viewed as being lowly are equally referred to as women: "This meeting is for men." The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman" (p. 21). Several times in the text, Okonkwo was seen to put his women and lesser men in their place. After bringing home and handing him over to his most senior wife, the following ensued:

When Okonkwo brought him (Ikemefuna) home that day he called his most senior wife and handed him over to her. 'He belongs to the clan,' he told her. 'so look after him'. 'Is he staying long with us?' She asked. 'Do what you are told, woman,' Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. 'When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umofia? And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions.' (p. 12)

Again, concerning the spiritual ancestors of the land, *egwugwu*, women had limited roles to play in the sacred rituals of these ancestors:

The *egwugwu* house into which they emerged faced the forest ...who saw only its back with the many-coloured patterns and drawings done by specially chosen women at regular intervals. These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men...No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan (p. 71).

The gender roles played by men and women, as well as societies' conceptions of the associated concepts are frequent themes in Achebe's writings as Okonkwo is seen giving instructions to his wives without seeking their opinions. Anytime any of them questions him, he asks if they are the head of the home; he expects them to do as instructed and not question his authority. The women on the other hand are expected to be responsible for feeding their husbands and children. Most traditional men take numerous wives, and these women are beaten regularly so that they can live in perpetual fear of their husbands.

Achebe has not in any way portrayed women as "useless"; rather he has subtly relayed their importance in society. If the woman is not important to Okonkwo, a character created by Achebe, he would not have desired that Ezinma should be a boy (45), while his first born son is said to have effeminate attributes. Here, Achebe tries to link the usefulness of both male and female, even though the male is rated higher than the female. From Achebe's perspective, the link between Mbanta and Umuofia also has a connotation that confirms the importance of both genders, as they play complimentary roles. Okonkwo sees Umuofia as masculine while Mbanta is feminine, yet in his time of need, Mbanta provides shelter for him and his entire household.

Achebe (1966: 138) opines that: Most African states today are politically free; ...African states are managing their affairs sometimes very badly. A new situation has thus arisen. One of the writers' main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice...as it is still is when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not. Achebe presents a point that needs to be carefully examined. New kinds of injustices have sprung up and now we have the elites referring to 'oppression' as marginalization. All kinds of social injustice now exist and are aggravated daily. These days, so many social injustices arise in society such as abject-poverty, electoral violence, exploitation, kidnapping, religious crises, political subjugation, arson and wickedness that man faces in society. If these evils are not properly checked, the monster known as social injustice will continue to eat deep into the fabrics of society. With the above analogy, it is very clear that poverty and class stratification are responsible for the emergence of social injustice and it is the poor that suffers all these injustices.

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Class stratification continued throughout the novel as the coming of the colonizers compounded by creating other social classes – the racial and the religious classes. It was the racial class that first set Okonkwo on edge as he got scared of losing his social status to foreigners who were making the clan people to deviate from their old beliefs. This new class condemned every act, action and beliefs of the traditional rulers and decision makers of Igbo community as well as their ways of life and gave lesser men some level of power.

Unlike the traditional religion that gave little roles to women, Christianity was to an extent gender unbiased. According to Tobalase (2013), the plot in *Things Fall Apart* suggests that colonial conquest helped undermined the authority and power base of senior men in the Nigerian community as we see colonial officers (even messengers), labour recruiters and young men challenge titled chiefs and fathers, attacking the dominant idea of class stratification. The things that ordinarily will not happen in the African cultural society begin to happen with the arrival of the Whiteman. People begin to disregard elders who are not Christians, spiritual norms were being broken (the killing of the sacred python) and younger male began to resist elders by contradicting their dictates. The church had come into Igbo land and led many astray:

Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians (139).

And in the lowest position of social stratification, there is the *osu* or what is termed social outcasts. The people of the clan, even the lower class resist the church's move of accepting *osu* into their midst.

It all began over the question of admitting outcasts. These outcasts or *osu*, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abomination, thought that it was possible that they would also be received... The whole church raised a protest... 'Before God', he said, 'there is no slave or free... You do not understand, said one of the converts. 'What will the heathen say of us when they hear we received *osu* into our midst? (125).

The implication of this extract is that even the lower class of the Igbo society still delineates the *osu* cast as they view them as less in stature than them.

