



## Portrayal and manifestations of social injustice in selected plays of Esiaba Irobi

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### Abstract

This study, "Portrayal and Manifestations of Social Injustice in Selected Plays of Esiaba Irobi", carefully examines and points out the persistent and prevalent social injustices in the Nigerian and African societies. The preponderance of social injustice in Nigeria and Africa has remained a topical issue for playwrights. Various forms and shades of social injustice are prevalent, including but not limited to: appropriating and exploiting natural resources by the privileged, misappropriation of public funds, denial of quality education, denial of basic health care and the non availability of basic amenities like water and power, and sundry others. Using Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*, *Hangmen also Die* and *The Other Side of the Mask*, the issue of social injustice is carefully explored. The study employs the Marxist theory because it triggers the quest for social transformation and liberation. The theory preaches equality for all; it condemns oppression and seeks to establish a classless society where equality reigns.

**Keywords:** portrayal, manifestation, social injustice, marxist theory, oppression, exploitation, equality

### 1. Introduction

Literature is a reflection of life; it is a mirror, held up by the literary artist for society to see its reflection; for society to see itself in. One of the simplest, yet powerful definitions of drama defines drama as an imitation of life. For a society replete with contradictions and injustice, its reflection is bound to be the same; its drama is bound to imitate this. Therefore, literature is a mirror which shows and exposes the socio-political, religious and economic realities in society. The duty of the literary artist is, more than anything else, to expose those persons and/or things which continue to militate against a free, peaceful and egalitarian society. The other side of the coin is that it encourages and extols those virtues and values that make for a peaceful and stable society. Emmanuel Ekunke corroborates the foregoing when he says:

Literature as an artistic creation presents episodes that reflect social currents that humanity is expected to learn from. It captures the interplay of social forces. It also portrays the consequences of man's actions, inactions, and reactions in his society (159).

On his part, Femi Osofisan (2001) affirms the x-raying or mirroring potentials of literature when he asserts that:

Arts born of that society, comments back on that social matrix, and by commentary I am implying here both the possibility of consolidation and erosion, of reaffirmation as well as contradiction. Sooner or later therefore it must collide or collude with authority, whether of State or shrine, of pulpit or classroom. Everywhere, in the close intimacy of domestic life, or the expansive space of social being, no hegemony is sacrosanct to the probing impertinence of art (108).

Considerable amounts of Nigerian cum African drama reflect various shades of social injustice. This is so because the societies in question are riddled with injustice. From the days of colonialism to the days of so-called independence, Nigerians and Africans have had to fight one from of injustice or the other. During the 12th regional conference for Africa and Arab countries (AFRECON) which held in 2015 in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, the Public Services International (PSI) General Secretary, Rosa Pavanelli, in here opening speech averred that "African people have a proud history of fight against injustice. So, they keep fighting against the inequalities of today..." (np). This confirms the fact that social injustice has remained a cankerworm in Africa.

John Rawls defines injustice as "inequalities that are not to the benefit of all" (54). It would appear to us that this definition implies that there is injustice in any society where some people are exploited and unfairly treated. Usually, the exploiters are the ruling class or the elites while the majority less privileged are on the receiving end of this. It is believed that after Latin America, Africa is the next most inequitable region of the world. Plagued by myriads of socio-political, economic and religious problems and in spite of its wealth of resources, Africa countries remain rooted at the bottom of the international human development index. Femi Osofisan (1988) captures this when he says:

...although so much has changed, nothing really in Africa has changed... our continent has remained backward, static and decaying... and the principal reasons for our backwardness are still very much the same... a treacherous leadership and elite... the elite and their allies still gobble the wealth of the land, leaving the vast majority in abject poverty (17).

In Africa, the growth pattern enriches the state and the elites but does not transform or better the lives of the majority of the citizenry. In Nigeria, the elites have destroyed the educational system and turn around to send their children abroad. Unemployment has taken on a toga leaving youths to endure the frustrations of employment.

Talents are neither recognized nor rewarded. Mediocrity is encouraged and partiality elevated to a national religion. Workers are denied their pay; pensioners are deprived of their legitimate and hard earned pensions just as everyone is denied the right to talk about, talk less of demanding for, their rights. Law enforcement agencies are used to hound, haunt, intimidate and oppress dissenting voices. Retrenchment from work scores very high marks. Social and economic inequalities are manifestly seen and conspicuously displayed in the opulence of a few vis-a-vis the loud poverty of the majority. The outrageous and horrendous injustice suffered by the masses is exacerbated by infrastructural deficit, dysfunctional schools and healthcare, perennial scarcity of petrol and kerosene, runaway inflation, etc, etc, all of which leave the masses with a deep feeling of hopelessness. The elites are slowly but surely ensuring that the masses lose their essence and humanity by the magnitude of injustice foisted on the people.

