

# Polis: Journal of Political Studies

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2025

E-ISSN:3092-9113

*Department of Philosophy, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria*

# Socio-Political and Revolutionary Issues in a Traumatized Society: A Study of *Hangmen Also Die* by Esiaba Irobi

Uche Oputa  
Jersey Onyekachi Obinali  
*Department of Theatre Arts*  
*Faculty of Humanities*  
*Imo State University*  
*Owerri, Nigeria*

## *Abstract*

This paper examines the socio-political and revolutionary themes in Esiaba Irobi's play *Hangmen Also Die*. The study examines how the play reflects a traumatized society faced with political oppression, economic hardship, and social disintegration. The paper employs a critical analysis of the text, highlighting Irobi's portrayal of systemic violence, state corruption, and the revolutionary spirit of the oppressed. This paper situates *Hangmen Also Die* within the broader discourse on postcolonial trauma and resistance. This paper argues that *Hangmen Also Die* is not just a work of drama but a revolutionary text that challenges the status quo, urging societies to confront their past traumas and reclaim action in the fight for justice.

**Keywords:** National rebirth, Reform, Good governance, Science, Technology, Philosophy.

## **Introduction**

Societies that have experienced trauma, whether through war, colonialism, dictatorship, or social upheaval, often bear deep psychological and political scars that shape their socio-political landscape. These societies struggle with issues of justice, resistance, and the lingering effects of past oppression. Theatre as a powerful medium of expression has long been used to examine and critique the socio-political conditions of such societies, offering a lens through which historical and contemporary struggles are explored. One such literary work that delves into these themes is *Hangmen Also Die* by Esiaba Irobi.

Esiaba Irobi, a renowned Nigerian playwright, is known for his radical and revolutionary works that confronts the realities of oppression, tyranny, and social injustice. *Hangmen Also Die*

presents a society haunted by trauma and oppression, reflecting the socio-political turmoil of many post-colonial nations. Through a gripping narrative filled with intense dialogue, psychological depth, and political symbolism, Irobi captures the struggles of individuals caught in a system of violence and resistance. The play interrogates power structures, the role of the state in perpetuating fear, and the revolutionary responses of those who refuse to be silenced. This work examines the socio-political and revolutionary issues embedded in *Hangmen Also Die*, examining how Irobi portrays the dynamics of oppression and resistance in a traumatized society. The paper focuses on key themes such as political repression, historical trauma, the psychology of fear, and the role of the revolutionary individual in challenging oppressive regimes. By analyzing the interplay between these themes, this work aims to reveal how Irobi constructs a narrative that not only reflects the socio-political realities of post-colonial societies but also serves as a call to action against injustice. This work situates *Hangmen Also Die* within the broader context of African literature and political drama, highlighting Irobi's contributions to the discourse on resistance and transformation. The play's relevance extends beyond its immediate historical setting, resonating with contemporary struggles for justice and human rights in various parts of the world. By examining the ways in which Irobi employs theatrical elements, such as character development, symbolism, and dramatic tension, this study sheds light on how *Hangmen Also Die* functions as both an artistic and political statement. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Hangmen Also Die* is not just a work of drama but a revolutionary text that challenges the status quo, urging societies to confront their past traumas and reclaim action in the fight for justice.

### The Role of Drama in Modern Times

The role of drama and theatre in society has become evident, and it does not need to be over-emphasized. Thus, drama has gone beyond mere entertainment to solve many socio-cultural problems as it concerns all social institutions. "Drama is a tool for conscientization, liberation and change" (Dibia 20). As Adeyemi noted, "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" (435). It has come to the conviction that no aspect of life does not need the services of drama and theatre to realize its goals. This is because drama and theatre are agents of education, entertainment, information, and edification.

