

Theatre, Terrorism and the Society: A Study of Revolutionary Violence in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*

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ABSTRACT

The playwright as a social commentator is both a critic and a prophet. Often times he plays a non-conformist role as he takes a radical stance on the issues affecting the society. The playwright through his art mirrors the society and gives direction on the desirable social pattern to guide society out of its quagmire, at times charting the course of a revolution or revolt. This essay examines revolutionary violence in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*. The role of the artist as a prophet, a critic and as an advocate for change is analyzed. *Hangmen Also Die* portrays the issues and the use of violence as a tool of revolution. Intertwined in the play are the themes of corruption, greed, abuse of power and terrorism. The essay scrutinizes the use of terrorism as a tool against oppressive government and unfavorable politics. Adopting the analytical approach of methodology, this essay seeks to analyze the circumstance that births a violent revolution as the most attractive option. It is discovered that violence holds a performative and transformative element as it can serve as an alternative means in achieving consensus especially in a society riddled with massive corruption and exploitation.

Keywords: Theatre, Terrorism, Violence, Revolution, Corruption

Introduction

"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" Gerald
Seymor

The theatre is a microcosm of the society and the playwright draws inspiration from the society to create his work of art. Modern society has become a global village and with globalization has come both positive and negative results. Some of the recognized effect of globalization is increased opportunities for developing countries in international trade as well as positive economic growth. The negative

effect of globalization includes income inequalities, domination of global commerce by transnational cooperation as well as disregard for the local population development needs. Korten (2) notes various economic, social, and environmental devastations being wrought nearly everywhere by globalization. With globalization has come terrorism. There have been many attempts at the definition of terrorism however there is no one single definition to terrorism. The key elements of terrorism as stated by Matusitz are: violence, non-combatant targets, and the intention of spreading fear and for achieving political aim (2). With the September 11 attack on The World Trade Center terrorism took a new dimension and meaning. Best and Nocella state that, “The attacks of September 11, 2001 marked a salient turning point in the history of the U.S and indeed of global geopolitics” (1). They note further that the word “Terrorism” is one of the most commonly used word in current vocabulary as well as one of the most abused term. The last decade has witnessed an escalation in violence in the world and at home. These include the menace of Boko Haram, ISIS, Niger-Delta militancy and lately in Nigeria, the scourge of the Fulani Herdsmen. This paper aims to examine the depiction of violence and acts of terror in modern Nigeria drama and its effect on the society. It also examines the role played by the playwright as a critic and a social commentator. The primary data employed is Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die*.

Violence is defined as any behaviour involving or caused by physical force that is intended to hurt or kill. Carrol notes two forms of violence: physical and symbolic. He posits that both forms of violence are linked and the relationship between both can change within a short space of time. Carrol states that:

In many acts of violence there is a performative element, and a strikingly dramatic gesture can dramatize ideas and transform the political scene and social environment... Violence thus has a social and political potency because it can break norms and overturn consensus. It can transform the social environment sometimes for the better, sometimes for worse (10)

Irobi’s Hangmen Also Die treats adeptly the issue of violence and its effect on the society. Intertwined in the play text are the themes of corruption, militancy, abuse of power, revolution and the unnerving prophesy of the emergence of the Niger-Delta militants. *Hangmen Also Die* is a chilling and volatile tragedy. It tells the story of the Suicide Squad made up of seven university graduates unemployed and frustrated by the exploitation of the oil rich Niger Delta as well as the mindless corruption of the government of the day. Irobi depicts with chilling

precision the resultant effect of ideology gone wrong in the hands of the youth. Revolution and revolt is the result of the frustration with the socio-political institution of the state. Supporting the Frustration Aggression theory which holds that aggression is the result of being frustrated (Berkowitz 5). These frustrated individuals experience the urge to be aggressive towards the source of their frustration. For Irobi, the cause of revolution is the state of the mind of the people. The playwright states succinctly through the character of Acid that:

ACID: Revolutions do not start in the head. They start in the stomach with starvation and hunger. With marasmus and kwashiorkor. With joblessness. Revolutionaries do not grovel. They topple. They do not grin and laugh, they frown because what they are facing is the slime, the rot, the maggots, the viruses, the, nauseating residue of a consumptive society! (26)

