

Social Inequality in Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* and Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *A Spell of Good Things*

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Abstract

*This paper examines how social inequality is represented in Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* and Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *A Spell of Good Things* through the theoretical framework of social realism. The study investigates how the two novels portray unequal access to wealth, education, political power, healthcare, social opportunities, and institutional protection in contemporary Nigerian society. Social realism is adopted as the theoretical framework because it emphasizes the representation of ordinary life, material conditions, class relations, social contradictions, and the effects of political and economic structures on individuals and communities. The qualitative textual-analysis method is employed in the study. The study finds that Soyinka and Adébáyò present social inequality not as an isolated personal experience but as a systemic condition sustained by several factors, including political corruption, institutional failure, class privilege, economic exploitation, and the abuse of power. In *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth*, inequality is represented through the privileges enjoyed by members of the political, religious, economic, and professional elite, while the poor and socially vulnerable bear the consequences of institutional corruption and moral collapse. In *A Spell of Good Things*, inequality is demonstrated through the contrasting experiences of Eniola's impoverished family and Wuraola's relatively privileged family. The study concludes that both novels use realistic characterization, social contrast, political satire, multiple perspectives, and detailed representations of everyday hardship to expose the unequal distribution of power and opportunities in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Social inequality, social realism, class, corruption, institutional failure, privilege, poverty*

Introduction

Many African societies today are confronted with a lot of challenges ranging from poverty, disease, illiteracy and unequal distribution of resources. In every corner of post-colonial African state, there is the struggle by a large number of people to break evens and live decent lives. This struggle often creates and places one group against another with one living a comfortably privileged life with the people's resources while the majority struggle from the lowest ebb, completely cut off from life's opportunities. Lanre Adata arguing about the existence of these two classes in the society quoted a 2022 reflection on Nigeria by a novelist

and satirist, Elnathan John who argued in an engagement of tweets that, “there is something about poverty in Nigeria existing close to wealth. You can see it but you can’t touch it. Someone is starving on the left, someone buying his girlfriend a house in Dubai on the right.” This position collaborates Marx and Engels concept of societies splitting into two classes of upper and lower classes. Contemporary African writers employ the literary skills of satire and protest to inform the society about issues around the post-colonial state of mis-governance, unethical politics and social inequalities that betray human dignity and weaken people’s economic rights and choices. Olowonmi noted that, “within the context of social realism, some African writers are portraying greed and tomfoolery of the elites as generating significant collateral damage, resulting into the unbridled propagation of poverty, disease and human suffocation denying the masses productive lives” (120).

Social Inequality

Social inequality is one of the most prominent problems facing postcolonial African societies. Judijanto noted that “it relates to differences in social status, education, and opportunities held by individuals or groups in society. It includes issues such as racial discrimination, gender differences, and gaps in opportunities to participate in political and social life” (65). This means that social inequality is expressed through unequal access to wealth, education, healthcare, employment, political participation, justice, and social opportunities. According to Gunderson, social inequality “refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges among individuals and groups within a society” (1).

Wole Soyinka’s *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* and Ayòbámi Adébáyò’s *A Spell of Good Things* are important contemporary Nigerian novels that examine the relationship between social inequality and the abuse of power. The two novels clearly portray societies in which access to opportunities is strongly influenced by class position, wealth, family background, political connections, and institutional privilege.

The two novels are therefore suitable for this study because they reveal how political and economic structures intersect to influence individual lives of the people especially those at the lower ladder. Using Social realism as its theoretical framework, this paper examines the ways Soyinka and Adébáyò represent class divisions, unequal access to opportunities, institutional failure, political exploitation, and the consequences of inequality for individuals and communities.

Social Realism

Social realism is a literary theory and artistic movement concerned with the realistic representation of society, particularly the experiences of ordinary people and socially disadvantaged groups. It focuses on the relationship between individuals and the social, political, and economic conditions that shape their lives. Social Realist literature examines class relations, poverty, exploitation, unemployment, political oppression, institutional failure, and other social problems. Social realist writers therefore portray characters as members of particular social groups whose experiences are shaped by material conditions.