In carrying out its salvific functions, literature strives to correct societal ills which threaten peaceful human co-existence. As a member of his society, the literary artist examines and evaluates societal ills and, in some cases, proffers solutions to them. Emmanuel Otete-Akpofure opines that the dramatist as watch dog of society uses the medium of drama to lampoon negative and anti-social behavior (248). The dramatist is a social crusader who uses his art to address social issues. Being an important and influential member of his society, the dramatist with a social vision and commitment must help to rescue, incorporate, preserve and mediate elements which serve the interest of the people.

This essay examines Esiaba Irobi's portrayal, and manifestations, of social injustice in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular via his social vision and art in the plays: *Nwokedi* (1991). *The Other Side of the Mask* (2009) and *Hangmen Also Die*(2011).

## 2. Background of the playwright

Esiaba Irobi who hailed from Osisioma Ngwa in Abia State was born on October 1, 1960 exactly the day and year Nigeria got her independence, so he sees himself as having the same destiny with Nigeria. He was a playwright, poet, stage director, actor, literary theorist and scholar. He held a B.A. in English/Drama and an M.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka: an M.A in Film and Theatre from the University of Sheffield, UK, and a Ph. D. In Theatre Studies from the University of Leeds, UK. He belongs to the third generation of Nigerian writers and the suffocating impact of high level of moral decadence and political instability inspires his adoption of Marxism and revolutionary aesthetics in his works. Irobi's enduring theme is the frustration and marginalization of even the most gifted Nigerian youth which has its roost in the corrupt Nigerian leadership – politicians and soldiers alike. His ideal is the reconciliation of purposeful revolutionary zeal with selfless

social commitment and this is reflected in most of his works. His published plays include: *The Colour of Rusting Gold* (1989), *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* (1989), *Hangmen also Die* (1989), *Nwokedi* (1991), *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999), *The Fronded Circle* (1999), *Cemetery Road* (2009), amidst his plays and critical works. He died on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2010.

## 3. Scope of the study

There are two key concepts in this study, namely: (1) Drama (2) Social injustice. Drama is a universal art. It speaks a universal language and cuts across national and international boundaries and tribes. Social injustice shares this characteristic with drama. It is a universal problem. There is hardly any human society where it does not exist. Even the most advanced and developed of human societies have their fair share of social injustice.

This work is concerned with socio-political issues in Nigeria. References to other societies with similar problems might be made; however, in the main, the central focus is in the portrayal and manifestations of social injustice in Nigeria as seen in three plays by Esiaba Irobi; namely: *Nwokedi*, *Hangmen also Die* and *The Other Side of the Mask*. The study examines and interrogates social injustice suffered by the Nigerian masses in the hands of the elites.

## 4. Significance of the study

Firstly, this research is significant because it joins a few others to bring to public view a playwright so gifted and talented but sparsely studied. Indeed, most undergraduates in Irobi's native, Nigeria, are barely aware of this writer.

Secondly, it is our contribution to bringing to public view and to the consciousness of the global community, the level of social injustice – dehumanization, subjugation and untold suffering meted out to the Nigerian masses by the elite. This is against the backdrop of excessive affluence, obscene opulence and wealth of the privileged few.

Thirdly and lastly, this study sensitizes Nigerians that the solutions to their problems is in their hands. This sad state of affairs can be changed through their collective efforts. The people cannot remain complacent while expecting foreign intervention to change things for them.

## 5. Theoretical framework

The Marxist theory advocates for a classless and equal society. It therefore, appeared to us to be a suitable theory for this study. This theory, has therefore, been used to interrogate the Nigerian socio- political system. The Marxist believes that man should not resign to fate and accept oppression, subjugation and exploitation as his lot. Man is urged to realize that the ability to free himself from the strangle hold of the oppressor rests on him. The radical, committed playwright sees no justification for the injustice and exploitation that abound in society. He rejects them totally and urges the people to seek and enforce change. He questions the luxury enjoyed by the privileged few and the injustice suffered by the less privileged majority in the midst of an abundant common wealth.

The Marxist theory seriously frowns at the lackadaisical attitude of oppressed people and empowers them to rise and speak up for themselves. Even the physically weak, the poor

and helpless, can find a way, indeed, they can and do have ways and means by which they can protest against social injustice. This study confirms Esiaba Irobi as a revolutionary playwright, one who is deliberate and precise in his revolutionary message. His plays dramatize the crisis of injustice meted out to the common man in Nigeria.