Karl Marx holds that the source of power in the society lies in the economic infrastructure and the forces of production that are owned by a few. He explains all human activities in terms of distribution and dynamics of economic power. Thus, for the Marxist amassing and controlling economic power is the motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, the media, and so on. Alienation and extreme social class structure leads to revolution. The men of the suicide squad tow the path of violence as the only way to participate in politics. For them, violence becomes an avenue for expression; the means and way to purge pent up and accumulated frustration at the system. Carrol notes that the radicals of the sixties viewed violence as a language, a form of social action and communication (8). Thus violence becomes an expression of power, a liberating force and an act of participation albeit a negative one. Carrol posits that:

Seen in this context violence was populist in that it enabled people to participate in the public sphere as a substitute for participation in (democratic) politics; it gave actors and spectators power, and in particular demonstrated who was friend and foe. For those at the bottom of the social hierarchy it could be an enabling and liberating experience. (9)

Irobi who is a self – declared intellectual terrorist does not shy away from stating the obvious, critiquing the government or portraying the bleak future of Nigeria due to the constant siphoning of its wealth by a few greedy politicians.

Through his poetry and plays such as *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) and *Nwokedi* (1991), Irobi depicts the favourable and despicable end in place for greedy politicians. He also presents his views on the necessary cleansing the lands demands. In his interview with Azuonye, Irobi presents a violent revolutionary alternative. He states that:

What is needed is methodological and strategic insurrections. Insurrections aimed at change. Permanent change. What the Irgun Stern gang did in Israel to the British. What the Mau Mau did in Kenya. Kamikazee pilots. Suicide Bombers. Coups. Against Nigerian leaders. What Nzeogwu did. What Sankara did. What Jerry Rawlings did. (n.p)

Osu, writing on the revolutionary aesthetics in Irobi's plays notes that the playwright is filled with "revolutionary revulsion" at the fantastic corruption of the Nigerian government and the ruling class. Prompted by this, Irobi recreates society in its crudest nature. He does not sugar coat the truth or apply satirical mirth in his depiction of the society. Rather, he presents society realistically as it is.

The Playwright and his Social Vision

The relationship between theatre and politics has been one of constant debate as far back as the time of Aristotle. The arguments concerning Art for Art sake and theatre's didactic nature has been the focal point of many academic discourses. According to Boal:

...always a vision of the world in transformation and therefore is inevitably political insofar as it shows the means of carrying out that transformation or of delaying On one hand, art is affirmed to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand, it is considered to present it. (2)

It is on this premise that the contemporary playwright focuses his dramatic prowess on the evils of the society; unlike Pre Independence Nigerian playwrights who focused on the evils and effect of colonialism, as well as the dysfunctional political system of Nigeria during the early days of independence. Adelugba and Obafemi notes that the plays of the first generation playwrights such as Soyinka, Rotimi and Sofola, had a "certain elitist and reformist perspective" and satirize the leadership of Nigeria at that time (153). They state further that the second generation dramatists were influenced by Marxism and its ideology of dialectical

materialism. Their theatre focused on the people rather than the leaders. Their thematic preoccupation had to do with more general issues largely identified in a neo-colonialist society. Adelugba and Obafemi are of the opinion that:

At varying levels of accomplishment, the plays of these dramatists are best characterized as theatre of ideology and politics, committed to social and historical reconstruction through class struggle and a proletarian consciousness. Their theatre deals, more or less consciously, with urgent and topical political and social problems largely identifiable with the realities of a neo-colonial society, problems of poverty, violence, insecurity, disease, corruption and so on, with a certain idealistic proposition of alternative strategies of social transformation. (153)

Prominent among the playwrights of this category and examples of their works, are Femi Osofisan (*Morountodun, Once Upon Four Robbers*), Bode Sowande (*Farewell to Babylon*) and Tess Onwueme (*The Reign of Wazobia*). Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* falls under the category stated above. Irobi's play is one that is politically committed to the society. However, Irobi takes a pessimistic outlook to life. He employs the absurdist and existentialist belief that man is doomed. The members of the Suicide Squad state unequivocally:

