

THE PROLETARIAT IN AFRICAN PROLETARIAN NOVEL: A SOCIOLOGICAL READING OF PETER ABRAHAM'S *MINE BOY* AND FESTUS IYAYI'S *VIOLENCE*

Ayodele Anthony Bamidele (PhD)
opele1970@yahoo.com

&

Paul Kennedy Ndubuisi Enesha (PhD)
paulkensha@yahoo.com

Abstract

Workers have been the most marginalised aspect of the human society. The rise of capitalism ensured the dehumanisation of the working class. Writers over the years have captured the plights of the working class with such verisimilitude that the genre “proletarian novel” has come to represent all works depicting the existential condition of the working class in the entanglement of capitalism. This paper seeks to investigate how writers in Africa have captured and represented the lives of the proletarian class in their fictions. Furthermore, using the principles of sociological criticism, the material condition of the workers of Africa as represented in Festus Iyayi's *Violence* and Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* is investigated. The novels, it is observed, were written at different phases of African history. *Mine Boy* was written in the epoch of colonial hegemony while *Violence* was written years after the deconstruction of colonial structures. However, uneducated and unskilled workers in the novels share similar fate and survived under similar existential conditions. It is concluded that, African proletariat share common fate, especially unskilled labourers who try to etch a living amidst crunching poverty, illiteracy and the scythe of capitalism. In calling the attention of the world to the abject situation of the proletariats, proletarian novelists move towards bettering the lot of the workers.

Keywords: proletariat, capitalism, Marxism, proletarian novel

Introduction

Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* explains the history of class struggle in Africa. He traces the history of the rise of classism in Africa to “class stratification” in the epoch of communalism. He observes that, “class stratification was the basis for the rise of classes and for social antagonisms” (53). He maintains that,

From a political perspective, the period of transition from communalism to feudalism in Africa was one of state formation. At the beginning (and for many centuries) the state remained weak and immature. It acquired definite territorial boundaries, but inside those boundaries, subjects lived in their own communities with scarcely any contact with the ruling class until the time came to pay the annual tax or tribute. (55)

With the advent of colonialism, “European robber statesmen... decide who should steal which part of Africa...and to colonise and further underdevelop Africa” (149). The colonization of Africa led to first, racial struggle and clash of cultures. Chinua Achebe in *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, noted,

When Europeans first came to Africa, they knew very little of the history and complexity of the people and the continent. Some of the group persuaded themselves that Africa had no culture, no religion, and no history. It was a convenient conclusion, because it opens the door for all sorts of rationalizations for the exploitation that followed. (54)

Walter Rodney corroborates Achebe when he says that, “colonialism fettered the development of the enslaved peoples. To facilitate colonial exploitation, the imperialists deliberately hampered economic and cultural progress in colonies” (287). The other thing done by the colonialists was the division of the African society into regions, unusual nation states and the preservation and restoration of “obsolete forms of social relations, and fomented discord between nationalities and tribes” (287). The division of Africa into classes and nation states benefited the colonialists as it made it easier for them to exploit the continent and the people.

The struggle, therefore, for the liberation of Africa from mental slavery culminated in the emergence of Negritude movement championed by Leon Damas, Aime Cessair and Leopold Sedar Senghor. In "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century" Leopold Sedar Senghor explains that negritude "is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self confirmation; confirmation of one's being..." (195). Thus, although African workers working in colonial establishments were exploited, marginalized and dehumanized, the energy of African intellectuals went into the struggle for the decolonization of the mind from racial inferiority. In this light, the struggle could be said to be a racial one and negritude in the francophone region was at the forefront.

In Southern Africa, the experience was quite different. European settlers settled in the region and converted themselves into citizens, displacing the indigenes. Rodney insists that, "When colonial governments seized African lands, they achieved two things simultaneously. They satisfied their own citizens (who wanted mining concessions or farming land) and they created the conditions whereby landless Africans had to work not just to pay taxes but also to survive"(180). South Africans had their land stolen from them by the European invaders and subsequently turned into unskilled labourers on mines and plantations belonging to European capitalists. Within the colonial system, African societies began to split into two antagonistic camps. European capitalists owned plantations, mines, factories and establishments where Africans worked as unskilled labourers, while the colonial state governments owned the civil service where Black Africans were employed as civil servants. Within these structures, class distinction was maintained.

The rise of nationalist movements created a picture of egalitarianism in the minds of Africans. They were sold images of blissful future built on the principles of equality, fairness and justice. Some of the nationalist leaders were revolutionary in spirit. They promised the people another political and social paradigm different from the colonial structure. These promises inspired hope in the masses and in some places, even peasants were involved in the struggle against the European colonialists and capitalists. With independence, however, the drums changed and likewise the dance tune of the nationalist leaders. The leaders stepped into the offices, houses, and shoes of the white colonialists and to a large extent continue in the philosophy of the colonialists.