In modern times, theatre has become more embracing outside a physical setting, a stage where dramatic action can be enacted. Today, drama has become an art that can be launched through a multi-media approach, unlike in Greek times when people gathered on a slope surrounded by elevated levels where the audience sat to watch all sorts of actions that entertained them. Today, drama can be accessed through play texts, the television screen, cinema, and the radio, among other media. This multimedia approach to drama and theatre has equally presented a challenge to the drama list to write or create drama, bearing in mind the different media through which drama could be appreciated. This is why we have scripts or dramatic writing meant for television, radio, film and even the new media, which we can now view on the screens of phones. No matter the medium any dramatist chooses, one thing is sure: there is a target audience and a message aimed at impacting the lives of the people who view the series.

### Nigeria as a traumatized Society

Every social institution has contributed to the growth of society throughout the world civilization. Drama and theatre are among the institutions that have helped develop human society. When we refer to theatre as a social institution, one discovers that there is no aspect of life in which theatre and drama have not made an impact or significant contribution. This also illustrates how drama and theatre have contributed to reforming traumatized societies. Considering the socio-political conditions in Nigeria today, it could be viewed as a traumatized society. Against this backdrop, the significance of drama and theatre in a society like Nigeria should not be underestimated. Essentially, drama and theatre have a vital role in the reformation of a traumatized society. It is important to recognize that trauma can be perceived in various ways and dimensions.

In Nigerian society, trauma can be observed through the overall state of the nation, particularly due to socio-political hardships and a steadily declining economy. Firstly, it must be established that Nigeria is experiencing trauma as its citizens face significant economic difficulties despite the vast human and material resources available. Among all the institutions within various social organizations, the political institution holds the most power, as all other institutions fall under its jurisdiction. Consequently, when a Nation encounters any form of social issue, all attention is directed towards the political leadership. No nation can be in a traumatic condition if its political leadership is responsive to the needs of the citizenry.

Trauma within the context of Nigerian society encompasses many associated issues. These include bribery, corruption, oppression, discrimination, injustice, tribalism, etc. In addition to these problems, inflation, unemployment, and tribal conflicts further diminish the citizens' enthusiasm for their country. In such a situation, one should not be surprised at the overall outcome. This is the context from which the concept of societal trauma can be understood. Nigeria is one of the countries grappling with this kind of issue. Thus, Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* is a seminal work that dissects the socio-political landscape of a society plagued by dictatorship, violence, and psychological trauma. The play is a reflection of the historical and contemporary struggles faced by African societies, particularly Nigeria, where colonial and postcolonial experiences have left deep scars. Through a gripping narrative and powerful characterization, Irobi explores how oppression fosters resistance.

### Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and Socio-Political Issues

Most works of drama in recent history make one political statement or another. This is evident in the themes Nigerian playwrights write about, such as oppression, bribery and corruption, nepotism, bad governance, etc. The backdrop of *Hangmen Also Die* is deeply rooted in Nigeria's Niger-Delta region with a history of environmental injustice, civil unrest, and economic instability. The play echoes the postcolonial struggles of African nations, where authoritarian regimes suppress dissent and weaponize fear against the masses. Irobi intricately weaves the theme of trauma into his narrative, illustrating how oppression manifests in both the physical and psychological realms. The characters in *Hangmen Also Die* represent a society battered by political repression, environmental negligence and social injustice. The trauma inflicted upon citizens by the ruling class is depicted through visceral imagery and dialogues that expose the brutality of state machinery.

Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* rises with the awful scene where life is about to be snuffed out of some seven young men (Tarila Iganima alias R.I.P., Waritimi Tamuno alias Mortuary, Atiemie

Waribo alias Moshe Dayan, Labomie Allagoa alias Ayatollah Khomeini, Tekena Iketubosin alias Hydrochloric Acid, Konji Amakarama alias Tetanus, and Fubara Igonikon alias Accidental discharge) through the guillotine for the murder of Chief Erekosima. The disobedience of Yekinni, the prison hangman, in refusing to perform his duty on the condemned young men reveals to us the events leading to their action and, consequently, their being sentenced to death. It also sparks off a stream of flashbacks telling the story of the genesis of the suicide squad, a revolutionary vanguard group, a gang of disinherited and dislocated young men, very well educated and so determined to hit the track at a society which has deprived them the right to live well, even though the material and natural resources are in superabundance. Therefore, these positive heroes led by Tarila Iganima aimed to change a society where leaders embezzle public funds and employ state security organs to silence the people.

