

## THEATRE AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION: A STUDY OF RADICAL ALTERNATIVES IN TWO SELECT PLAYS

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### Abstract

High-profile corruption, injustice, moral decadence, insurgency among the numerous challenges facing the country present themes for the theatre. Over the years, theatre has served as an instrument of socio-political revolution around the world. Though critical works abound on the ideology as well as the approaches for social integration in play texts, studies have not sufficiently examined the collectivism in the role of characters as revolutionary alternatives to the socio-political and economic maladies. It is on this note that this paper critically focuses on the use of collective heroism in achieving radical change in the plays under study. In doing this, this paper engages the social criticism theory and the Marxist theory predicated on content analysis of texts to explore the use of revolutionary characters as social vilification of the Nigerian polity. *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen also Die* are reviewed as plays that have been proactively employed to unearth the social dislocations and decadence of the society with the vision to bring about social conscientisation, edification and mass action for social change. The findings reveal that a radical play fully identify with human right activism to release the masses from the clutches of bad governance. Also, findings show that the mass of the economically deprived people need to rise up collectively as heroes to save themselves instead of waiting for an individual to do it for them. The paper concludes that the select plays led a new tradition in the reformation of the body polity of the nation.

Keywords: collective heroism, radical theatre, radical playwrights, social integration, revolutionary characters

### Introduction

From the classical era through the modern period, theatre has served as an instrument of socio-political integration. This has been the case where and when the excesses of the ruling class, state-sponsored oppression, economic exploitation, unfair discrimination or unjust socio-cultural practices have grievously impaired human rights. Theatre that serves this purpose is radical because its aim is to facilitate liberation. Through dramatic presentation, such theatre rejects the status quo and advocates radical social transformation and freedom of humans from all inimical forces. The Radical playwrights believe that the level of injustice, corruption and other forms of malpractices and moral decadence in contemporary society have got to where the art of speaking with “tongue in the cheek” on the stage alone is no longer enough, but rather demands an urgent and more direct proactive representation for an immediate social reform. Femi Osofisan, one of the pioneer proponents of radical theatre movement in Nigeria states that “if we warned ourselves often and painfully enough with reality, with the reality around us, if we refused to bandage our

sensitive spots away from the hurts of truth, then we can attain a new and positive awareness” (4). A review of the developmental trends in Nigeria theatre practice shows that since post independent era, there has been a noticeable change in the tone of Nigerian plays both in content and form. This of course is a result of the influence of radicalism in the practice. Social Dramatist such as Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Tess Onwueme, Bode Sowande, Esiaba Irobi, Ahmed Yerima among others use their drama to prescribe a corruption, exploitation and a deprivation free society. They have portrayed the social- political and economic situation of the contemporary Nigeria so as to motivate the leaders and the common men for social integration.

Esiaba Irobi has been distinguished as a playwright whose dramatic works remained consistent in confronting Nigerian socio-political issues by going to the root, economic and social heart of the matter. Critical works abound on the ideology as well the revolutionary weapon of Irobi as a radical playwright. Oloruntoba-Oju in “Emerging Perspectives on Osofisan” (ed) submits that the theoretical basis of Femi Osofisan’s theatre, that is, its embracing a collectivist approach to societal problems and rejecting metaphysical answers to the human predicament is well established in his plays. Benedict Binebai and Leon Onyewuchi Osu in their works identified Irobi’s *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* as revolutionary aesthetics with Marxist canon. While some examined the confrontational dialectics and metaphors inherent in their plays, others have dealt on the ideological postures of this playwright. Ngozi Udengwu among other critics underscores Irobi as gender sensitive in his use of strong female characters.

Modern art has gone beyond the argument of Plato’s imitation of truth. Considering the relevance of the creative mind as a reaction to the beauty of the social and critical aspects of human existence, Ahmed Yerima (2010) concludes that art has become more “organically beautiful”. This implies that theatre has become more functional, more realistic and more truthful at depicting the social reality of the people. African writers are social crusaders; however, Irobi has been consistent in using their works to express their concern over bad government in the society. According to Odion (56), “Drama, apart from being didactic, has become a tool for social advocacy”. African theatre from colonial to post-colonial (contemporary) period is used as a weapon of change. The pre-colonial period of folktales, myth, legend and proverb was characterised by didacticism and mere criticism of bad and unapproved behaviour in society. The colonial period criticised subjugation of African cultural values as western hegemony, colonial administration, corruption, deprivation and exploitation in plays such as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *Edufa*, *Bread and Bullet*. The period also projected cultural assertion in Africa with drama as a tool. The contemporary period critic operation, deprivation, exploitation, rigging of election, poverty, prostitution, insurgency and other social vices caused either by bad leadership or myopia in leadership. The prevalent socio-political conditions which is the object of the subversive protest in these plays are perceived in the opinion of Amuta who asserts that:

The issues that form the objects of critics, its forms and functions as well as its specific ideological predilections are contingent upon current preoccupations of society itself. In other words, the series of critical acts in a society across time are in themselves structurally analyzable along a diachronic paradigm (p.13).