Dele Bamidele and Rotimi Agbana in "Richard Maduku's Kokoro Compound – A Postmodernist Reading" observe,

Postcolonial African nations emerged from colonialism with a heritage of social ugliness of all sorts: political corruption, social stratification, tribal sentiments and resentment, general disunity, nepotism, self-aggrandizement, and much else – this is what constitutes the entire fabric of our present day reality in Africa. (271)

One of the vices inherited from colonialism is social stratification. Colonialism stratified African societies into classes, setting the foundation for class antagonisms. African political elite and the bourgeois class continued the legacy of the colonialists. The present kind of class system in Africa is legacy of colonial imperialism. They constructed African nation states and instituted class system and antagonism. Right from the colonial times, workers were not treated fairly in Africa. In Angola and Mozambique, for instance, workers in colonial times were "exported to the South African mines to work as subsistence, while the capitalists in South Africa paid the Portuguese government a certain sum for each labourer supplied" (183).

The maltreatment of workers in colonial economy is graphically captured in *Mine Boy* by Peter Abrahams. In postcolonial Africa, African bourgeoisies behave and treat African workers in similar derogatory pattern as the erstwhile colonial overlords. Workers, thus belong to a class while the bourgeois capitalists belong to another class. After the demise of colonialism, African capitalists continue with the structure bequeathed them by the colonialists. Thus class system as it is today in Africa is a legacy of Western colonial imperialism.

Proletarian Novel in Africa

Every continent has its own kind of proletarian novel. Proletarian novel is a genre of the novel and it has several nomenclatures by means of which the genre is called. It is called: working class novel, socialist novel, social problem novel, problem novel, sociological novel, social novel, propaganda or thesis novel, political novel or socialist realist novel. M. H. Abrams and G. G. Harpham in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* put a knife between social novel and proletarian novel. They maintain that,

The social novel emphasizes the influence of the social and economic conditions of an era on shaping characters and determining events, it also embodies an implicit or explicit thesis recommending political and social reform, it is often called a sociological novel. (256)

The social novel to Abrams and Harpham deals with social and economic situation of a given historical epoch and the novel recommend reformative paradigms by means of which political, sociological systems could be reformed. Reformation is a central concern of sociological novel. On the other hand, proletarian novel is “a Marxist version of the social novel, representing the hardships suffered by the oppressed working class, and usually written to incite the reader to radical political action...” (256). Proletarian novel is built on the tenets of Marxism. It is meant to incite the reader, to conscientize them and to make them struggle against the capitalist forces holding them in chains. The struggle could be violent or non-violent. But the essence is to stimulate change or social transformation.

Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* defines Marxism as, A scientific theory of human societies and of the practices of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression. There is nothing academic about those struggles... (vii)

This is to say that, the emphasis of proletarian novel is to change the world and not to merely interpret it like an academic enterprise. In all, it is very clear that, where social novel uses the principles of critical realism, proletarian novel uses the principles of socialist realism. Abrams and Harpham observe that, socialist realism “was a term used by Marxist critics for novels which, they claimed reflected social reality – that is novels that accorded with the Marxist view that the struggle between economic classes is the essential dynamic of society” (368). Socialist realist novels as mentioned earlier align with Marxist ideology of the communist party. It “adhered to the party line by stressing the oppression of workers by bourgeois capitalists, the virtues of the proletariat, and felicities of life under a communist regime...” (368). In critical realist novels, the world is interpreted but modalities for changing it are not adumbrated. However, as Karl Marx and Engel have said, the world has been interpreted by philosophers; the onus is how to change it. In socialist realist writings, change is a constant.

Theoretical Considerations

Sociological criticism as a literary praxis was introduced by Kenneth Burke in his theoretical essay, “Literature as Equipment for Living.” It is influenced by “new criticism”. Austin Harrington in his book, *Art and Social Theory* presents “six ways in which art can be approached from a sociological standpoint” these standpoints are: humanistic historic approach, marxist social theory, cultural studies, theory of art in analytical philosophy, anthropological studies of art, and empirical studies of contemporary art (wikipedia). Omafume Onoge in “Towards a Marxist Sociology of African Literature” harps on the imperative of politics in African culture. He observes, the “politics of oppression versus the politics of liberation” (464) are at the heart of African political, cultural and historical discourses. The sociology of African literature is anchored in the saying that no writer writes in a vacuum (often credit to Ngugi wa Thiong’O). Onoge identifies two kinds of sociological criticisms: “Bourgeois sociological criticism and Marxist criticism. To the bourgeois sociological critics, “literature does not struggle against society” (468). Literature to them reflects life and stops at that. On the other hand, Onoge maintains,

Unlike bourgeois criticism, Marxist criticism has never involved itself in any internal conundrums about the admissibility of sociological factors in the consideration of art and literature. Marxist criticism is necessarily sociological. This sociological nature ...is what immediately distinguishes it from all other types of literary criticism. However, its sociology is rooted in materialist understanding of cultural consciousness given by Marx (471)

