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Psychological Realism and Social Marginalities in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things.*

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Abstract

This study explores the topic of psychological realism and social marginalities in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s A Spell of Good Things, with a focus on how characters' access to education, healthcare, and political agency are unequally distributed in contemporary Nigerian society. It purports to x-rays the structural forces that perpetuate marginalization and poverty, as well as the personal consequences of these inequalities. The literary theories employed are New Historicism and Psychological Criticism. New Historicism is a critical approach that considers literary texts not only as a reflection of the culture that produced them, but also as a means by which that culture is produced, playing an active role in the social and political conflicts of an era. Psychological criticism primarily treats a literary work as an expression of the author's personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires. Through a close reading of the parallel narratives of Eniolá, a teenage boy from a disadvantaged background, and Wúràolá, a privileged young doctor, the findings evidence how the authoress uses contrasting characters not only to expose the deep-rooted socio-economic divide, artistically, but to portray the complicity of the elites and the failures of state institutions in addressing injustice. By highlighting the harsh lived realities of inequality through emotional and symbolic storytelling, Adébáyọ̀ challenges the illusion of social progress and invites reflection on the fragility of hope in a deeply stratified society. This research work thus contributes to the growing body of African literature that interrogates class disparities and advocates for a more equitable future.

Keywords: *Contrasting characters, social inequalities, fragility of hope, illusion of social progress, parallel narratives.*

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Nigerian society, like many postcolonial nations, remains deeply divided along social, political and economic lines. In the dynamic landscape of modern society, African literature, ever since strives for equitability by challenging injustice wherever it may come. It is an ideological platform where the Nigerian novelist Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ emerges close those African intellectual who, becoming aware of their role in a New Nation (Chinua Achebe, 1973: 8), endeavour to explore ways to promote social justice, by dedicating themselves as "*la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche*" and making of their voice "*la liberté de celles qui s'affaissent au cachot du désespoir*". (Aimé Césaire, 1963:22) Césaire articulates the responsibility of the writer as initially a pedagogical one in which the writer in addition to writing about burning issues of his days (concerning life in the society), also has to assume the role of teacher and guardian of his society. These assertions reveal how African literature is the megaphone of the '*Wretched of the earth*' to borrow Frantz Fanon's expression.

Published in 2023, Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things* gives voice to marginalized and oppressed communities, challenging harmful stereotypes and misconceptions which continue to fuel iniquity in postcolonial African countries. This novel, taken as template for the current study, presents a dual-characterization narrative, following the lives of two protagonists from vastly different social backgrounds whose paths eventually intersect with tragic consequences. On the first hand, Eniola is a teenage boy living in poverty with his family. Once middle-class, his family has fallen on hard times after his father loses his job as a teacher and becomes withdrawn and abusive. Eniola is forced to drop out school due to lack of funds and begins working errands for a tailor, while also becoming entangled with local political thugs who exploit his desperation. Wúràolá, on the other hand, is a young doctor from an affluent and politically connected family. Although she seems to live a comfortable life, Wúràolá faces her own struggles—particularly in her romantic relationship with Kúnlé, a man whose temper and controlling behaviour raise questions about gender roles and emotional abuse in the elite Nigerian society.

This study explores the issue of psychological realism and social marginalities as they are contextualised in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things*. It aims at examining critically the structural forces that perpetuate marginalization and poverty, as well as the personal consequences of these inequalities. Conducted through the lens of New Historicism and Psychological Criticism essentially based on the facts and the text, it examining the intersection of class, politics, gender, and education, the study seeks to demonstrate how systemic disparities shape the lives, choices, and trajectories of the novel's characters. Since the analysis attempts to illuminate how literature reflects and potentially reshapes societal understandings of inequalities in modern-day Nigeria, the Psychological approach which has the merit of probing into the human nature and speculating upon the unconscious or the 'interior parts' of every character proves helpful to analyse the characters' behaviour within the novel. Indeed, this approach which, according to Kofi Agyekum (2013:217), is "*based on the tradition of psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud analyses a work of literature from the point of the mind, personality, mental and emotion of characters*" fits the current research since the novel under consideration involves an intensive psychological activity. It is in this regard that F. L. Lucas, quoted by Wilbur Scott (1962:72), asserts:

> Psychology can be used to explain fictitious characters. […] clarify the actions and reactions of created characters who might otherwise be puzzling or implausible. The critic who brings this interest to fiction becomes, again, a psychoanalyst, searching for the subconscious patterns which motivates a character.

Since Post-colonial literature is always socially contextualized with writers depicting societal challenging issues, the New Historicism proves helpful to appreciate Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s portrayal of the Nigerian society through *A Spell of Good Things.* Indeed, New Historicism is a literary theory that considers texts not only as a reflection of the culture that produced them, but also as a means by which that culture is produced, playing an active role in the social and political conflicts of an era. Hence, to be in harmony with Adebayo's ideological orientation, this approach better highlights her ability in handling both fiction and reality through literary means. Indeed, her novel considered in this study aims at helping overthrow the dominant capitalist ideology for the benefit of the masses or the 'down-trodden' of the African societies with a specific emphasis on the issue of gender-based inequalities.

