

CLASS STRUGGLE AND POLITICAL EXPLOITATION IN JUDE DIBIA'S *BLACKBIRD*

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Abstract

Literature stands as the mirror through which the society is reflected, the major functions of literature is to replicate the happenings in every human society, encourage virtues, expose vices and proffer solutions to them. This paper explores the schisms of class Struggles and political exploitation as reflected in Jude Dibia's *Blackbird*. This research interrogates the dynamics of social inequality and exploitation within African society as represented in the novel. This research tends to address persistent socio-political and economic divide that perpetuates class struggle, suppresses the working class, and empowers the ruling elites, thereby creating structures of oppression. The hallmark of the paper re-examines and provide an insight into the dynamics of power, inequality, social changes in an African society. The theory employed in this research is the Marxist literary theory. Marxist criticism is a theory rooted in the ideas and propositions of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that focus on literature as a product of material conditions, economic structures, and class relations. This research intends to analyze how literary texts reflect, reinforce, or resist the ideology of the ruling class while foregrounding the voices and experiences of the oppressed. This theoretical lens is suitable for uncovering Jude Dibia's present class antagonisms, exploitation, and the power dynamics that shape their characters' realities. This study adopts a qualitative and textual analytical approach. The primary data consists of the novel understudy, while secondary data is derived from scholarly texts, journal publications, and critical works on Marxism, class struggle, and African literature. The findings reveal that the literary work understudy articulates the harsh realities of political exploitation, corrupt leadership and continued subjugation of the working class. This study further shows how literature mirrors people's plight and can serve as a voice and form of resistance. As a solution, it proposes that literature be more consciously harnessed as a tool for awakening societal consciousness and demanding systemic change.

Introduction

Class struggle and political exploitation are pervasive themes in African literature, reflecting the continent's complex history of colonialism, post-colonialism, and contemporary socio-economic realities. African writers have long used literature as a platform to explore the social, economic, and political realities of the continent, often highlighting the struggles of the working class and the exploitation of the ruling elite.

Written African literature from its beginnings has been reactive, first against the monstrosity of colonialism as it was experienced in Africa and later against neo-colonialism, which replicates the colonial structures, in most cases, even though Africans are now supposed to be in charge of affairs in the nations and states of Africa since the attainment of political independence from their erstwhile colonial masters. The neo-colonial phase of Africa's political evolution has been largely dominated by ill feelings against the political class whose members assumed the mantle of governance at the exit of the colonialists. This was the reason for the euphoria that followed the granting of political sovereignty to African nations and states because the gains of this freedom did not percolate to the masses of the African people, and thus their pre-independence expectations have largely remained unfulfilled. While politicians jostle for appointments to plum jobs and lucrative posts in the corridors of power, the aspirations of the common people have not been given the desired attention. Not only are the healthcare needs of the people almost at a zero point, there is massive corruption in the civil service and the staggering percentage of unemployment has accentuated the degree of insecurity of lives as some unemployed youths indulge in armed robbery, kidnapping of hostages with the aim of getting ransoms and other similar social problems.

In addition to exploring the impact of colonialism, African literature also examines the ways in which post-colonial governments have exploited their citizens. For example, Ayi Kwei Armah's "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born" explores the corruption and exploitation of the ruling elite in post-colonial Ghana. The novel highlights the ways in which the ruling elite have exploited the working class, perpetuating poverty and inequality. More recently, African writers have continued to explore the themes of class struggle and political exploitation. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Half of a Yellow Sun" explores the impact of the Biafran War on Igbo society in Nigeria, highlighting the ways in which the war exacerbated existing class divisions. Similarly,

NoViolet Bulawayo's "We Need New Names" explores the struggles of a young Zimbabwean girl growing up in a post-colonial society, highlighting the ways in which the ruling elite have exploited the working class.