To Onoge, Marxist criticism is sociological in nature. However, it is not a mere study of the presence of sociological elements in a novel but placing in context the dialectical materialism. The distinction between Marxist criticism and other forms of criticisms is highlighted by Attied Balwan and Ranbir Kaur in *Anatomy of Literary Criticism* thus:

Marxism is a “sociological approach to literature that viewed works of literature or art as the products of historical forces that can be analysed by looking at the material conditions in which they were formed. ...Marxism generally focuses on clash between the dominant and repressed classes in a given age and also may encourage art to imitate what it is often termed as objective. (259)

The task of a Marxist sociological critic is to interpret literature as a product of historical, political and sociological forces objectively or scientifically. Men are shaped by the economic condition of their epoch. Therefore, literature, a part of the superstructure is also a means of representing the existential conditions of a given class. In “Bourgeois Politics and Ideology in Vincent Egbuson’s *Womandela*,” Dele Bamidele and Akwu Victor did observe that,

Literature and politics are so connected that it is difficult to talk of one without the other. The argument by some scholars that literature should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political statement. Literature finds content and sustenance in every facet of society and is thus necessarily emblematic of the society that produces it. Every socio-political age gives its writers content, and ideology (58).

From the excerpt above, the duty of a Marxist sociological critic is adumbrated. He is to look at the connection between literature, politics, and society. These are intertwined in the African context. Besides that, the critic is to study the dialectic between form, content and ideology. The critic is also to consider the authorial ideology “overtly professed in a novel” to see if it has “the potential to move society forward, out of the dilemmas it finds itself and into the nirvana we all yearn for” (68).

To Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh on the other hand, the Marxist sociological critic, in a nutshell has the following tenets as guiding principles for the conduction of his criticism. The Marxist critic Attempts to understand the relations between the literary text and the social world, recognizing that literature is a process and that the social world involves contexts of production and those of receptions, Marxists regard literature as both production and reflection of and on culture and society and political world in order to change it (103).

From the purview of Rice and Waugh, the Marxist critic must take into cognizance the fact that the text is a social product. Literature is thus a tool by means of which society is reelected. Here, the emphasis is reflection and not representation. The aim of reflection is change. Thus, literature “should be analysed in historical and materialist terms or, in other words, as an integral part of a social structure resting on economic base” (103).

Apart from the focus above, elements such as dialectical materialism, class struggle, exploitation, oppression, strike, violence or revolution, political consciousness which are core tenets of Marxism must be identified by the critic and interpreted as constituting the inherent aesthetic components of radical sociological criticism.

Reflection of the Proletariat in Peter Abraham’s *Mine Boy*

The central character Xuma appears from nowhere and encounters, Leah in the dead of the night. He introduces himself as Xuma from the North. When Leah retrieves his torchlight and the powerful beam caught different segments of Xuma’s body, we see a muscular and powerfully built man. At Marlay Camp, Leah offers him a sleeping space and he encounters other characters like Dladla, the perpetual drunkard, Daddy, the old woman, Ma Plank and others. Although Leah is portrayed as a powerful and strong woman, she also has her moments of weaknesses. Her lover killed a man who attempted kissing her and is thrown into jail. She is in the business of selling contraband beer to the peasantry and proletarian classes who patronize her. Her place is where the downtrodden come to find solace to their broken souls. She invites Xuma to join her in her business which he turns down. He later works in the mines and there, the veil of ignorance about class struggle was shredded and he sees reality in its starkness.

Published in 1946, Peter Abrahams captures the life of South Africans in the epoch of apartheid. The novelist portrays the ills of industrialization on nature and man. The central character Xuma is uneducated. We encounter him in his state of innocence. In that state, he is portrayed as impoverished. He encounters Leah at night and through her eyes, and torch, we have the first glimpse of Xuma:

It started with the big, old tennis shoes that were kept together by bits of string and wire, and saw the toes peeping out in spite of the string and wire; moved up the dusty, colourless old trousers that were ripped at both knees and looked as though they would burst at the waist because they were so tight; up the immense chest and huge shoulders against which the equally tight and tattered shirt seemed to cling fearfully; it lingered on the broad, good natured face for a brief moment; then it shifted to the right hand with its bundle and then the empty hand (2)

From the onset, we are shown a portrait of Xuma, poverty stricken, badly dressed but strong and sturdy. Instead of taking recourse to social vices he decides to migrate from the rural area to Johannesburg. Chronic poverty and unemployment is the root of rural to urban migration. Xuma says: "I came for work. There is no work where I came from. And here, they say, there is much work" (5). Towns and cities are seen as places flowing with milk and honey and every bee flies there in search of nectar. Leah who has been in the city from childhood asks and warns:

'Where will you work?'

'In the mines. It is man's work.'