Before going deeper into the subject matter, it is worth clarifying the expression 'social marginality.' *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (2004) defines the word 'marginality' as "*the state of being on the fringes, or the edges, of the society, system, or phenomenon, preventing full participation and access to resources and opportunities.*" Put in another way, marginalization is a sociological condition where people are excluded from mainstream society and its benefits. Hence, the expression 'social marginality' carries connotations of 'social *inequality*' which, according to Anthony Giddens (2006:295), "*refers to the existence of unequal opportunities and rewards for different social positions or statuses within a group or society.*" Giddens shows how factors like class and gender, to quote only a few, contribute to unequal resources and life chances. Almost two decades earlier, in the same vein, Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 241-258) indicates how inequality is embedded in everyday practices and institutions, such as education and family background when he writes: "*Social inequality is reproduced through the distribution of different forms of capital-economic, social, and cultural-that give individuals unequal access to power and privilege.*"

Talking about the review of literature, this research work is far from being the first to be approached on Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things*. Early reviews and scholarly commentary on Adebayo's novel under scrutiny highlight the writer's commitment with political corruption, class disparities, and gender oppression in Nigeria.

Ann Marie Short (2023), for instance, has analysed how *A Spell of Good Things* navigates structures of hierarchy and power and criticized structural violence in contemporary Nigeria. Similarly, Lucy Popescu (2023) has described the novel as a blistering indictment of the abuse of power and vividly conveys how deprivation fuels characters' descent. In the same vein, Ahmad Aamina (2023) has praised Adébáyọ̀'s deft hand and expansive canvas, highlighting her compassionate humanization of characters and the novel's exploration of shared vulnerability to socio-economic forces. Writers like Ato Quayson and Stephane Newell

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(2017) have noted the power of Nigerian fiction to address the politics of everyday life. *A Spell of Good Things* is situated within a broader tradition of African literature that interrogates the postcolonial state and social injustice, aligning Ayobami Adebayo with authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, and Helon Habila, to mention a just few. As for Abiola Irele (2021), she has highlighted how postcolonial African fiction often addresses the lived realities of inequality and marginalization. Another important work is that of Madhu Krishnan (2018) which stresses the evolving representation of urban poverty, political disillusionment, and resilience.

Like these intellectuals, the current study seems opportune to prove that Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things* is concerned with the issue of inequality and particularly the contrast between Eniolá's family and Wúràolá's one.

This work is structured around three main analytical axes. The first one explores class disparities by contrasting the socio-economic backgrounds of Eniolá and Wúràolá. The second one focuses on education as a powerful marker of inequality. Finally, the last axe addresses the novel's exploration of hope, resistance and disillusionment.

I- Class Disparities

One of the central issues raised in Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things* is the deep chasm between social classes. Indeed, the authoress presents a powerful and poignant portrayal of class disparities that define the lives of her two central characters, Eniolá and Wúràolá. Through their parallel yet contrasting life paths, Adébáyọ̀ exposes the structural inequalities that determine access to opportunities, quality of life, and even personal dignity in postcolonial Nigeria. The novel's narrative alternates between the two characters— Eniolá, the son of a laid-off teacher living in destitution, and Wúràolá, a privileged young doctor from an affluent family—thereby highlighting the jarring contrasts between poverty and affluence.

I.1-Eniola's Family

Class disparities are vividly portrayed through the struggles of Eniolá's family, who live in abject poverty despite the father's previous status as a respected teacher. Indeed, Eniolá's father is a state-employed history teacher who is unexpectedly sacked together with many other teachers, due to a government policy aimed at educational progress, as the narrator puts: "*his father and over four thousand teachers were sacked.*" (p.29) Here, the sacked teachers are concerned with subjects which do not suit with the modern age needs since they are useless for a nation's development, as the narrator furthers:

> On the radio, one of the governor's aides explained that most of the teachers who had been retrenched taught subjects—fine arts, Yorubá, food and nutrition, Islamic and Christian religious studies—that would do nothing for the nation's development. (p.30)

One clearly understands that the above quoted subjects are said to be non-productive, since people need science and technology, as the government's spokesperson argues on the radio:

> What will our children do with Yoruba in this modern age? What? You see, what we need now is technology, science and technology. And how will watercolours be useful to them? Isn't that what the fine arts teacher teach them about? Watercolours." (p. 30)

This textual snippet evidences the government's malicious desire of removing subjects such as history or fine arts from the secondary curriculum. This dismissal marks the collapse of Eniolá's family's formerly modest middle class security. Bàbá Eniolá is very heartened by the current situation since he now offers himself up for menial jobs such as cleaning other people's garments and latrines, looking for bottles on dunghills or transporting cement on building sites. This sad reality brings him to tears, after he realizes that his education has been useless and his choices wrong ones, as evidenced in the following passage:

> What triggered those tears? A realization that all his education has 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 castaways. The knowledge that if they found an old T-shirt, it would be washed so that Eniolá could have some new clothes to wear? (p.38)

