

MANICHAEAN PROBABLE POSSIBILITIES: RESTIVENESS IN ESIABA IROBI'S *NWOKEDI*

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Abstract

The better part of the world runs on ideas and ideologies; and the Manichaeon concept although from an extinct religion of yore has been brought to the fore on the contemporary issue of good governance and social stability. The Manichaeon idea of duality and dichotomy based on good and evil is brought on the fictive verisimilitude of Esiaba Irobi's play, Nwokedi to bear on governance and social stability in Nigeria. The outcome is more or less a warning of sorts: that it is important to prevent restiveness and a bloody revolution like the Nwokedi example, than to face the dilemma of the inevitable but not totally predictable duality of outcomes.

Introduction

Apart from the large corpus of religious literature regarding the beginnings, nature, beliefs, spread, and influence of the Persian Mani and the Gnostic religion he founded, the associative word 'Manichaeon' has had more than the ordinary and normal usages (religious) it should originally. In the contemporary world, it has acquired a somewhat more germane distant from its origins and historicity. It has become a suggestive trope. In Geo Windgren's historical exegesis, Manichaeism which is more or less extinct now, thrived between the third and seventh centuries; and at its height, was one of the most popular and widespread religions of the world.

Its teachings centred on an elaborate cosmology on the struggle between good and evil. This dichotomy could be extended to a perpetual battle between a spiritual world of light (good) and an evil, material world of darkness (bad). It further teaches that good, as light, is trapped in evil and that through an ongoing process in human history will finally be liberated in order to return to its original abode.

Premised on the above, it is evident that Manichaeism is based on duality – the dichotomy between good and evil; and as an ideology it is nothing much different. This means that as a figurative trope, its allusion in issues related to a dichotomy, if well expressed, will present the said issue in a more appreciative light. Given the expressive and suggestive nature of literature with its attendant universalism, the principle, ideology, or concept of Manichaeism could be put to good use in discussing certain analogous conditions in the contemporary world. This paper combines the concept with applications of propaganda and revolution in studying Esiaba Irobi's play.

According to Samy Azouz in "Black Theatre and Propaganda", propaganda and more specifically, propagandist art is designed to influence people and excite the populace to a rethink and possible action. He differentiates between integration propaganda and agitation propaganda and maintains that while the former aims at making people conform to patterns and models, agitation propaganda turns people from emulation and docility to rebellion and action (2). His view is that in "propagandist art, the dramatist intends to sensitize and teach his...audience and change spectator's attitudes" (1). The essay studies Amiri Baraka, the iconic and revolutionary African-American writer who was known for his fervour and inflammatory plays and essays calling for the emancipation of blacks in America in the more pronounced days of racism, neglect and segregation. He summarizes Baraka's artistic

intention as a dramatist thus: “In sum, Baraka’s conception of theatrical performance entails the notion of theatre art as useful and pragmatic propaganda” (11). Many notable blacks of the Harlem Renaissance era in African-American art and literature also popularized the same view. W E B Du Bois, the famous writer and activist uncompromisingly says: “All art is propaganda and ever must be.... I do not care a damn for any art that is not used as propaganda” (297).

In a more fiery and revolutionary tone, Baraka intones his extreme ideas for the use to which art and drama could be put to in his seminal and controversial essay “The Revolutionary Theatre”; necessarily quoted at length here:

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change. The Revolutionary Theatre should EXPOSE! Show up the insides of humans.... The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of the poor, it should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness... but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must ...because it is a theatre of victims. Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims....

Nigerian literati, dramatist and poet, Esiaba Irobi, in his play *Nwokedi*, employs this mindset. Inasmuch as Baraka’s immediate context is America, his views on revolutionary drama encompasses all the subjugated people of the world who are fighting oppression; especially blacks. Esiaba’s milieu is corrupt Nigeria; with its unemployed youths as the

downtrodden. He aptly treats the issues of social restiveness in a corrupt society and the attendant bloody revolution. This social unrest is powered by a revolutionist, unemployed, and disenchanting youth bent on changing the status quo, albeit violently, in order to secure a better present and future for their seemingly hapless lot. Esiaba mixes myth, ritual and propitiation rites from his native Ngwa Igbo roots in the actualization of his dramaturgy. Ekumeku, the central character's age group gives support to the protagonist, Nwokedi their leader, in the fight against the suppressive, corrupt and oppressive older generation. According to Isidore Diala in his *Esiaba Irobi's Drama and the Postcolony*,

It is in the translation of a ritual festival marking the renewal of life in traditional society to contemporary Nigeria as an agent of purgation that *Nwokedi* seeks function and relevance. Recognising political corruption as the ailment that threatens the contemporary Nigerian society, Nwokedi and his age-grade, the Ekumeku, charged with the responsibility of renewing the face of the earth through the ritual sacrifice of a ram, regard the elimination of corrupt politicians themselves as the proper purgation. (120)

