

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 10 October 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

## When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining *Violence*

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)



**Festus Iyayi**

Courtesy: <http://odili.net/news/source/2012/apr/29/502.html>

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence

## Abstract

Questioning Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak (in her celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"), Tabish Khair gives importance to the *body*, and writes: "One has to leave space for the body to 'speak' in action and noise—shouting, smashing—and in order to do that one has to leave space for the body to exist outside grammatical language" ("Can the Subaltern Shout (and Smash?)" 14).

In this article I want to show how the Nigerian novelist Festus Iyayi in his novel *Violence*, emphasizes the importance of the *body*, and highlights the *actions* of resistance of the working class, who are exploited by corrupt political leaders and upper class people, in post-independent Nigeria. He makes excellent use of the technique of introducing a play-act session to re-define his notion of *violence*. There is a questioning of the denial of these basic rights to people. This article also directs one's attention to a few essays and two short stories by Chinua Achebe, where he questions the corrupted state of post-independent Nigeria, and highlights the voices of resistance of the common mass. Taking into consideration Iyayi's notion of *violence*, the article aims to highlight how common men become victims of *violence*, in the two short stories of Achebe taken up here.

**Key words:** Body speaks, violence, subaltern, resistance, corruption.

## Introduction



There have been numerous writings highlighting the fact that Africa stands as much in need of change today, as has been during the colonial era. Corruption among political leaders and upper class people has submerged the continent into a mire of misrule. The working class continues to remain in the suffering end. The social, political, individual rights of the common mass lose space, and they are subjected to denigrated living conditions. These issues have been repeatedly dealt with by African as well as non-African writers. They highlight how, after the struggle to gain freedom from European domination, African countries have fallen into the folds of corruption, getting re-colonized by its own men, men endowed with power:

After a youth spent fighting the white man, why should not the president discover as he grows older that his real desire has been to be like the white governor himself, to live above all blackness in the big old slave castle? . . . That is all anyone here ever struggles for: to be nearer the white man. All the shouting against the white men was not hate. It was love. Twisted, but love all the same. . . . (*The Beautiful Ones* 92).

### Focus on Nigerian novelist Festus Iyayi's *Violence*

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body "Speaks": Re-defining Violence

In my article I would like to direct one's attention to the Nigerian novelist Festus Iyayi, whose novel *Violence* re-defines the notion of *violence*, and brings out the manner in which the *body* poses resistance to exploitation, when voices of the working class go unheard; and thereby proceed to take into concern a few lectures and short stories by Chinua Achebe, highlighting the corruption in African societies.

Being inspired by Iyayi's attempt to re-define *violence*, I also endeavour to reveal how *violence* is committed in the incidents underlined in Achebe's stories, and to uphold the need for the *body* to "*speak*."<sup>1</sup>

Iyayi reconstructs the notion of "violence" in combating corruption, bringing to the fore, the acts of violence which the common mass are subjected to, who are deprived of the basic amenities of life, and who constitute the majority of population in Nigeria. He emphasizes the living presence of the body, and voices the actions of resistance of the working class, who are exploited by corrupt upper class people, in post-independent Nigeria. The body "speaks" out in a world where voices of the exploited are stifled. Iyayi has been acclaimed least recognition for his novels. Though his other novel *Heroes* has been much of a success; no such critical attention is paid to his novel *Violence* till date. The lectures and short stories by Chinua Achebe, taken up in this article, reveal the corrupted state of post-independent Nigeria, and question the exploitation of the common mass, urging them to speak out against such "violence."

### **Violence and Decolonization**

Frantz Fanon has made use of the notion of *violence*, to define decolonization in the context of Africa. According to him, the colonized can only find his "freedom in and through violence" (28). The native needs to put an end to the history of colonization, and bring into existence the history of his own nation, the history of decolonization. He propounds the idea that decolonization is a violent process; it is "man re-creating himself" (18). This notion of "man re-creating himself" (Fanon 18) is applicable not only in the context of decolonization but also in the context of exploitation of the common mass at the hands of corrupt upper class people and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Note 1.

national leaders of Africa. Aimé Césaire writes—taking into account the countries of Africa—how, after independence from colonial rule, “the *nation* [has only resulted in being] . . . a bourgeois phenomenon” (22).

