

Descriptive Focus as a Semiotic Marker in Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

Godwin Oko Ushie^{[a],*}; Eno Grace Nta^[a]

^[a] Ph.D., Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Descriptive Focus is a technique of rendering fiction whereby (mock) reality is constructed vividly and graphically through the descriptive power of portrayal. A prose writer using this style may zoom his lenses on certain episodes and characters to foreground areas of interest that contribute significantly to the understanding of the theme of the works. Descriptive Focus or Focalization, therefore, not only yields stylistic meaning, but also provides a means of deciphering the ideational dimension of a text. In the novel, *Violence*, focalization on the squalour, destitution and pitiable conditions of the poor masses is so pictorially captured with typified visual, tactile, gustatory, olfactory, auditory and kinaesthetic images that we are tempted to regard the work as fiction. Contrastively, Iyayi portrays the upper class as rich and comfortable and reeling in surfeit while the poor who provide this comfort wallow in want. This paper analyzes this text-forming strategy and reaches the conclusion that the descriptive focus itself is a semiotic marker or a code in developing the ideational content of the novel and in deciphering same by the audience. This evocative power of graphic description reinforces the themes in the novel.

Key words: Descriptive focus; Ideation; Semiotic marker; Typification

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INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of language which a literary writer like Iyayi exploits in the creation of his reality (or mock reality) is displacement. This is the ability of a language to capture events or states removed from the audiences in time and space. Verisimilitude is used in this novel to aid in the creation of mock reality. Verisimilitude is achieved with the sense of being in actual individual things, events, people and places that are described. Mock reality is also achieved by the presence of circumstantial detail in the narration or in description of symbolic scenes and typical characters that are stylistically significant and thematically reinforcing in the fictional world of Iyayi's *Violence*.

In an attempt to speak for the socio-economically deprived and underprivileged class and deplore corruption in Nigeria – both of which are the result of the type of the nation's economic and political system – Iyayi deploys his evocative power of pictorial description to give what Decker and Schwegler (1995) calls “painting a word-picture of something concrete, such as a scene or a person” (p. 361). Such a description may appeal to some or all of the visual, aural, tactile, olfactory and gustatory senses. The moral burden, which he has in the exposition of the social situation, is carried by slanted description of the scenes that capture the deplorable conditions, persons as products of the socio-economic system and ideologies of the bifurcated worlds of the deprived and underprivileged classes. Of course, Marxist literary criticism views the economic system as the base upon which social consciousness, including art, as the superstructure stands. The symbols, metaphors and general imagery, therefore, directly reflect this material reality in the novel's (*Violence*) fictional world. It is instructive to note that Marxist concept of literature is a reflection of material reality; a representation which reflects the class ideology and which directly constrains the choice of metaphors and symbols in a text.

Semiotics studies signs and symbols of all kinds, what they mean and how they relate to the things or ideas they refer to. Semiotic markers in this paper, therefore, are features of the text (the novel, *Violence*) that are distinct and that become meaning makers within the novel. The position of this paper is that descriptive focus itself makes prominent the thematic concern of the novel; hence it becomes a sign or a code, among other codes, in understanding the novel. Note that anything can be a sign provided it is interpreted as signifying something else other than itself (Chandler, 2007, p. 13).

The Universe of Discourse of the Novel (*Violence*)

This novel, (*Violence*) captures the various experiences and situations that inhibit the poor, the deprived and the down-trodden typified by a married couple (Idemudia and Adisa). These experiences and situation work against their realizing their dreams and aspirations. They are so poor that they cannot feed. And to be able to feed, Idemudia sells his blood. Without a stable employment like many others, Idemudia stands in vain waiting for any person who would hire him as a casual labourer. Impelled by pecuniary want, he does just anything to survive. He, like many others, accepts to be hired out at a laughable price or as the last resort, even to sell his blood at a give-away price. Even Adisa is impelled to sell her body to raise money to feed them when her husband who ought to have returned home upon recovery is held up in the hospital.