The radical theatre has the responsibility of passing objective comments on issues of contemporary concerns. The playwright through the powers of his pen predicts the future of the society. The radical

dramatist therefore brings out the big socio political issues of his time and lays them bare to the consciousness of the people. Brecht contemplating this position says that:

Any popular artist who wants to influence his society must turn away from the down-town stage to the neighbour-hood where he can meet people who share the same interest in changing the society. Once there, the artist should transform his image of social life in a graphic vivid from before the proletariats who are amenable to change for the purpose of conscientization. (46)

Having been born and living amidst deprivation, oppression and victimization, the playwrights project the masses themselves as true agents of change. The only way out of this crisis according to the radical perspective is for the masses to rise against and surmount the oppressors so as to establish a true democracy. This informs the creative representation of both sides (the oppressor and the oppressed) in such works which are inevitably class-based. The characters are designed to belong to either of the two classes: the bourgeoisie or the dominated proletariats. In Kole Omotoso's *Shadows in the Horizon*, for instance, the battle was between the masters and owners of landed properties and the impoverished labourers. In Bode Sowande's *The Night Before*, it was between the Managing Directors, Vice Chancellors on one hand and the subordinate staff and students activists on the other. In Femi Osofisan's *Once upon Four Robbers*, it was the unemployed youths represented by the armed robbers against the nonchalant government. The characters in these plays are not individualized but are representative, possessing a group personage, hence, people who belong to the same class manifest similar characteristics. The characters are usually polarized into the good and the bad ends along class lines. The dominating capitalists are often assumed to dwell at the bad end, where the characters are crude symbols of degradation. They are ostentations, corrupt, unproductive, exploitative and repressive. The oppressed class on the other hand is assumed to dwell on the good end and their characters are stereotypes of regeneration. They are unassuming, honest, upright and productive, but ultimately aggressive and united in their struggle for liberation. The characters in radical plays are designed to show that all the proletariats are good while all capitalists are bad. For anyone seeking to change the world in a socialist direction, the ideas of Marxism are a vital, even indisputable tool and weapon to assist the working class in its struggle to change society. Marxism recognizes that revolutionary theory is incomplete in itself, the praxis, the operation of that theory when power is seized by a revolutionary party that professes the theory is what constitutes the infallible test of that theory (Wole Soyinka, forward). As Ken Smith enunciates, "Marxism adds to an understanding of the capitalist world and how to change it" (1). Change is the bedrock of Marxist ideas. No wonder Marx described capitalism as evil and called for its change while advocating socialism. As Karl Marx himself has said, and which Marxists are fond of repeating "the philosopher has only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is, however, to change it". (2) For the Marxist the pilot for such change is the revolutionary hero. A hero according to the Marxist is the man or woman who understands the relations on one individual's stand to one another and who fights for a new social order - one in which the bourgeois values of individualism and upper class domination are smashed.

From the foregoing, it is therefore clear that the ideology and social vision projected in radical drama is socialist and this socialist order can only be achieved through a violent destruction of capitalism. Under the classical hero ideal, an individual hero was required to perform this extraordinary feat even when it results in a tragic end. The classical hero resorts to violence for his honour with his legacy belonging to his community after his demise. His self-concept often brought about the tragic flaw that mars his ultimate goal. In contrast to individual hero, collective heroism is social based. The adoption of the collective

heroism according to Gbilekaa is one of the characteristics of radical theatre. Heroism as a concept can only be significant in the light of contemporary realities if it is championed by the mass of the poor and the downtrodden. It is when the struggle is collective or collaborative that its fruits are more valuable and will make greater impact. The universal truth communicated in a radical drama, therefore, is one of unending class conflict and redemption after group sacrifice and affirmative action of the collective. Against this backdrop, this paper will now examine two selected plays of Irobi to see how this plays applied the canons of radical poetics. Emphasis will be on how these plays assign such redeeming responsibilities to the collaboration of a group or the society itself. Works that examine the radical characters have not sufficiently examined the collectivism in their role play. This paper interrogates *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* focusing on the use of collective heroism as radical alternatives in achieving social integration in contemporary Nigerian polity. Also, this study shall examine the peculiar adaptation of Marxist thought in the plays selected and analyse how the drama of Irobi have proved to be classified as radical theatre.