Moreover, Babá Eniolá keeps on complaining about his misfortune because when he makes other job applications, no one seems to care about a history teacher, not even the ramshackle private schools he has once looked down on. Here again, he wants to weep, as it appears in the following lines, when Búsolá, his daughter refuses to eat gaari once and asks him about the job applications:

> I can't eat this thing. Baámi, have you heard from any of the jobs you applied for? […] Búsolá was waiting for an explanation he could not give. Bàbá Eniolá averted his gaze. He feared that if he spoke, he might burst into tears. He lay on the bed and felt the energy drain from him, to be replaced by despair even at fixing them lunch, he had failed. Búsolá repeated questions he could not answer without sinking further into darkness. No one wanted to employ a history teacher. Not even the ramshackle private schools he had once disdained. Those ones did not bother to feature history on their subject lists anymore. If he spoke to Búsolá about this and began to weep, as he sometimes did without knowing, would the darkness not overpower him? (p.41)

Assuredly, this loss of job has plunged the family into an economic despair. Bàbá, for instance, begins to sell things so that to face the daily needs. Meanwhile, the family is forced to abandon their quite luxury house and relocate to a decrepit home, as the narrator epitomizes:

> Soon, they had to move out of the three-bedroom flat that had been home before his father was sacked. When his family moved to the house where they now lived, only a few doors down but nearly a century behind, Eniolá had assumed the move was only temporary. He had believed after a few months, at most, they would once again live in a house that had indoor bathrooms and at least one water closet. He should have known then, when they left the house that had an indoor kitchen and louvre blades, after the television, bedframes and sofas were sold, before his father tried to sell the VCR… (pp. 30-31)

Since the family experiences housing problems because of retrenchment and its corollaries, Iyá Eniolá even plans to go back to her family's compound together with her husband and children, instead of sharing one room with them all and also because the

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landlord claims a two-years rent deposit. Alagba, one of her brothers, rejects this idea but rather persuades her to divorce her husband and comes back only with her children. The following passage is very illuminating:

> The retrenchment had forced her to begin sharing a room, one room, with her husband and children, in a house no better than the ones in her family compound. After a couple of years there, the landlord was insisting that they pay two years' rent in advance, something she knew they could not afford. It had made sense to her that she might as well move back to her family compound and live in the house that was being rented out to strangers. But that Easter Monday, her brothers had insisted that it was unseemly for her to move back home with her husband and children. When Alagba suggested that the only way she could return was as a divorced woman, she had thought he was joking until he went on to call her husband a useless, lazy fool. (p.113)

The one-room home, shared among all family members, appears as a symbol of overcrowded hardship. And Bàbá Eniolá now struggles with life since he sells his very precious belongings to pay his landlord, his debtors, food and afford many other usual needs. Also, he finds himself unable to solve the daily life problems. For instance, when his neighbour's radio is too loud, he feels unable to rebuke her as he owes the woman some money. This is what the narrator illustrates in the following passage:

> The neighbour's radio was too loud. If h paid attention, Eniolá's father could hear the newscaster's breathing between sentences. He was sure the radio could hear in the next building too, but he never complained to his neighbour. How could he, when he still owed the woman three thousand naira. (p.37)

One evidently understands that Eniolá's father now plunges into an economic despair since apart from owing the neighbour and the landlord, he also owes other people. This leads him to adopt a fugitive attitude, that of staying indoors the daylong and going out only at night so that his creditors cannot recognise him in the dark, as the narrator notes: "…*his father had become a man who now preferred to leave the house after nightfall, because his creditors were less likely to recognise him in the dark*." (p.32)

As far as the landlord is concerned, Bàbá Eniolá hesitates to answer and hopes there is a way through the wall in order to escape, when he knocks on the door with a booming voice. When he shouts again, Bàbá hides himself and sends his wife to open and tell him that her husband has travelled. Dashed hope ! for when the landlord enters the room, he becomes furious, threatening to chase them out unless Bàbá pays his rent. The following conversation between the landlord, Iyá Eniolá and Eniolá is quite expressive:

– "Do I need to break this door?" the lord shouted.

"It's open sir, but let me come and—" Eniolá's mother rushed towards the door, then fell to her knees as the landlord barged into the room. "Good afternoon sir."

– "Don't bribe me with empty greetings, Iyá Eniolá," he yelled, hitting the floor with his carved walking stick. "I'm here to see your husband. Where is he?"
– "He has gone out," Eniolá's mother said. "Erm, he has gone on a travel…on a journey. He had to travel some hours ago. Erm, his brother's uncle called him and said there was an emergency he needs to attend to in—"

The landlord scanned the room. "I heard a man's voice when I was standing outside the door."

– "Yes, yes, it was my son." She pointed towards Eniolá. "His voice is becoming a man's voice and he now sounds like his father. Oyá, Eniolá, speak up, greet Bàbá Landlord."
– "Good afternoon sir," Eniolá said.