Festus Iyayi is a post Nigerian civil war writer and he can be situated within the second generation<sup>1</sup> of Nigerian novelists. He is a pioneer of social realism, a literary approach that analyzes society and its problems in Marxist terms. His works deal with the everyday oppression of the common man by his fellow Africans; his works also clearly describe the concept of class struggle. His novel *Violence* is referred to as one of the first truly proletarian novels in Nigeria, which x-rays the Nigerian society as it progressively moves towards the path of retrogression, degeneration, corruption and moral decadence. This is a clear manifestation of the Nigerian society as a class society with all the contradictions and problems inherent in such a society. With the adoption of such narrative techniques as flashback, simple diction, bitter tone, irony, juxtaposition, symbolism etc, Iyayi is able to graphically and truly present what he sees and experiences personally, and concludes that Nigeria is a class society where nothing goes well: a society based on violence, injustice, brutality, immorality. A society where greed and corruption of the privileged and the ruling class has created a big gulf between the few wealthy and the majority of the poor masses, thus creating a society woefully lacking in proper human relationship and brutal economic relations.

In *Violence*, Iyayi takes a deep philosophical look at a neo-colonial set-up like Nigeria's and announces violence as its guiding principle of social protest. The dominant structural element is the opposition of the oppressors and the oppressed. As noted by Fatunde in Gugel Berger (ed.) {1985: 113}, Iyayi presents the working people as individuals who believe in struggling for their liberation, as fully conscious humans who are ready to combat their problems headlong with courage whether male or female. At the same time, they are not presented as infallible heroes but humans who have their own shortcomings and weaknesses irrespective of gender. In the view of Maja-Pearce (1992: 74),

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to those novelists who concern themselves with themes that assess topical issues in a post oil boom Nigeria. They are almost far removed from the themes of colonial rule and the culture clash.

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*Violence*, a long sprawling novel which derives its power largely from the author's outrage at the injustice of a system that reduces human beings to chattel, and love to a commodity measured in terms of naira and kobo.

The novel *Violence* depicts class struggle as a menace plaguing postcolonial Nigerian society and the work is set in Nigeria in the 1970s. The story revolves around the lives of an unemployed Nigerian and his wife, and their battle against poverty and oppression. Iyayi contrasts a vivid picture of the Nigerian society as being partitioned into two clearly distinct groups – the Bourgeoisies and the Proletariats. Idemudia, Adisa, Osaro and the Jimoh family represent the working class burdened by poverty and made to suffer appalling work conditions and poor remunerations. This class of workers put in so much but are not able to benefit tangibly from their labour, thus they are locked in a vicious circle of extreme labour and extreme poverty. The Bourgeoisies are represented by Obofun, Queen, Iriso, Dala, Commissioners, General Igreke, Azonzo and the likes. This class of capitalists is portrayed as parasitic by Iyayi. The immense riches of the wealthy are derived from the exploitation of the working class. Unlike Achebe, Iyayi does not stratify gender as he creates a successful pair of male and female and at the same time the unsuccessful pair.

The major thrust of this novel is class stratification and a protest against it. The lower class of the society is depicted as being utterly poor through Iyayi's creation of characters that can hardly make ends meet, thus resort to menial jobs that are much more demanding than the wage they get at the end of the day. Iyayi introduces to the reader, Adisa, a man born into abject poverty just like Okonkwo. In the same vain as Unoka, Adisa's father is unable to cater for the need of the family thus withdraws his son from school. Shortly after, Adisa's father and his uncle are seen running into the bush to evade tax:

'I have no money,' his father had said... you can ask your mother... 'My mother has no money....How can I stop going to school!' he had cried... "The tax collectors and policemen are in the village,' his uncle explained. "And they are arresting anybody who has not paid tax.'... Both his father and his uncle had

then hastily departed and jumped into the bush behind their house. (Iyayi: 5)

All through the text, the inequality of men are depicted by Iyayi as able-bodied men are seen salivating at the sight of food being wasted:

'I haven't eaten since morning.' 'I have had nothing to eat too,' Idemudia said, and tried to forget Adisa. It's so unfair,' Osaro added. 'One man has enough to eat, in fact so much that he throws some away. Yet here we are, hungry, with nothing to eat.'(p. 29)