This therefore shows that this subject matter has deepened the despair and frustration of African writers who have had to change their role from being cultural custodians of the African society to using their writings to criticize the putrescence and misdemeanor of members of the political class in post-colonial Africa. This has manifested in the development of a very pessimistic tradition of literary writing in Africa, unlike the colonial period when both the political class and the intellectual elite class saw themselves as nationalists who had the common patriotic cause of driving away the colonial masters and thereby securing political sovereignty for their nations and states. This rift between the intellectual elite class and the politicians has been deepened by the writers' subscription to the Marxist ideology, which is an equalitarian ideology that sees the interactions, conflicts and relations among peoples in class terms, but with a dialectical support for the oppressed class which redeems itself through the dictatorship of the proletariat class - the true vision of every socialist revolution.

The persistence of class struggle and political exploitation in many African countries has led to widespread social, economic, and political instability, perpetuating inequality, poverty, and human rights abuses. The exploitation of the working class by the ruling elite has resulted in a significant wealth gap, with the majority of the population living in poverty while a small minority controls a disproportionate amount of wealth and power. This has led to social unrest, protests, and conflicts, which in turn have hindered economic development and undermined democratic institutions in every sector of our society.

The lack of representation and voice for the marginalized and oppressed in African societies has also contributed to the perpetuation of class struggle and political exploitation. The dominant narratives and ideologies that legitimize exploitation and oppression have been challenged by African writers, who have used literature as a platform to expose the social, economic, and political realities of the continent. Jude Dibia as an African contemporary writer and his novel *Blackbird* will be explored for this study. Through the literary work understudy, the research have highlighted the need for a more pronounced understanding of the complex relationships between class, power, and exploitation, and for a more critical examination of the ways in which literature reflects and shapes our understanding of the world around us. By examining the ways in which class struggle and political exploitation are represented in African literature, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these issues and to shed light on the ways in which literature can be used as a tool for social change.

Aspects of Class Struggle and Political Exploitation in Jude Dibia's *Blackbird*.

In *Blackbird*, It did not take more than three pages for the writer to bring us to the extent of class gap and division forms the major subject matter of the novel. Class divide, the socio-economic separation that exists within a society, often determined by factors such as wealth, occupation, education, and social status. In Marxist theory, this divide is primarily seen between the bourgeoisie (the ruling or capitalist class) and the proletariat (the working class), where the former controls the means of production and the latter is subjected to economic exploitation. However, drawn into the life of Scorpion, who was a member of a lower class; a notorious man who was being used as a serial killer by a member of the ruling class; as he was preparing for a nightly execution with his allies Razor and Cobra, the writer captured the nature of their poor and slummy habitat and the kind of people that can be found there. He put it this way: "They stood by the entrance of the ogogoro suck that, moments earlier, they had exited. He could hear the banter of the patrons that lol still remained in there, old voices ruined by years of guzzling the vile liquor..." (14)

It was through the view of Scorpion that the writer came to demarcate the condition of the wealthy class; a sheer contrast of the earlier captured condition of the poor class. This was when Scorpion was already at the location of his nightly execution with his thugs. The writer put it thus: "The street lights shone like flood lights at a midnight football game, illuminating each mansion on the street, casting huge, monstrous shadows in paved streets and grass lawns. It surprised Scorpion that only fifteen minutes separated chaos from harmony. He sighed; this was the country they lived in, a country where a glass wall separated the rich from the poor. The rich could show off their wealth, look disdainfully at the less fortunate, and feel protected by the fragile barrier that divided them, while the poor people from his neck of the wood - could only look on in admiration, envy and awe" (17)

This hierarchical structure creates a situation in which the privileged class enjoys access to power, comfort, and opportunities, while the underprivileged majority struggles with poverty, marginalization, and voicelessness. The divide is not only economic but also psychological and political, often reinforced through institutions and ideology that legitimize inequality.