Considering the marginalized position of the common mass during and after the colonial period, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also highlighted the issue of the *nation* being a “bourgeois phenomenon,” as she writes:

In the case of the nationalist movement for independence it is clearly pointed out that the bourgeoisie’s ‘interested’ refusal to recognize the importance of, and to ally themselves with, a politicized peasantry accounted for the failure of the discursive displacement that operated the peasants’ politicization (*In Other Worlds* 273).

She raises a very pertinent question: “According to Foucault and Deleuze . . . the oppressed [peasants, tribals], if given the chance . . . *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: . . . *can the subaltern speak?*” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 283). However, her view that the subaltern cannot speak, has been contested by certain theorists. Benita Parry points out that: “. . . Spivak in her own writings severely restricts (eliminates?) the space in which the colonized can be written back into history . . .” (40). Leela Gandhi also questions Spivak’s argument: “. . . while Spivak concluded her provocative essay by categorically insisting that ‘the subaltern cannot speak’ . . . postcolonial studies have come to represent a confusing and often unpleasant babel of subaltern voices” (3).

### **Subaltern Cannot Speak?**

It is significant to take into consideration Tabish Khair’s notion in this context. He critiques Spivak’s idea that the subaltern cannot speak. According to him:

The question “Can the subaltern, speak?” assumes central importance only within an intellectual tradition that has divorced speech from act. . . . the subaltern may not ‘speak,’ but the subaltern can and does act. Acting, however, is also a kind of speech: it is the kind of “underprivileged” speech that is resorted to when the “privileged” speech of words is denied to a subject. (10)

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence

He emphasizes on the importance of the body; and writes how there has to be a “space for the body to ‘speak’ in action and noise—shouting, smashing—and in order to do that one has to leave space for the body to exist outside grammatical language” (14). The body “contests subalternity,” and “organises itself into an opposition to hegemonic discourses and structures inscribing it into subalternity” (14).

### **Body Speaking out “in Action and Noise”**

Being inspired by Khair’s notion of the *body speaking out* “in action and noise,” (14) I would like to direct one’s attention—in my article—to Iyayi’s novel *Violence*, where he highlights how *body* plays an important role in resisting the exploitation imposed upon the working class by the upper class endowed with excess of wealth. I have used the term “subaltern” here, to refer to the working class—in Nigeria—which Iyayi portrays in his novel.

The predicament of the working class in a society where corruption rules the day is revealed in *Violence*. Iyayi highlights the resistance of the working class, to re-colonization by people in the higher echelons of society. The body “speaks” out when voices go unnoticed. The street lies bare before one’s eyes as a space where people *act*, to get back lost respect and lost wealth, which truly belongs to them, which they deserve. The remarkable manner in which Iyayi portrays resistance put up by common people, deserves attention because of its innovative method of portrayal, through a play-act session, where he re-defines *violence*.

Idemudia and Adisa are part of the working class in the city who suffer exploitation despite their resistance. Recalling their days in village, after Nigeria’s independence, Idemudia recollects the days of constant need in the family as well as that of fear. The government has been a terror to them, standing as a force against the people: “. . . policemen were terrors in the villages. Nobody knew exactly what their authority was and therefore what part of it could be challenged. They acted on behalf of the government, not on behalf of the people” (Iyayi 6). In the city, people of the working class lead a more deplorable life. Where Idemudia has to sell his blood to earn meals for his wife and himself, loads of food from hotels are thrown as waste. Iyayi highlights the unemployed common mass, standing in streets in search of some work to earn

money for food, despite getting drenched in rain, and reveals their predicament in a society where wealth and corruption rule the day.

### **No Silent Acceptance**

However, there is no silent acceptance of this unjust suffering:

... 'It's so unfair,' Osaro added. 'One man has enough to eat, in fact so much that he throws some away. Yet here we are, hungry, with nothing to eat.'

