

## Interrogating Nationalist Ideologies in Nigerian Drama: A Textual Analysis of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*

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### Abstract

There is no contesting the fact that dramatic writing and criticism in Africa have their relevance; either for the purpose of entertainment, information or conscientisation for social transformation, or drawing attention to new ideas in scholarship. Also, within this, is the notion that every writer has his/her ideological leaning(s), which serve as the springboard for contextual understanding of what the work addresses. Esiaba Irobi is one of such writers that deploy their drama texts in the signposting the aforementioned ideals. This article, through textual analysis, investigates how the play, *Hangmen Also Die* engages the concepts of nationalism and the call for social order. Using the Social Revolution Theory (SRT), the paper argues that Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* contributes to the comprehension of the discourses of nationalism and national development. Like other related African drama texts, the play calls for subtle social revolution especially in Nigeria's political landscape.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Ethnicity, Social order, Social revolution, Ideology.

### Introduction

Nationalistic tendencies have vigorously reflected in the works of Esiaba Irobi, a Nigerian dramatist, who had once or twice referred to himself as a 'Biafran.' This paper is set out to contest this assertion and situate him as a Nigerian nationalist rather than a Biafran. This is because most of his

dramatic works engage salient issues that have recourse to the ideas of nationalism and national development. It is a fact that dramatic productions create potential source for critical analysis of issues arising from society, thereby giving room for the interrogation of contextual social happenings. Esiaba Irobi has considerably worked to harness the Nigerian social issues and thoughts through the wheel of drama productions. To achieve this, he deploys his works as conversations with emerging social discourses in the country. This paper identifies three stages by which dramatists such as Irobi could interrogate social issues. These are: the identification of the cases that are seen as problems, locating the problems through the process of examination and analysis and proffering solutions to the identified problems.

Irobi adopts the abovementioned stages as tools to engage the developmental processes and the relationship between the different facets in Nigeria, as a means to critiquing the country's social condition with respect for positive change and stability. His drama texts are used to cross-examine society from the standpoint of its emancipation and collective social transformation. These dramatic works most times, serve the purpose of social criticism that question and examine issues that have created obstacles to social and human development, hence, rejecting the social imbalance that permits injustice, unemployment, exclusion and exploitation. Nwabueze (2021) attests to the fact that through the dramatic texts, Irobi "displays his penchant for critical thinking and the ability to examine initially the negative issues that ravage his society" (p.243). In *Nwokedi* (1991), the playwright reveals the agonizing imageries of the ineffectiveness and inaction of contemporary Nigerian politicians to improve the socio-economic status of the country. They rather prefer to loot the nation's treasury for their own selfish end and cause untold hardship for the masses. In *Cemetery Road* (2009), he exposes the heartlessness of the Nigerian leaders (military rulers/politicians) and how the university intellectuals connive with them to oppress the peasants. The drama takes a deep look at the rots in the Nigerian educational system. This shows that Esiaba Irobi is a nationalist playwright, who through his plays demonstrates passionate interest for a better Nigeria by using the texts to navigate the challenges of insincere rule by those at the helms of political affairs and the psychological trauma experienced by the exploited in the hands of the ruling class. Adopting Social Revolution Theory, we argue in this study that Irobi uses his play texts to participate in the political struggle against social stratification and capitalism and to also

investigate myriad of techniques by which capitalism operates within political, economic and cultural institutions in Nigeria.

### **Nationalism and Nigerian Dramatists: A Review**

The idea of 'nationalism' tends towards fostering integration and a sense of identity among the people. A review of conceptualisations given by scholars on the term is necessary as a means to formulating a grounded definition of the topic of discourse. Nationalism basically implies two closely knitted connotations: (i) the behaviour, practice and activities exhibited by groups belonging to a nation as a means of identifying with the nation, and (ii) the activities and roles engaged by groups within a nation towards the achievement of sustainable self-rule. It suffices that describing nationalism tends to create in one's mind the use of such terms like 'conflict,' 'interest,' 'pride,' 'political struggle,' 'quest for self-emancipation,' 'rebellion and terrorism' (if need be). Other elements of human nature like religion, common language and history of origin, race, custom and culture are also considered in the description. Opafole (2016) states that "Nationalism relates to the wish of a large group of human beings belonging to the same origin and language, to mention a few links and to establish an independent nation" (p.1). Opafole's definition explores Nationalism from the perspectives of ethnic identity and territorial rights as they bother on frontiers/boundaries. In contrary to Opafole's description, Kohn, (1982) declares that Nationalism is "a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt due to the nation-state" (p.9).