Apart from the ruined lives of those in Sambo; a slummy area that was stacked with the poor; people who barely feed, we also were plunged into the impecunious and poverty-stricken life of one of the major characters, Omoniyi and his wife Maya. This was how the writer write about his slummy environment:

THE HEAT was unbearable. He unlatched the front door and walked out. Twenty-one other families shared the block with Omoniyi and his family, but at least his apartment was the closest to the front entrance. He moved to the right, went through the main doorway and a light breeze touched his face. He stepped out into the moonlight. In the yard in front of him, people were huddled in mats, sleeping in the open. He counted himself lucky that his family was small. Some of the others had eight or ten people sharing a single room. At least he had a separate bedroom and a kitchen, in reality little more than a cupboard, and his own bathroom and toilet, a tiny space with a hole in the floor to drain water, and an old, discoloured toilet seat (22)

Omoniyi was an educated young man, although not extremely educated to the brim, but he believes that he should have a better life than the life he was faced with. He could recount what his father told him:

What was it his semi-literate father used to say about education? "It is the future. It is what will make you a better man than I am. Go to school and listen to your teachers. Read the books; invoke their magic and powers. Sing the white man's language in his words. Master his language and you will master him for he never can and never will master yours. There are no limits once you have that education. No limits..." (23)

Omoniyi believed the words of his father, but he did not know that he was up against a society that has become capitalistic in nature, where a few individuals can connive with the people at the helm of political affairs to sabotage the poor and make them even more poorer and dependent on them by providing a job that could barely sustain them and their families.

The poor have been conscientized with the consciousness that there is no way out. That is why they fall for peanut of jobs, without acknowledging the fact that they are being used to grow the pocket of the bourgeoisie.

We saw Edwards, one of the bourgeoisie in the story, who was the manager of a big hotel known as Oasis hotel. He had a lot of peasants as workers. An event occurred in the novel which the writer used to accentuate the effect of poverty and the consciousness of poverty in the peasants.

The three men had been in deep discussion before he entered the room. From the corridor that linked the rooms in the lodge, he heard a snatch of their grumblings:

"Which kin work be dis one sef? Salary no reach..."

"Na so everything dey increase, like garri when don soak finish for water..."

"...if person complain...sack be dat...wetin happen to Julius. Yet all this our ogas go dey chop belleful, dey drive big cars... even the oyinbos sef!" (117)

Theoretical Framework

Marxist literary theory is grounded in the socio-economic and political ideologies developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. At its core, this theory examines literature as a product of historical and material conditions, shaped by the economic structures of the society in which it is produced. Marxist criticism, therefore, interprets literary texts as expressions of class struggle, power relations, and ideological control within capitalist societies. One of the central tenets of Marxist criticism is the concept of historical materialism, which posits that material conditions—not abstract ideals—are the foundation upon which societies and ideologies are built. Literature, in this view, is not autonomous but is influenced by the class interests that dominate the historical period in which it is produced (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*). Terry Eagleton, a prominent Marxist critic, notes that "literature is part of the ideological superstructure; it both reflects and helps to shape the socio-economic base" (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, 1976). This means that authors may unconsciously reproduce dominant ideologies in their works, even when they appear to critique them.

Another fundamental concept in Marxist theory is class struggle. According to Marx, all history is the history of struggles between the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat). In literature, this conflict is often represented through tensions between characters of different social standings, or through themes that expose economic inequality and social injustice. The role of literature, then, is to reveal these power imbalances and, ideally, to contribute to class consciousness and revolutionary change (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1).

Closely tied to class struggle is the notion of ideology, which Marxist critics define as a system of beliefs and values that supports the interests of the ruling class. Louis Althusser, a structuralist Marxist, famously argued that ideology operates through "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISAs) such as education, religion, and culture—including literature—that help to reproduce the conditions of capitalism by shaping how people think and behave

(Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 1971). Literary texts, therefore, can be analyzed to uncover how they either challenge or reinforce these dominant ideologies.

Alienation is another key Marxist concept, especially relevant to literature that portrays working-class life. Marx described alienation as the estrangement of workers from the products of their labor, from themselves, and from their fellow humans under capitalist systems (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*). In literature, alienation often manifests through characters who are disconnected from society, from meaningful labor, or from their own identity. The depiction of alienated individuals or communities can serve as a critique of dehumanizing capitalist structures.

Exploitation, in Marxist terms, refers to the appropriation of surplus value from the labor of the working class by the ruling elite. This exploitation is both economic and symbolic, and it often becomes a key thematic concern in Marxist literary analysis. Fredric Jameson, a leading Marxist critic, emphasizes that all cultural production is “an ideological form of class struggle” and that literature can illuminate the mechanisms through which economic exploitation is normalized (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 1981).