'Well, all fingers are not equal. Everything is God's work,' Patrick said.

'*Kai*, it's not God's work, it's man-made,' Omoifo disagreed. (20)

The street becomes a space where one witnesses the distressing condition of the poor in post-independent Nigerian society, while the Freedom Motel—a hotel run by Queen and her husband Obofun—stands as a space where the unemployed are exploited to work with very less wages. One also finds how the wealthy takes advantage of the state of want of the working class, and exploits their bodies to serve their own needs. Obofun forces Adisa to bed when Idemudia falls sick and has to be sent to the hospital, for Adisa has been in dire need of money. She finds the “flagrant display of wealth” (168) in Obofun’s hotel Samson and Delilah, while at the same time witnesses the depressing condition of the hospital where people are lying down on floors, and her husband is considered *lucky* to get a bed, though he has to share it with a man suffering from severe cough and fever. Iyayi brings out her voice against such a deplorable condition of the society: “And so one man could live so well while others like her starved to death. ‘What makes the difference?’ She asked herself” (168). But no one lends an ear to these voices, to attempt to bring a change in society because of such suffering voices. What needs to be done, as the author highlights here, is to act, to speak through action, through body. The play-act that Idemudia sees in the hospital, makes clear to him how everyone of them is a victim of “violence,” and that it is time for them to resist such crudity of the upper class, by their actions. Issues of poor wages, injustice towards labourers, exploitation of the unemployed are raised in the play. A school teacher is brought for trial, being accused of “robbery with violence,” and the audience is awestruck by the manner in which the predicament of the common mass is addressed in the process of the proceedings of the trial in the Court. The lawyer, in addressing the case of Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence

the teacher, raises serious concerns, regarding the social condition of Nigeria: “. . . the plight of the school teacher, the worker, the farmer . . . personifies to a greater or lesser degree the fate of at least fifty million of our citizens . . .” (181). He goes on to argue how the State and the government is responsible for the crimes that the majority of population commit every day.

### **Re-defining the Notion of “Violence”**

Iyayi here re-defines the notion of “violence”. It is not when poor and unemployed people indulge into acts of terrorism that violence is committed; violence results when the State denies basic rights to its citizens:

. . . 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 realize that it is the society, the type of economic and hence the political system which we are operating in our country today that brutalises the individual, rapes his manhood. We often do not realize that when such men of poor and limited opportunities react, they are only in a certain measure, answering violence with violence. . . . The system has already proved that it operates through violence. (185)

The author points out, that when some patients get the privilege of treatment in hospitals with air-conditioned rooms while others lie down on floors, being denied the basic requirement for a bed in hospitals, it is “violence”; when a certain section of people are blessed with enough quantities of food to feed their family as well as their cats and dogs while another section die of starvation, it is “violence”. It is this “violence” that Idemudia and Adisa are victims of. Therefore Idemudia and his group of co-labourers *act* against Queen when she pays them less wages for the job she has offered to them, and form a strike to oppose such injustice. They revolt against the exploitation they are subjected to, and it is now a bodily protest. The act of protest does not entail “violence”; it is only then, that the body “speaks” out against violence which has been repeatedly committed on the working class. The street is used as a space to shout and demand justice, to sit down in strike, to ask for proper wages.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence



The novel reaches a moment of climax when Queen offers her body to Idemudia to bring an end to the strike, and Idemudia's denial to commit adultery leads to the revelation of the adultery which Adisa has committed with Queen's husband Obofun. Quite contrary to what Idemudia has threatened Adisa again and again that he would kill her if she commits adultery, he realizes how Adisa has sacrificed her body, her honour, to save him when he has been in the hospital. He is reminded of how he has also sold blood from his body to procure food for Adisa. The body stands as a site which questions subalternity.