'The mines are no good, Xuma, later o you cough and then you spit blood and you become weak and die. I have seen it many times. Today you are young and strong, and tomorrow you are thin and ready to die' (5)

Xuma is adamant on working in the mines and Leah lets him be. While in Camp Marlay he encounters different kinds of people who lack background and they exist like clouds drifting away without any destination. These characters have traumatic history and to forget their plights, they resort to alcoholism. Daddy, Lena and Liz are such characters. The dwellers of Vrededorp and Malay Camp are peasants and workers. On Saturdays, the people will take to the streets and become reckless with the money they laboured hard to get during the weekdays. Leah's place would be filled up to brim with drunks. "There were people everywhere. People trying to get into the house for their drinks. Other trying to get out. And the whole place reek of kaffir beer (19)

The character, Eliza is enigmatic in the novel. She is a testament of the corrupting nature of the colonial educational system. Walter Rodney is of the opinion that, "Colonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation, creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment" (264). Ma Plank identifies education as the tap root of Eliza's irrationality and insanity. "it is going to school. she likes you but she wants one who can read books and dress like the white folks and speaks the language of the whites and wear the little bit of cloth they call tie" (31). Eliza also laments: "inside me there is something wrong... I cannot help it. Inside I am black and I don't want to be a black person. I want to be like they are..." (60).

J. P. Williamson introduces Xuma to the mines. Johannes is his name. But when beer has stirred his ego, he prefers the colonial toga: "J. P. Williamson." The environment where the workers domicile is described as "unfamiliar, so empty" (32). On their way to the mine, they walk "up empty streets and down empty streets with tall sleeping buildings on either side" (33). At the camp, Xuma sees a new world entirely. The miners are called "mine boys" (34) and they live "in compounds" (34) provided by the colonial owners of the mines. Johannes explains to him:

They are not of the city, they come from the farms and some are from the land of the Portuguese and others are from Rhodesia. The white man fetched them. And those that are fetched must live in the compounds. It is the law here. But I came to the city like you and I am the boss boy for a white man so I do not stay in the compounds (34)

Rodney captures this situation in his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and Jose Craveirinha also captures it in his poem, "Mampara M'ganza." Southern Africans were taken from their countries and forced into mines to work. However, within the colonial capitalist structure, some Africans were placed over and above others. The boss boys were placed above mine boys and these boss boys helped the colonialists in the exploitation and oppression of fellow Africans. Thus, there was a kind of informal training of the new set of capitalists who will eventually take economic power in postcolonial epoch. Paddy taught Xuma, "there will be fifty men under you. some will try to see if you are soft. You will have to crush them with your fist..." (46)

Xuma is introduced to Paddy. The mine is a place where the wealth that belongs to the people is being exploited by European settlers. In the mine, everything was strange for Xuma.

Stranger than any day he had ever known. There was the rumbling noise and the shouting and the explosions and the trembling of the earth. And always shouting indunas driving the men on to work. And over all those was the bitter eyes and hardness of the white man... (41)

The indunas are the policemen. Policemen are arms of capitalism. Vladimir Lenin in *State and Revolution* observes: "a standing army and police are the chief instruments of state power" (10). The policemen inspire dread in the workers. "And the white man had shouted, 'Hurry up!' and the induna had taken up the shout" (43). The workers are treated like animals.

And men gasped for breath and their eyes turned red and beds of sweat stood on their foreheads and the muscles in their arms hardened with pain as they fought the pile of fine wet sand. [...] And for their sweating and hard breathing and for the redness of their eyes and the emptiness of their stare there would be nothing to show (42)

The workers are traumatized by the "hissing and explosions from the bowels of the earth" (42). The earth itself was traumatized. They work hard from dawn to dusk but nothing to call theirs'. Their lives are controlled by whistle.

When the whistle blew for them to stop for food [...] They found a shaded spot and sat on the ground. Everywhere men found places for themselves and ate their food. All the men had the same kind of little tin. In each tin was a hunk of mealie meal porridge cooked into a hardened chunk, a piece of meat, and a piece of very coarse compound bread (43)

At Malay Camp, images of filth and rot are portrayed. "Around them the street was alive. People moved up and down. Children played in the gutters, and picked up dirty orange peels and ate them" (49). Children are not exempted from the quagmire the generality of the black population finds itself in. The settlement is not properly arranged and it is filthy: "Malay Camp. A row of streets crossing another row of streets. Mostly dirty streets. Mostly dark streets" (77).

Xuma is engrossed with his work that he feels, "the only place where he was completely free was the underground in the mines..." (61). He goes to Paddy's place in Johannesburg and there, he sees another kind of reality. He is stopped by the police "without a word, he fished his pass from his pocket and gave it to the policeman" (62). The constraining of Blacks' movements by the pass is portrayed in Athol Fuggard's *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*. At Paddy's place, he encounters what it is to be free. Leah sells beer, but she has to go underground for her to eke a living from the trade. It was conscripted and declared illegal by the authorities. However, in Paddy's place, assorted wines are arrayed and he could not believe that in South Africa, a man could, "drink wine and keep the bottle on the table without fear of the police" (65). Certainly, a black man couldn't do that.