ALL: And we do what we do because we know we have no future, because we know no matter what we do, no matter how much we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us... (38)

Driven by anger, fueled by despair and unemployment, the Suicide Squad lash out against society. This group of highly educated, intelligent and talented young men becomes a machine of destruction and death. Their creative strength is channeled towards destruction. There is no vision to their fight as they had been previously betrayed by the Marxism touting Dr. Obanisege the staff adviser of their club. There is no unity of purpose to their struggle as their lash out blindly to both the masses and the elites. The Niger Delta region is a hot bed of violence waged on three sides by the government through the military, the multinational companies and the local militia. At the receiving end is the poor, especially women, little children and the aged. The Suicide Squad falls under the category of the local militia. In this case, they worsen further the lot of the oppressed people. The young men turn their bitterness and bile against a society already oppressed

by unfavourable policies, greedy politicians and profit seeking capitalist. It is through the intervention of Tamara that their excessive energy is channeled to the thieving and corrupt politicians. These young men while till students at the university were influenced by Dr. Ogbansiegbe, the staff adviser of their club; The Comrades. The club had been formed out of their lofty dreams for change in leadership and of the society. Created by a group of radical young men filled with lofty ideas to change the world, their encounter with Dr. Ogbansiegbe was to change the course of their lives for forever. Ogbansiegbe taught them revolution, the uses and abuses of terrorism. Terrorism thus became a legitimate tool against oppressive government and unfavourable policies. Through Ogbansiegbe, the boys are initiated into the culture of violence. It is interesting to note that, despite the playwright's attempt to situate the struggle of the young men within the societal structure of impoverishment, poverty and lack, the playwright fails woefully by directing the violence to the people; thereby making the Suicide Squad a gang of confused young men operating with no form of vision or direction. For them all that mattered was their own satisfaction. No thought is given to the welfare of the people or the resistance movement. According to Acid, mimicking Dr. Ogbansiegbe:

ACID: ...so I want you to write this down on the walls of your mind, and remember it now and always, that revolutions are always based on terrorism. Revolutions are always based on violence, on bloodshed and terror. (25)

The playwright herein discussed draws inspiration from his immediate environment as a member of the Nigerian society. Irobi through *Hangmen Also Die* mirrors the Nigerian society and in particular the Niger Delta. This play is Irobi's most prophetic play. As a critical observer of human nature and event, Irobi depicts the emerging trend in the Niger Delta. This includes kidnapping, cult fights, militancy and pipeline vandalism. Just as the seven young men of the Suicide Squad are hung to death for the murder of a chief; the Ogoni seven and the great playwright and environmentalist Ken Saro Wiwa are hung, left to die and buried in unmarked graves. The playwright also predicts with striking accuracy the Niger Delta militancy which emerged from the troubled bowels of the Niger Delta. Fueled by economic exploitation and environmental degradation by the Multinationals, the Niger Delta youths have taken up arms to fight back against their perceived oppressors. While their cause is honourable enough, it has lost its initial vision as greed and selfishness has crept in thereby causing them to mutate into factions. Irobi's social vision is to see a society that is free from corrupt and

greedy politicians. While success is not guaranteed, Irobi posits that the act of trying is enough, until through revolution a state of utopia is achieved (if possible). In trying to make a difference and sanitizing the environment, the younger ones are influenced to continue in the fight against oppressive government until sanity is restored. Irobi also depicts the result of high rates of unemployment in his play by depicting the after effect of idleness and lack of economic wherewithal which is seen as the major reason the young men took up arms as an option. It is ironic that the Suicide Squad is formed in the corridor of the Directorate for Employment when they had tried without success to assess micro loans for unemployed graduates. Unemployment is currently the biggest problem facing the Nigerian society. The unemployed youths are frustrated and easily enticed by politicians who use them as mercenaries in their scuffles with their opponents. Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe an intellectual and a failed politician is the first to channel the exuberance of the young men into personal vendetta against his political opponents. As the staff adviser of their club "The Comrades", rather than act the supervisory role he is assigned to the students, he brain washes their empty stomachs filled with lofty ideas for the betterment of the society. Dr. Ogbansiegbe betrays the trust of the university and of the young men. As stated by R.I.P, Dr. Ogbansiegbe used words like loaded pistols and taught the young men the act and levels of armed struggle. In a strange fashion, Dr. Ogbansiegbe falls victim of the monsters he created. He is killed and hung by the young men who mask his death to look like a suicide.

