

Religious bigotry and military despotism in Olukorede S. Yishau's *In the Name of Our Father*

Ibrahim Nureni*, Nigerian University of Technology and Management, Lagos-Nigeria <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1605-1748>

Suggested Citation:

Nureni, I. (2020). Religious bigotry and military despotism in Olukorede S. Yishau's *In the Name of Our Father*. *Global Journal of Sociology: Current Issues*. 10(2), 32–39. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gjs.v10i2.4539>

Received July 15, 2020; revised September 20, 2020; accepted November 15, 2020.

Selection and peer review under responsibility Prof. Dr. Mustafa Gunduz, Cukurova University, Turkey.

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Abstract

Although religious bigotry and military tyranny have been overtly delineated by the first and second generation novelists, especially the ones who witnessed the military maladministration in Nigeria, the contemporary Nigerian novelist also attempts to contribute and provide with more resources on the rights of the people and the liberty to be free from the imposition of religious and/or political doctrines that are socially constructed upon the people. In the Nigerian context, religious and political/military despotism are considered to go hand in hand since their ideologies formulate part of the hegemonic, determinist superstructures that push the masses to be at the corner of receiving end. Within Nigeria's copious output of literature written in English, this paper, using Yishau's debut novel *In the Name of Our Father* as a case study, attempts to develop a bird's eye view of the religious and military issues in Nigerian society. Adopting the praxis of Marxist critical thinking, this paper acknowledges how the author, Yishau, allows his intellectual capacity in the form of a novel to direct his writing in relation to the religious bigotry and military despotism that spearheaded Nigerian society, most significantly in the military regime between 1966 and 1999. The outcome of this paper is that Yishau has accorded a pedigree for himself on the shore of Nigerian novels by leveraging critical attention to unfold the thematic precepts of religious bigotry and military despotism in his first literary, textual appearance.

Keywords: Religious bigotry, military despotism, Nigerian novel.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Ibrahim Nureni, Nigerian University of Technology and Management, Lagos-Nigeria
E-mail address: inurein@yahoo.com

1. Preamble

Yishau's (2018) novel *In the Name of Our Father* problematises the atrophying military regimes and the engagement of religious indoctrination which played a material role in Nigeria between 1966 and 1999. The novel offers an engaging opportunity to weigh and analyse, not with the objective of muckraking, but to understand how past experiences can aid in restructuring Nigeria positively. Due to the fact that political despotism and religious bigotry are part of the core thematic fibres in Nigerian literature from the first generation up to the present, Yishau shows his unflinching determination to outline in a novel form the political and religious drawbacks in Nigeria, thereby unravelling the egoistic susceptibilities of those who are entrusted with the mandate of leading the masses, either politically or religiously. Drawing inspiration from the less-than-stellar military history of Nigeria, the novelist pokes at the follies of men—those people who demonstrate a preference for power and selfish interest over humanitarian services.

The underlying strength of Olukorede S. Yishau's novel lies in his strategic thinking to be a paradigm changer by using literature as a journalistic medium to broadcast the social and political disorder as well as promote human rights in Nigeria, as seen in the case of Justus Omoeko who is resentfully tortured by military rulers. Although Yishau's work has not received much literary attention from critics and theorists, one can assert that his novel is somewhat aligned with some thematic models—such as corruption, military torture, religious hypocrisy and other social-cum-moral disillusionments—in Nigerian novels. Just like other Nigerian novelists do, Yishau uses his characters to match the real-life situations he presents in his fictional narrative. Through their characteristic roles, we understand the absurdities, abnormalities and socio-political debasement inherent in the military regime.

In a graphic and oblique style, Yishau regurgitates the motivation of Nigerian writers—Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Festus Iyayi and the like—who have expressed within the novel form the experience of the religious followers who have been brainwashed by their religious mentors. In the process, a dialogue ensues about politics, religion and leaders of both factions and their relationship with their followers. Yishau does this following the assertion of Adeoti (2003, pp. 4–33) that: 'the realm of fictional literature also bears the imprints of decades of military rule [...] Through their arts, writers participated in the general struggle to end military dictatorship as well as expose the social decay in Nigeria'. In line with this and in a pragmatic sense, *In the Name of Our Father* acts on the literary platform to expose the lust for materialism, brutality towards activists and religious exploitation and unfair treatment.