Going by Opafole's description, the idea that there are ethnic colourations to nationalism could lead to the concept of ethnic-nationalism or ethno-nationalism, which is also as complex as nationalism itself. It is a belief system established by a particular ethnic group in manifesting some sort of superiority over other ethnic groups. This form of Nationalism is in opposition to the colonialist construction of nationalism which technically structured different ethnic groups under one nation. The evolution is, therefore, an indication that there is a kind of disillusionment within the existing ethnic groups which then prompted a desired social change from what the ethnic groups feel as oppression, marginalization and failure of favourable social political system. Ethno-nationalism could also manifest in individual's loyalty and identity with a particular ethnic group within a nation/country.

This explains why in Nigeria, for instance, there are different groups that have emerged as bodies with ethnic colouration with the aim of canvassing for their own ethnic agenda, as this had directly led to the emergence of different ethnic militia groups across the nation. For example, in Southwest, there are groups like Odua People's Congress (OPC) and Agitation for Yoruba Nation. In the North are Arewa Consultative Forum and Northern Elders Forum. In the Eastern part, there is Ohaneze Ndigbo. In the Niger-Delta there are groups like Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Volunteer Force, Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). These groups in different ways and times called the attention of government at the centre to what seem to them as neglect or injustice (Omoera, 2019).

In the field of literary writing, various Nigerian literary writers have deployed their writings at examining various issues that have recourse to nationalism, ethnic chauvinism and the question of nation building. Since the nation's independence in 1960, drama has been used by several Nigerian dramatists to capture the socio-economic and political realities of the nation by reacting and protesting against social inequalities that have been brought about by the political leadership. The texts are used as revolutionary tool to access political freedom from both corrupt politicians and military dictators who are continuously subjugating the masses. Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers* (1980) and *No More the Wasted Breed* (1983) are examples of drama texts that draw attention to the notion that the masses should engage a critical analysis of their situation as a nation therefore making effort towards self-liberation.

### **Esiaba Irobi's Nationalistic indices in *Hangmen Also Die***

*Hangmen Also Die* is a drama that depicts the horrifying picture of the Niger-Delta region in Nigeria through the metaphor of Izon State. The play opens in a guillotine section of a prison yard in Izon State. Seven unemployed Nigerian graduates that have been sentenced to death by hanging for the killing of Chief Isokopiri Erekosima, a Commissioner in the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs await their execution. The prison hangman, Yekini, a former fisherman, refuses to execute the graduates because of what he observes as injustice. The seven graduates are members of a violent group referred to as Suicide Squad. In their university days, they formed a revolutionary group called The Comrades due to their strong alignment with Karl Marx's ideology of revolution and the influence of Dr. Ogbansiegebe, the

student's Staff Adviser. Dr. Ogbansiegbe as "an ideologue and an orator, who uses word like a loaded pistol" (p.38) and has a very good knowledge of convincing one to take action through his verbal eloquence. He tutors the students on the philosophy of terrorism, revolution and protest. In one of his lectures, Dr. Ogbansiegbe informs them as retold later by Acid, a member of the squad:

You are all young men. And being young men in a third world country where no one, not even your leaders, makes any plans for your future, you are potential revolutionaries. (fierily) 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. .... (p.39)

After the formation of the group, Dr. Ogbansiegbe is made the coordinator and he used his position as the staff adviser and coordinator to manoeuvre the group to attack his political enemies. However, after realising that "they are just tools in Dr. Ogbansiegbe's hand. Spanners and hammers in the hands of a political mechanic" (p.43). They kill him and disbanded the group. The group meets at the office of the Directorate of Employment, after seven years of graduation with employment with the hope of accessing soft loan as start-up for entrepreneurial engagement but hits a deadlock. They lament thus:

**Acid:** We were there seven times a week

**Rip:** From eight in the morning to eight in the night

**Dayan:** We even went on Sundays.

**Acid:** But we never got a kobo

**Rip:** So, there, on the corridor of the Directorate for Employment, we remembered Dr. Oghansege's speech on the uses of terrorism. (30)

At this point, they set up another deadly group referred to as Suicide Squad which begins to unleash terror on the society by killing, maiming and vandalism. The aim of this youth group is to protest government's mismanagement of the peoples' resources. This scene of protest is in line with Yussuf, U.L and Benisheikh, B.I (2021) assertion that: Nigeria has become a violence-prone nation with the youths at the centre of most of it. No part is immune from one form of violence or the other, ranging from Boko Haram insurgency, herdsman-farmers crisis, ethno-

religious crisis, kidnapping, armed robbery, terrorism and #EndSARS, among others (p.380).