Irobi the revolutionary writer in a tribute to him by Diala is said to have "(diagnosed) the cause of (Nigeria's) 'political epilepsy' and locates it in the corruption of the Nigerian leadership – politicians and soldiers alike" ("Tribute", 21). His dramaturgy advocating summary executions for corrupt oppressors is not limited to *Nwokedi*. Chidinma Madukaife in the article "Hangmen Also Die" on Irobi's *Hangmen Also Dies* says: "The major conflict in the drama starts when Yekini (the prison hangman) refuses to hang them. Their cause – the killing of a robber of the people – is just, he maintains" (28). Irobi clearly makes defiance, revolution and executions of corrupt leaders

his intrinsic message. However, Diala is quick and right to observe and note that “Irobi’s advocacy of revolutionary violence, however, is constantly interrogated by his awareness of its limitations” (*DramaandPostcolony*, 279).

Irobi’s restive and revolutionary spirit made manifest in the generality of his works and in *Nwokedi* particularly seem to stem from his indebtedness in style, theme and language to the playwright Wole Soyinka and his affinity with his native *Ekpe* secret society; though maintaining his own distinct style. Quoting Diala again, “In *Nwokedi* (indebted to Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed and Death and the King’s Horseman*) Irobi appraises the relevance of a traditional festival for communal expiation of guilt, the *Ekpe*, in the context of contemporary political corruption... (“Tribute”, 22). Furthermore, Irobi was initiated into the *Ekpe* masquerade society (distinct but linked to the *Ekpe* festival) as a child and got involved early in masquerade music and group rivalries. According to Diala, he was immersed in and understood “that symbolic violence and the occasional decapitation of sacrificial animals undertaken by the *Ekpe* society as part of propitiation rites... (and) discovered the germ of revolutionary instinct... (*DramaandPostcolony*, 32). This made him understand the necessity of confrontation and occasional bloodletting in the attainment of personal dignity and communal regeneration.

An Analysis of Irobi's *Nwokedi*

In the eponymous play, *Nwokedi* (Jnr), the protagonist, is presented as a hot-blooded fire-brand whose belligerent bent is brought to the fore throughout the length of the play. He refuses to be unduly intimidated by soldiers during his mandatory one year stint as a para military corps member in the National Youth Service Corps scheme. He ends up being punished for beating up his military superior. Another subplot shows his

militant attitude in their campus confraternity, The Buccaneers, where he also refuses to condone injustice and corruption and subsequently kills their capone (leader) in a sword duel. He carries these antecedents of uncompromising militarism against corrupt and intimidating authority (constituted or otherwise) into the main plot of the play as he metaphorically, metaphysically, and physically executes his destined charge as an element of change by facilitating the ultimate sacrifice for a better tomorrow by killing his corrupt and scheming father, Nwokedi (Snr) and his equally corrupt brother-in-law(Arikpo), instead of the traditional sacrificial ram.

Nwokedi (Jnr) and *Nwokedi* could be seen as the archetypal symbolic metonymy of a disenfranchised, unemployed, and restive youth; who are portrayed as the losers in a corrupt society. Senator Arikpo laments about them:

They have burnt my car and burnt my life.They have butchered me like a sacrificial animal. They have torn my flesh limb from limb. What you are looking at is a pillar of ashes. (3)

He further describes them as

The Devil's own brigade! A miserable mob of jobless young men and women. A menace of unemployed chimpanzees. A harvest of political illiterates. Nonentities. Pieces of dirt. Most of them graduates from the universities. Others from polytechnics. Louts who cannot find jobs for themselves.The only job they could find was to shatter my house into fragments. (3)

He later describes them as people who 'murder marches in their minds with militant feet' (8). He goes on and on in other scenes in the same lines of tirade against the youths. But Mrs Nwokedi has another view; on their behalf:

We are the last human frontiers to the marauding monsters and bleating beasts devouring our lives daily. We are tomorrow. In our hands are the batons of our destiny. In our arms are the banners of a rumpled future. Between our fingers burn the tapers and the flames of a new life. In our eyes gleam of dawn. We are tomorrow and tomorrow is us. (12)

Ozoemena, an involved and emphatic youth makes the view more extant:

Our time has come. And time is not the tick-tock of your wristwatches. Neither is time the rising and setting of the sun. Time is event. Time is decision. Time is action. Time is made when young men flex the muscles of a new resolve and decide to change their fate. Decide to change the world. Change the course of history. Create a new order. That my generation, is how Time is made. And that, ... is how Time trips tyrants. (13)

As these festering drums of war and confrontation are broiling, Nwokedi himself presents his mien as thus: 'I would rather die on my feet than live on my knees'. He further preps himself:

Run? Why should I run? Why? (fierily) This is our moment. Our moment. When we must gather our strength and energies into the demands of a revolution. This is the moment when what makes us young men and women must muster us to the last and supreme sacrifice. The supreme action. The greatest decision. This is the moment of revolt. We must cross the threshold now. All of us! (28)

For Nwokedi's macabre bent, 'A man must dare. He must go on daring. Until he dies' (27). He further describes himself and his mission as a rebel: 'A rebel is the man who says "no!"