The playwright raises important points on the double standard created by the society especially on issues of war and terrorism. He notes that success is the yard stick by which terrorism is judged. He states that "the yardstick for determining the validity of terrorism as a weapon for revolution is success. If a terrorist succeeds, he becomes a hero. If he fails, he goes into a shallow grave as a villain" (26). Terrorism -violence and threats of violence- thus because a weapon of political warfare. It is the deliberate target of harmless civilians for political gain. The easy manipulation of the definition of terrorism shows the intricacies and the irregularities in the war against terrorism as there is no one accepted definition of Terrorism. According to Matusitz, the defining feature of Terrorism includes the use of violence or threats of violence in the pursuit of political, religious, ideological or social objectives (2). The playwright through the use of language depicts fear, terror and violence. He captures the oppressive system of government and societal ills. The playwright's choice of words is laden with violence similar to a time bomb ticking away. He depicts varying forms of violence to show the warped mind of oppressed individuals. The tone of the play is tense

and the conflict is on varying degree from the refusal of Yekini, to hang the boys and Tamara's clash with chief Erekosima.

The playwright imbues Tamara with his social vision depicting her as a strong, brave and fearless woman. The people of her village regard her as the goddess of the earth, Tamara, after whom she is named. It is Tamara that is brave enough to challenge chief Erekosima for embezzling the compensation money paid to the people by the multi-nationals. She is fearless and insist that chief Erekosima puts the money down for the intended purpose. She sticks to her morals even when faced with difficulties. She refuses to acknowledge that corruption is a universal trait in man. She points out that it is poverty, wants and deprivation that causes the greed in man and in the case of Erekosima who has never tasted deprivation; she states that his ego is his burden. Tamara is understanding and full of compassion, she is also a firm believer in justice and equity. She highlights the playwright's ideal which is "the reconciliation of purposeful revolutionary action with selfless social commitment" (Diala 89). Tamara fine tunes a rebellion into the first wake of a revolution. She is also able to channel the wrath of the Suicide Squad away from the masses to the guilty politicians. She makes them see reason why they should fight for the poor and the dispossessed and overthrow the corrupt political class. She challenges them to prove their manhood and the vision to their struggle by recovering the money stolen from the people by Chief Erekosima.

TAMARA: can't you show your humanness, your compassion, your sympathy for the poor, and how tough you are by fighting on the side of the dispossessed. The side of the poor, of those who have nobody. The wretched of the earth. Is there no vision to your rebellion? Are you empty cups? Half-baked apes yet to evolve into human beings? Do you have in your skulls what should be in your anuses? (64)

When Tamara realizes that Erekosima has squandered the money she begs the Suicide Squad to free him and spare his life. This shows her as a compassionate person with a humane spirit. It is the same spirit that leads her to seek the best for her people. Through the character of Ibiaye, the playwright unfolds the agony of the poor Niger Deltans who have lost their livelihood and family members to the activities of oil drilling companies. Ibiaye, a fisherman is left a blind old man when the river is contaminated by oil spillage, he loses his livelihood and his two sons to the unsafe practice of oil drilling from the bottom of the river. Chief Erekosima represents the politicians and the ruling class. Despite his university

education, Erekosima lacks wisdom and common sense to cater for his people who have been heavily exploited and demoralized. He splits the three million naira between the local government chairmen, himself and gives the balance to his godson Daminagbo, the Superintendent of the Prison. Erekosima is power drunk, thoughtless and totally selfish. He is also corrupt and uncaring. He treats the poor with disdain and contempt. He holds that politics has nothing to do with morals but rather with personal survival. His lack of human empathy and morals is the reason he can embezzle money meant for the whole state. Despite the fact that Erekosima has never known poverty as he was born into a wealthy family, he is totally lacking in moral compass. Rather than spend money to rebuild the school system in Nigeria, he sends his children to foreign schools and embezzles the peoples' money to pay school fees for his children abroad. This is very common with many politicians in Nigeria. The playwright openly ridicules the vices of the society and shows the resultant effect of a society gone awry. Esiaba Irobi says without mincing words, says that, this is the result we will reap if we do not do something fast. For Irobi, the youths must act fast and now. In the words of R.I.P “...when man waits and waits for God to act and God does not act, man takes up the role of God and acts. That is why HE made us in HIS own image” (87).