### **Corruption in African Nations**

Chinua Achebe in his lectures, has repeatedly pointed out that: "Within six years of Independence, Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth" ("The African Writer" 82). He reveals how corruption in African societies have been a crucial factor apart from colonization—unveiled towards the end of the colonial rule in Nigeria, and overtly manifested after the power has been transferred from the hands of white colonizers to indigenous colonizers—which leads to the degradation of society: "The British . . . made certain on the eve of their departure that power went to that conservative element in the country which had played no part in the struggle for independence. This would ensure Nigeria's obedience even unto freedom. . . ." (82). He highlights the fact that there is "squarely a failure of leadership" in Nigeria (*The Trouble* 1). Nigeria's change can be accomplished if she discovers leaders who have the will to truly work towards the welfare of the country. Nigerian leaders are unwilling and not responsible enough to take charge of the nation, and therein lies the root of problems which surface today. He unveils the corrupt and disorderly condition of Nigeria, whereby one finds how inefficient politicians have contributed—together with colonization—to a degrading state of the country.

Talking about the Biafran War, Achebe directs one's attention to the destruction caused by the War (1967-1970). In this context he writes:

My feeling towards Nigeria was one of profound disappointment. Not because mobs were hunting down and killing in the most savage manner innocent civilians in many parts of northern Nigeria, but because the federal government sat by and

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body "Speaks": Re-defining Violence

let it happen. The final consequence was . . . the secession of Eastern Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra. . . . It was Britain and the Soviet Union which together crushed the upstart Biafran state. . . . (“What is” 44)

He voices the atrocities committed by political leaders: “Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are *not* what *they* should be,” (*The Trouble* 10) and urges the common mass—in his writings—to protest, as is very well highlighted in some of his short stories.

### **Defining “Violence” in the Short Stories, by Achebe**

I have taken up two short stories by Achebe here, to bring out the plight of common men, who repeatedly are victims of “violence.” Achebe reveals the deep-rootedness of corruption in post-independent Nigeria, overtly delineated in the Biafran Civil War and its aftermath. In “Vengeful Creditor,” one finds how, corruption leading to degradation of society adversely affects the psychology of a little girl.

Achebe highlights the issue of free primary education which has been introduced for a short period of three months, by power-thirsty politicians, to secure their votes from common men.

Just when the little girl Veronica has started to relish the joy of learning at school, it has been stopped, and she has to serve the family and look after the baby of Mr. Emenike, a Permanent Secretary. She is promised school once the baby grows up. Though Mr. and Mrs. Emenike forget about their promise, Veronica does not, and once she tries to kill the child so that she can go to school, for she has always felt that it because she has to take care of the baby that she cannot go to school.

Taking into account Iyayi’s notion of “violence,” I would like to highlight the fact that it is the denial to a girl to provide basic education, the denial to provide her the opportunity to study and instead exploit her poverty to make her work as a nanny, that defines “violence.” Her suppressed desire gets an outburst when she makes an attempt to kill the child. Her body “speaks” out in a world where people turn deaf to the needs of the poor. She gets a harsh beating, and Mr. Emenike tells her mother Martha that: “I had always known that the craze for education

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence

in this country will ruin all of us. Now even children will commit murder in order to go to school” (*Girls* 68-69).

Achebe highlights the mean nature of corrupted politicians and government servants, whose greed to accumulate wealth for their own lavish lifestyles, lead to the denial of free education to children, and instead use them as servants in their households. Martha’s thoughts reveal the real plight of Nigeria, post-independence: “. . . All his [Mr. Emenike’s] children go to school, even the one that is only two years; but that is no craze. Rich people have no craze. It is only when the children of poor widows like me want to go with the rest that it becomes a craze. . . .” (69).

### **The War and Its Aftermath**

Corruption and the Civil War have made Nigeria a more pathetic place to live in, than it has been during the colonial rule. Achebe shows how, not only the War but also its aftermath has led the country to extreme degradation. In the story “Civil Peace,” Jonathan Iwegbu and his family survives the Civil War in Nigeria, but loses one of their children in war. After he returns to Enugu, he finds his bicycle, his house, and the little money that he has saved. With full vigour, he starts his livelihood by selling palm-wine, his wife selling akara balls, and his children mangoes. He painstakingly earns money, which is a blessing to him and his family. However, “the *ex gratia* payment (the *egg-rasher*) he receives for handling in all the illegal Biafran money the family has earned so painstakingly--£200 Biafran becomes £20 Nigerian—and which confirms his belief in a bountiful providence against all the evidence,” (Carroll 157) actually brings him more sorrows; for that very night, thieves plunder and snatch away all that they have earned. Being well-aware of the corrupted condition of his country, Iwegbu has nothing to do but to revert back to his extreme optimism:

“I count it as nothing,” he told his sympathizers, his eyes on the rope he was tying. “What is *egg-rasher*? Did I depend on it last week? Or is it greater than other things that went with the war? I say, let *egg-rasher* perish in the flames! Let it go where everything else has gone. Nothing puzzles God.” (“Civil Peace” 88)

### **Reply to Violence: Faith in Oneself**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence

His reply to the “violence” inflicted on him and his family, first due to the Civil War, and then because of the corrupted state of Nigeria, is his faith on himself, on his ability work to support his family. One witnesses the shattering condition of Nigeria that the after-effects of Civil War has brought into, and there is “little to distinguish ‘civil peace’ from civil war” (Killam 109).

Achebe’s attempt to re-visit the past and unveil the corrupted state of Nigeria after independence, does not only reveal the atrocities committed by politicians towards the country but the common men are also given a space to speak out against the indigenous government servants, who simply re-colonize the country, robbing her of her wealth to fulfill their personal material needs. The repeated “violence” being committed on common men brings out the deplorable condition of society after the colonial rule. The authors Achebe and Iyayi highlight how the body cries and “speaks” out, to reclaim the basic rights of being human.

### **“Where the Rain Began to Beat Us”**

This article brings out the brilliant manner in which Iyayi and Achebe uncover the degrading situation of Nigeria after independence, and vehemently protest against corruption among their own people which has led to the pathetic condition of Africa, under the auspices of indigenous black colonizers. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his writings has repeatedly talked about “this *historic failure of the nation to come to its own*, a failure due to the *inadequacy* of the bourgeois as well as of the working class,” (31) in countries with a history of colonization.

There is a need for the “body” to speak, when voices go unheard. Iyayi emphasizes the living presence of the “body,” and the protestations of the working class. In his re-definition of “violence,” he opens up a space to question the cruelty which upper class people and political leaders inflict on common men. To build a nation which can serve as a better living place for her people, it is very essential to realize the fact, to which Achebe calls one’s attention to: “It is too late in the day to get worked up about it or to blame others, much as they may deserve such blame and condemnation. What we need to do is to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us” (“The Novelist” 44).

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 10 October 2012

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)

When Body “Speaks”: Re-defining Violence

---

---

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

- Achebe, Chinua. "Civil Peace." *Girls at War and Other Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 1972. 82-88. Print.
- . "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause." *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975. 78-84. Print.
- . *The Trouble with Nigeria*. England: Heinemann, 1984. Print.
- . "What is Nigeria to Me?" *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. England: Penguin Classics, 2009. 39-46. Print.
- . "Vengeful Creditor." *Girls at War and Other Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 1972. 50-69. Print.
- Iyayi, Festus. *Violence*. Essex: Longman, 1979. Print.

### Secondary Sources

- Achebe, Chinua. "The Novelist as Teacher." *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975. 42-45. Print.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1988. Print.
- Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe: Novelist, Poet, Critic*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1990. Print.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review P, 1972. Google Docs. Web. 5 Dec. 2010.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999. Print. Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)  
12 : 10 October 2012
- Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)  
When Body "Speaks": Re-defining Violence

- Khair, Tabish. "Can the Subaltern Shout (and Smash?)." *World Literature Written in English* 38.2 (2000): 7-16. Web. 18 Aug. 2010.
- Killam, G. D. *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*. London: Heinemann, 1977. Print.
- Parry, Benita. "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 36-44. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. *In Other Words: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- . "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271-313. Print.
- =====

Anwasha Das, Ph.D. (English Literature)  
The English and Foreign Languages University  
Hyderabad- 500605  
Andhra Pradesh  
India  
[anwasha.english@gmail.com](mailto:anwasha.english@gmail.com)