From a Marxist dialectic, the novel relates to Soyinka's (1964) *The Trials of Brother Jero*. As Soyinka's text reveals the materialist ideology of religion, Yishau's narrative, as the new breed of Nigerian novels, reiterates the theme of religious commoditisation. Soyinka's text focuses on the life of Brother Jeroboam, a Christian and profit-minded prophet, whose aim was to fill his pockets with the wealth of his disciples, using deceit to achieve his goal. The text shows how Jeroboam manipulates government officials (the military ones, to be precise) and his followers such as Chume. Similar to Soyinka, Yishau also cites examples of the pseudo-religious leaders and the government officials who seek aid from religious leaders in their power struggle, notably in the case of the head of state, General Idoti, who forsakes the welfare of his countrymen to attend to Pastor Jeremiah. Based on the thematic connection between the two, it could be argued that Yishau's novel is a sequel to the works of first and second generation writers—such as Wole Soyinka and Festus Iyayi—who portray the sociopolitical and religious issues in the society.

Although many critics may argue that Yishau's novel *In the Name of Our Father* dwells on the military regime, which has little or no bearing on the present situation in Nigeria, this study nevertheless contends that the nebulous and unfriendly contemporary environment is to some extent a result of the compounding issues of the past. The systemic and delicate issue of religion not only has an influence on the past, it is also a trending discourse in contemporary Nigeria. In this regard, Yishau

is careful in his portrayal of the disciples of Brother Jeremiah, seeing them as a microcosm of the larger society.

2. Military (Mis) rule versus religious indoctrination: a Marxist perspective

Using the story-within-a-story technique, Yishau's novel contains two narratives: the experiences of a writer and journalist, Justus Omoeku, who is brutalised by military dictators; and the narrative of a dubious pastor, Jeremiah—also known as Alani—which is encapsulated in the manuscript of Justus Omoeku titled 'Angels Live in Heaven'. The novel generally deploys first person narrative to reveal the military disillusionment in Nigerian society but in the story within the main story, the manuscript 'Angels Live in Heaven' delivers the theme of religious indoctrination from the omniscient point of view. The manuscript not only offers some hidden religious perspectives; it also explicates how these religious leaders present themselves as the rightful custodians of Christianity. It is in this same manuscript 'Angels Live in Heaven' that the character Justus largely draws the cross-boundary scope of religion and politics in Nigeria. In a larger scope, the novel *In the Name of Our Father* evinces the mutual relationship between religious and political administrators and how the ideologies are enforced upon the people. The novel grants itself the will to thrash out the issue of religious irresponsibility and how the leaders are acquainted with wealth acquisition.

When Marx and Engels (1975) describe religion, they consider the doctrine of Christianity which emphasises on the eternal gratification in heaven as a ploy by the ruling class to control the masses and make them submit. Religion prevents the masses from revolting against the ruling power in which the religious leaders fall under. In the manuscript 'Angels Live in Heaven', we could understand that Justus's target is to free man from the enslavement of Christianity from the religious tyrants. As a result, the revolutionary fervour of the Marxist ideology on the side of the peasant resonates conspicuously in Yishau's *In the Name of Our Father*. The narrative addresses the principal predicaments of the peasantry under the hand of the military juntas. In this vein, one could sum up that Nigeria's military administration excelled in all forms of dehumanisation. Observing this, Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ezenwa Ohaeto and Tanure Ojaide resisted the dictatorship by writing in English, pidgin and indigenous languages. It is not far-fetched to say that Yishau's *In the Name of Our Father* joins the league of literature that opposed the dictatorship.

In the study of Marxism, two opposed entities spin around the general idea of class struggle: the rich (the oppressor) versus the poor (the oppressed). They represent conflict between human forces: the subjugator and the subjugated, the oppressor and the oppressed. Although, Marx's conception of class struggle centres on economic values and the means of production, this paper argues that religion as a tool for capitalism produces class struggle. The end result of this class stratification is a society or system where some people subjugate and exploit others. In line with this, the approach of Marxist literary theory from the viewpoint of Marxist forerunner, Karl Marx is best described by Habib (2005, p. 528) as follows:

Marx's main objection to capitalism was that one particular class owned the means of economic production: 'The bourgeoisie... has centralised means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands'. The correlative of this is the oppression and exploitation of the working classes: 'In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed; a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital'.