Irobi's Theatre of Disillusionment

The deviant is seen as an individual who tows his own path and whose actions are deemed to be inimical to the good of the society. In drama, revolutionary consciousness is imbued into certain characters who educate the exploited society and create social awareness against corrupt leaders. According to Amaefula, “revolt entails rebellion against an authority; an uprising; an overthrow of an established order which often involves a radical restructuring of social and economic relation” (139). The members of the Suicide Squad are the deviants of the society and through them the playwright depicts the time bomb the Nigerian society is sitting on with its' teeming population of certificate carrying unemployed youth. Revolt against the status quo is the only motivation they need to harass the police and the institution of the government. For members of the Suicide Squad toppling society is the means to an end. Violence, thus is participatory, an avenue to make an impact, to be felt and to be feared. They became a force to be reckoned with and are noticed by the government, the police, and the society at large. As stated by Dayan and Acid, it is because they have no place in the politics of the nation that they have turned to violence. They have nothing to lose but all to gain. Thus, to echo the word of the Communist Manifesto, “they have nothing to lose but chains” (258). Violence, thus serves as a purgation of excess emotion and pent up frustration. Although revolt is the recommended panacea against oppressive and

ineffective leadership, the play is marked by disillusionment. This disillusionment is reflected in the hopeless nature of the chant of the Suicide Squad.

MORTUARY: every dream we have you have stolen from us.

DISCHARGE: every hope we had you have also taken from us.

DAYAN: everything we have you have taken from us

KHOMEINI: and even that which we do not have.

CHORUS: you have also taken from us. (36)

ALL : And we do what we do because we know that we have no future, because we know no matter what we do , no matter how we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us...(38)

At the end even though Erekosima is killed, his prophesy on the death of the Suicide Squad comes to pass, at the point in time when they had achieved a vision to their struggle. Yekini, the prison hangman that refuses to hang the members of the Suicide Squad gives up his job and gratuity to go back to a life of fishing. In the confrontation with the police, Tamara and Ibiaye are shot down. The Suicide Squad is conquered and sentenced to die by hanging. It is poignant and devastating to note that seven young men are sentenced to death for killing one corrupt politician. While one does not make a case for murder or crime, one is forced to ask, what is justice? Where is justice against the poor and the oppressed? Erekosima boldly states that the boys will die by hanging and surely they hang just as he predicted. To what essence then is their struggle? It is in this state of confusion and dilemma that we take solace in the words of Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe:

ACID: ...But for me, for me Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe, I believe neither in success nor failure. I believe in effort! Yes, effort!
The Suicide Squad played their part in the revolution. It is now left for the people, the youths to continue the struggle against corruption, mediocrity and exploitation.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the people are oppressed, marginalized and abused on all sides. Like the saying goes, “when two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers”. The people bear the brunt of the clash between the suicide squad and the police. The victims are the common man such as Ibiaye and Tamara, who suffer the exploitation of the multi- national oil companies that destroy the farm lands and the rivers in the course of oil exploration and oil spillage. The people are also the victims of lack of infrastructures and development caused by greedy politicians

who embezzle public funds and divert them for personal and selfish use instead of developing their communities and states. Plagued by such colossal and mindless abuse the people are called to revolt. Esiaba Irobi thus, makes a case for revolutionary violence in *Hangmen Also Die*. Man must take the radical approach out of his predicament, even by violence if needs be. It is no longer permissible for man to sit and hope things will get better on its own. Rather, man must take the lead to change his situation. It does not matter whether the desired change happens through violence or not, what matters is that a change that befits all happens and man must never stop trying till he succeeds. Man must act and act now!

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