Jha and Mukherjee identified ten approaches of social realism in a literary work. According to them:

There is a socio-political perspective, the action is in the contemporary setting, the plot is natural, characters are plausible and the events are common place. The controversial issues and problems of society are the subjects of debate and concern. There is truthful and complete depiction of the society with point to point resemblance, and without any fancy, ornamentation and exaggeration. No explanations, solutions or instructions are conveyed to the

readers/audience. Character is more important than action and plot. Ethical choices are often the subject, attention is focused on bourgeoisie, and diction is natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic. (669)

Majority of these aspects of social realism as outlined above are evident in Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* and Ayobami Adebayo's *A Spell of Good Things*.

In analysing social realism in Nigerian novels, Melvinia posited that:

Social realism as a concept in Nigeria literature is aimed at reflecting real life experiences. It is a generally accepted principle that challenges the accuracy of an existing social order and if found lacking proffers a revolutionary alternative. It is a doctrine for change which aims at reconstructing and re-engineering the society through the medium of literature. (2)

Soyinka and Ayobami portray inequality in their novels by presenting the experiences of the working class and the ordinary people in the society. This social realist view of the classes justifies Marx and Engels position that, "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other" (36). In trying to portray how social realism portrays the fate of the poor, Ezenwamada noted that "social realism is a style of art, fiction, movies and plays which describes the daily life of workers and poor people" (2).

Social Inequality in Soyinka's *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth*

One of the major expressions of social inequality in *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* is the unequal distribution of political power. The novel exposes a society in which political offices are used as instruments of personal enrichment rather than platforms for public service. Political leaders and their associates enjoy access to wealth, influence, security, and institutional protection, while ordinary citizens experience poverty and neglect. Soyinka demonstrates this through the extravagant lifestyle of public officers at the expense of the people's common wealth in the attendance of a governor to an award night.

It happened that this expectant winner, a governor from the north of the River Benue, Usman Bedu, had turned up in a motorcade of thirty 'luxury buses' and motorized caravans. These ferried his entire harem of twenty-seven wives, plus extended families totaling three hundred and eighty-five, the state Cultural Troupe including acrobatic horsemen with glittering lances and attires straight from the Arabian Nights. (20-21)

The political elite in the novel is portrayed as possessing the power to influence public policies and control national resources. Their privileged position enables them to benefit from institutions that are expected to serve the citizenry. Political authority therefore becomes a source of economic advantage that is used against the people. The political leadership portrayed in the novel use state power to frustrate the smooth airlifting of one of the nation's intellectual assets, Duyole Pitan Payne, for medical attention because he was considered an enemy of the government. This is because he was very critical of government policies especially those, he considered a waste of the state's resources. State institutions that are supposed to cater for all citizens were manipulated to frustrate the effort to fly him abroad for medical attention after becoming victim of state sponsored assassination attempt. "Mr. Fixer, it seemed was nowhere to be seen. Missing also were the flight permits and accompanying documents, a part of which he, Menka, had checked then celebrated the previous night" (343). The novel's ironic title emphasizes the contradiction between official claims of national progress and the realities of social suffering. The idea of "the happiest people on earth" becomes a form of political irony because the society is characterized by corruption, insecurity, exploitation, and institutional decay. The title exposes the tendency of

political leaders to promote positive national images while ignoring the conditions experienced by ordinary people. Happiness in the text becomes a project of the government where state resources are used by a few family members who turn common resources to personal gains, ignoring the wellbeing of the people.