## 6. Social justice

Social justice, as a term, emerged as an expression of protest and resistance against the exploitation and marginalization of the people and it is geared towards the improvement of the human living condition. It is a revolutionary term as well bearing the burden of a dialectical change and progress in an unfair and unjust society and it is based on the concept of human rights and equality. Plato believes that justice is not mere strength, but it is a harmonious strength (np). Justice is not the might of the stronger but the effective harmony of the whole. All moral conceptions revolve around the good of the whole individual as well as the social aspect. In the same vein, the United Nation's 2006 document, *Social Justice in An Open World: The Role Of The United Nations* states that "social justice may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth". Taking it further, John De Coninck *et al.*, observe and state that "Economic growth is an essential component for development, but without a deliberative policy focus on equity and social justice, evidence shows that it reproduces individual and society-wide deprivations." (13). All societies have a basic structure of economic, social and political institutions and it is expected that all these institutions function effectively. Where they fail to do so and allow the bourgeois to manipulate and control these institutions to satisfy only themselves, the people suffer and are denied their basic rights and justice. Amartya Sen compels one to recognize that "deprivation is not just the absolute lowness of income, but various "unfreedoms", varying from hunger and prevalence of preventable or curable illness... to social exclusion, economic insecurity and the denial of political liberty". (qtd in *Social Justice* 15). According to Rawls, therefore, "the social justice question must address problems engendered by social differentiation along class, ethnic, gender, and other social cleavages that arise or are unsolved within a nation" (21).

## 7. Social Injustice in the selected plays

Udenta O. Udenta believes and states that,

Art as a form of social consciousness, having dialectical relation with social being... exists only in the context of the negation of existing contradictory reality of class society, by rising above its impediments, by going beyond its ideology and developing a system qualitatively new that challenges it (55).

The above quotation is what sets the thrust for this study and by interpretation, Udenta is no doubt, making a case for art as a veritable tool in the battle for the extermination of class society in all its manifestations: a realization which can only come through aroused consciousness furthered with action. Udenta's statement is clearly indicative of the reality of class

consciousness inherent in African society; more so, in Nigeria which forms the focus of our study. This is a class consciousness that is replete with its attendant contradictions. Art therefore, through various aesthetics, has not only become instrumental in portraying these contradictions, but also in interrogating them.

Social injustice in the contemporary society has been a lingering theme and a source of concern and worry to African playwrights and as much as they try to entertain with their works, they as well set out to correct those anomalies through their works. In this regards S.E Ogude observes that: "what constitutes the mainstream of African writing to date derives ultimately from definite historical event or social conditions" (1). Thus, African Literature has its roots in the socio-economic and political history of the continent. The post-independence disillusionment is very glaring in every part of Africa, Nigeria inclusive. There is a general spate of unbridled acquisition of wealth by the ruling class, the tendency towards property accumulation by those in leadership, thus the uncompromising attack on the privileged few by the playwright. Just like every other Marxist writer, Esiaba Irobi dwells on the same societal issues. In an E-conversation with Azuonye Nnorom as was published in the Vanguard Nigeria Newspaper, Irobi says: "the historical rigor mortis and political epilepsy of the country has left cracks on the mirror of the mind." (48). To Irobi, the leadership of the country has failed on fundamental issues. In the texts treated here, Irobi shows the level of social and inhuman injustice meted out to the people.

## 8. Misappropriation of funds

In Africa of today, greed and embezzlement of funds are the order of the day. Instead of apt leadership, African leaders are involved in diverting funds meant for the general populace. Trying to maintain their standard of living, they unjustly take more from the common wealth of the people. Emmanuel Obiechina points out that the world of post-colonial Africa is:

...a doleful tale of embezzlement of public funds, appropriation of public resources, diversion of public facilities to private use, and the use of bribery and corruption for personal enrichment. A corrupt society full of thieves, big and small, professional and amateur ... (131).

Through the character, Senator Arikpo who represents the ruling class, Irobi describes the kind of houses these people leave in which of course, are built with the resources every member of the society should enjoy. By recounting his loses and the expensiveness of the materials used in building the house, Senator Arikpo reveals this to us as he tells Mrs. Nwokedi,

... my house. My new house at Ugep. What that house cost me is my secret. The doors were sliding doors. The floor was tiled with Italian Carrara marble. The walls were sprayed with terracotta, the roof was brittle asbestos. The ceiling made of brisket. And the parlour? The parlour was rugged with velvet. There were twenty five bed rooms; it was air-conditioned. Every window

was glazed with silicon. The chairs were imported from France. The tables were chrome-plated. The side stools were silver coated... (Nwokedi, 3).