The landlord moved through the room, past the wooden cabinet that held clothes, pots and schoolbooks, past the closed window and the raggedy curtain that was drawn across it. When Bàbá landlord stopped at the foot on the bed, Eniolá held his breath as the man stood still with his head cocked to the side, listening for something.

– " Iyá Eniolá, tell your husband, wherever he may be, that I want my money next week. If you don't pay me my money by the end of next week, you are leaving my house." (p. 161)

After being laid off due to government cutbacks, Bàbá Eniolá's inability to provide for his family dives them into pecuniary anguish, highlighting the fragile nature of middle-class security in Nigeria. Here, the family's descent is marked by increasing social invisibility and humiliation; since they finally resort to street begging, which emphasizes how poverty strips people of dignity. When, for instance, the landlord comes at Bàbá Eniolá's house to claim his rent, the latter hides himself, pretending to have travelled. The landlord then becomes angry and promises to chase them if they do not pay his money by the end of the next week. Terrified, Iyá Eniolá decides to go begging the following day, together with her children, as it appears in the following lines:

> "Iyá Eniolá, tell your husband, wherever he may be, that I want my money next week. If you don't pay me my money by the end of the next week, you are leaving my house. […] I've only been pitying you people because of your children, but I can't pity you anymore. Remember when I told you people not to pay the electricity bills for two months?" […] "You can't say I've not been kind. This time, whether your husband is here or not, I will chase you out." The landlord hit his stick against the door. "Do you understand my words?"
>
> "Very well, sir," Eniolá's mother said. "Thank you sir."
>
> The room was quiet after the landlord left.
>
> Eniolá's mother stood up, shut the door and stayed with her hand on the doorknob. "We are going begging tomorrow morning." (pp.161-162)

In the same way, Búsolá refuses to eat gaari, their only food because her father has put too much water in so that it can be enough for all the family, as the narrator enlightens it in these terms: "*It's too soft now. Why did you put so much water? […] I can't eat this thing*." (p.41) Furthermore, when Búsolá goes to buy some gaari, she hits against something, on her way back, and falls on the ground together with the gaari. And then her father comes and takes it from the ground without caring about its quality. The wasted gaari is according to him enough for at least three meals, as the narrator puts: "*The wasted gaari was enough for at least three meals and he did not need to crouch to see that there was no way*

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to separate it from the sand." (p. 86) Since the family must find money to face school fees, rent, food and many other necessities, Eniolá's mother tries to talk to her husband in order to get rid of these intricacies, instead of begging her brother again: "…*Please talk to me, we need to think about this together. I've tried everything and I don't want to go and beg my brother for school fees again.*" (p.109)

Unable to afford her problems alone, since her husband is now useless Iyá Eniolá finally goes back to her brother and begs him for school fees, as she complains:

> … Bodá mi, I want to beg you. If there is anything you can give at all to help, no amount is too small sir. You're the only one I have left. Last week I called Bàbá Súpo, and he couldn't send any money. […] The money is ten thousand naira for both of them, but we've only managed to raise two thousand plus. (pp.120-121)

Unfortunately, her brother has his own problems and can't give her more than one thousand five hundred naira, as he retorts: "*But, Iyá Eniolá, I can't afford to give you more than one thousand five hundred naira.*" (p.122)

Embarrassed by the events, Eniolá is convinced by his mother that there are no other alternatives and that all their relatives have already been reached. Finally, he embarks in the adventure, pretending together with Búsolá that they are deaf, dumb, blind and orphans, so that they be pitied, as the narrator epitomizes:

> Eniolá did not want to do it, but according to his mother, there were no alternatives. Every relative within reach had been begged to contribute the little they had. And now, as his mother counted the money that had been gathered so far, Eniolá wished it would all add up and somehow be enough. For school fees, for food that week, for what was left of rent. He would even settle for just rent and school fees. He'd gone for days without food before and wouldn't gladly do so this week to avoid begging in the streets again. (p.173)

From the forgoing, one easily infers that Eniolá's family sinks into an indescribable impoverishment. A destitution that obviously contrasts sharply with the wealth and privilege of Wúràolá's one.

I.2- Wúràolá's Family

Wúràolá's family represents the Nigerian upper-middle class, enjoying relative wealth, comfort, and status in contrast to Eniolá's impoverished background. Wúràolá, for instance, does not complain about life, since she enjoys financial stability and the love of a good man as the narrator puts it:

> The world was exactly as it should be. No more and, definitely, no less. She had the love of a good man. A house. And her own money—still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green—the thought of it buoyed her and gave her a rush that made her hum. (p.97)

Taken from 'Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*,' this quote reveals how happy Wúràolá is since, as a medical doctor, she is afforded respect and financial security. Also, she is in love with Kúnlé, a young man from a good family, she is engaged to. As such, during the celebration of their engagement, hosts have been served some bottles of champagne, as a way to show that their family navigates a relative ease. The passage below brings evidence:

> The previous week after they celebrated Wúràolá's engagement with exclamations, two bottles of champagne and suffocating hugs, Yèyé's sisters had drawn up a timetable of women who would supervise the hired caterers through the night. (p.130)

The use of champagne symbolizes luxury, hospitality, and social status. For, serving expensive drinks like champagne is not just about being generous, it reflects a lifestyle of wealth and social prestige, showing that the family belongs to the upper or elite class, where appearances and high standards of living are important. In the same vein, Yèyé wants her daughter to maintain a modern, elegant, and fashionable look, in preparation for her engagement, which again reflects their elite status, showing how women in privileged families are often pressured to conform to standards of beauty and class expectations, as it appears as follows: "*...Yèyé responded by insisting she could not wear outdated jewellery*." (p.137) This example reveals how Wúràolá's family values wealth, status and image.