The group is tagged a rebel group who does not care for the state. The members become the most wanted in the land though becoming a hero-group for youths who are disillusioned by the activities of the government. Demeari, Tamara's son abandons his mother and decides to be a member of the Suicide Squad in the creek. While Tamara was looking for her son in the creek, she meets with the group and serious argument ensues. She redirects their mission and ideology on protest towards corrupt politicians who have aided the environmental pollution of Izon State. She asks them to look for Chief Erekosima and ask him to refund the compensation money given to him by the federal government for oil pollution and environmental degradation of the natural habitat in Izon State. She chastises them thus:

**Tamara:** ...Here you hide in the bush and burgle people's houses in the night...A man has three million naira belonging to you in his house and you are here choking on crumbs of bread... remember also your poverty-stricken people; remember too your petroleum which is being pumped out daily from your veins and then fight for your freedom...Is there no vision to your rebellion?... (pp.85-89)

The above dialogue according to Ukor (2022) is to "urge the protesters to speak up, air their views and grievances against any unjust system that tries to repress them" (p.25). Hearing this, the squad rises and invades Chief Erekosima's coronation ceremony, abducts and brings him down to their hideout. In the process of questioning, he becomes arrogant and defends his action of looting the Izon States' compensation fund. In annoyance, the group members decide to hang him. It is at this point that armed soldiers appear and arrest the squad. In the end, the entire group is sentenced to death by hanging. At the guillotine, Yekini, the hangman refuses to hang the condemned group as he laments the reason, he could not carry out the duty he is being paid for:

**Yekini:** You see, some time ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which as you know is a riverine state, the sum some of three million naira as compensation money for the oil spillage which has ruined their farms... homes, and their lives.... But the man they killed. One Chief Erekosima, a Commissioner for Chieftaincy Affairs, connived with his

Councillors and Local Government Chairmen to confiscate the three million naira. The Councillors took one million and shared it among themselves. The Local Government Chairmen shared one million. The Commissioner himself, one million. No single citizen, no matter how wretched, got a kobo. That was when these men stepped in. (p.22)

Eventually, he resigns his appointment with the prison service and goes back to his traditional occupation which is fishing. A critical study of the text shows that Irobi emphasises that there are critical national issues that need critical thinking and solutions. A foremost issue emphasised by Irobi is the high level of corruption in the Niger Delta symbolically represented by the State of Izon. The Niger Delta in Nigeria as it is generally known is the economic reservoir of the nation in terms of crude oil and natural resources. Ironically, the region is one of the poorest in terms of socio-economic development. Agbiboa and Maiangwa (2012) lament that “for many inhabitants of the Niger Delta region, progress and hope, much less prosperity remain effectively out of reach” (p.12).

All of this is as a result of corrupt practices of political leaders as represented by Chief Erekosima, who loots the public fund for his own self-aggrandisement. He diverts the fund given to Izon State by the government as compensation for the damage done by oil spillage in the land. Chief Erekosima is a representation of the few political elites in the land that benefit from oil exploitation at the expense of the masses. This is evident in the relatively recent suspension of the Niger-Delta Development Commission (NNDC) probe panel set up by the National Assembly to investigate the Interim Management Committee of the commission over the allegation of mismanaging 81.5 billion naira within three (3) months. The play is a reflection of Irobi’s criticism of the imbalances and injustices that characterised the political landscape of Nigerian nation and a metaphor of high-level corruption with unlimited impunity. The consequence of this according to Ogonnaya, M (2020) “has been protracted unemployment, lack of income generating opportunities and abject poverty, other misery and health hazards among other environmental and human security issues” (p.2). The playwright therefore uses the drama to espouse the view that the continuous suffering and emasculation of the masses by the corrupt political leadership is inimical to the economic advancement of the Niger Delta region and Nigeria as a whole. Beyond this, the play calls for intellectual revolution as symbolised

in the dialogue of Dr. Ogbansiegbe, collective heroism as encoded in the action of the Suicide Squad and individual heroism as represented by the action of Yekini as he demonstrates the government's neglect of the poor like himself through his dialogue with Doctor.