Considering the funds pumped into the building of this house, we then can imagine what that money if allocated and used properly could do to better the lives of the people but one man decides to claim monopoly to it just because he finds himself in a position of authority. When asked by Mrs. Nwokedi why his house was burnt, Senator Arikpo tells her: "they said I built it with stolen money, political money, corrupt money, the voters' money. They said I didn't perform in my first term of office..." (4). His words later on prove that the youths were not wrong about that. When asked what he has done to make better the lives of his people since he went to the Senate, he tells Nwokedi that he didn't go to the Senate to make arguments for the betterment of anybody's life (Nwokedi, 72) and, also, that he went to the Senate to hang his portrait on the walls of the Senate (Nwokedi, 73). What a height of selfishness! Thus, Irobi denounces the greed, waste of resources and ruthlessness of the bourgeois who neither remember that they have constituencies nor think about the welfare of those that elected them into power. Nwokedi Snr. Is toppled by his son because of his corrupt nature. Promising them electricity, pipe-borne water and tarred roads as well as jobs, he was elected into an office but for four years of his active service, he did nothing but to think only about himself while the youths in the community who voted him in remain unemployed. This is captured in the play-within-play acted by Mrs. Nwokedi:

Mrs. Nwokedi: He promised us electric light, pipe-borne water and tarred roads. Did he not?\*

Ekumeku: He did.

Mrs. Nwokedi: Where are the cables to bring the light, where are the electric poles, where are the taps, where are the roads not to talk of the tar? To you the Ekumeku, he promised jobs. Did he not?

Ekumeku: He did

Mrs. Nwokedi: He said that once we vote him into the parliament he would make sure that every man in this village gets a job. But as you can see, our job in this village is still to look for job. Is it not?

Ekumeku: It is...

Mrs. Nwokedi: Shall we squat here with folded arms and watch our lives shrivel like cocoyam between the paws of a disembodied entity, a trousered ape who has no dream for anybody including himself?

Ekumeku: No. (Nwokedi, 11).

This excerpt reveals their false and deceitful nature before they are voted for and their true selves when they are finally elected into an office. Irobi recreates such character again in Chief Erekosima in *Hangmen also Die*. *Hangmen also Die* is a play that explores the socio-political situation in the Niger Delta and Nigeria at large. The land of Izon is messed up by the activities of the oil companies and the people suffer and live in abject poverty because of the level of neglect on the part of the government. When the Federal Government decides to compensate them, a man by name Chief Erekosima,

who is the Honourable Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs embezzles and pockets the money, using it for his selfish ambition. He shares the money amongst his fellow representatives and uses the rest to get a title for himself, send his children abroad to study and bribe the people he felt could protest while his people suffer. He tells the Suicide Squad when he was captured over the embezzled funds that: "politics is the art of what is possible. It is the art of survival. Personal survival! Morality does not come into it" (116). From his statement, we see the selfish mindset of those that should protect and further the interest of the people. They assume an office for their personal gain and selfish ambition while the helpless masses suffer and are relegated to the background. Through Nwokedi Snr., Irobi explicitly reveals why the leaders fail. He tells Nwokedi:

We failed because we were selfish. We failed because we thought only for ourselves, our families and our tribes. That is why we are trapped like prisoners in this narrow porch of history. That is why we are clawing each other's eyes out like blind vampire bats flapping in a concave cave. We had no vision... (78).

Irobi uses this excerpt to invariably talk about Nigerian leaders. It reveals the "only me" consciousness and mindset they possess as they take up political positions and so, the country and community cannot move forward. Yekinni's conversation with the doctor depicts the level of poverty and suffering of the people as a result of the insensitivity of leaders. Yekinni says to the doctor: "... where I live, I have no water. I have no light. The stream is two miles away. And I have no car" and the doctor replies saying: "you are not alone in this plight Yekinni. Millions of people all over the country are suffering the same fate." (*Hangmen also Die*, 28). Dimeari lamenting over his plight to the Suicide Squad says: "... but after serving your country as a youth corper for one year, is it too much to ask your country to serve you for even one day. For even one month. Three months. To put a shirt on your back and some bread in your hands?" (*Hangmen also Die*, 72-3). It was out of frustration that the Suicide Squad group was formed. Accidental Discharge, a member of the Suicide Squad laments thus: "... because after seven years of joblessness, you are toughened, hardened and so humiliated into a human beast that you can no longer be lured back into the society by the softer indulgence of those living on the other side of life..." (*Hangmen also Die*, 50). Kamuche in *The Other Side of the Mask* is also used by Irobi to show the self-centeredness of the upper class as well as their insensitive nature. The play portrays the societal frustrations of the young elites in pursuit of their career irrespective of their artistic ingenuity. Firstly, Irobi's description of him as an "over-fed naval officer" (1) is a pointer to his personality and he did not disappoint to reveal who he is eventually. His fierce order to shatter and break the door so he can gain entrance into the house of Jamike (11) is revealing of the fact that he only thinks of himself and will go to any extent to make sure his wishes are followed to the letter irrespective of who the next person is. Irobi seizes this opportunity through these characters to expose the true nature of the upper class as against their relationship with the masses. This is what Ayi Kwei Armah decries as he laments:

How long will Africa be cursed with its leaders?... There were men dying from loss of hope, and others were finding gaudy ways to enjoy power they did not have... These men who were to lead us out of despair, they came like men already grown fat and cynical with the eating of centuries of power they had never struggled for, old before they had ever been born into power, and ready only for the grave (94).

The political struggle in the African society is very debilitating as anyone in power never wants to let go and the people that want to go in will do all they can to get themselves into a place of authority. So, their actions and reactions are determined by opportunism. As Emmanuel Obiechina puts it:

Those in power are aware that in order to have more than others, they must continue as the sharers, that is they must retain political control... so while he is at it, the politician tries to cut as much as he can for the rainy day. Those outside become more and more frantic as those within batter on the... national cake. (137).

This situation obviously generates bitterness with its manifestations of instabilities, plots and counterplots by the masses.

### 9. Disrespect for humanity

We see another form of injustice meted out on the people when they are denied the dividends that naturally should come with democracy. The politicians are elected into political offices after making heavy promises, yet they do not keep them. They embezzle funds meant for the general populace without any thought of the majority whose lives are being destroyed by their actions. They practically deny the masses the basic needs for their survival and when the masses show a little sign of disapproval or revolt, they offer them a paltry sum of money just to get them off their backs and not necessarily because they have any good thoughts and intentions towards them. When Tamara confronted Chief Erekosima on why he was squandering the funds meant for their people, he simply offered her a hundred naira so she can keep quiet. He tells her: ... Tamara, I know that if I don't give you something now you will go and spread your propaganda about me and this money and ruin my coronation. So, take this one hundred naira (*Hangmen also Die*, 60). When Tamara again confronts Chief Erekosima over his silence in the case of Ibiaye who became blind because of the environmental hazards caused by the oil companies, he spitefully tells Tamara that she should bring him to his palace after their "jokes" and he will instruct his wives to take care of him till the next installment of the compensation money comes (117). What a sad way to spite a fellow citizen! Nwokedi Snr. And senator Arikpo offer Nwokedi a cheque of fifty thousand naira to 'buy himself a future' (*Nwokedi*, 80) when Nwokedi confronts them over their corrupt and insensitive nature as their leaders as against the future he desires for his people. This sadly portrays the level of disgrace and less value the bourgeoisies has for the life and future of the ordinary people in the society. Dr. Animalu, in an act of mockery tells Jamike:

...why then has nothing come out of your sterile

industry? Why do embassies refuse to sponsor your exhibitions? And the university, why has it refused to give you grants to improve your creative work? Mr. Sculptor, why does the yellow book decree that your works are not suitable for promotion? Why are you given one and a half points for a piece of sculpture that took you seven years to carve?...

And continues in the mockery by telling him:

...no laurels. No garlands. No fame. No name. You don't even have a face. (*The Other Side Of The Mask*, 65-6).

Animalu just like others spite Jamike. Despite his huge efforts to make a name for himself it is still his likes that subjugate him and bring his efforts to nothing. He openly spites him and puts it to his face how unsuccessful he has become in his preferred carrier. Jamike decries his predicament and says to Prof. Njemanze: "I am just a young man trying to chisel my way out of enfolding gloom. I am just a tortured soul trying to make meaning out of a meaningless life. I am a life-force. Why must people go on mocking my genius?" (82). Furthermore, in this discussion with Prof. Njemanze, he reminds him of his hypocritical attitude towards his work even though he is like a son to him. He reminds Prof. Njemanze of "the omniscient disdain you wear on your face when you look at my works. The sneer behind the tongue whenever you want to comment on any artistic contribution my generation makes into the stream of history" (96). He continues: ... you have nothing for me but spite (97). With these, we see the greedy and self-centered nature of the ruling class as against what they portray outside. They deliberately spite their fellow citizens so as to keep them low.