In any political entity or state, such as Nigeria, the social scale or the class struggle of the society proposed by most Marxist critics means that the upper classes receive special treatments while the lower classes—those at the bottom of the social scale—remain mistreated. In the fictional work *In the Name of Our Father*, the novelist devotes the intriguing chapter 'Living with General Iya' to a discussion of the metrics of the social scale. In the chapter, the living condition of two prisoners

negates Marxist principles, which propose equality and revolution to bring about a classless society (Habib, 2005). Yishau's novel is not only a revolutionary critique of class struggle or capitalist society; it is also concerned with the need for social change in light of what Yishau sees as injustice and oppression caused by the military leaders. Citing the living condition of Justus Omoeku and General Iya, Yishau unfolds the dichotomy between the two social classes through contrast. Being a member of the lower class, Omoeku is brutalised and tormented in the prison by both soldiers and 'the unfriendly mosquitoes'. However, although prison authorities abuse Omoeku, General Iya—a member of the upper class—is given preferential treatment. When transferred to the general's ward, Omoeku has this to say:

My room was a paradise compared to where I was coming from. It has a 4 by 4 bed, a table fan, an air-conditioning system which I later found out had been disconnected, and a one-seater chair. As I was left alone in the room, I looked forward to new experiences in this executive prison. I was in high spirits that day. It was exactly a week since I was moved into this guest house, which hitherto was for General Iya alone. The change of environment had really done me a world of good. Although we were not free in the real sense of freedom since there were at least 20 soldiers keeping watch over us, yet I could not but feel free considering where I was coming from (Yishau 2018, p. 210).

From the foregoing, one can observe that the novel recounts a story that describes the power of military players. Justus's suffers in prison because of his social class while General Iya receives less brutal treatment. Their experiences show the element of favouritism and preferential treatment among the two scales.

The novel highlights the highly structured and hierarchical nature of military force—evident in the relationship between the senior and the junior officers. Based on the hierarchical model, the junior officers adhere to the decision of senior officers whether they want to or not. This demarcates the bourgeoisie from the proletariat in a capitalist society, as the bourgeoisie (senior officers) determine the ideology and formulate the principles that govern the society. The working classes (the junior officers) follow the guidelines and principles of their masters without question. In *In the Name of Our Father*, the military hierarchical structure appears in a phone conversation between junior officer Biliaminu and his superior officer. The former keeps the tone of admission without questioning the instruction or principles of the latter:

Just then, the phone in his office rang and he picked up. I did not know the person on the other end. I just heard Biliaminu, saying 'Yes sir...everything is under control...I'll do as you wish sir...consider everything done sir' (Yishau, 2018, p. 176).

Still with the idea that Nigeria's military regime shaped and formulated the ideologies of the society and the sort of news to be disseminated, the novelist lights up the use of media as a propagandist mechanism to deceive the masses. This is revealed in Justus's lamentation at the prison: 'I was sad for our country each time I read the newspapers and the magazines, especially when I read new publications which obviously were being funded by the regime to twist the reality on the ground' (Yishau, 2018, p. 199).

It is noteworthy to understand that military dictators do not operate in isolation. All military regimes around the globe have their own civilian acolytes who do not only bootlick the profoundly repugnant government but at the same time are accomplices in distressing the masses. The narrative affords us with the opportunity to read through the relationship between military and religious leaders concerning the tormenting temperament of the masses. In this sense, the brutality the journalist, Justus, encounters comes as a result of his manuscript 'Angels Live in Heaven' which exposes religious insipidity in the country thus:

Until that day it never occurred to me that there was any link between my time in jail and my novella Angels live in heaven (sic). It never crossed my mind that my stint in prison had anything to do with the fetish prophet who lied and committed atrocities in the name of

the Father A young man...revealed to me that it was my refusal to co-operate with them by insisting on publishing that novel ANGELS LIVE IN HEAVEN, that made the Prophet use his contact with General Idoti to implicate me in the coup plot (Yishau, 2018, pp. 226–227).

In relation to the struggle of Justus to liberate the people from religious exploitation, Olaniyan and Quayson (2007, p. 101) describe a very interesting phenomenon which is akin to the character's action: 'the dominant conception of literature is as a pathfinder for the society, a deconstructive searchlight of truth against all the dark burdens that circumscribe the ability of the community to achieve its best and realise its finest aspiration'. In this scope, the character Justus attempts to use literature as 'a deconstructive searchlight of truth' to bail out or illuminate the 'dark burdens' of the people from the hand of religious oppressors.