These seven young men, whose group is called 'The Suicide Squad', is identified as a rebel faction that rejects the state's authority. Its members are seen as highly sought-after figures in the area and viewed as heroes by disillusioned youth frustrated with the government's actions. Demeari, Tamara's son, abandons her to join the Suicide Squad by the creek. Tamara encounters this faction during her search for her son, leading to a heated confrontation. She shifts their focus and beliefs towards opposing the corrupt politicians responsible for the environmental damage in Izon State. She urges them to find Chief Erekosima and demand the restoration of the compensation funds designated by the federal government for the oil pollution and ecological harm caused to Izon State's ecosystem.

**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)

Tamara here exhorts them to move from being petty thieves to forcefully advancing to save and fight for the cause of the poor masses by disrupting Chief Erekosima's coronation ceremony. They went beyond merely disrupting his ceremony, escalating to kidnapping the chief and murdering him. It was at the course of questioning that Chief Erekosima became increasingly arrogant, defending his decision to loot the compensation fund of the Izon States, and frustrated, the group decides to hang him. Suddenly, armed soldiers arrive and apprehend the squad. In the end, the whole group receives a sentence of death by hanging. Tamara's words, however, are an urge for them to speak up and show their grievances against injustice.

The text underlines youth unrest as a critical challenge facing the nation. The rapid increase in unemployment significantly obstructs national development and contributes to rising youth crime throughout the country. The play effectively depicts the impact of youth unemployment in the Niger Delta which extends to the Nation generally through the actions of the Suicide Squad, a group of graduates who have faced seven years of joblessness. Their anger is expressed thus:

**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.

Some members of the Suicide Squad recount what job-seeking youths go through in their quest for employment:

**R.I.P:** Seven years later we met. This time at the office of the Directorate of Employment... which claims that the government is giving loans to unemployed graduates who want assistance for self-employment...

**ACID:** We were there several times a week.

**R.I.P:** From eight in the morning to eight in the night.

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

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

**R.I.P:** And there, on that sweating Friday afternoon, we formed this outfit: Suicide Squad: so if today we have turned to violence as the only weapon to redeem our destiny, redeem our fate, our future and our manhood, it is because...

**DAYAN:** We have no place in the politics of this nation. (31)

The members of the Suicide Squad, it must be noted, have varying degrees as expressed by Dimeari.

**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)

Despite the pervasive trauma, *Hangmen Also Die* is not merely a tale of suffering but also one of defiance. The revolutionary undertones in the play highlight the inevitability of resistance in the face of systemic injustice. Irobi presents characters that, despite their pain, rise against oppression, embodying the undying spirit of rebellion. Thus, at the guillotine, Yekini, the executioner, hesitates to perform the execution as he mourns his failure to fulfil the duty for which he receives payment. In the end, he leaves his role in the prison service and goes back to his regular job of fishing.

**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)

The play's climax, where the oppressed take a stand against their oppressors, serves as a cathartic moment that encapsulates Irobi's belief in the power of collective resistance. The narrative reinforces the idea that societal change is driven by those who dare to challenge the status quo, despite the personal costs involved. Thus, Irobi employs rich symbolism and metaphors to enhance the play's revolutionary message. The hangman, a recurring figure in the play, represents the machinery of oppression, yet also serves as a paradoxical symbol of transformation. The execution, meant to instil fear, becomes a catalyst for rebellion. Moreover, the play's grim and dystopian setting mirrors the existential despair of a nation in crisis. The imagery of darkness, gallows, and blood-stained streets reinforces the grim reality of a society under siege. However, these dark symbols are juxtaposed with elements of hope, such as the rising sun in the final act, signifying the dawn of a new era.