### 10. Exploitation of resources

Like other Marxist writers, Irobi laments over the oppression, exploitation and injustice in the society where the helpless man is exploited and tossed about. Dr. Animalu in *Hangmen also Die* is also found in this group of exploiters. He openly refuses to acknowledge Jamike's works but comes behind to take pictures of them for a competition. His conversation with Jamike reveals this fact as it is seen in this excerpt:

Animalu: Why are you so hostile? I came to take photographs of your work.

Jamike: For what?

Animalu: An article I want to send to Africa arts magazine...

From the excerpt above, we see a clear exploitation of the common man's resources. The ones at the helm of affairs want everything just for themselves and do not care about the fate of the common people. Furthermore, Jamike as a committed sculpture has nothing to show for all his efforts over the years. He and Yekinni in *Hangmen also Die* are archetypes of the masses that work so hard, yet have nothing to show for it. People like Yekinni are made to do the most insecure, dangerous and risky jobs yet they live in harsh conditions, their families have barely enough meal to eat and quality education is obviously out of their reach. He tells the doctor:

... I am serious, #198 a month. For a man with seven children, and all of them in school. Imagine it. And on top of it you have no rest of mind (*Hangmen also Die*, 25). Jamike's works are considered the best just by mere words but are given no due recognition because, they have to please some other people. Jamike cries out that: "...humanity owes me a name. The world owes me some confidence. They need to tell me that they appreciate what I am doing. Prof., You know as well as I do that art thrives on praise." (*The Other Side of the Mark*, 85). This is the heartfelt cry of the ordinary man in the society who does not get anything at the end of the day for his efforts to live a better life. He further refers to himself and others like himself as ... talented and neglected artist. (117). This form of injustice is prevalent in our society where talents are ignored and recognition is given by partiality and so, Jamike while weeping, tells Prof. Njemanze that he: "weeps for the wasted years. The murdered years. The shriveled life. The bleeding life. The tender life that gathers moss. The sweating stone. I am weeping for that which I know is mine but which I never get. Prof., where are my laurels?" (83). This excerpt represents the situation of the helpless masses that are left at the mercy of the ruling class. They put in efforts to make ends meet but are frustrated at the end of the day. Just like Yekinni who works so hard and has nothing to show for it, so also is Jamike and this he describes when he tells Prof. Njemanze:

... O Prof., if I could tell you what it costs the body and the mind to wade the swamps towards the anus of the sea just to scoop the clay for molding of these masterpieces... if only I could tell you what the skin endures as my palms and fingers delve into the clay soil to redeem from the worms what belongs to man. If I could show you the blisters from the shell of the periwinkle, the conch, the crab, the oyster, the mudskipper and electric fish as I defy the crocodiles to harvest from the earth what belongs to me... (81).

On this issue, Zhipora tells Kamuche:

... he is a harassed man. A harassed soul. Harassed by the world. For the past six years, he's been entering for an art's competition. A national competition. And every year he hopes to win. But when the results come out, what happens? The prize goes to some other person who is a great name in the eyes of the judges or someone who is a friend of the secretary of the organizing committee for the competition. But he, the unknown artist, he gets what the judges call a special mention or some other miserable and polite pseudonym for mediocrity. (*The Other Side of the Mask* 22).

It is indeed a system where mediocrity is exalted and given a first place rather than giving the finest shots the opportunity to express themselves. Njemanze disclosing this fact tells Jamike: "... you must understand that simply because a work wins an award does not mean it is better than all the other works submitted..." and Jamike responds with a question: do you then give award to mediocre works?" (84) This idea of giving artistic laurels to writers on the basis of connection and not merit is given sufficient validation by Kamuche when he

tells Zhipora: He should have entered again for the national competition. And informed me. I would have gone to meet the judges one by one in their homes and brought the laurel here to him two days before the announcement of the results. Lady, I am respected. I have powers. I throw my weight around. In this community, I have connections. (*The Other Side of the Mask*, 14-5).

These establish Irobi's view on the issue that mediocrity and plagiarism have plagued the Nigerian system over the years and need to be curbed.