### **Methodology**

The study adopts the dual design of deductive and inductive investigation. In doing this, the texts will be examined and subjected to a diachronic and synchronic analysis. In the process, the radical aesthetics in the plays will be highlighted. Theoretically, this essay shall apply the social criticism theory predicated on content analysis of text to explore the literary text as an instrument for social integration. Social criticism drama takes on an interpretation of an aspect of society it considers fruitless or deceitful. This theory as used by the writer takes practical and utilitarian forms. It queries and faces up to all shades of dominance and exploitation that contribute to the operation of reconstructing decent and self-governing societies. Craig McFarlane (35) makes it clear that the business of social criticism is to dispassionately subject the operational values of society to critical evaluation. Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, *Nwokedi* fulfill this cardinal function of the literary text particularly that of the dialectical paradigm.

### **Radical Alternatives in *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi***

Irobi is committed to using his drama to unearth the social dislocation and decadence of the society with the principal vision to bring about social conscientization, edification and mass action for social change. *Hangmen Also Die* well illustrates this vision. This play is the dreadful story in which the lives of seven young men are to be terminated by means of the guillotine because they murdered Chief Erekosima, in cold blood. Yekini, the hangman's aggressive refusal to hang the young men who are to be murdered unfolds the events leading to the action of the young terrorist through a flashback dramatic methodology which narrates the story of the foundation of the Suicide Squad, a vinegary and impertinent bunch of criminals, dispossessed and displaced but suitably educated youths, who are strong-minded to visit the very society that failed to give them decent living with celebrated violence. The Suicide Squad, led by Tarila Iganima alias R. I. P., has strong faith in crime, criminality and violence to eke a living for them. Prompted by Tamara, the priestess of a goddess they receive the logic and propulsion of revolution against their popular cause instead, the squad confronts Chief Isokipiri Erekosima who is about to dance home with a high value chieftaincy title for embezzling three million Naira, compensation money paid to the common populace of Izon state for the devastation of their livelihoods by oil spillage. Erekosima after his abduction by the Suicide Squad confesses that he spent half a million naira on his coronation as the Amatemeso of Izon State. He also reveals paying some money for the educational pursuit of his children abroad due to the fallen standard of education in Nigeria. Chief Erekosima is hanged from a tree haven been found guilty in the court of the suicide squad.

The play is a literary document with vilifying philosophical thoughts that represent genuine revolutionary impulses aimed at social reconstruction. It sarcastically exposes the grinding ills of the society and points the way forward for an oppressed society. The Suicide Squad was not ideologically committed to change the society they are paying back with violence. Their frustration is so pathological that not even a little light of purposeful reasoning reminded them of their capacity to change their society. Violence against the society was their practical manifesto. It was the happening and most cherished iconoclastic philosophy of the Squad until they encountered Tamara who educated and inducted them into the ideological war between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressor. While they have the means to embark on social change by means of radical revolutionary methods they lack the ideological fire and bearing to effect the change until Tamara confronts, challenges and mobilises them to transform their energies and anger into a social cause that will bring economic liberation to the oppressed masses of Izon State. She states unequivocally that the Suicide Squad should direct their radical energies towards the trendy and communist philosophical foundation of emancipating the economic marginalized and oppressed people from the poverty imposed on them by the likes of Erekosima. This moral light of revolution offered the Suicide squad by Tamara has the support of Marx and Engels who argue that a reliable prop such as “a rallying document of the procedure for mass action” is all that is needed to initiate a revolution (17)

Again, the consistent use of the first person plural pronoun (we) and pronominal adjective (our) depict collective heroism. In *Hangmen*, the Suicide Squad illustrates in unison and makes a rhythmic boast of the procedure for its violent practices in the following manner.

We maim. We murder. We massacre [...] We are the Suicide Squad. We are the Kamikazee [...] we sway. We prow! And pounce like apes. And roll like dogs and stand like snakes. We strike like mambas and leave on your flesh the marks of our fangs, the sign of our venom, the insignia of our fury [...] And we do what we do because we have no future, because we know that no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us. (Hangmen, 65–66).

A. B. C Duruaku cited in Osu (160) sums up well Irobi’s use of collective heroes in *Hangmen* when he says, “Irobi does not have one character battling to even things out; he presents a bunch of wild, educated young men.” I agree with this observation because this group found their revolutionary zeal in Tamara and later in Yekini who also has the support of the people.

