

Language of Oppression in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four and Festus Iyayi's Heroes

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Abstract

The use of language creates different impacts on the individual and society and therefore, elicits different reactions. Throughout generations, human beings, have always exercised one form of power or another over other human beings resulting to man's inhumanity to man. Most times this inhuman treatment is exercised through the oppressive use of language. This paper examines the decadence in the use of language to oppress other human beings as illustrated in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four and Festus Iyayi's Heroes respectively. The paper examines the extent to which the language of oppression is possibly evident in these works. The works selected for study will be critically examined so as to ascertain the extent of the psychological effect on the individual and society arising from the use of the language of oppression. The paper belongs to an area of study which attempts to establish a relationship between literature and stylistic discourse. The paper concludes that the oppressor's ability to effectively convey his oppressive tendencies depends on his choice of words. Stylistically, language has effect on the oppressed; it intimidates and suppresses them to do the will of their oppressors and hence coerced them to carry out only the will of their oppressors.

Key words: oppression, oppressor, language, stylistics, discourse, dictatorship, totalitarianism, victimisation, dehumanisation

Introduction

The role of language in human socio-political activities has been emphasized by several writers. However, it is important to state that language is a common property shared by both the speaker and the hearer as their basic form of communication for self-expression. It is a working system of communication in a society where it is used and also a product of its past history and the source of its future development. Bloch and Trajer (2002) assert that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates through communication. Communication is said to be a chain of events in which the significant link is the message. The chain connects a source which originates the process and a destination that interprets the message. The source which originates the process is the speaker while the destination that interprets the message is the hearer. It is a source and extension of imagination in form that can be learned and shared. It is the production, perception and understanding of the message that bears man's notion of what is important, what is right and what affects him in his society (Ngugi, 1985). Language according to Ingraham (2003) is used to direct superfluous nervous energy, to direct and stir actions in others, to communicate ideas, as means of expressing an order to set matters, in motion, as an instrument of dictatorship and oppression. Language can be contextual and situational dealing with the immediate environment; ideational in terms of the expression of real life experiences, interpersonal for social interaction and textual, that is for linking itself to the feature of the situation (Jackobson, 2011). The directive or persuasive formation of language which direct a hearer to carry out an action is prevalent in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four and Iyayi's Heroes. That human beings have the ability to recall and form association and learn from experiences becomes the reason why tyrants use language alongside torture to coerce and command others. This act is known as oppression. It is the negative outcome experienced by people targeted by the arbitrary and cruel exercise of power in a society or social group.

The concept of oppression and theoretical consideration

The language of oppression is a universal phenomenon. It exists in every society and the society determines its nature and form. Africa for example, has her own form of oppressive use of language as occasioned by her encounter with the Western colonial masters. The colonial masters used all sorts of derogatory names ‘savages’, ‘barbaric’, dark continent to refer to Africans and their continent. The use of these words wrapped the psyche of African and this degenerated into a state of inferiority complex (Roper, 2011). The white superior, the black inferior and as inferiors, they lost their dignity... this means that language is not a mere strings of words, it possess a suggestive power well beyond the immediate lexical meaning (Okpiliya, 2005). The suggestive power of language can be appreciated more when we analyse the powerful effects of certain expressions on characters in *Nineteen Eighty four* and *Heroes*. The significance effect which a name has on a person or a thing has been further emphasized by Schlandi (2009) who avers that,

from time immemorial, men have though there is some mysterious essential connection between a thing and a spoken name for it... use the name of your enemy, not only to designate him either passionately or dispassionately, but also to exercise a baleful influence.