## 11. Unemployment

Unemployment ravages the Nigerian society due to the fact that the people at the helm of affairs have refused to empower the youths by creating jobs for them. Senator Arikpo who stands as the oppressor is seen to be in a hurry to tag them peasants (*Nwokedi* 19), "Jobless vagabonds, an irresponsible generation. A brigade of unemployment devils and the question, who left them unemployed? (15) put forward to Senator Arikpo by Mrs. Nwokedi in response to his statement exposes the level of wickedness and greed of the upper class by their deliberate refusal to gainfully employ the youths. The Ekumeku age grade actually is a group of unemployed youths who were angry with the likes of Nwokedi Snr. And Senator Arikpo who think only of themselves and not about the people that voted them into power. Mrs. Nwokedi who is on the side of the youths tells Arikpo: "you can decide between the two of you to go to Switzerland and bring back some of the money you stashed away there, the money you used to buy houses in New York and London, you can bring it home and build some industries and employ the young men" (55). The youths are denied employment because the funds to use for it are diverted by the ones controlling them. While delivering his speech, Nwokedi in a bitter outpour of his disappointment in the leaders decries the fact that,

My generation gave you the future to hold in trust for us. You turned it into a handkerchief, used it to wipe the mucus of greed dripping from your wretched nostrils. After that, you rumbled it, crumpled our future and squeezed it into your pocket. But your pocket was full of holes. So our future fell out to the ground, and with your leprous feet, you quarried it into dust... (*Nwokedi*, 73).

The case of the Ekumeku age grade and the unemployed youths in Ugep in Nwokedi is similar to what we find in *Hangmen also Die*. The story of the suicide squad is a sad story of millions of graduates in Nigeria who are unemployed as a result of financial mismanagement and profligacy of those at different levels of authority in the country. The land of Izon has been exploited and polluted by the activities of the oil companies and the government sends some money to them as compensation. Chief Erekosima who is in charge of the funds decides to squander it for his personal, selfish benefits instead of using it to better the lives of his fellow citizens and so, the people still suffer and the youths remain unemployed. The suicide squad which represents youths in the society is seen watching in frustration. With their different levels of academic qualifications, they cannot secure jobs. Despite their

wonderful academic achievements, they are denied the opportunity to contribute and give back to the society meaningfully; therefore, they form a deadly group that decides to get back to the society that has caused them so much pain. Their conversations reveal their disappointment and the frustration this has caused them. With statements like: "...we are the rejects of the world, our jobs in this nation is to look for job, we have no chance to help in shaping the destiny of this nation, we are not given a chance to contribute our own quota, we have been marginalized out of existence...etc." (*Hangmen also Die*, 46-7), we can identify their grievances towards the government concerning their plight. A sad statement by Khomeini reveals this fact when he says:

"...mineral wealth with which we could have built this nation and fortified the future for posterity and ourselves for four generations to come. But some wretched souls squandered the riches..." (47). In line with the above, Dimeari on his part, while lamenting over the socio-economic situation and proffering his reasons for wishing to join the suicide squad says that it is to enable him "... hit back on those who have turned me into a spiritual nomad, into an economic destitute" (52).

Beneath Nigeria's unending unemployment crisis lies typical corruption: the incessant decline of civic virtue particularly among Nigeria's political and economic elite which has become intrinsic. But beyond the exploration of the situation it further reveals a certain truth and reality. Hence, writers are mostly always involved in the cynical argument to make us view a certain kind of reality and also persuade us to take a stand with them. For writers to achieve the great feat of persuading us to take a certain stand and of course with them, they cannot do without dialectics. He has to come up with not just new ideas and belief systems but also methods by which he can either support the previous facts or counter them but in a defined and progressive way. This work in its entirety sets out to rule out the already established belief system that attributes the oppressed state of the people to only the activities of the failing government but also, to the privileged few who have the opportunity to control a sector in the play. He empowers them to fight for what belongs to them. So, from the beginning of the play, we find Obidike, a member of the Ekumeku age grade telling Senator Arikpo: Senator, we may be peasants. Poor peasants. But we can poison your peace (19). As against the belief that those elected into government control the power, Irobi, in *Nwokedi*, proves otherwise. He does this by his formation of Ekumeku age grade, which consists of the restless youths in the village that are tired of the activities of the corrupt politicians in their community and vested a whole lot of power in them and so, when Arikpo tries to say that he is the government, they shut him up and beating their chests, they chorus that they are the government (21). This counters the general belief that power rests with the government. Yekinni also by his revolutionary disobedience not to hang the seven young men and standing by it reveals the kind of power that the common man can wield so as to fight for what he believes is right. Though pressurized by the doctor, the warden and even the superintendent himself, he does not budge; rather, he tells the warden: "why you de waste your time? I don tell you say I no go hang those boys. No be so? Look, warden, as I don take my mouth talk am, as Yekinni

don talk am, nobody, I say nobody in this world not even the head of state can make me hang those boys." (*Hangmen also Die* 14) On the same issue, he shows his extreme defiance in his conversation with the doctor:

Doctor: If you go on like this, Yekinni, you'll get sacked.

Yekinni: I don't mind.