The immense riches of the wealthy are derived from the exploitation of the working class. The Bourgeoisie Queen is seen capitalizing on the hardships facing the working class like unemployment, poverty and hunger to continually perpetrate immoral exploitation of labour. A worker paid so little is left with no choice than to accept it just because if he complains he loses the job, and there are thousand others waiting for any kind of job at any cost. Queen exploits the likes of Idemudia, Omoifo and Patrick as she bargains to pay them five naira each to offload three trailer-load of cement, containing five hundred bags each. Idemudia and friends eventually accept the bargain as it was better than nothing at all. Nigerian workers are given too little for their labour due to the non-availability of jobs and the exploitative tendencies of the upper class:

There are hundreds of workers who like my client receive so little pay for so much work done... Why is he paid so little if he works so hard? He is paid so little because he accepts it. And he accepts it because he would starve if he refused it. Even if he refused it, there would be many more people who would accept it. (p. 176)

Adisa on her part is equally manipulated by Obofu and sexually exploited while seeking funds to pay hospital bills for her sick and admitted husband. For a mere Hundred naira, she allowed Obofun to take advantage of her:

'What do you want with her? A poor woman ... she is beautiful! Look at her black lips... Look again at those breasts ... You must have her ... A woman is not married when her husband cannot take care of her ... You are helping her. She will sell your whiskey. You will give her another fifty naira. You can even make it

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a hundred naira ... Adisa is something. Don't miss her! (p. 165)

Within her, she knew she was defeated. Only Obofun did not know this... "Really, I must go... but her voice was weak and she knew she could never fight Obofun now... Adisa knew that if he grabbed her and embraced her, she would be unable to fend him off... She struggled once more and attempted to break free but it was no use. Obofun weighed down heavily on her (p. 168-169)

This situation describes the many challenges facing the female gender in Nigeria. This is visible in various work environments including in schools and colleges of higher learning. Unemployed youths, especially the female gender, are most time compelled to surrender their dignity in order to get jobs, promotion or even grades.

Idemudia and Adisa represent the beleaguered everyday Nigerians who face hard times trying to make ends meet and are subjected to all sorts of intimidation, molestation and degradation, but despite the odds will keep on fighting and hoping that tomorrow will be better. Idemudia epitomizes a man who is resolute to achieve a set goal, "But I am not going to give up... I am going to continue to struggle, to fight. And where I cannot fight because I am held as I am held now, I am going to escape" (p.157)

Dobbie (2009) posits that conflict arises as a result of the attempt to control the forces of production between the proletariat and the bourgeois. The proletariats who supply the labor are endlessly in conflict with the bourgeoisie who control the means of production. This is depicted in the several conflicts between the workforce (labourers) and the bourgeois (Queen) as they become organized and several times down tools with the aim of getting better pay for their services in her numerous construction sites. The reaction of Queen to the strikes describes poor and often insensitive approach of government to workers' demands during labour disputes in Nigeria. Rather than granting the workers better work conditions, Queen results to frantic efforts to suppress the strike, adopting intimidation as a tool and where necessary sexual enticement to make Idemudia convince other workers to call off the strike.

Iyayi employ elements of Marxism in this novel by revealing Idemudia's struggle against poverty

life as a symbolic representative of the masses of society. Threatened by abject poverty, Idemudia resolves to sell his blood on a daily basis just to be able to cater for the immediate needs of his immediate family:

And what hadn't he done to earn money? He had even sold his blood to make money. Yes, given out pints of his blood for as little as fifteen naira a pint. Sold his blood so that he and Adisa would not starve, so that they could survive (p. 154).

His struggle against poverty describes the unfortunate fate of the poor unemployed Nigerians burdened by hunger, joblessness, poverty and the non-availability of social amenities and security.

Adopting a play within a play, Iyayi uses the hospital scene and the several plays acted in it to vibrantly depict the class struggle and the resistance by the commoners against social class stratification, poverty, oppression and lack. The plays are acted to receive the Commissioner and it strongly sends a message to all present as intended by the writer. The Commissioner gradually becomes uncomfortable with watching the play as he sees himself been simulated, just as the masses also get agitated as they also see themselves, confirming that the 'whole society stands on trial' (p. 180).