3. Religious frivolity: exploitation and commoditisation

To conduct a realistic and graphic portrayal of themes of religion and military despotism, the text *In the Name of Our Father* by Yishau can be viewed from diverse theoretical perspectives: Post-colonialism, Marxism, Realism and Historicism, and a league of others. As discussed in the introduction, this paper adopts the Marxist ideologies reflected in the narrative. In the praxis of Marxism, the words 'exploitation', 'commoditisation' and 'materialism' are reiterated to describe people, systems or societies that exist in an economically asymmetrical society. Marxists believe this inequality can be accounted for by the inequitable or unjust distribution of economic resources (Bressler, 2003; Eagleton, 1996; Newell, 2006). In most cases, an unequal society begins with a party perceiving the other as inferior and goes on to utilise this perception for selfish purposes. In the novel *In the Name of Our Father*, the theme of inequality is well elaborated, and its evaluation can be considered through the prism of Marxism.

The foundation on which Marxist pseudo-religious ideas are created is essential because it provides the opportunity to examine the religious overtones in Yishau's novel through the characters that observe themselves as 'godlike' beings. The characters such as Pastor David and Pastor Jeremiah are delineated as the hypocritical religious entities in contemporary Nigerian society. Throughout the narrative, it is crystal clear that Pastor Jeremiah and his peers view Christianity as a tool for economic value and wealth creation. Jeremiah considers himself the rightful custodian of the Christian doctrine in the presence of the congregation—even though he is aware that his doings, such as consulting the demonic gods for spiritual guidance, counteract the moral principles of Christianity. It could be argued that for someone like Pastor Jeremiah whose life had once been downsized to a prosperous gospel preacher, the call for prophecy is nothing but a call for exploitation. The exploitative tendency in his religious house is built upon the ideal of Marxism, which describes Christianity as a means of financial livelihood.

In the Name of Our Father is set in post-independent Nigeria, where Yishau deploys young, vibrant and self-conscious characters. The novel epitomises the notion that religion goes beyond the worship of God (or man as the case maybe), it also serves as a tool of torment, mandating personal will upon the people. This reinforces the idea that although religion is supposedly considered a purification of the soul, the manner in which it is practiced differs from this. Depicting a causal sequence of how religion has sometimes depicted the downsides for which it is known, the text contrives several instances and frames of anguish that characters suffer, such as the case of Justus Omoeko who is compelled to tear up his manuscript 'Angel Lives in Heaven' because it exposes the duplicitous and immoral traits of some religious leaders.

For Yishau and many other Marxist writers, society needs a rebirth and the rebirth must be instigated by a revolution. Yishau believes that the only antidote for a debased society is to create a revolutionary mission through writing. In *In the Name of Our Father*, the religious institutions have failed the masses, and the character Justus Omoeko calls for a revolution by writing his novella 'Angels Live in Heaven' to expose the religious decay. As a Marxist-oriented character, Justus makes up his

mind to expose the ills of religion in order to seek redress, despite the threatening letter he receives from an unidentified person:

Dr Mr man, No time for pleasantries, Justus. This is the fifth time I am writing you and you are still adamant pretending as if you do not know that publishing that book is the same as bringing storm into your life. Mr Journalist, do you know what happened to Dele Giwa? He was blown to pieces for following a path similar to the one you are now following. If you love yourself, just keep the term of the deal. That useless book you are working on about our prophet must not see the light of the day. If it does, then light will be permanently snuffed out of your own life (Yishau, 2018, p. 6)

From the above quotation, it is observed that the masses are intimidated when they are about to revolt against the upper class. Notwithstanding the letter's threatening tone, Justus is highly determined. This makes him to utter this: 'Even if I'll die, this work must see the light of the day' (Yishau, 2018, p. 7).

The framework of Yishau's text largely discusses the idea that religion, like any human institutions, is imperfect. As a social reporter, the novelist takes it upon himself to address its flaws. The exploitative mindset of the religious leaders puts the novel in league with the capitalist ideology in a bid to reinforce the writer's ideals and pit them against the perceived capitalist aspects of religion. In relation to this idea, the contribution of Shaffer (2006), lending his voice from Marx and Engel (1975, p. 39), becomes more apt, as religion is described as 'the worship of the society', the opium of the common-man, used by the 'haves' of society to enforce their choices and ideologies on the 'have-nots'. In 'Angels Live in Heaven', Yishau's characters, especially those who are at the centre of disseminating religious teachings, variously confront the situations that require them to use religion as a tool for financial and social advancement. One of these exploitative situations can be found when Pastor David creates a false, planned prophecy in order to exploit his gullible followers:

Your mother-in-law is behind the low turnover you're experiencing in your business. What you need to do to change the face of things is beyond you. There is the need to go into the forest to remove the padlock, with which she has tied your happiness. Don't worry, I'll do it for you. Just bring five thousand naira (Yishau, 2018, p. 27).