They did not only call the colonials names “dispassionately” but also the culture of the colonials which is the very existence of their human nature. They claim that the colonials had no culture and if perchance had anything close to it, it is ‘barbaric’. According to Frye (2010) oppression is a systematic invisible, group-specific and exploitative social structure meant to keep one group in an inferior or submissive position. This definition seems to suit Plato’s ideal society which guaranteed unhappiness for the producer class in the society (Egwu, 2010). Plato’s society was highly systematic and stratified as we see in *Nineteen Eighty four* and *Heroes*. Oppression primarily describes how a certain group is suppressed by unjust use of force, victimisation, dehumanisation, demonisation, authority or society norms. When oppression is institutionalized formally or informally by the oppressors it is referred to as systematic oppression (Okpiliya, 2005). Agnew (2010) retorts that the oppressed being sub-human and inferior should be annihilated “from our society with more regret than we should feel over discarding rotten apple. They are not worth being heard but punishment and separation should be their lot”. When people are separated, there is class distinction. In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*, there is class distinction between the party members and the proles and even within the party members there is still further distinction. Class distinction is much more obvious in *Iyayi’s Heroes*. There are two categories of people: the ordinary soldiers and the masses. The other category comprises the generals, politicians, religious leaders and contractors. There is a close nexus between language and self-perception, self-awareness, self identity and self-esteem as exemplified by the portrayed characters. As the thoughts of characters affect their language, so does their language affects their thoughts and eventually their action and behaviours (Okpiliya, 2005). Also, in the words of Edward Sapir (2011),

we are all at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression in our society (community... the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built upon habit of the group. We see, hear and actually experience very largely as we do because the language habit of our community predisposes certain choices of interpretation...

In George Orwell’s famous essay *Politics and the English language*, language is described as “ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish thoughts”. Language is very important and powerful hence, its constant use in diverse ways. Heide (2002) asserts that “... in any social movement, when changes are affected the language sooner or later reflect change—we are changing language pattern to actively affect the change a significant part of which in the conceptual tool of thought – our language”.

This paper therefore, aims at identifying the decadence in language use by the characters in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* and *Iyayi’s Heroes* against their fellow characters just as Bosmajian (1974) talked about the “silly words and expression” used to “justify the unjustifiable”, to make “palatable the unpalatable”, to make “reasonable the unreasonable” and to make “decent the indecent”.

Textual Analysis

George Orwell, whose real name is Eric Arthur Blair was born in 1903. His novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* which was written in 1948 with events drawn from Hitler’s lunatic oppressive mannerism is typical of Bosmajian’s assertion as noted above. Orwell also authored *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, *Keep the Aspistras flying*, *Animal Farm* etc. *Nineteen Eighty Four* aside from being a political novel written in the early 20th century is also a satire of the virtues and vices of man. Orwell as a political satirist as evident in the novel and even *Animal Farm* wrote to expose

the worst aspect of totalitarianism through its unhesitating penetration into the innermost core of the human mind and spirit to corrupt and destroy them (Hubbard, 2001). Orwell used his style of writing to make serious caricature of totalitarianism and a century almost devoid of the value of living.

The family in Nineteen Eighty Four as exemplified by the parson family is one of betrayal and hate as against what Smith experienced during his childhood as ‘who’ becomes ‘peace’, ‘freedom’ ‘slavery’ ‘ignorance’ and ‘strength’(p.37). Orwell has artistically defamiliarised these words such that they no longer mean what ordinarily we know them to mean. He has made them assume entirely different meanings. ‘Ignorance’ on the part of the masses about the true nature of things becomes “strength” for the oppressor who makes sure that they are “entirely irreconcilable” (p.189). Hence, a stratified society must be maintained at all cost. Freedom to air one’s opinion or to say that two plus two is four as against five as stipulated by the party leads one to “slavery”. Room 101 where the worst form of inhuman treatment which leads to a whap of the mind is perpetrated. Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty four is a “serious caricature” (p. viii) of a society claimed of the value of living. The human values in the novel resemble survivals of “vestigial physical organs” like the tonsils or appendix (p.ix). The citizens are worth nothing except that they are survivals in a world dominated by machine control and oppressive use of language.

Take him to “Room 101’ is an order by a senior party member /officer. The man to be there is a “chinless man”. Comrade offer! The chinless man cried. You don’t have to me to that place! Haven’t I told you everything already? What else is it you want to know. There is nothing I wouldn’t confess, nothing! Just tell me what it is and I’ll confess it straight off. Write it down and I’ll sign it- anything. Not Room 101” (p. 241).

The above reaction from the chinless man buttresses the fact that language has a great degree of power on the human psyche well beyond the immediate lexical meaning. It is not mere strings of words. From the above excerpt, “Room 101” which goes beyond mere numbering(.241) is a place where the oppressed are tortured, intimidated and made to “confess anything”.