In *Nwokedi* a vibrant young man, Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi, who recently graduated from university and completed the mandatory National Youths Service Corps programme for Nigerian graduates, is filled with a burning desire to change the state of drift in his country. He finds his local age grade club, the Ekumeku, a rallying point and the annual community cleansing ritual, Ekpe festival, an ideal occasion to eliminate the people he sees as the main cause of society’s problems - the older generation of politicians, exemplified by his father, Nwokedi Snr, and brother-in-law, Senator Arikpo. His revolutionary intents are deemed to have been realised, symbolically, when he substitutes the two politicians for the festival ram and uses their blood to cleanse the land of the sacrilege of the past year, letting his generation, the Ekumeku age grade, take charge of things, henceforth.

Nwokedi is seen as the only person who is capable of leading the people across the dangerous path as this is seen in his being the only person empowered to slaughter the sacrificial animal at the shrine of the gods. He reaffirms his resolution in reply to Habiba:

NWOKEDI. I am the one empowered by the land to slaughter the sacrificial animal at the shrine of the gods and renew the strength of the earth with its blood ... Nobody else can. The courage to act requires repose in our family. That's why we are called Nwokedi. (*Nwokedi*: 37)

The young man whose role it is to symbolically dispatch the old year and usher in a new one of yield, by a sharp stroke of the machete, slits off the head of the ram and spills its blood at the shrine of the god of the land. Nwokedi inherited the role from his father and has performed it for six consecutive years now. But for this year's festival, he thinks that he wants to go for something higher, something more potent, human blood, instead of animal blood, and most preferably a politician's blood. That to him is the only form of sacrifice that could really transform the society and usher in a new generation founded on equity and social welfare: "it is the sacrifice the future demands" (*Nwokedi*, 73). Nwokedi and his Ekumeku age grade purge the land of the many political and social sacrileges the corrupt old politicians, like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr, are perceived to have committed against the people.

In the play, we notice such wanton and brazenly violent statements and actions by characters that suggest the kind of individuated and uncoordinated protests against an unjust social order that Engels repudiated in his letter to Marx. Such violent retaliation is suggestive therapy to provoke rational thinking in the audience which would necessitate social change. In the play, *Nwokedi*, when Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi is not postulating: "there is a joy in breaking the law which only the true rebel knows ... triumph in hurling stones at the throne of tyrants ... an ecstasy in spilling the blood of the ancient serpent" (*Nwokedi*, 79); he is throwing up images of violence such as "sword and scabbard" (*Nwokedi*, 52); or worse still he is screaming "spill his blood! Murder the bum!" (*Nwokedi*, 43); and feeling so fulfilled that "the sun goes down in blood" (*Nwokedi*, 71). This is paralleled in *Hangmen* where the Suicide Squad's Acid says: "terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all downtrodden people seeking to combat oppressive governments", hence "revolutions are always based on violence" (*Hangmen* : 25–26) However, Tamara's admonition to the Suicide Squad, the potential revolutionary vanguard force in *Hangmen*, goes in the same direction with Engels' position in the very last line of the above quotation, to the effect that the Suicide Squad should direct their radical energies towards the popular and communist cause of liberating the people from the poverty engendered on them by the Erekosimas in their midst.

## Analysis

### Theatre and Social Integration Possibilities

Irobi in these plays subtly asks the pockets of revolutionaries in Nigerian society to come together and find a common front through which a communist or at least a socialist order could be installed to better the lot of the people. He reasons, as it were, that the people's plight has really become so pathetic and practically leading up to that final stage of the old civilisation that Engels talked about. In *Nwokedi*, however, the dominant revolutionary atmosphere is that of a people who have transcended the realm of the old civilisation. This signifies some Marxist ideological progression in Esiaba Irobi. All through Nwokedi's rampaging and bloodthirsty campaign of cleansing the society, the people stood solidly by him and the Ekumeku cult of young revolutionaries. They sang and cheered him to apparent triumph over injustice until the point where he murdered his father and his brother-in-law for the ultimate purification of the land. Emphasizing revolutionary drama in Nigeria, Nwabueze adds that 'some Nigerian playwrights evoke themes of revolution to show their disapproval of the exploitation and oppression of the poor masses in the capitalist system, and motivate them to take up arms against the oppressors' (130). Irobi, in some unique

ways, has also initiated some peculiar adaptation of Marxist thought. For instance, in *Nwokedi*, Nwokedi posits: “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 created us in his image” (Nwokedi, 64). Irobi also demonstrates his belief in the virility of the peasants, led by the literate and some semi-literate Ekumeku vanguard force, as an effective proletariat, capable of ridding the African society of the oppressive bourgeois elements. Hence, the Ufo-Bearer says:

UFO-BEARER Nwokedi, we are a peasant people. We live by the strength of our hand and the sweat on our backs. We know that what we owe the earth the earth is toil and what the earth owe us is a smiling harvest. If in December the barns are bare and our rafters are filled with husks of life; if now the festival of a peasant god is threatened by a dearth of yams; if at this moment the dry earth pants like a tired dog, what it wants on its parched tongue is a spill of blood. Is it not so? (*Nwokedi*: 39).