The exploitative method becomes obvious when the same pastor beseeches Aduke, who brings her friends, to the church to follow him into the office for spiritual deliverance. Ironically, this is planned work for economic value, as the dialogue between Aduke and Pastor David testifies to the Marxist relationship between religious leaders and gullible disciples. The dialogue goes thus:

'The Great Pastor...'

'Come and sit on my lap...'

Aduke obeyed'.

'Did I perform convincingly?' Pastor David asked Aduke.

'Very well, my dear. They won't waste time in complying with your advice...'

'But you are bad o...'

'If I'm bad, then you are worse', Aduke joked

'Poor them, they won't know you gave me the whole low-down about them...' (Yishau, 2018, p. 27–28)

In another instance, Prophet Jeremiah analyses his monetary ploy with General Idoti, and it is apparent that the capitalist ideology of religion is behind his mission. Using an omniscient narrative technique in the novella 'Angels Live in Heaven', the novelist describes Jeremiah's mission in the following quotation:

And the picture he got was that of a man scared of even his own shadow, and such people could easily be enslaved. And he was more than prepared to enslave General Idoti under the guise of providing spiritual counselling. He was going to make a super-slave out of him. And in turn he would make billions of Naira. He was not bothered about the morality of what he was about to do. After all, the money belonged to Nigerians, and he was a Nigerian! (Yishau, 2018, p. 113)

Even when Alani is sworn into the evangelism industry, his concern to be referred to as Prophet Jeremiah is to satiate the people's will and proclaim himself as a righteous being. The oath is as follows: 'Say this after me. In the name of the Lord of the Great men, I, Alani Atotonu hereby swear to an oath of secrecy to dedicate the rest of my life to the worship of the Lord of Great men in pursuant of my dealing in the evangelism industry' (Yishau, 2018, p. 34). From the oath, we discover that Alani, also Prophet Jeremiah, hopes to worship 'men' other than 'God' in order to use religion as a capitalist tool in exploiting the gullible masses.

The historical materialism which is paramount to Marxist's philosophy is concerned with the results of the actions of human beings within the material world—not as in the hand of God or some other supernatural forces (Bressler, 2003). Marx and Nietzsche lampoon religion as the principal detriment to mankind. Both philosophers expand their views into the theological debate because they aver that religious institutions put humankind in bondage, both socially and mentally (Habib, 2005). In light of this, this study reiterates that religion is a tool of self-actualisation—a framework of building a satisfactory model for only a few. In this materialist view, Yishau highlights religion as a capitalist and material circumstance designed to shape the ideas of religious followers. Yishau interrogates in the narrative the notion of religious exploitation and how it is used in the context of capitalism in Nigeria. He underscores this by describing Pastor Jeremiah as a character who uses religion as a tool for manipulation. As depicted in the novel, Prophet Jeremiah satirically counts on the gullibility of the masses by unearthing the material basis of the clergymen. Even when the pastor televises his ability to cure AIDS, the gullibility of the masses in believing such prayer is astounding: 'The Lord tells me that 15 people are being freed from bondage as we pray now.... Right now five people have been cured of that scourge that is threatening to wipe out the world.... Somebody shout [sic] 'Amen' A thunderous 'amen' rentd [sic] the air' (Yishau, 2018, p. 85). This gullibility is contrary to the goal of Marxism which seeks to give scientific and rational explanation of discernible facts. Thus, it is illogical from the scientific and rational standpoint that a prayer can cure AIDS without medical treatment.

4. Conclusion

On the whole, this paper has commented on Yishau's novel *In the Name of Our Father* from the Marxist perspective showcasing how Yishau describes religious and military rulers as the dominant class in the society and how they control the traditions, customs and values of the society. From the left-wing's critical appraisal, Yishau has used his novel to redeem the society from the money-oriented religious leaders and also to challenge the military rulers who hauntingly enforced their ideologies on the common man. This paper has also fore-grounded that from the military era up to the contemporary day, Nigerian literature written in English has been functional in gearing up the attention of the society to the demarcation that exists between the bourgeoisies and the proletariats, the religious leaders and their disciples, among others. Yishau's novel does not just critique the class and capitalist system in the religious warehouse but also revolts against the superstructure in the Nigerian society.

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