The man who says, "it is enough!" who refuses to conform and threatens the establishment... I am a rebel, the future is my cause.' (31)

In a situation akin to the one being presented and described above, it is not unclear to see the impending disaster about to erupt because of an uncaring and corrupt leadership and the probable and possible actions of a restive and disenfranchised youth. Naturally, with such things occurring in a country like Nigeria, as we can presently see in different dimensions, a bloody revolution might well nigh be on its way. Literature, as we can deduce has one of its functions as giving us second handles on reality. It provides us with possibilities cloaked in pseudo prophecy; our task is only to heed the warnings and steer the nation or society's ship clear of disastrous icebergs and rocks. In an uncannily horrible culmination of events in *Nwokedi*, the disquiet had reached a gory crescendo that a bloody crash was inevitable. The following scene describes in crystal clear verisimilitude, a probable possibility:

Immediately Nwokedi Snr. rushes in screaming frenetically 'Nwokedi! Nwokedi!' He falls on Arikpo intent on untying the rope behind his back. Crouched in the position, his neckdoes not see the descent of the machete! Blackout! Some villagers dart forward to see the headless body of NwokediSnr. Immediately the knife descends again on Arikpo. Blackout! The Ekumeku surges forward, hoists Nwokedi up....The village gathers around the corpse. A dirge rises. They cover the corpses...(73)

The inevitable and unmistakable end of a mismanaged society and nation is clear from *Nwokedi*. The calamities that bloody the end of the story should serve as a warning – which is what literature does; to warn and teach us while delighting.

Both fictive and real life revolutionaries are always focused on their causes. Now, whether they ultimately succeed or not is generally inconsequential for the concerns of this paper. Our thrust in this treatise involves the notion that when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. This is a metaphorical position. In actuality, when firebrand revolutionaries like fictive Oshevire (*TheLastDuty*), or Idemudia (*Violence*), or historical Che Guevera and Fidel Castro are on a war course against their oppressors, whether riots, revolutions, guerrilla or conventional war erupts, the society ultimately suffers. Recently, the blood spilled and the bad blood generated by the irruption of the Arab Spring in the Middle East is yet to stem in Syria and other Arab nations. More recently, it has horrendously culminated to the menace known as ISIS/ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Sham/Islamic State of Iraq and Levante).

For social stability to gain a foothold in Nigeria, we should learn from such works and work towards preventive measures. Our leaders should be more people-oriented, shun corruption and remember that they are mere servants; because anything could happen.

The Manichaeian Angle

In concordance with Manichaeian ideology as a figurative trope, the outcome of a revolution inspired by mis-governance and corruption could very possibly be couched in its attendant dualism of either good or bad. There is a constant factor in a revolution: there must be destruction. Now, whether it succeeds or fails, for good or for bad, will be an 'if' of future history. The point here is prevention, lest we become the proverbial madman in Igbo lore who relates with a machete-wielding killer in these words: 'I will only be concerned when I look for my head and I don't find it!'

The probable possibilities of a war or revolution borne out of bad governance and dyed in restiveness and social instability is in reality, Manichaeian – it could either be good or evil in the real sense of the Manichaeian duality. And there are no guarantees in this ever-dynamic and mercurial world that things (revolutions) will turn out (with little or non-existent collateral damage) for the better. The question becomes: What do we do? Incidentally the answer is not far away. It lies in our collective resolve to conscientiously forestall catastrophe in our governance and polity.

Conclusion

Through the world of literature and using Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*, we have seen in a controlled fictive situation, probable possibilities of certain factors and occurrences; in this case restiveness and revolution. Being humans and having the capacity to learn and adapt, the message is that the leaders should adopt a more positive and responsible stance for the masses and that the populace should be supportive and less destructive. If in event we fail to heed these warnings and pseudo prophecies, then revolution, albeit a bloody one becomes inevitable. And our dream of a stable society will be lost. The Manichaeian concept and principle therefore serves as a model sounding board as to the inevitable duality of outcomes of any endeavour; thus, rulers and the ruled should beware of probable possibilities – prevention, they say, is better than cure.

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