This Fanonian belief in the revolutionary strength of the peasants combined with the deep traditional connotations in the play shows a peculiar Irobian approach to Marxist revolutionary aesthetics. In the same way, Animalu, the Marxist character in *The Other Side of the Mask* has to be murdered by Jamike when the former becomes a clog in the wheel of the later’s progressive artistic pursuit. Irobi must be making an ideological point with the incidents of the two identical characters, Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe and Animalu in *Hangmen* and *The Other Side* respectively, who are self-serving and narcissistic Marxist intellectuals and whose lives end in an equally identical tragic way: murdered by the positive heroes in the two plays. The message therefore is for the people to collectively come to a full realization of their deprived and oppressed state and be ready to change their situation at all cost. The other message is that revolutionary terror and violence must be directed towards a general or popular cause, and not towards a personal vendetta, as was the case with the Suicide Squad in the hands of Ogbansiegbe, before they were redirected, by the French student ideologue and later by Tamara, also. Otherwise, terror and violence would be purposeless – a “meaningless anarchy” (*Hangmen*, 28). This point is what is expatiated upon in the French student’s speech, as rehearsed by the character Moshe Dayan, in the play: A revolution is always organised, its strategies planned out, its aims and objectives mapped out.

A revolution is always planned and executed by a generation. In doing this, they have no need for an ideological mentor or an ideological Methuselah. We are just tools in Dr. Ogbansiegbe’s hands, spanners and hammers in the hands of a political mechanic. We have allowed him to sell to us an insane philosophy.

Terrorism! Comrades, terrorism is useless if we are not organized. (*Hangmen*: 28)

The above position according to Osu (156) reasoned that it reinforces the unorthodox or peripheral nature of Irobi’s Marxism, that is, the philosophy that a revolution (albeit communist) must reveal mandatory presence of an intellectual ideologue. That is also the point in Irobi’s saying that “revolutions do not start in the head but from the stomach.” (*Hangmen*, 12).

## Findings

- ❖ *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* project collective heroism as radical alternatives to social integration in Nigerian developmental context in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- ❖ The two plays seek to evoke instant change by inciting the audience to revolt against oppressive system. The subversion manifests in the plays such that heroism changes from its common

mythological and philosophical concept as a salvaging sacrificial task undertaken for all by an extraordinary individual to one which is collective, collaborative and mass oriented.

- ❖ This study found out that it is the mass of the economically deprived people who need to rise up collectively as heroes to save themselves instead of waiting for an individual to do it for them. This is the major significance of the play's subversion of oppressive systems in Irobi's *Hangmen also Die* and *Nwokedi*.

## Conclusion

The quest for social integration is the drive for adopting radical alternatives to end social injustice and release the masses from the clutches of bad governance. The era of political intimidation is over. Esiaba Irobi used his plays to suggest the need for a subversive change in the socio-economic and political system in Nigeria. The Marxist ideology bear on the themes of the plays examined. Irobi used heroic characters that recognize the importance of mass consciousness in the struggle for revolution. *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* seek to evoke instant change by inciting the audience to revolt against oppressive system. The subversion manifests in the plays such that heroism changes from its common mythological and philosophical concept as a salvaging sacrificial task undertaken for all by an extraordinary individual to one which is collective, collaborative and mass oriented. Furthermore, this study pointed out that it is the mass of the economically deprived people who need to rise up collectively as heroes to save themselves instead of waiting for an individual to do it for them. This is the major significance of the play's subversion of oppressive systems in Irobi's *Hangmen also Die* achieved through an entrenchment of group action against official oppression and deprivation. The collective action in this dimension of struggle for liberation by the poor and disadvantaged of the society requires the involvement of men and women, the old and the young, the strong and the weak. Could this have informed the ENDSARS movement of 2020? This paper therefore recommends that all Nigerian writers can and should engage in as much practical ways as match their temperament to bring about change in Nigeria socio-political context. Since performance reflects reality, the most accomplished Nigerian writer are those who have genuinely hated the imbalance in the national polity and have sought to initiate social integration.

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