“You are a traitor, a thought- criminal you’ve a Eurasian spy! I’ll shot you, I’ll vapourise you, I’ll send you to the salt mines” (P. 26).

This is an oppressive expression used by a boy of nine years old to a man of thirty six years and the man, Winston, “had an uneasy feeling” (P.260).So vicious was the boy’s demeanor that “it was not altogether a game” (P.21). Ironically, an adult becomes afraid of a child so long as he is a member of the ruling party. Such children who are trained by the ruling party as spies become “farned systematically... ungovernable little savages, which is not against the party’s principles since the party aimed to catch them young and society becomes a prison where there is no human freedom either for the present or the future”(p.26). Any person who dares to think of freedom in the future should;

Imagine a boot stamping on a human face- forever... remember that it is forever. The face will always be there to be stamped upon... it will be a word of terror as much as a world of triumph (P.274).

The above statement which is “suggestive power of a mind-control tool, whose ultimate goal of usage is the total destruction of wills, aspiration and imagination tells Winton how bad the oppression will be in future (Berke, 2000). What the party does is an unending victory over one’s “meaning and reality control” (P.38). In this situation of dictatorship, one could not express one’s personal opinion as,

... Winston Smith, knew that oceania had been in alliance... but where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness which in any case must soon be annihilated (p.38).

His “consciousness” does not matter because he is inconsequential as far as the party is concerned. And if all others acted the lie which the party imposed – if all records told the same tale- then the lie passed into history and become truth (P.38).This is because “who controls the past... controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (P. 38).

This explains why the party uses “Reality Control”(p.38) often to control the human psyche, history and everything in the society. As the caption goes in every street in Oceania “Big Brother is watching you” (p.6), it is a constant reminder to the oppressed. Continuously rings a bell in their ears and with the dark eyes of the all-seeing ‘Big Brother’ piercing into the individual (p.60) there is usually a certain chill shiver that runs through the person

such that the human instinct that warns an individual of danger advises the person to remain a faithful or is the appropriate word the oppressed of the party? (P.6). For the fear of “Thought Police” (P.7) the citizens are afraid of expressing themselves. The “Thought” Police “is a body that controls people’s thought through the telescreen in every home which will eventually notice and worst still is that, “thought crime does not entail death: thought crime is death” (P.7). The above at the back of the mind of every individual, the need to stay alive arises and the only way to achieve that is not to think at all. Because, “WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH” (P.30).

This is another “Reality Control”(p.38) oppressive use of language. The above is a slogan of the party inscribed on coins, stamps, cover of book, banners, posters, wrappings of cigarette papers and in every street corners as a sign of “no escape” (P.30) from the oppressor. The “Reality Control” just made a twist of the above expression, “war is anything but peace, neither is freedom slavery” (P.310). Also, ignorance is most certainly not strength, but the people buy idea. Whatever the party says is final and must be accepted. The party wield power and for the party,

“... power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution, one makes the revolution in order to establish dictatorship the object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me? (P.209).

The above question asked Winston Smith by O’Brien shows that power for the party is not just “power over body-but above all, over the mind”(p.209). Once the individual’s mind is under control, the entirety of the person becomes a complete breakdown to the will and power that controls it through whatever means and as evident in the novel, through the oppressive use of language.

Festus Iyayi is a poet, a Marxist and a social realist. Among his novels are *Violence* (1983), *The Contract* (1985) and *Heroes* (1986). *Heroes* assesses the Nigerian civil war as it was experienced by the people in the former Bendel State now Edo and Delta States. Through Osimi, the major character, having experienced the war, thus having a knowledge about the reason behind the war, one begins to understand that the federal troops are as “venereal and brutal as the secessionist” (P.11) and that the effect of the war was solely felt by the common soldier, worker, peasant and their families whether Nigerian or Biafran while the ‘shark’- the colonels, generals, politicians, contractor from both sides benefit from their game of death caused by their greed and corner-cutting (P.11).