Not many nations, for instance, could boast of a ministry of Happiness. Yet, this was an innovation that came from one of the most impoverished states within the federated nation. Its pioneer minister known as commissioner was the spouse of the imaginative governor, while other members of the family and relations filled the various positions generated by the unique cabinet installation ... the celebration of a single title was often sufficient to implement the annual budgetary plans of other nations. (12)

From a social realist perspective, the political elite in the novel represent a dominant class that controls social resources as evident in Nigeria today. Their power is maintained through political connections, institutional influence, and access to wealth. The poor, on the other hand, possess limited opportunities to influence the political system. In such societies as evidenced in the novel, the wealthy benefit from the corruption of public institutions because they possess the connections necessary to access opportunities. Poor citizens, however, experience the consequences through inadequate social services and economic insecurity. Social inequality is therefore reproduced through institutional corruption. People cannot access health care, and many institutions cannot serve the people because of poor infrastructure. This is demonstrated in attempts to stabilize Duyole when he was bombed by suspected state actors. The hospitals had no drugs needed to stabilize him. "The critical drug is not in our Pharmacy... I was on my way from the store. We do not have even one ampule... One drug was on the tongue of everyone but the hospital had none. Phone calls to sister institutions, the university hospitals all over the nation, always beginning with the closest. It all ended in absence" (337-338). Religion is also used as a weapon of promoting inequality in the novel. It emerges as one of the major issues exposing unequal standing of people across classes in the text. Religious institutions are expected to provide moral guidance and social support, but religious leaders in the novel use spiritual authority to gain wealth and influence. The principal culprit in this grand deceit is a con artist packaged as a religious leader, Papa D. His place of worship is a theater of exploitation and manipulation of the people. The above issues are revealed in the interaction between a female character simply identified as the Seeker and the satirized religious leader, Pa Davina at a place called the EKUMENIKA, another satirical representation of Nigeria's National Ecumenical Centre, a non-denominational Christian worship center where all Christians fellowship in Abuja

The novel captures the exploitative tendencies of the Church and its leaders in the interaction between the ministry's head, Pa Davina and the seeker: "The seeker felt thankful that her sister had faithfully contributed her tithes to Papa Davina's ministry. One did not earn a private audience with papa D until at least after a year of attending the open services that he conducted below for all and sundry, and with an unbroken record of 'tithing'" (9).

Similarly, insurgency, which is the major source of the people's pain, becomes big business for the powerful in religious houses and government who trade in the body parts of victims of bomb blasts, accidents, kidnappings and medical operations. "Like the cost of clipped toe-nails, especially if the patient ended up dead. Or menstrual pads-you'd be astonished at cleaners, even nurses who scavenge those things from disposal bins, offer them to the highest bidder"! (207). The above sacrilegious complicity by medical personnel, betraying the trust and confidence of the ordinary people to appeal to the wealthy, exposes the reality in contemporary Nigerian society. The human body which should be revered becomes a commodity on display in human body part shops.

Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth therefore reveals the relationship between wealth and power and how economic privilege provide access to political influence. It also shows how political influence creates opportunities for further economic advantage, the result being a system in which inequality becomes self-reinforcing.

Social Inequality in Adebayo's *A Spell of Good Things*

In *A Spell of Good Things*, Ayobami Adebayo exposes the abject penury and dislocation that makes up the social reality of the majority of people in contemporary Nigeria. The novel presents a vivid exploration of contemporary Nigerian society through the social realist approach. It depicts the everyday realities of life which creates conditions that foists inequality in the society. The novel particularly exposes inequality in the struggles and aspirations of the ordinary people as seen in the life of Eniola and the systemic failures that lead to the struggles of the ordinary people as evident in policy inconsistency and declining institutional standards and integrity. Several other issues expose inequality in the text which will be discussed below. Using the multi-perspective narrative technique, the novel demonstrates the effects of class contrast and unequal life opportunities. Ayobami presents two families represented by Eniola and Wuraola, whose experiences reveal the contrast between privilege and poverty. The novel's multiple perspectives allow readers to observe how social class influences access to education, employment, security, and personal development. Wuraola belongs to a family with greater economic stability and social influence. She does not have to worry about food and accommodation. This is evident in the nature of their house, "The house itself was set back from the gate, leaving room for a lawn wide enough to host novelty football matches and an artificial waterfall that was turned on only when her father has special visitors" (96). This gives an insight into the palatial lifestyle of the Wuraola's family. Even as she experiences gender expectations and family pressure, she possesses opportunities that are unavailable to Eniolá. Her education and professional position provide her with a level of social mobility and security.