From the encounter between Xuma and Paddy, it becomes clear that Eliza's impediment may not be far from the absence of freedom. The society wherein she exists chokes her and deprives her of the good things of life her soul yearns for. She feels entrapped within herself and this bottling of the innermost desire led to the cracking of her mind. Xuma explains to Paddy that Eliza wants the things Europeans are enjoying and because she couldn't find them, "it makes her unhappy" (66). Eliza is thus symbol of those who have seen through the colonial and capitalist veils clouding society but is unable to channel her consciousness into a revolutionary struggle. Paddy explains to his girlfriend Di, "Yes. Grand, but not a human being yet. Just a mine boy. His girl's human and he can't understand her wanting things I want and have" (67).

Xuma is confused as regarding the personhood of Paddy. He could not explain the rationale behind his friendliness with him. Paddy sees him first as a human being. But because of cultural constructs and colonialism itself that has redesigned the tapestry of the world by the induction of the great chain of being theory that places Europe at the apex of the world's existential hierarchy and Africa at the nadir, Xuma sees himself and operates within the ambit of colonial constructs thereby negating his humanness.

The conscientization or reeducation of Xuma began with his visit to Paddy and continued with his visit to Doctor Mini. The doctor lives in Malay Camp but in a decent apartment. Xuma is confused that a black man could live in a place like that. The doctor educates him:

‘No Xuma,’ the doctor said. ‘You are not copying the white man when you live in a place like this. This is the sort of place a man should live in because it is good for him. Whether he is white or black does not matter (75).

The mentality that good things of life belong to the European settlers and Africans must domicile in piggeries was foisted on the people by colonialism which simpletons like Xuma keyed into and thus, behaved and looked at the world from the purview thrust on them. Daddy is a character who is wrecked by the burden of his knowledge. When he arrived Camp Malay, he was a strong man who worked on the mines but seeing the injustice going on there and understanding the structure of colonial capitalism, he understood that he was a beast of burden constrained to live life in an ugly pattern. Ma Plank interprets the phenomenon behind his devastation thus:

He understood too much and it made him unhappy and he became like Eliza. Only he fought. And listen, Xuma, that one lying down there in his own piss is wiser than Eliza. He can read and write even better than she can. He found Leah on the street and looked after her. ‘Yes Xuma, you scorn him. But I tell you he was a man such as I have never seen...’ (81).

The ability to see through colonialism is a thing, and changing the status quo is another. Eliza and Daddy are characters who have seen through apartheid, they were able to interpret their worlds, but unable to change it. Thus, their knowledge become their undoing. Within the gloom of Malay Camp and the monotonous rhythm of the life of the proletariats, blades of love sprout here and there. For instance, Xuma is deeply in love with Liza, but she was in love with the things the white man loves. Maisy, the smiling one is in love with Xuma, but Xuma isn’t in love with her. Although at the end of the novel, Xuma will abandon the mentally unstable Liza and turn his attention to Maisy.

The Black people of Malay Camp are harassed by the raiding police and their crunching penury. While at the mine, Xuma joins hands with the white mine owners in oppressing the black mine boys. Xuma is unconscious of the role he plays in the capitalist economy. As they ravaged the intestine of the earth, crushing and sorting for the “yellow metal men love and call gold,” (107) their health condition keeps deteriorating.

A man near Xuma coughed. A trickle of red spittle flew out of his mouth and fell at Xuma’s feet. Xuma stared at it. He had heard about the sickness of the lungs and how it ate a man’s body away, but he had never seen a man who had it. He looked at the man. the man’s eyes shone brightly and his nostrils quivered. He was an old man (107)

The old man is a symbol of the future of the miners and even Xuma. The mines have drained his vitality and health and is reduced to a wretch. The old man was “bony. He was a man who had been big and muscular once and this showed in his boniness” (108). Despite his deteriorated health condition, he pleads with Xuma to keep it secret. “Don’t tell the white people. The others will not....I know I am going to die, but if there is a home for my wife and children I will be happy” (108).

In Malay Camp, Leah’s business is busted. She sells contraband beer as a means of livelihood. She bribes the police so as to continue in the business but she is betrayed and finally arrested. She instructed Ma Plank, to sell everything and keep the money, “don’t waste the money on lawyers” (166). The persecution and condemnation of Leah by the colonialist law enforcement agents made Xuma to think: “why is it wrong if Leah sells beer and right if a white person sells beer” (168). Xuma begins to think “and many questions that were a strain on his brain for he could not find no answer to them” (168-9).