The language of oppression in the novel is powered by propaganda, symbolism and defamiliarisation, all in the bid to capture according to Terhempa (2006) the “monumental greed” behind the Nigerian civil war and the psychological trauma which the oppressive use of language subjected the masses of that time. Through the major character, Osimi, a journalist, we see how the military officers of high caliber displayed their inherent ability to use language to oppress the masses during the war.

Do you want your body to be carried away from here?... Do you want me to tell you what we have done to journalist in this war?... journalist like you we have first of all shared and then whipped before shooting. Now go away (P. 25).

This shows that the masses of that period had no right whatsoever and as such,

Have a gun and you can seize a man’s passport... Have a gun and be a private in the army and the chief superintendent of police will be afraid to speak the truth (p.40).

In view of the above, freedom of expression is non-existent as will further be seen when Osimi asks for his passport from an officer “Give me back my pass” (P.28) and by that simple expression of right, the result is “open the gate and let him out of the stadium... detain him and if he resists shoot him when you get outside” (P.29). The oppressive use of language further extends to the lower cadre of soldiers who are sent to the war front. They are refused their pay and sent to war before their pay day so that when they die, the money goes to the generals. Despite such inhuman treatment, they are referred to as “deserters”. As the general said “Soldiers who did not have the stomach for the war could go home, although as everybody knew, deserters were liable to be executed when caught”(P. 124). Since there is no pay nor any incentive and they are asked to go to war, some decided to “shoot themselves in their hands and legs”, (P.149) but because the war is one of business enterprise which must yield profits, the war must go on by all means. Thus, Ohirishi and his generals “... sold our arms to the rebels... to the Biafrans ... Biafrans used our own arms to kill our soldiers” (p.147).

The generals were able to convince the real heroes (soldiers of lower ranks) to go to war through the use of propaganda and manipulative slogans referred to as “meaningless slogans” (P.132) such as:

To keep Nigeria one-Biafra must stay as the sun... To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done or (P.132).

If it is the generals from the Biafrans side the slogan goes thus;

“... to defend the survival of the new Biafran nation is a task that must be done” (P.132).

It is important to note that the manipulation is not from the Biafran generals to their soldiers. While the generals who have the “monopoly of the means of indoctrination and information... misinform the people” (P.63) to war, it is of great importance to say that they were totally impersonal about their passion for the country, Nigeria as it is exemplified by their speeches.

This country Nigeria. This country must do better. This country can
Not afford to let things go worse (p.132)

While the masses get busy referring to Nigeria as “our country, Nigeria” (P.132) without minding the fact that they are killed everyday without being told the real reason for the war

... which is greed of those in power for more power... an investment in blood and destruction by those at the helm of affairs with the expectation of profit” (P.64).

The word ‘Nyamiri’ (p.92) is a tag name for the Biafrans which the writer has defamiliarised to symbolise instant death of the Biafrans, ethnicity and regionalism. The war as portrayed in the novel through the heroes and non-heroes “is a great teacher and we are its pupils” (p.62).

To compare the variety of language use in the two novels, it is important to state that while the language of oppression in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* is powered by greed for power for its own sake because “the party is interested only in power... power is not a means, it is an end (P. 269). In *Iyayi’s Heroes*, the greed for power is informed not only by power for its own sake; because the “reason for the war is the greed of those in power for more power ... (P.64), but also for “the expectation of profit” (P.64). That is why the Nigerian generals sold arms to the Biafran rebels to kill the soldiers.

Conclusion

Having taken a critical assessment of the language of oppression in the two novels, one concludes that language plays a fundamental role in conveying the intended message(s) of the writer. It is language that enhances communication between the oppressor and the oppressed as it is evident in the two works. The oppressor’s ability to convey his intentions depend on his choice of words. It is the right choice of words that creates the desired effect on the oppressed; it intimidates and suppresses them to do the will of the oppressor. Hence, they become non-existent and as such, only carry out the will of the oppressor. Therefore, one begins to appreciate the fact that language is not mere strings of words. It possesses a suggestive magical power well beyond the immediate lexical meaning. This suggestive magical power is best appreciated as seen from the various excerpts from both George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty four* and Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes*. The language of oppression is one form of man’s inhumanity to man and it is a global phenomenon since as depicted in the two works, it is not restricted to only one part of the world.

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