Likewise, they live in a world where materials, goods and outward appearances matter deeply, reinforcing the notion of class disparities between Wúràolá and Eniolá. This contrast is also visible through Kúnlé's family which is both powerful and also influential. Indeed, Kunle's family is not just rich, but also well-connected. They represent the ruling elite, people who have access to power, control, and privilege such as going abroad for sabbatical among the others, as one reads:

> Wúràolá was home from her boarding school on a midterm break when her father sent her to the Cokers with a sealed envelope. She knew from eavesdropping on her parents that the white envelope contained dollar notes for Kúnlé's father, who was preparing to leave for a sabbatical in Saudi Arabia. *[...]* Kúnlé's family still lived in the General Hospital's staff quarters, and though the row of identical bungalows confused Wúràolá, her father's driver had had driven straight to the Cokers' doorstep. (p.132)

Additionally, Wúràolá's mother is fulfilled and proud because her children have access to a life of comfort, success, and status. They enjoy every material advantage: a good home, expensive possessions, social respect and financial security, as evidenced through Yèyé's ensured attitude it:

> Yèyé smiled and adjusted her coral bracelet. Her children had the life she once wanted but could not have. One in which, even if they experienced sudden disaster, as long as it did not kill them, it would be cushioned by their surname and the bank balance of the man she had chosen to be their father. A wealthy uncle or aunt or cousin would rescue them if their parents could not. If all else failed, there was a stash of gold waiting for her daughters, tucked away now in that fireproof safe. And for all three of them, her share of the swaths of land she and her sisters had acquired together after she had wasted those first two years of marriage believing a man's love was some limitless thing. (pp.143-144)

As it can be seen, Adébáyọ̀ does not portray class disparities as a mere background detail; rather, it is the central force driving the novel's plot. The lives of Eniolá and Wúràolá occasionally brush against each other, but they are essentially confined within their respective social class boundaries. Through this dual narrative

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structure, *A Spell of Good Things* depicts a society where upward mobility is nearly impossible for the poor and where wealth perpetuates social detachment and indifference.

Moreover, while class disparities determine the social and economic status of characters in the novel under scrutiny, it is through access to education that these inequalities are further reinforced, revealing how schooling becomes both a symbol and a tool of exclusion.

II- Education as a Marker of Inequality

Education is skilfully presented Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀'s *A Spell of Good Things* as a powerful lens through which social inequalities are both revealed and sustained. It does not merely symbolize a means of personal advancement in the novel, it becomes a symbolic and structural boundary separating the privileged from the disenfranchised.

II.1- Eniolá's Experience

Eniolá's educational journey is repeatedly disrupted by his family's financial struggles. Though intelligent and eager to learn, he is expelled from school because his parents cannot afford the fees, as Mister Bisade argues:

> "…the school management has asked me to inform you that you all have until next Monday to pay your school fees. See how generous, ehn? You've been given a whole week. Now if you have paid already, bring your teller to me so I can write a receipt for you. If you have not paid your school fees by the beginning of next week, don't bother to come to school at all. All debtors will be?"
>
> "Flogged and sent back home," a few students said.
>
> "Debtors will be?"
>
> "Flogged and sent back home." (p.37)

The school, a supposed place of hope and social mobility, becomes for Eniolá a symbol of rejection and social stratification and shame. The following lines are quite expressive:

> "We will have mercy on you too. You will not be sent home this week, in fact you will have a grace period that will last for two whole weeks, but, every morning, I will serve you breakfast. And when you get home, you will remember to tell your parents that they should pay your school fees so that your teachers will not go hungry. What did I say?" They should pay your school fees so that…?"
>
> "Our teachers will not go hungry," the class chorused.
>
> "Louder."
>
> "Good. We will allow you to attend all your classes, but first of all we will serve you breakfast every day, and you don't want the breakfast, you can stay in your father's house. Do you know what the breakfast is?"
>
> "Yes," Paul shouted.
>
> "I say do you want to know what the breakfast is?"
>
> The whole class mumbled a yes.
>
> "You will be served six strokes of this." He cracked the whip. (pp.84-85)

This situation underscores a broader systemic failure in which the poor are systematically excluded from institutions that should, in principle, provide equal opportunity.