The mind is where conscientization begins. Paddy prods Xuma to see his material condition as foisted on him by the system under which he lives and not a natural phenomenon. Paddy patiently revolutionizes the mind of Xuma, sharpening it to confront the system that dehumanizes him. To Xuma, Africans have nothing to do in the face of cultural and economic aggression. They have to ‘bear it’ (171). Paddy advocates ‘fight’ as the only means of confronting the status quo. Xuma asks: ‘How can

you fight guns with bare hands?’ To fight imperialism and capitalism, the fighter must erase ‘fear’ from his mind and be able to: ‘think and not be afraid of your thoughts’ (171). Paddy is aware of the oppression going on and he is also a part of it but he does not find delight in it. He sees every man as ‘human being’ and thus wants Xuma to “be a man first and then a black man” (172). He maintains: “It is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them” (173).

The mine where the proletariats work is in a state of disrepair. The mine owners are concerned with profit and not the health and safety of the mine boys. Thus, when the mine collapses and traps Johannes and Chris, Paddy and Xuma go into the womb of the earth and reappear with the dead bodies of Johannes and Chris. Despite this great tragedy, the mine manager signaled that the mine boys should go back into the earth and continue mining. “It was a minor collapse” one engineer said. “It’s all right now” (180). Xuma is bold enough to challenge the manager of the mine: “Let them fix up the place first, Xuma cried” (180).

The protest against oppression and exploitation by the proletariats result into a strike. Strike is a tool used by proletarian novelists to awaken the conscience of workers and to ensure that they are aware of their powers as a class. Xuma asserts his freedom: “We are men!” he shouted. “It does not matter if our skins are black! We are not cattle to throw away our lives! We are men!” (181). The manager is angry, his colonial authority is being challenged. “This is a strike!” he cried. He pointed at Xuma and shouted: “You will go to jail! I have called the police! They will be here soon!” (181). Paddy is at the intersection between the oppressors and the oppressed. He joins Xuma at last:

I am a man first, Xuma is right! Xuma is right! They pay you little! They don’t care if you risk your lives! Why is it so? Is not the blood of a black man red like that of a white man? Does not a black man feel too?... I am with you! Let them fix the place first! (182).

The policemen “rushed on the crowd striking left and right with their batons” (182). Although Xuma runs away, he is able to help the miners to regain their self esteem by protesting against the forces that hold them captive. Xuma insists that he will turn himself to the police. He is happy that he is able to confront the apartheid apparatuses:

It is good that a black man should tell the white people how we feel. And also a black man must tell the black people how they feel and what they want. These things I must do, then I will feel like a man” (183)

The transformation of Xuma’s mind by Paddy is important in the revolutionary role he later assumed in the novel. As a proletariat, his political consciousness will help him and other workers “wrest, by degrees all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all the elements of production in the hands” of the proletariat (Lenin 22). In the novel, there is a “general tone of restlessness. The society depicted ...shows people caught up at a cultural cross-roads. neither the bewildered masses nor the alienated elite are shown to be capable of answering the challenges of their time” (Shatto Gakwandi 123).

The proletarian class have been represented as underprivileged, underdeveloped and caught in the web of poverty, gloom and disillusionment. However, they are not portrayed as docile and stupid. They grapple with their world and struggle to liberate make a living for themselves. But they are also presented as capable of wrestling with the system in a bid to liberate themselves from the enchainment of colonialism and capitalism.

Representation of the Proletariat in Festus Iyayi's Violence

In the book, *The African Novel in the Context of Combat Poetics: Selected Works of Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, Ousmane Sembene and Festus Iyayi*, Ayodele Bamidele observes that Festus Iyayi’s

Novels are dialectical analyses of the social contradictions that set the stage for class struggle between the privileged and the underprivileged. Since these novels are nurtured by contemporary postcolonial and post-civil war periods and out of a tradition of socio-economic and political dysfunctionality, they are bound to be combative in temperament (147).

The novel, *Violence* captures class contradiction in post colonial Nigeria. In *Mine Boy*, the conflict, although is generated by dialectical materialism, it is anchored on racial and economic struggles. Africans fought at two levels, racial and economic. However, we see class cannibalism graphically

portrayed in Iyayi's *Violence*. The classes live side-by-side, one feeding on the other callously. Bamidele observes that, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie is of the opinion that, "Iyayi's *Violence* is "the first proletarian novel in Nigeria" (147).

The characters that play important role in the novel are Idemudia, his wife, Adisa, Obofun, and his wife Queen. Idemudia and his wife belong to the proletarian class while Obofun and his wife belong to the class of the capitalists. The subaltern class is further peopled by characters like Osaro, Jimoh, Mama Jimoh, Omoifo, Patrick and the sick ones in the hospital, traders, and even wheelbarrow pushers. Idemudia is an uneducated worker. He hails from a polygamous family and his mother badly treated by his father. His wife, Adisa is a simpleton who is unaware of class struggle. She blames her husband for his inability of providing her daily bread. On a raining morning, she blocked his path and forbade him from going out. They were tenants "in one of the low mud but zinced houses along Owode street" the place where they live is the hub of the poor and downtrodden. When it rains, some of the old houses give way, trapping their inhabitants.