There was great agitation among the audience. Many of them sat forward on their seats. They wanted to hear more. They no longer thought that the play was funny. They began to identify themselves with it. And so did the commissioner who sat, very uncomfortable, in his comfortable seat (p. 180)

The commissioner half rose from his seat. 'The play must be stopped!... It must cease immediately! This is a tragedy, a calculated attempt to ridicule the government!... The bastards are using this forum to preach...' (p. 185-6)

The play in itself is a social protest against the class system practiced by the government.

In Ogbe hospital, a supposed public health centre, class stratification is adept as certain rooms allotted to the bourgeoisie are left vacant while rooms of the proletariats are congested to the point of having to sleep on bare floors on the corridors.



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African writers like Iyayi had to a large extent focused on social injustices and calls for a classless society. Marx and Engels called for a radical societal change from all classes. King Jr. (1996: 26), in *Letters from Birmingham jail* believes that oppression which is a form of social injustice should be rejected and eliminated. He states that: Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The issue of social injustice has debased men and women like Idemudia and Adisa. Today, poverty issues had dominated the world attention as a result of the stratification and injustices that exist in every society, especially in Nigeria where every form of social injustice is the order of the day as depicted in the play performed in the hospital. The masses, as represented by the teacher and the other accused persons in the play experience prejudice, ill-treatment, injustice and fanaticism. The emotional content of Iyayi's *Violence* drives home that there is the need for a change in society, and the change can only come when all the participants know the revolutionary roles they should play. Without equity and peace in the social, economic and political institutions of the country, the society will continue to depreciate.

### CONCLUSION

The concepts of class struggle and poverty define the history of all existing human civilization. As Class struggle has persisted through history, between freeman and slave, lord and serf, bourgeois and proletariat, oppressor and oppressed, poverty also gradually crept into the fabric of humans and has remained to date. Two broad ranks in constant opposition to one another, a fight that often end in a revolution changing the social order or at times leading to the common ruin of the contending classes and birth of other social ranks. Class struggle is an inevitable means to an end; it is not just a battle against capitalism, it is a constant revolt against any social system that creates an immoral hierarchy by which the weak and poor are exploited by the privileged. The class struggle between the proletariats and bourgeoisie mirrors the irreconcilable character of the class interests. A constant struggle is, therefore, going on between employers and workers over wages. Political struggle is also a brand of class struggle, demanding for a change in the social system. The duo of Chinua Achebe and Festus Iyayi are Nigerian writers representing different generations of writers, yet both affirmed the existence of class stratification

in the Nigerian society. While Achebe creates a level playing ground for all male in society, yet discriminates again the female in his Igbo society, Iyayi on his part delineates between men as there is clearly inequality and an unlevelled playing field brought about by education and politics amongst humans irrespective of gender. The two writers are from West Africa and their selected novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Violence*, x-ray the extent of class struggle in the context of the African society. Subthemes such as poverty, violence, gender discrimination, sexual exploitation, corruption, etc. were also expressed. Thus, in both texts there are varying characteristics that determine the social classes of each generation. Achebe's generation discriminates again the female gender though there is a level playing ground for all men. However, Iyayi did not discriminate against women, rather the financial capability of the individual irrespective of gender is what he brings to fore.

Findings in the study reveal that social stratifications in the two generations of the selected Nigerian writings, confirm the existence of the four ideologies as posited by Horney (1947). The two novels confirms that social stratification is indeed a characteristic of society; that it persists over generations as discovered in *Things Fall Apart*, a first generation writing, and in *Violence*, a second generation writing; that social stratification is a universal phenomenon but with variable tendencies because it changes from time to time and place to place as evident in the two communities of Nigeria, the Eastern part and the Middle Belt of varying times; and that Social stratification involves both inequality and beliefs.

Class struggle will not be easily eradicated or preventable until democratic principles, human rights, equity and justice are imbibed: "Until the philosophy which hold one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes, until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race, the dream of lasting peace remain but a fleeting illusion." (Bob Marley: 1976). The clarion call is for all humans irrespective of colour, gender, religion or social standing in society to embrace the principle of equity and create a level playing ground for all of humanity so that peace can permeate the world.

## Class Stratification and Poverty in Nigerian Literature: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

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