Búsolá, Eniolá's sister, is subjected to regular corporal punishment too, because of unpaid school fees, in the same way like her brother, as she complains:

> "…Is it not me they will flog in school on Monday? I will not take it o, I can't take another week of flogging. If you're not going to pay let me just stay at home as from Monday."
>
> "Not in this house. If you've started paying rent elsewhere, you can go and stay there. We are trying, Búsolá, we are trying." […]
>
> "But it's not you they are beating, it's not you." […]
>
> "Because of you my back is swelling. Every day beating. The people in my class will be laughing at me. You're the one that caused all these things." (pp.100-101)

The above excerpt unmistakably illustrates educational injustice since poor children are punished instead of being supported, as a way to maintain that schools reinforce inequalities rather than reducing them.

Furthermore, Eniolá tries to learn tailoring, which seems like an alternative path to secure his future, yet even that option is blocked by the demand for an apprenticeship fee he cannot consistently afford, as illustrated in the following extract:

> But when the last day of that month arrived and his parents did not pay his apprenticeship fees, she called him aside and explained that she could not continue training him. She understood that his father didn't have a job, but nobody as giving her threads and needles for free either. (p. 44)

Eniolá's story illustrates how poverty not only bars access to education but also erodes a child's sense of self-worth and future potential. Deprived of school, he is reduced to begging and odd jobs, all the while watching his dreams fade into despair. The narrator particularly epitomizes:

> Eniolá did not want to do it, but according to his mother, there were no alternatives. Every relative within reach had been begged to contribute the little they had. And now, as his mother counted the money that had been gathered so far, Eniolá wished it would all add up and somehow be enough. For school fees, for food that week, for what was left of rent. He would even settle for just rent and school fees. (p.173)

As a final point, Eniolá's exclusion from the educational system is not a result of laziness or lack of ability, but of a socio-economic condition beyond his control. For instance, his move from Glorious Destiny, a private school, to United, a public one, is not simply a change of location but a social and academic downgrade. The following lines are enlightening:

> "Búsolá said I'm not going to Glorious Destiny again."
>
> "Eniola, I'm the one who told Búsolá that. Don't shout, leave your father and let him—" […] "Your father has a friend in United, one of his former colleagues. He went

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there to speak to her this morning, and they say you can start this week." (p. 203)

Adebayo uses this shift to illustrate how financial hardship forces families to compromise on their children's education. The sentence "*your father has a friend'* suggests that even entry into a public school requires connections, underscoring systemic inequality. This narrative reveals how the education system, far from being a neutral ladder of merit, is rigged in favour of the privileged.

II.2- Wúràolá's World

Wúràolá enjoys uninterrupted access to quality education, a privilege afforded by her upper-class status as one can read: "…*They were younger and still attended the same primary school, before they were sent to different boarding schools for secondary school*." (p.57) By the same token, Wúràolá's position as a young doctor, educated in elite institutions, demonstrates how wealth facilitates academic success and secures professional stability, as it appears in these terms: "*Get good grades and become a doctor*." (pp.81-82) Furthermore, after six years of training at university, she becomes a doctor and wants to make use of her skills. The lines below are meaningful enough:

> When Wúràolá was assigned to lead nurses as they wheeled the patient through the hospital's darkened corridors after the surgery, she'd burst into giggles as she stepped out of the theatre. Six years of training, and the only skill that had been required of her was in a twelve-hour-long surgery was her ability to hold up her phone so its torchlight would guide nurses? (p.19)

Moreover, Wúràolá refuses to darn clothes, choosing to practice suturing on pads, bananas, and chicken breasts, revealing her privileged access to resources. Not every medical student, especially from poorer families like Eniolá's, could afford to run through several packs of suturing pads or even buying chicken breasts for practice. Meanwhile, the character Kingsley fears to hurt his patients by practicing suturing on human skin. This shows how Wúràolá's identity shifts away from domestic expectations of women and aligns with her professional, medical role, as clarified in these terms:

> In medical school, away from home and her mother, she'd refused to darn any clothes and had taken to suturing pads, running through several packs each month and sometimes calming herself by suturing unripe bananas and chicken breasts. Over the past few months, she'd managed a seamless transition to human skin without any of the fears that made Kingsley so anxious about hurting his patients. (p. 241)

Wúràolá's refusal to darn clothes while in medical school and her substitution of suturing pads, bananas, and chicken breasts perfectly evidence the intersection of gender roles and class privilege. Traditionally, darning is a domestic skill tied to women's expected contribution within the private sphere, but Wúràolá rejects this role and redefines women's work through her medical practice. By suturing flesh instead of fabric, she transforms a symbol of household care into a professional and life-saving act, signalling her departure from patriarchal prescriptions of "feminity." At the same time, her ability to run through several packs of suturing and practice on expensive items like chicken breasts exposes the privileges afforded by her wealthy background. Unlike poorer students such as Eniolá, whose limited resources hinder opportunity, Wúràolá's class status enables her to develop mastery and confidence. Her seamless transition to working on human skin, in contrast to Kingsley fear of harming patients, further underscores her professional competence while destabilizing gendered stereotypes that cast women as fragile. The episode therefore dramatizes how Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ uses Wúràolá's character to reveal the entanglement of social inequalities within postcolonial Nigerian society.