The impoverished situation of the family constrained their marriage. The only child is taken away to live with Idemudia's mother in the village while his wife condemns him with her pitiless eyes. The strain in the family degenerated into a fisticuff on a Sunday morning when Idemudia wants to go out. She blocks his path:

They became locked in a fierce struggle, Idemudia trying to break her grip and she trying to by all means to retain it. They panted and sweated, struggled and cursed. In a corner of the room the cooking pots stood empty. The kerosene was finished in the kerosene stove. There was no food in the house. And both were hungry (14).

He hits her hard and blood flows out of her mouth and nostrils. She threatens that he is not the only man, she will go out with other men. "I'll find out and I'll kill you" (15) he threatens. Fate brings Queen his way and he assists her, she invites him to Freedom Motel to help her offload three trailer trucks of cements. He invites his friends, Patrick, Omoifo and Osaro. At the motel, Idemudia who has not eaten for all through the day sees the waiters throwing unfinished plates of food into the dustbin:

As Idemudia watched the unfinished jollof rice, dodo, meat and beans being emptied into the dustbin, the sweat broke out on his forehead. Very quickly, he turned his eyes away, biting his lips sharply (18)

In the rain, the four friends offloaded the truck. Queen is unkind to them seeing that she has what they do not have. At the end of toiling in harsh weather condition, she pays them peanuts, five naira each. Queen is so preoccupied with wealth creation that she abandoned the home front and her children became morally bankrupt. Literally, she uses her body to get what she wants while her husband, a corrupt civil servant has stolen so much from the civil service that he uses in building houses, lodges for himself. He and his wife live a kind of social contract marriage where the parties are free to do whatsoever they deemed fit. Queen

Already owned two modern storey buildings in New Benin. One of the houses he had had been let out to the University at nine thousand naira a year and the University had paid rent for two years in advance. The things a woman could do! ... At the moment when her husband was trying to expand the Freedom Motel, she was setting up her own hotel along Sakpoba Road. Also, she was building another house at Ugbowo. She had been reliably informed that the future of the city lay there and she was determined to get a foothold there before it became too late (23).

Queen and her husband represent the capitalist class. They are concerned with the exploitation of the labour of the proletariats. To Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels as cited in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh in their book, *Modern Literary Theory*, "materialism accounts for events in the world ..." (1). Therefore, the struggle to control economic wealth of the state is at the heart of class struggle.

Idemudia and his friends work until there was no energy left in them but they have to keep working. They breathed in thin long, sharp gasps as hunger gnawed at their stomachs and tore at their hearts, almost making them dizzy... at the back of each man's mind was the money: five naira (34). Marx and Engels believe that, "in imagination, individuals seem freer under the domination of the bourgeoisie than before, because their conditions of life seem accidental; in reality, of course, they are less free, because they are more subjected to the violence of things" (24). Idemudia and his friends do

not have the slightest notion that they are being exploited by Queen. They see their condition as an accident. Thus, they accept the violence meted out to their humanity.

After working all through the day in the rain, they are given twenty naira and Idemudia gives each five naira. "We should be very grateful to you," Osaro said as he accepted the money. "You don't know how much this money means to me" (37). Idemudia returns home and immediately falls sick: "He held his head with both hands and noticed that his hands shook and trembled" (38). His body was in pains: "He moaned and cried from the pains that tormented him...his mind was feverish" (39)

His health condition deteriorated and is rushed to the University Hospital. "Even at that early hour, the University Hospital was crowded, it is a pitiable sight. So many people were sick and in need of the doctor" (53). For absence of bed space, he was referred to Ogbe Hospital. The doctor feels that sending them to Ogbe was like "sending them to their graves" (54). The hospital lacks drugs and necessary tools for effective service delivery. In his sick state, he thinks of how to get "another job soon. The money he had brought some time ago would soon be gone..." (55). Marx and Engels have taught in that,

For the proletariat, on the other hand, the condition of their existence, labour, and with it all the conditions of existence governing modern society, have something accidental, something they, as separate individuals, have no control, and over which no social organization can give them control. The contradiction between the individuality of each separate proletarian and labourer, the condition of life forced upon him, becomes evident to him himself, for he is sacrificed from youth upwards and, within his own class, has no chance of arriving at the conditions which would place him in the other class (23)

While in the hospital, Idemudia is cut from the world he is conscious of and is introduced to another kind of reality. He is treated but lacks the finance to settle his bills. His wife is preyed upon by Obofun. She could not raise the fifteen naira needed to settle the hospital bills. She finally succumbs to Obofun and sleeps with him. She did not commit adultery for the fun of it. She did it to save her husband from ridicule. At the hospital, "Children cried, women wept, everywhere there was a great urgency and paradoxically, little activity: a hopelessness, and helplessness that invoked the onlooker to tears" (56). The hospital was like an underworld. There, Idemudia encounters different kinds of horrors. But it was also there that his perception of the world was altered by a dramatic performance. The performance was staged the night he had planned to run away from the hospital with the assistance of his wife.