Sharply contrasting with this is the affluence of the bourgeoisie. This class is typified by Obofun and Queen who amass wealth through bureaucratic fraud and corruption. They have enough to eat and to spare. This class is so shrewd, exacting and exploitative that both the government and the poor masses are at its mercy. The poor masses in their employ are so ludicrously remunerated that they cannot feed their families or meet other needs. The government, also at the receiving end of the barefaced graft of unscrupulous contractors, loses a fortune in contracts. It is so insensitive to the dire needs of the poor – that of providing and expanding health facilities to cope with the teeming cases of disease – that it joins in the fray to build hotels instead providing the much needed facilities, indicative of the social contradictions and social injustice. The poor wonder why hotel building is a priority of government in the face of acute shortage of hospital beds and wards. It is this social reality that is the universe of discourse in the novel, which Iyayi passionately portrays with a powerful descriptive detail.

Semiotic Analysis

Iyayi adopts a descriptive focus, which fits Leech's and Short's (1981) definition as "a fictional technique whereby mock reality interacts with the ideational choices of meaning through which it is portrayed" (p. 180). Here the concern is the description of an event in concrete or abstract terms, in objective or subjective terms. The

description pervading the entire novel focuses on the squalour, poverty, want and hardship of the masses, thereby giving prominence to the fore-grounded image of the poor. Conversely, the description also focuses on the affluence, glut, surfeit, moral depravity, judicial and social injustice of the privileged class (Ushie, 2007, p. 98).

Iyayi utilizes an evocative power of pictorial description of the terrible condition of the poor. To a large extent, the strength of his art lies in capturing graphically the situations that reinforce this theme. The hospital where Idemudia had been taken to was filled with sick people who unfortunately were given inadequate attention. Here, we are presented with a dismal picture that bespeaks neglect, anguish and suffering of the people:

The Ogbe Hospital was an even bigger market of patients than the University Hospital. There were haggard and distraught faces everywhere. Worry had eaten deep into the faces of the majority of them. Wrinkles and cracks were in abundance. It was evident that these were people who had been engaged by life in a terrible and fierce struggle and that they had come out of each bout worse and still more badly battered. Children cried, women wept, everywhere there was an great urgency and paradoxically little activity, a hopelessness that provoked the on-lookers to tears ... These people still struggled and aspired to keep their lean frames of lives going (p. 56). (Emphasis ours).

The visual image of this scenario is typical of other similar ones that focalize on the condition of the poor. For a hospital to be a "bigger market of patients" and abounding in "haggard and distraught faces" who have been "badly battered" evidenced by abundance of "wrinkles and cracks", it is clear that the masses' condition is pitiable and hopeless. The attributive adjectives "haggard", "distraught", "badly battered" and "lean" bespeak of the abject poverty of the masses that are destitute of the basic necessities of life in the midst of plenty. The paradox is that in the midst of so much need – need for more and expanded hospital, need for urgent medical attention by the health personnel – there was "little activity" as intervention. The metaphor, "market of patients", seen against the background of a capitalist society, is an apt one. There is even a suggestiveness of the marketability of this condition, a profit making opportunity for unscrupulous men. Note that metaphors arise from the paradigm of the user or "one's set of beliefs about the world" (Clancy, 1989, p. 24) and here the author is holding up to an unapologetic scorn the capitalist society that has impoverished the masses.

Ironically, just across the hospital fence, the world of the rich side by side the struggling masses is unaffected. In fact, the noise from their unending stream of cars drowns the cries and moans from the hospital:

On the other side of the fence was Sapele Road. The traffic moved on in it in an endless confused stream, horns biting and barking, voices cursing, tyres screeching. These were the Volvos and the Mercedes Benz cars and the taxi and the motorcyclists and the truck pushers and confused argument, leading nowhere (p. 57).