**Yekini:** Which government? Which useless government are you talking about?

**Doctor:** Yekini, don't talk like that about the government...

**Yekini:** Why hasn't the government protected me from poverty all these years? Why hasn't the government, your useless government, increased my salary all these years? Why hasn't your government transferred me from here to the V. I. P section of the prison where nobody is ever hanged? Doc, don't tell me anything good about your useless government unless you want me to damage your life. (p.16)

The play according to Nwosu and Arinze-Umobi (2016) is a revelation on "how the oppressed masses have in turn converted oppression and violence into instruments of confrontation for the resolution of the endemic conflict between the people and the leaders" (p.117). The text then becomes a political metaphor of corruption and exploitation perpetrated by the few political elite groups that anchor the political and economic affairs of the nation. Environmental degradation and pollution are another issue addressed in the play. The ecological and biological damage caused by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta becomes a major point of discourse in the play. The ruination and debasement of the natural habitat and the general environment of the State of Izon is well captured as the representation of the environmental decay in the Niger Delta region, which is as a result of oil and gas exploration which has culminated in the people losing access to their natural and traditional occupation; fishing and farming and thereby becoming jobless. This is succinctly captured by Ibiaye:

We wake up to see the sea heaving something thick and pungent- like petroleum jelly... surged like lave from the armpit of the ocean until it embalmed the mouth of the fresh water spring from which we daily drink. Our plants began to die, our roots to rot. Our seeds shrivelled. We fled. Our Canoe capsized in an ambush of water-hyacinths. Everything we own was lost except our lives... So, we swam ... onto the



shore. But little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the film of rancid crude oil where we saw our faces as we swam (p.71).

The failure to carry out environmental impact assessment by the government and the oil multinational companies leads to serious environmental and health hazards which grossly affect the people. This particularly turns Ibiaye to a blind man. He says: ... seven days later, the darkness fell. And now, I who once showed strangers the way through the creeks, am now led by the hands, ... I, who once fed people, I am now fed people, I am now fed. And why else would I be here, if not to find some crumbs for my empty stomach? (p.71). The associated challenges that come with oil spillage and gas flaring in the region are numerous as they include; water and air pollution, climate change, emission of toxic waste, destruction of ozone layer, loss of biological diversity and damage to fisheries and aquaculture. The root cause of this is total neglect of the people by the various succeeding governments in the country. Nwosu and Arinze-Umobi (2016) conclude that "the government and its colonial allies as well as its agencies lay bare the environment through seismic operations and oil drilling...they pollute the environment in such a manner that they can no longer support life" (p.118). Up till the present moment, economic activities through traditional occupations have drastically dwindled because the rivers have been polluted for fishermen to fish; farmlands are poisoned by toxic acid while oil canals and pipelines have made it difficult for farmers to farm. The issue of environmental pollution in the play is a foreshadow of the protest by the Ogoni people in 1994 which led to the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight (8) Ogoni men in November 10, 1995. The playwright deploys the play to capture the plight of the people of the Niger Delta region in the hands of corrupt political elites both at central (federal) and local (community) levels and the interrogation of the ecosystem in the Niger-Delta region that has been tampered with.

Youth unemployment/youth restiveness are emphasised within the scope of dialogic space in the text as major issues plaguing the nation. The rate at which unemployment is increasing is alarming and this has contributed a major hindrance to national development, hence increase in youth crime across the country. Youth unemployment and its implication in the Niger Delta region is well captured in the play through the activities of the Suicide Squad, a group of unemployed youths who are in the labour

market for seven years after graduation. Frustration sets in and they become security and political threats to the state. The mood and tone of their anger could be felt through the ensuing dialogue:

**Acid:** After that the comrades disbanded. We disbanded.

Then the years went by and we graduated.