The play dramatizes the material situation of the oppressed class. The audience are shown the root of their suffering: corrupt political system and capitalism. The accused person is a teacher who taught Igreka, the retired army general who "retired with full benefits after embezzling substantial government funds amounting as many sources have it to nearly two hundred and forty million naira" (178). The accused person and his lawyer are the spokesmen of the oppressed classes. The lawyer speaks for "the school teacher, the workers, and farmers" (181). In the court room, it is a case of society against the subaltern class. Those arrayed for prosecution were the wretched of the earth. The judge who sits over the case is an extension of the state. Karl Marx cited by Vladimir Lenin has said that, "The state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another; it is the creation of 'order', legalizing and perpetuating this oppression by moderating the clashes among classes" (9). The court, thus exists to legalise illegalities and to normalize abnormalities in the state. They are extension of the bourgeois capitalists who have a stake in the affairs of the state.

The drama, thus, exposes the ideology by means of which the bourgeois class holds the proletariat in chains:

Council of the defence nodded his head, 'Yes,' he said. I'm my understanding, acts of violence are committed when a man is denied the opportunity of being educated, of getting a job, of feeding himself and his family properly, of getting medical attention cheaply, quickly and promptly. We often do not realise that it is the society, the type of economic hence the political system which we are operating in our country today that brutalizes the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realise that such men of poor, limited opportunities react, they are not only in a certain measure, answering violence with violence... I feel and think it is necessary that all the oppressed sections

of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence... (183)

The division of society into classes is applicable even in the hospital. The defence council who is the voice of the author says:

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 hard, cold and roughly cemented floors or share beds, this is violence... (187).

Idemudia is transformed by the play and he becomes aware of the forces that hold him bound. He is now a conscious and rational being. On site working for Queen, he is dissatisfied with the working condition he was subjected to; he was given bribe of five hundred naira by Queen which he refuses. The workers who have been working like asses have now become Balaam's ass. "The labourers surged forward towards Queen. "Our money! They cried" (268). The mob is calmed by Idemudia: "We must be organized or we fail" (269). The weapon the workers decided to wield was "strike" (271).

Queen tries to lure Idemudia into bed but he refuses and insists she pays the workers their wages as agreed upon or she should expect a strike. She reveals to him that his wife committed adultery with her husband. He returns home in rage to strangle his wife, but he lacks the courage.

The novelist uses characterization in portraying workers like Idemudia, Osaro, Patrick and others in their natural states. They are impoverished, uneducated and unskilled labourers. The society they found themselves in is cannibalistic. The bourgeoisies keep feeding on the sweat of the workers. The live larger than life while the proletarian class lives in abject poverty, misery and squalor. The workers are able to rise up and challenge the status quo. In portraying realistically the existential condition of the workers and x-raying the relationship between them and the capitalists, the novelist showed the interface between the exploiters and the exploited, the oppressors and the oppressed and thus the themes of oppression, exploitation, ills associated with capitalism are expressed in the novel.

Conclusion

The study adopts Marxist sociological theory as the tool for the analysis of the texts: *Violence* by Festus Iyayi and *Mine Boy* by Peter Abrahams. The nexus between literature and society is analyzed. In the novel *Mine Boy*, the conflict takes two lines, economic and racial. Black Africans were economically and racially oppressed, and dehumanized. Xuma is the central character and his mind was transformed as a result of his contact with Paddy a white miner. He leads a strike after his transformation. In *Violence*, Idemudia is the central character. He is married to Adisa and both live in abject penury. However, he was conscientized in the hospital by a dramatic performance. He finally realises that he and his wife are victims of the same merciless capitalistic society. He also like Xuma leads a strike against Queen. He is morally upright as he refused sleeping with Queen. The novelists use characterization in portraying the living condition of the workers in a capitalist society. The workers are shown to have been marginalized, oppressed but they have been blindfolded by their earlier belief that their social condition was foisted on them by the supernatural or fate.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Ayodele Anthony Bamidele is a Professor of Contemporary African Literature and teaches African and Postcolonial Literatures, Literary Theory and Criticism, African Fiction and Popular Culture in the Department of English and Literary Studies of the Federal University, Lokoja, Nigeria.

Paul Kennedy Ndubuisi Enesha is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. His areas of specialization include Afriacan-American and Caribbean Literatures, and Contemporary African Literature. He teaches Literary Criticism, Contemporary African Authors, African Novel, Modern Comedy, and Studies in Prose.