The aural image of this picturesque scene, loaded with apt iconic words (“biting and barking”, “voices cursing”, and “tyres screeching”), produces a cacophony and presents a state of confusion characteristic of a market. This is reflective of a stiff competition, of a capitalist, market – driven economy where the race is for the swiftest, the battle is for the strongest, survival for the fittest and profiteering for the shrewdest and the most unscrupulous. Here, we see a shift in the focalized objects to show the contrast in inequality between the world of the privileged and that of the underprivileged. This scene that bespeaks of stiff competition borders also on the struggle by the latter for survival. And struggle breeds confusion.

Impelled by the need to look for food, many people go out on Sunday, a worship day, to work. In the end, children and other beggars who throng the church street and premises, return with empty plates:

There were many who stood at the side of the road their hands out-stretched or walking along the road, their faces dry, their clothes rough and ugly and torn. They were this mostly, dry, like their faces. Their cheek bones stood out, their eyes were set deeply in their faces, the hunger had eaten out the flesh and dried up the fat ... they thought only of their stomachs, of ants in their brains, the red ants that moved about their heads eating them up slowly and gradually (p. 220). (Emphasis ours).

Even the tactile image of the dismally poor masses in the passage above is distasteful and odious but piteous: their “faces” are “dry”; “clothes [are] rough and ugly and torn”, and “their cheekbones [stand] out”. These people are so neglected as if they are social misfits and the dregs of the society. But the society rests squarely on their shoulders. Conversely, the Commissioner who had come to grace the occasion of silver jubilee celebration of the Ogbé Hospital in the evening with his entourage cuts the picture of a mogul. He is described as “a small plump man in a lace agbada ... in a large Mercedes Benz car”. He is accompanied by mostly a bevy of women “finely dressed in lace and brocade material ... heavy, fat women with oily, polished skins, their eyes scarcely looking at the floor on which they walked. They passed by, smelling every inch a thousand naira, the heavy black hand bag hanging loosely from their shoulder” (p. 159). A combination of the powerful visual image, tactile image (alluding to the “polished skins”) and olfactory image of the commissioner with his entourage (“smelling every inch a thousand naira”), speaks of affluence – a sharp contrast with the general want and pervasive poverty. And this foregrounds the thematic concern of the novel, thereby accentuating the tensions, class conflict and violence which the novel semiotizes.

Even rain contributes its quota to batter the under privileged and hence accentuate their plight. Much of it hampers their economic activities and endangers their lives.

Outside, the flood built up steadily and gradually. Owode Street, like its father, Ekenwan Road, was always over flooded anytime

the rain fell. Two days before two houses had collapsed on the street. A small child had been trapped in one of the buildings under the fallen walls. Fortunately, rescuers including Idemudia, had dug the child out in time. For people who lived in mud houses on Owode Street, there was now another preoccupation, which house would be next to fall (p. 2).

Here, we see a dismal picture that inheres with the piteous condition of the poor: the dwellings of the masses are described as “mud houses”, which “collapse” and “trap” people when there is a rainfall that always causes flood.

Another instance of the provocative display of extravagance on which the writer focalizes is the hotel. Obofun’s hotel symbolically christened “Samson and Delilah” flaunts affluence. Poor Adisa who is lured into Obofun’s hotel room is “overwhelmed by the flagrant display of wealth exhibited here...”. She cannot understand why a “man could live so well while others like her starved to death” (p. 168). And this is what provokes angst and intellectual Marxist thought. And lechery seems to be concomitant with affluence. This can be gleaned from the two passages above. The Commissioner is accompanied by a bevy of women to an official occasion in the evening. Obofun’s obsession with secretly having Adisa who is miles apart from him socially can only be understood in this context. Even Adisa does not understand why Obofun is bent on having her. The name “Samson and Delilah” at the prime order level of meaning means both “flirtatious” and a “devotee”, the latter “suggesting religious prostitution” (Amerding, 1997, p. 333). At the primitive order level of meaning, the names “Samson” and “Delilah” conjure up the allusion to the biblical story of the love affair between Samson (a super powerful Israelite Nazarite) and Delilah (a Philistine woman). Israel and Palestine were arch enemies and Samson was a judge, a deliverer sent to deliver Israel from the oppression of former (Judges, pp. 14-16). But Samson became a lecherous man flirting with Philistine women who became instrumental to his destruction. And so the hotel’s name “Sampson and Delilah” suggests a place of lechery, which is capable of destroying Adisa’s home. And this is where Obofun has lured Adisa to in order to have a fling with her in the guise of helping her.