Besides, Wúràolá's family's influence not only guarantees her education but also protects her from the economic and social instability that Eniolá faces. Although education is often portrayed as a vehicle for upward mobility, the novel reveals its limits within a society marked by entrenched inequality. For characters like Eniolá, the barriers to accessing and sustaining education are so severe that the very hope it represents becomes a source of frustration and despair. Put another way, disparities in educational access and experience between the two main characters, Eniolá and Wúràolá, illustrate the deep-rooted class divisions within Nigerian society. This breakdown of aspiration, where systems fail to deliver on their promises, leads directly into disillusionment.

III- Disillusionment: The Collapse of Aspirations in a Stratified Society

The final layer of social inequalities that Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ explores in *A Spell of Good Things* is the pervasive sense of disillusionment that haunts both the underprivileged and the elite. While class disparities and unequal access to education expose the structural imbalance of Nigerian society, it is through the characters' shattered dreams and emotional despair that Adébáyọ̀ most poignantly illustrates the consequences of such inequalities. Disillusionment, in the novel, acts as both a personal and collective reckoning with the false promises of progress and meritocracy.

III.1- Eniolá

Eniolá's life is a powerful emblem of the collapse of aspirations. Despite his intellectual potential and his yearning for education, Eniolá is continually upset by economic hardship and systemic neglect. His father's retrenchment from civil service, the family's descent into poverty, and the loss of educational opportunities gradually erode his hope as evidenced in the following passage:

> Eniola had wanted to attend the Federal Unity school in Ikirun since Collins, whose family lived in the flat upstairs, had gone off to secondary school there three years before […]. Eniolá did not have to think twice before agreeing to stay in primary school for one more year. After his father's promise, it was easier for him to listen as his classmates bragged about secondary school. He could also tell them about how he would attend a Federal Unity school. A year after they all went off to secondary school, yes. He was going to be like Collins. That would make up for everything; all he had to do was wait. And then, at the end of his first term in primary six, just a couple of weeks before Christmas, his father and other four thousand teachers in the state were sacked. (pp.28-29)

Furthermore, the narrator even furthers that when Eniolá is finally manipulated into joining a political campaign and exposed to brutal violence, the dream of social mobility vanishes:

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> Throughout his first term at Glorious Destiny, Eniolá often told his classmates that he would in a proper school that did not have make-shift classrooms where chairs leaned against wardrobes, by the next school year. There, students did not have to squeal and scream when the family of bush rats that lived in one of those wardrobes decided to attend the social studies class. […] After his father's books disappeared, Eniolá tried to forget about the Unity School. His classmates, however, especially the boys whom he'd asked why their parents weren't going to send them to a school where they would not share the cafeteria with rats, lizards and occasional snakes would not let him forget. (p.33)

As it can be seen, what initially appears as lifeline or a chance for income, respect and purpose, turns into unfathomable despair. He witnesses the exploitation, manipulation, and violence at the heart of political patronage, as shown in the following passage:

> Eniolá felt dizzy. He did not want to be part of this anymore. These were not faceless people he could not care less about; this was Yèyé. She had been kind to him. What sort of person would he be if he followed through with what was required of him tonight? […] Why had he thought he could do that? He wanted to be anywhere else but here right now. He wanted to run across the lawn and out of the compound, going away and away until he was home. That was impossible, because the gate was locked and Holy Michael had the keys. Besides, he understood things, a little better now—Holy Michael would shoot him if he ran. He was sure of it. (pp.306-309)

Later on, Eniolá tries to break away from the violence and exploitation Holy Michael, Rashidi, and the other boys represent. Yet his choice has unintended consequences— Búsolá's abduction—and in the eyes of his parents, especially in a crisis fuelled by fear and anger, he becomes the immediate culprit, as it appears as follows:

> Eniolá had spent hours apologizing to his parents, trying to explain that he would not have returned home if he knew anyone in his family would be in danger. His father had cursed him every day since Búsolá was taken, more than once he'd raised his fist to strike Eniolá but so far had never let it land. Eniolá welcomed the curses as deserved punishment. His mother still hadn't responded to any of his apologies. Anytime he told her that he was sorry about Búsolá, she looked elsewhere. To the door of their room, off into the street, towards the ceiling or the skies, her brows arched in almost constant expectations that Búsolá would return, appear, even descend. (p.325)

The fact that his parents curse rather than protect or comfort him is symbolically crushing. This indicates the collapse of his last emotional refuge. In effect, Eniolá's disenchantment reaches a menacing pitch since he realizes that even familial love can fracture under the weight of fear, loss, and poverty. This desperateness is not merely about personal failure but is deeply tied to a system that dangles opportunity while denying the means to attain it. Also, neither the classroom nor the political arena offers genuine hope for change, only cycles of control that benefit the already powerful.