Doctor: You'll be retrenched

Yekinni: I don't care (19)

And at the end of the play, we still see him defying the orders of the superintendent when he straightway tells the superintendent that he still will not hang the boys and moves away saying he does not care if he is replaced (124). So, even as "insignificant" as Yekinni is, he could resist the oppression and exploitation of his selfish superiors and that is the point Irobi is driving home using dialectics! He indeed does not leave them helpless but presents them as strong-willed and determined to fight and create a classless society. Jamike is not left out of this as Irobi empowers him to reject the injustice and denial meted out to him. When Dr. Animalu tells him that he reminds him of a scorpion wriggling in his sting, Jamike responds saying: ...exactly! That is what I am. And that is what you want me to be. Isn't it? A scorpion wriggling in his sting. But never mind, very soon, sooner even than you think; I will become something else." (*The Other Side Of the Mask*, 53) and it was indeed a matter of time for his eventual murder of Dr. Animalu is a bold step to show that indeed, the downtrodden are not really powerless as they appear to be. Irobi through his radical character(s) does not believe that change comes by folding of hands and crossing of legs and he does not even buy the idea that change comes with time. He also uses a dialectical perspective to define and explore the concept of time as regards demand for change and revolution. Through his dialectic perspective of time as a concept, he believes that change and revolution are a matter of urgency if justice must be attained for the oppressed and so, he advocates for a "now action". Ozoemena while addressing the youths tells them that:

...our time has come. And time is not the tick-tocks of your wristwatch.

Neither is time the rising and setting of the sun. Time is an event. Time is a 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, Mr. Nwakerendu Nwokedi, is how time trips tyrants (*Nwokedi*, 13)

On the other hand, Nwokedi while speaking to his mother on this issue of time tells her that: "...because 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 own image" (64), this being exactly the same words R.I.P used in *Hangmen also Die* when Tamara was pleading with the Suicide Squad to spare the life of Chief Erekosima after he was kidnapped, tortured and eventually hanged because of the

money he squandered (118). Irobi repeats this in this play to reiterate his stance on the concept of time. This establishes the fact that he is a staunch advocate of the “now-action” and not waiting for some supernatural powers to fight for the people who should have taken it as their responsibility to change the cause of their lives in a degenerated and failing society. On his part, Jamike, in his response to Prof. Njemanze, asks him: “... understand what Prof.? What must I understand? What do I have to understand after six years of toil? I have always had faith in art...” and he goes on to say that: “a man continues to strive for silver lining, but the world keeps raising the sky beyond his reach. A man continues to grope for gold, but the world only gives him bronze, and sometimes, wood. How can such a man not be tempted to spit at the world?” (84). Through their despair and frustrations, Irobi gives his oppressed characters a sense of protest and revolt and infuses them with the ability to fight against the oppressors no matter how insignificant.

The title, *Hangmen also Die* becomes an irony in this situation. Irobi empowers the Suicide Squad to always fight against injustice and exploitation though at some point, they derailed and made the innocent citizens the victims of what they feel against the society. When Chief Erekosima threatens the Suicide Squad that he will get them all hanged once released after he was kidnapped, in return they chorus: ...hang him, he has been hanging us all these years (121). This notion is seen in their earlier conversations:

Dayan: We have no place in this politics of this nation.  
 Acid: The constituent assembly is filled with the faces of the same ancient chimpanzees.  
 R.I.P: It is because...  
 Dayan: We have no chance to help in shaping the destiny of this nation  
 Acid: We are like tigers in a game reserve.  
 R.I.P: It is because...  
 Dayan: Our hands are tied behind our backs.  
 R.I.P: It is because...  
 Dayan: We are not even given a chance to contribute our quota.  
 Chorus: We have been marginalized out of existence... (46-7)

This is what they mean when they tell Chief Erekosima that he and his likes have been hanging them all these years and so, they also have the power to retaliate and exact justice on those that have exploited and oppressed them. Irobi also dialectically brings us to an understanding that in contemporary times, revolutions are not something to be joked with. A human life, if necessary, may be involved if this change must be realized.

## 12. Conclusion

The Nigerian and African society are ripe for social change. This explains why playwrights have channeled their creative prowess towards the reorganization of the society. Drama may not be the only medium of addressing social issues but it is one of the major ways through which artists express themselves and talk about society. Writing on the potency of drama in bringing about social change, Diana Delving

observes that, “at various times in history, groups with particular messages to teach, sermons to preach... have used the theater as an immediate, effective and entertaining medium of communication” (29). Though drama is not the change itself, it serves as a catalyst for addressing societal concerns and achieving the desired change. Buttressing this point, Wa’ thiongo states that the theater (drama) is not the revolution, but a rehearsal for the actual revolution (64).

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