The physical image, not to talk of the image of the essence and worth of Idemudia created by the writer, is symbolic. He is pictured as one with a gigantic personality. Even his physique is captured in a trope that gives us a penetrating perception of the heroic qualities of Idemudia thus: “He was like a big tree which a gigantic storm had toyed with. The trunk and branches remained but the leaves were gone. The storm had carried them away... [leaving him] so weak and fragile...” (p. 45).

Despite the fact that he is hungry and weak, he is able to single-handedly help rescue Queen’s and Obofun’s car from the ditch in the rain. This endears him to Queen who requests him to organize his colleagues to

off-load three trailer-loads of cement. And this they do defying the rain, almost the whole day. This capacity to work impressively is reinforced by his leadership mien, ability and intelligence. Clerides, Queen's construction engineer, confirms that Idemudia is a hard and clever worker, an organizer. He cuts the image of a very strong-willed union leader who is able to resist the several temptations of seduction and bribery Queen deployed and dangled as baits to him. This larger – than – life image is typical of not just a union leader, but also of Marxist revolutionary character who should rouse others to action to better their lot. He persists in his demands for better treatment for the workers rather than succumb to personal gratifications. And when Queen fails in her bid to douse the revolutionary fire in the union leader and uses intimidation to cow him, he withstands all the antics, even the loss of his job. Idemudia, is in deed a “big tree which a gigantic storm had toyed with” (p. 45).

An authorial comment, which is presented and intended to be understood as focalizing the perspective of Idemudia is loaded with a pragmatic meaning. It is crucial to the ideational meaning of the novel and significant in the narrative syntagm. It poignantly reads:

A	S	P	C
“Always	the ordinary people	did	the entertaining
A	S	P	C
While	the very important people	did	the receiving.
A	S		
Always	the gratitude and the acknowledgement		
P	C	A	
went to	the reception	.	Always”

| (p. 159).

The clause structure is ASPC, ASPC, ASPC, A.

This plaintive complaint is positioned strategically just before the Commissioner for Health with his entourage who has come to grace the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Ogbe Hospital is entertained.

Although the narrative tense used in *Violence* (past tense) does not suggest an eternal truth pervading the capitalist Nigerian society the parallel structure and the lexical choice of “always” suggest it: ASPC, ASPC, ASPC, A. This goes to show how unfairly this class has always treated the poor in their midst. And this is the

reason why the author is speaking for them and provoking some intellectual discourse to rouse people into action, hence the title, *Violence*.

CONCLUSION

A coalescence of pictorial language (literary semiotics) and the semiotics of symbolic characterization corresponding to physical descriptive focus and abstract description, respectively, effectively construct the mock reality in the novel. The so-called mock reality here is the socialist realism that decries the evils of capitalism unleashed on the people and raises the consciousness of the deprived. The audience is made to appreciate the predicament of the underprivileged, courtesy of the evocative power of pictorial language of Iyayi. The beauty of this craft is the fact that the cognition and construction of this realism from the perspective of a character like Idemudia is one that engenders a mass action on the other characters, on the one hand, and provokes socialist intellectual discourse, on the other. Idemudia who starts out as a naïve character, hardly ever knowing the cause of his predicament, not only discovers himself, but organizes and leads others by the end of the novel to press for better working conditions for the workers.

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