Eniolá, however, grows up in a family affected by economic hardship. His father's loss of employment creates serious difficulties for the family. Their financial situation affects access to education and threatens the future of the children. Eniolá's experiences demonstrate how poverty can restrict personal development. Contrast is apparent even in the kind of residence affordable to the two families. In Eniola's house, "The landlord had never bothered to paint the two-story building where Eniola's family rented a room on the ground floor. Like most houses on their end of the street, its walls were an accidental mix of concrete grey and mould" (115). The contrast between Wuraola and Eniolá supports the social realist argument that life opportunities are influenced by material conditions. The two characters do not begin from the same social position, and their choices are shaped by unequal circumstances. Wuraola is educated and becomes a medical doctor while Eniola battles with school teachers, evading daily punishment for non-payment of school fees until he finally finds himself joining a group of thugs sponsored by an elected member of parliament, (Fesojaiye).

Education is one of the major areas through which Adébáyò represents social inequality. Education is often regarded as a means of social mobility, but the novel demonstrates that access to education depends on economic resources. Eniolá and his sister possess academic potential, but poverty threatens their educational progress. Their family's inability to pay school-related expenses limits their opportunities. The problem is not a lack of intelligence or ambition but a lack of financial resources.

Eniola could not bring himself to remind his parents about his school fees. In all the terms and years since his secondary school education began, he'd had to tell them several times that he would be sent away from school if they did

not pay up within a month, two weeks, a day. Each term, his lips grew heavier and heavier whenever he wanted to discuss his school fees with his parents. (129)

The novel therefore challenges the belief that education is equally available to everyone. Students from wealthy families possess advantages because their families can provide school fees, learning materials, stable living conditions, and social support. Poor students may be forced to abandon their education or seek alternative means of survival the way Eniola ended up doing dirty jobs for politicians just to assist his family to feed. Adebayo's representation of education reflects the wider reality of social inequality. When access to education is determined by wealth, poverty is reproduced across generations. Children from disadvantaged families may remain economically vulnerable because they are denied the opportunities necessary for social advancement. The loss of employment is a major cause of hardship in Eniolá's family. His father's unemployment affects the economic and emotional stability of the household. The family's difficulties demonstrate that unemployment is not merely an individual problem; it affects relationships, education, personal confidence, and future aspirations. The fate and fortunes of Eniola's family changed dramatically when his father lost his teaching job to a unilateral government policy withdrawing some subjects from the curriculum. "On the radio, one of the governor's aides explained that most of the teachers who had been retrenched taught subjects like fine arts, Yoruba, food and nutrition, Islamic and Christian religious studies, that would do nothing for the nation's development" (43). The family's economic decline reveals the fragile position of many working-class households. A single economic crisis can transform a relatively stable family into one experiencing serious deprivation. Without adequate social protection, unemployment produces insecurity and desperation. This is opposed to families entrenched in the corrupt leadership like Wuraola's family who cannot be affected by such policies. Her father is a rich business man who made his fortune from a link with the military hierarchy in the state. He is a god father who sponsors candidates in expectation of more business patronage. His measured response when his friend called on him to support his governorship ambition better explains his standing.

I must think of what it would mean for me and my business if I switch camps now. It's one thing for me to pull back from contributing to Fesojaiye's funds, it's another thing to be visibly in support of another candidate. That man could decide to block anything my company wants to do in Abuja. All plum ministry contracts could be gone just like that. (106)

This clearly portrays Adebayo's message that wealth and opportunities are not equal and are also influenced by factors outside of merit.