III.2- Wúràolá

Wúràolá's narrative, though situated in privilege, also reveals a subtler form of disillusionment. As a medical doctor from a wealthy background, she is expected to maintain appearances and get married into affluence. At first, Kúnlé represents love, hope and the possibility of a perfect future, as enlightened in these terms:

> The conversations ended with her father remarking that Kúnlé was a good man, his parents were good people, he was from good stock. She had learnt through bans on the kinds of girls she could invite to visit when she was in secondary school that her father's view of anyone was refracted through his opinion of their parents. And it was clear that, as far as he was concerned, Kúnlé was the best boyfriend Wúràolá could ever have, one he already deemed eligible to father his grandchildren. (p.63)

However, Kúnlé turns out to be controlling and violent, slapping Wúràolá in her own family home, with her family so close by, as the narrator wonders: "*The effrontery of slapping Wúràolá in her family home, with her family so close by? No, he had to be doing worse when they were alone elsewhere*." (p.233) Kúnlé's offense forces Wúràolá to question the value system imposed on her by her family and the society, that is why she plans to leave him. The narrator elucidates it in these words:

> She was going to leave him. That was what she had to say. It was easy to predict how he might respond if she broke up with him now. He would plead with her and argue; then he would smash her head against the wall. He had not gone that far yet, but she knew now that he could. She was going to break up with him before he did. (p.315)

Furthermore, Wúràolá chooses to send a text message to Kúnlé because she is determined to stop with him: "*Hi, by this weekend I will have informed my parents that I'm not going to marry you. I suggest you pass this news to your parents too*." (p.316)

Wúràolá's disillusionment is mainly moral and emotional. This shows how social status does not guarantee personal happiness, freedom, or even safety. For instance, after she sends the message, she is informed that her father has been kidnapped, a tragedy which is even more bitter because it is linked to Kúnlé's father's political ambitions, showing how the man she has hope to marry is ramblingly part of the very machinery that destroys her life. Then she charters a taxi to come home and see what is happening. When she sees her family home burning, her instinct is to run, as a natural human response to disaster. Yet, she is physically unable because of the bruises Kúnlé, her fiancé, has inflicted on her:

> She began to run when she saw the house but had to slow to a walk because it hurt too much to move her bruised body. […] Wúràolá began weeping when Motárá held her again. Every bruise Kúnlé had left on her, visible and invisible, ached with an intensity that transformed relief into regret. No matter what Motárá said, how could she not consider the possibility that if she'd listened earlier this would not have happened? She sobbed into her sister's shoulder until she was dizzy; then they went to lay together in their mother's bed. (pp.317-320)

This passage highlights the intersection of domestic violence and social collapse, showing how Wúràolá's personal suffering makes

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her vulnerable even in moments of larger disaster. Through sentences such as "*Wúràolá began weeping when Motárá held her again. Every bruise Kúnlé had left on her, visible and invisible, ached with an intensity that transformed relief into regret*." Adébáyò helps the reader figure out the plight of women when inequality and patriarchy deny them both physical freedom and emotional assistance.

Adébáyọ̀ thus reconstructs disenchantment as a shared experience across class lines, but with different consequences. For the poor, it can mean the loss of opportunities and the descent into cycles of violence. For the elite, it often manifests as a crisis of values and emotional isolation. In both cases, disillusionment reveals the profound psychological toll of social inequalities. The title itself, *A Spell of Good Things*, becomes deeply ironic, as the novel ultimately suggests that any good spell is fleeting, fragile, and unequally distributed.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the central argument has been to present a haunting and poignant portrayal of social marginalities that continue to plague postcolonial Nigerian society. Drawing from the New Historicism and Psychological Criticism, this paper has evidenced through the parallel yet divergent lives of Eniolá and Wúràolá that the novel deeply exposes the sharp divisions created by class, the uneven access to quality education, and the complex emotional terrain of hope, resistance, and eventual disillusionment. The contrast between Eniolá's struggle for survival in a destitute family and Wúràolá's comparatively privileged life underscores the brutal consequences of structural inequality. Education, often seen as a path to social mobility, is depicted not as an equalizer but as a marker of exclusion—accessible to the few and denied to many, further entrenching the existing divide.

Adébáyò's narrative avoids simplistic binaries. Instead, it illuminates how privilege and deprivation coexist, and how societal systems fail to protect the vulnerable while reinforcing the power of the elite. The emotional and psychological toll of these inequalities is most palpable in the characters' eventual loss of faith in the institutions and ideals they once believed in. Disillusionment—whether in love, politics, or aspirations for a better future—becomes a powerful narrative force that reflects a broader national despair.

Ultimately, *A Spell of Good Things* is more than a tale of personal tragedy; it is a bold critique of the socio-political landscape that perpetuates injustice. It affirms literature's role in not only documenting social realities but also in challenging readers to imagine a more equitable world. The authoress invites the reader to confront the uncomfortable realities of inequality, prompting reflection on the urgent need for systemic change. As a final assessment, this study posits Ayọ̀bámi Adébáyọ̀ as radical writer whose writings address the socio-political burning issues and underscore the utility of art as agency of conscientization and social mobilization for a change of mentality.

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