While Irobi's expresses the situation of the Niger-Delta, its themes and messages resonate around the country and beyond. A thorough examination of the text reveals that Irobi underscores urgent national challenges that necessitate thoughtful deliberation and remedies. A significant issue pointed out by Irobi is the rampant corruption, which arises from the unethical actions of political leaders. Chief Erekosima serves as a prime example, as he misuses public funds for personal gain. He misappropriates the funds designated for Izon State to compensate for damages caused by oil spills on their territory. Chief Erekosima represents the exclusive group of political elites who benefit from oil exploitation, often at the detriment of the broader population. Chief Erekosima embodies the toxic leadership that consistently burdens Nigerian politics. The playwright uses his character to illustrate a troubling image of Nigerian leaders. Erekosima represent the brand of leadership present in today's Nigeria, which does not mind the effect of their actions on the larger society as long as they are to their benefit. Ibiaye, on the other hand, symbolizes the average Nigerian, whose integrity and toil bring minimal reward.

Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, though centered on the condition of the Niger-Delta, raises the theme of environmental degradation and pollution. It highlights the severe ecological and biological harm caused by oil exploitation in the Niger Delta. The vivid depiction of habitat destruction



and environmental damage in the State of Izon serves as a potent representation of the broader environmental decline in the Niger Delta, driven by oil and gas exploration. While this exploitation has deprived local communities of their traditional livelihoods, like fishing and farming, leaving them unemployed, the likes of Chief Erekosima prefer to pocket compensation funds given to the whole community. Ibiaye captures the predicament of the people when he notes:

**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).

Irobi's work underscores the role of art in socio-political revolutions. As a playwright, he wields theatre as a weapon against tyranny, using performance as a medium to provoke thought and inspire action. Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* serves as a clarion call for artists and intellectuals to engage in the struggle for justice and liberation.

### Conclusion

Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* is a compelling examination of the socio-political and revolutionary issues in a traumatized society. Through its powerful themes of oppression, resistance, and artistic activism, the play offers a profound critique of authoritarian regimes and the resilience of the human spirit. By portraying trauma not just as a consequence of oppression but also as a catalyst for rebellion, Irobi contributes to the discourse on political resistance in postcolonial Africa. As Dibia noted, "it is obvious that radicalism and violence are the aftermaths of the activities of irresponsible, exploitative and insensitive leaders who are not giving up on exploiting the masses. The oppressed masses, like the proverbial goat which bites when pushed to the wall, oftentimes, resort to radicalism and violence as instruments of confrontation which they can use to dismantle an oppressive socio-political system" (19). Thus, the oppressed has a limit at which point the chains will be broken. Thus, Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* demonstrates that the oppressed have a limit to how much they can tolerate unpleasant circumstances, particularly when those in power are unwilling to make the same sacrifices they frequently demand of the general population. Therefore, as Bibia notes, "it is dangerous to ignore the suffering masses even when they are not complaining openly for too long otherwise a consuming explosion with a circumference that cannot be determined by even the government and its agencies when it occurs, is imminent" (20). Irobi utilizes the situation in the Niger Delta as a platform to launch an attack on the Nigerian leaders, whose conception of power as an art of personal survival, put the Nigerian people in deep socio-economic and political mess.



**WORKS CITED**

- Adeyemi, Olusola Smith. "Interrogating Nationalist Ideologies in Nigerian Drama: A Textual Analysis of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*" *International Journal of Current Research in the Humanities* (IJCRH) No. 27 2023
- Esiaba, Irobi. "*Hangmen Also Die*" ABIC Books and Equipments Limited, Enugu. 1989.
- Nwabueze, Emeka. *Studies in Dramatic Literature*. Enugu: ABIC Books, 2011:57.
- Dibia, Kester Nnaemeka, "Radicalism And Violence As Imperatives For Social Change: A Critical Analysis Of *Hangmen Also Die* As A Metaphor For Nigeria's Situation"
- Eze, Norbert Oyibo "Environmental Impact Assessment and the Dramatist: A Conceptual Study of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*" *African Performance Review* Vol.1 No 2 & 3, 2007