Adebayo also examines the relationship between poverty and political exploitation/marginalization of young people. Eniolá's economic vulnerability makes him susceptible to political manipulation. His involvement in political activities is not simply the result of personal irresponsibility. It develops within a social environment in which legitimate opportunities are limited. Political actors exploit unemployed and disadvantaged young people by offering temporary benefits in exchange for loyalty and participation. The poor become instruments in political struggles, while the powerful remain protected from the consequences of political violence and instability. Eniola and his friend Saamu are ready victims of this exploitation. They are both set out to liberate their families from poverty when they fall prey to political exploitation.

Saamu was saving up money to set his own apartment so that all his younger brothers and sisters could move in with him. He lived with an uncle who had taken him in after his parents died in an accident when he was ten. Now well

over eighteen he had seen his siblings only once since all four of them were distributed across the country among relatives (350)

Eniola and Saamu are products of a failed system which in turn exploits their situations for selfish gains. Both of them underage, are recruited into a hit gang of a governorship aspirant and given an assignment immediately:

we have a special assignment this night, direct order from Honorable. Rashidi, you remember that foolish professor? The one that wants to be governor?... the professor and that his Otunba friend, enh? Honorable wants the two of them to know that the lion is the cats senior father... Honourable wants us to use that Otunba to send a warning to the stupid professor. We have information that Otunba is one of the major people funding the professor's campaign. So we go for him first. If professor doesn't hear after that, we move closer to home with our warning (357)

Social inequality in *A Spell of Good Things* is not limited to class. The novel also examines gender inequality. Wúràolá possesses education and professional status, but her social position does not completely protect her from patriarchal expectations. Her family's concern with marriage despite her accomplished educational and professional standing demonstrates the pressure placed on women to conform to traditional expectations. Women may be judged according to their marital status and their ability to satisfy family and social expectations. Their education and professional achievements may be considered less important than marriage. Eniola's mother and Wuraola's mother face life's challenges differently. They are of the same gender and mothers but life places them in different classes, changing their experiences and challenges in life. It is based on Marx and Engel's concept of societies splitting into two groups of rich and poor that Ayobami presents these two mothers in the novel. In fact, the two mothers, Mama Eniola and Yeye (Wuraola's mother) belong to different worlds of lack and wealth. One mother needs not worry about money and the other mother is disgraced to the point of begging to feed her children. Wuraola's father supports his family, while Eniola's father is castrated by the society and rendered useless to his family.

Adebayo has so perfectly projected this class hybridity in the novel such that the reader is taken into the deep pains of poverty, lack and hunger in one moment and in the next, he is beaming in the aroma and presence of good and abundant food, affluence and wealth. Mama Eniola for example became the bread winner of her family, "before she left the house, his wife had told him the children were to have garri for lunch. He rose from the bed and went to the food cupboard He measured out the garri, just one cup, not even enough to graze the measuring tin's rim. This was all his wife had managed to scrounge together. She was out again now, probably searching dunghills for used plastics and bottles she could resell" (53). This particular scenario moved Baba Eniola to tears, "what triggered those tears? A realization that all his education had been for nothing and all his choices must have been wrong if they led him to a moment when his wife was wading through refuse for other people's cast aways? The knowledge that if they found an old T-shirt, it would be washed so that Eniola could have some new clothes to wear?" (54). In contrast, Yeye's (Wuraola's mother) birthday attracted a lot of gifts and the preparations for the birthday alone could be a dream life for the Eniolas: "Wuraola's aunties descended on Wednesday. They came bearing complaints and coolers brimming with fried meat, live goats and exclamations, jars of Aboniki Balm, rebukes and bags of rice" (118). This clearly exposes the gap in social standing between the two families who have found themselves in different classes by fortune, not hard work or any form of merit.

Conclusion

This study has examined social inequality in Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth* and Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *A Spell of Good Things* using Social Realism as a theoretical framework. The analysis has shown that both novels present inequality as a structural problem connected to political corruption, class privilege, institutional failure, economic exploitation, and lack of equal access to opportunities. The social realist approach has proven to be an effective framework in understanding the two novels because of its ability to connect individual experiences to wider social and systemic issues. The characters' struggles go beyond their personal problems. They are determined by wider issues like political institutions, economic conditions, class relations, and cultural or family expectations.

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