**Dayan:** And we started looking for job.

**Chorus:** No jobs.

**Rip:** We have no jobs.

**Acid:** Therefore, we have no money.

**Dayan:** Which means we cannot marry.

**Rip:** And consequently, cannot have children.

**Dayan:** We even went on Sundays.

**Aid:** But we never got a kobo.

**Chorus:** Our job in this nation is to look for jobs.

The above dialogue is an indication that there is a link between youth unemployment and youth violence and criminality such as armed group and political violence. In a situation where there is no job, there is tendency for the youth to be involved in violent acts as means of survival. This result from the fact the political leadership in Nigeria has neglected the teeming population of the youth and the resultant effect has definitely bothered on national security and social economic challenges. Within the paradigm of dialogic space, it is clear that corrupt political leadership has plunged youth especially from the Niger-Delta into a form of systemic disempowerment. The members of the Suicide Squad have varying degrees ranging from first degree to Ph.D. Dimeari laments in such a way that his disenchantment is vivid in his expression:

**Dimeari:** I am a frustrated soul. A frustrated mind. I am tired of living a lifeless life....I graduated from the University of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, four years ago.... Since then I have been unemployed. I have bruised my knuckles on the doors of oil companies.... I have slept on the pavement of the recruitment office of shell, B.P for two nights. I have attended more fifty interviews in the last two years. Still no job... I am a reject of the society. (p.69)

The marginalization the youth has, however, led to disillusionment thereby creating spaces for them to engage in what Oduwole (2015) refers to as "hawking vandalized and adulterated

petroleum product in South-South geographical area of the country, urchins (area boys) syndrome in Lagos in South-West while rabbles of militants in the Niger Delta, Boko Haram in Maiduguri in the North-East" (p.31). The quick response of the government to the plight of the youths in terms of unemployment has become rhetorics. Programme initiatives such as National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme (SURE-P) and National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) have been set up but nothing concrete has been achieved in terms of youth development. The government's failure in this regard, coupled with economic strangulation and marginalization culminates into youth restiveness and militancy in the region, as reflected in the activities of the Suicide Squad.

**Conclusion: Qualities that define Esiaba Irobi as a Nigerian Nationalist**

In this article we constructed nationalism as an intense and committed love for ones' nation. Esiaba Irobi can, therefore, be regarded as a Nigerian writer who displays Nigeria's nationalist tendencies through his dramatic texts. He is a Nigerian who condemns the atrocities perpetuated by the government(s) of the day with the hope of effecting positive social change. His nationalistic artistry is woven around the subjects of inhuman treatments of the masses by the government, which enables him to expose the corrupt political elites who try to run the country aground in terms of socio-economic development. In *Hangmen Also Die*, the playwright is able to unpack the prevailing age-long social problems such as environmental pollution, degradation, corruption and neglect in the Niger-Delta area. The resultant effect of the neglect of the region by the government is the emergence of different revolutionary groups and movements that claim to fight for the interest of the people, as it is reflected in the activities of the "Suicide Squad" by killing Chief Erekosima, the corrupt politician that embezzles the compensation fund meant for the entire State of Izon. Through this, Irobi has shown his nationalistic concern by echoing and drawing people's attention to the level of corruption, the evolution of militant groups and the worsening environmental degradation in the Niger-Delta.

He deploys the play to complain bitterly about those political elites that have milked the country dry and turn it into what it is today. Thinking about the situation of things and condemning bad governance is a nationalistic attribute to show that no matter what happens, he still has the interest of his country at heart. Irobi could be likened to a pro-

democracy and human rights activists like Wole Soyinka, Femi Falana, Gani Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti and many others who have deployed whatever they have, as professionals to fight for the emancipation of the masses from the claws of military junta. If nationalism emphasises and hinges itself on sovereignty, Esiaba Irobi then is a Nigerian nationalist whose works focuses on sovereignty and freedom of Nigerian masses from the various successive oppressive governments. He has deployed his literary writings in engaging the nefarious actions of those at the helm of the country's affair. He chose to be referred to as a Biafran because of his angst against the leadership of the country and not the masses. It is this angst that forms his revolutionary writings against bad governments. Therefore, Irobi is a Nigerian nationalist and literary writer who according to Ofure (2014), harnesses "the relationship between art, ideology and social consciousness to articulate the prevalent conflicts in post-colonial Nigeria" (p.8). And as a revered, progressive and political nationalist dramatist, he has distinctively inscribed his individuality and experience through the fabric of his writings, to contribute to nation building as a veritable member of the Nigerian nation.

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