Marxist theory also places value on the material conditions of literary production. Raymond Williams, a Marxist cultural theorist, insists that literature must be understood not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its production and reception within specific historical and social frameworks (Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977). This includes the author's class position, the publishing industry, and the audience's socio-economic background—all of which influence the meaning and impact of a literary text.

Marxist literary criticism provides a framework for analyzing literature as a reflection and critique of capitalist society. It is concerned with how texts represent or conceal the realities of class oppression, economic inequality, ideological control, alienation, and exploitation. It offers a lens through which readers can understand literature as both a product of socio-economic structures and a potential vehicle for revolutionary awareness. Through its emphasis on historical context, material conditions, and class relations, Marxist criticism seeks to unmask the power dynamics embedded in texts and challenge readers to see literature not as a neutral art form, but as a deeply political and ideological tool.

This was a grumble from the peasants that work for the bourgeoisie Edward. They complained about the poor salary they were being paid, yet they were afraid to complain outwardly so as not to be sacked. This is indeed the story of the lower class. A class consciousness. A consciousness that make the oppressed individuals recognize their position within a social and economic hierarchy and develop awareness of their shared oppression. Meanwhile, this consciousness often fosters solidarity among the working class and drive them to resist systemic exploitation. As the poor characters reflect on their hardships and realize the artificial nature of class divisions, they are forced to begin to question the legitimacy of the ruling class. It is through this collective identity that the oppressed gain the insight and courage to challenge their subjugation. Without class consciousness, the working class may remain divided, blaming themselves for structural inequalities. We saw this in the novel when Omoniyi was in a crowded bus going to see his sick bus. The rickety he entered was filled to peasants like him, and when they reached a point, they encountered a long traffic. They saw as a woman was fighting with a police officer, and it was discovered that it was the fault of the police officers. The peasants inside the bus began to vent their anger against the unjust manner with which the people at the helm of affairs was demeaning them and exploiting them through forces like the police. It was captured thus:

"Come dey thief our money every time we pass check-point," the driver of the bus added.

"Dem go they blow their horn and siren, dey whip ordinary person with koboko as if we be malu!"

"Wetin come happen now?"

This question drew everyone's eyes to the scene outside. Omoniyi did not need an answer. It was easy to deduce. The police vehicle had attempted to worm its way illegally through the traffic, and had ended up damaging the woman's car. Instead of cowering in fear, as would have been expected of her, she had erupted. Omoniyi heard the approving sounds from the other commuters and he felt the collective unrest that united the oppressed as surely as he could smell the filthy armpit of the man who sat beside him. Soon people started dismounting from their vehicles. Among them were the smartly dressed and the rascally, all of them with anger in their eyes, challenging the police officers to continue with their assault. Soon the bus driver alighted, too, and so did his conductor and most of the passengers, to join in. (71}

The writer further painted pictures of exploitation. The ruling class profiting from the labours of the working class without fair compensation. Exploitation coloured the narrative of the plot and one of the incidents was with the wife of the bourgeoisie, Edward, her name is Nduesoh. It is pertinent to know that most of the people of the ruling class who exploit the working class in our societies today came from the lower class. They were not wealthy or powerful from the cradle. They inadvertently bump into wealth and power and never looked back from there. They became more wealthy and powerful and hence, start exploiting the lower class, a class where they once belonged. Nduesoh was such an individual. The fact that she did not only come from a poor background, but also was very ugly looking, made her story a very interesting one. Before she married Edward, she was just an ordinary ugly looking undergraduate. But she met Edward and married him and automatically belonged to the ruling class. Since that point she turned her back from the working class, even her family. She wore on the status of the ruling class like it was her inheritance and never looked back to see how the people of the lower class she left behind fared. One day, after being accused by her sister Idara of nonchalance and callousness, she decided to have a tour around the precincts of the lower class and know what was happening there. It was during the course of the tour that she noticed how lucky she had been by marrying a rich white man who altered her status forever. Nonetheless, it was during the same tour that she witnessed what the peasants witness cyclically. She was in her car and was being driven by her driver, Sunday when they met the police force. They were manhandled by the police in spite of her status. After smashing the face of her driver with the head of their gun, they ordered Nduesoh to come down. They did not want to know whose wife she was. They did to her what they did to a common peasant. It was written thus:

Nduesoh placed her hands on the hood of the car and moved her feet apart. She closed her eyes tightly as the rough hands of the officer moved across her body, and cupped her breasts. She felt crude fingers tweaking her nipples before the hands moved down to her waist, her buttocks and her bare legs. Without warning, the hands slide up her dress and the tears she had locked up within her tightly shut-eyes slowly escaped when she felt a thick middle finger wander up, push aside her underpants and wriggle its way through her labia for several seconds. (141)

The above treatment gotten from the police officers is a clear indication of how the government misuse power today. The power that was vested upon them by the people is what they are using against the same people. It is also an indication as to where Nduesoh really belonged to. If she belonged to the ruling class, she wouldn't have gotten that kind of treatment. She was given a bite of what she did to other lower class under her. Nduesoh was exploitative and full of her inherited wealthy status that she did not empathize with the working class. This was seen when she made a scathing remark about the poor. The writer captured it this:

"I wonder what the trouble is this time," Nduesoh said distractedly. She was not interested, but she felt obliged to show some concern.

"There are so many things happening at the moment, Edward responded. "Riots in town, protests in front of government offices. They say that the crime rate has gone up over fifty percent."

"That is poor people's problem," Nduesoh said, "always fighting when they don't have things their way." (88)

The apex of her exploitative character was captured when Omoniyi, who later got a job in Oasis hotel courtesy of his wife Maya's industrial nature. Omoniyi was a fine man and even his impoverished state couldn't fade his beauty. He was every woman's dream. Nduesoh find him attractive the day he was sent to clean her apartment inside the hotel as a cleaner. After beholding him, that day, she made plans to get him and sleep with him using her power. She tweaked the routine of the cleaning time table in order to get what she wanted from Omoniyi:

She inched closer to him and he felt her breath on his face as she stared at him. Omoniyi could not read her. He could not decipher the intense gaze of her eyes. All he could do in the end was look away. But even that, she would not grant him. Omoniyi felt her cold, bony fingers on his chin, directing his eyes back to her face. "Look at me", her eyes now seemed to command.

Omoniyi tried to resist her assault, but he could not fight her off. Her physical strength shocked him. She grabbed him fiercely, and with a determination that surprised him. When their lips met, she held his face and pushed her body closer to his. He tried to take control, to put up a sort of defence, but each time she would not let him, proving to be the more aggressive of the two. He was numb with shock, and after a while he let himself get lost in this new experience; this forbidden territory that was her flesh, her scent and her touch.

She undressed him hurriedly like a first time lover long denied the bliss of coveted solitude. Hungrily, she kissed the hollow between his shoulder and neck, and he had to stifle a scream when he felt her teeth biting his chest. Moments later, they were on the floor, sprawled out on the discarded bed linen he had dropped earlier. He was aware of her battling with the straps that held his trousers together.

Nduesoh mounted him. This was completely new. He tried to roll her over so that he could be on top, but she resisted his gentle manoeuvring by placing a firm hand on his upper body while she moved her pelvis vigorously. Suddenly, he felt the full length of his penis buried deep inside her. (217-218)

This was the highest form of exploitation captured in the novel. That exploitation left a heavy gash of psychological injury in the psyche of Omoniyi; not just because she did not even allow him to enjoy her and rather was the one that enjoyed him, neither was it because of the fact that she left him on the ground when she was sated and him still hard, but because of the meaning of it all: the ruling class can get whatever they want from the lower class, anytime and anyhow they want it and would not care to know how injured they left the lower class by their act. It disturbed Omoniyi that the lower class cannot stand up against the ruling class. The writer put it like this:

Another thing that bothered him was this guilt that had been pricking his heart and conscience ever since he left her. He felt dirty, cheap and used. Abused. And he also now understood the futility of the situation for people like himself and Maya—they were workers and no better than slaves. None of them had full control of their lives. It was easy to imagine that either of them could say an outright 'No' to their masters; there was always going to be that fear that if they stood up for what was right they could lose the little they had. If the white man was to foist himself on Maya and she refused, he could easily let her go and then they would be out on the street. Just thinking of this made him sick. (223)

Thus was the story of the working class throughout the story; no aggression, no resistance, no better days and no light at the end of the tunnel. The wealthy became more wealthy, while the poor never transited from poverty to wealthy. It is still the same today in outlet society. The ruling class know that the working class will remain in the working class. Even any attempt of resistance from the working class will not meet any change or reconsideration from the position of the ruling class; instead they using coercion and when they fail at that, they will use bribery and tips.

The novel understudy is a well crafted display of the unfair gap that exist between the ruling class and the working. The ruling class amplify this gap by working hand in hand with the government so as to snuff out any form of resistance from the working class. It is fair and sad to say that there was no resistance from the oppressed throughout the novel. They allowed the ruling class to soar while they wallow in fear, penury and recycled slavery.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that class struggle and political exploitation are predominant themes in the Nigerian contemporary society. The novel understudy highlights the vast economic and social disparities between the rich and the poor, and how the ruling elite exploit and oppress the vulnerable.

In Jude Dibe's *Blackbird*, the characters of Omoniyi and Maya represent the struggles of the poor, while Edwards and Nduesoh embody the privileges of the rich. Despite Edwards' soft spot for the poor, the novel reveals the entrenched class divide and the ways in which the rich maintain their power and privilege. Nduesoh's strong affiliation with her high-class status underscores the ways in which social status is used to justify exploitation. This research explores the ways in which the ruling elites exploit and oppress the poor and vulnerable. The characters' experiences reveal the entrenched nature of class struggle and political exploitation in Nigerian society. The novel also highlighted the resilience and determination of the working class in resisting exploitation and demanding change.

We found from the research that class struggle and political exploitation are pervasive themes in Nigerian society, as depicted in Jude Dibia's *Blackbird*. The novel understudy highlights the vast economic and social disparities between the rich and the poor, and how the ruling elite exploit and oppress the vulnerable, perpetuating inequality and social injustice. The analysis showed that resistance is a powerful tool in challenging exploitation and oppression, and that collective action is necessary to bring about change. The study also showcased the significance of literature in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes towards class struggle and political exploitation, and highlighted the need for systemic change and challenging the status quo to create a more just and equitable society.

This research arrives that class struggle and political exploitation are deeply ingrained in Nigerian society. The novels provide a powerful commentary on the need for systemic change and the importance of challenging the status quo. By exploring the experiences of characters from different social classes, the novels offer a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of class struggle and political exploitation.

Ultimately, the panacea to this malady of class struggle and political exploitation is to first of all address the pervasive issues of class struggle and political exploitation in Nigerian society, it is essential to promote critical consciousness and collective action among citizens. This can be achieved through education, community engagement, and advocacy for policy reforms that prioritize social justice and equality. Additionally, literature can play a significant role in raising awareness and inspiring action by providing a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives. By amplifying the voices of the working class and the poor, literature can help to challenge dominant narratives and promote a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of power and privilege in society. In other words, creating a more just and equitable society will require a sustained effort to challenge the status quo and promote systemic change.

Therefore, this research suggests that the struggle against class struggle and political exploitation requires a collective effort. The novels highlight the importance of solidarity and resistance in challenging the ruling elite and demanding change. By amplifying the voices of the working class and the poor, the novels offer a powerful call to action for readers to engage with the struggles of the marginalized and to demand a more just and equitable society.

In conclusion, the study of *Blackbird* provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of class struggle and political exploitation in Nigerian society. The novels offer a powerful commentary on the need for systemic change and the importance of challenging the status quo. By exploring the experiences of characters from different social classes, the novels provide a nuanced understanding of the struggles of the working class and the poor, and highlight the importance of collective action in demanding change.

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