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Environmental Impact Assessment and the Dramatist: A Conceptual Study of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*

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Abstract

The subject of Niger Delta predicament and crisis has been the theme of many editorials and publications in Nigeria and elsewhere. Before the November 10, 1995 execution of Sare-Wiwa and other Ogoni environmental activists, for their collective resolve to address certain fundamental interests that affect their common identity and humanity, Esiaba Irobi had, in a spine-chilling tragedy, *Hangmen Also Die*, painted bizarre and horrifying picture of this society, which is in acute danger of socio-economic and ecological extinction as a result of terrible effect of oil exploitation.

In this paper, attempt is made to examine *Hangmen Also Die* as an impact assessment study. It is the position of the paper that the Niger Delta youths represented in the play as the 'suicide squad', are victims of neglect and peripheral attention, and that as a social class, they turned deviants in order to draw urgent attention to a zone, which supplies the wealth of the nation, but which is in sore state of economic and social development. It is argued that in this play, Irobi demonstrates unreservedly, "the daring involved in naked confrontation with adversaries".

Introduction

The Nigerian environment constitutes the major theme of the dramatic writings of Esiaba Irobi. Indeed, many of his plays reflect the poor state of power relations in the country, as well its socio-economic impact on the people. However, Irobi's plays, especially *Hangmen Also Die*, appear very disconcerting to some critics, because "an element of nihilism unavoidably creeps into the picture" (Maanem and Bennis, 1979:3). For example, Toni

Duruaku observes that:

Irobi manages to present protagonists who rise above despair, even though their choice is not praise worthy. Therefore, they will at worst generate anger for their base option (2000:105).

The reason for the above comment is not far to seek. *Hangmen Also Die* undoubtedly vitalizes certain “instincts that people don’t like to gratify except with the help of ingenious disguises and a rather childish hypocrisy”(Fraser, 1976:10). According to Fraser, “these instincts, which are most deeply rooted in the human psyche, are on the one hand, fear, and on the other, the taste for blood and death” (1976:10).

Nonetheless, a general resentment of these instincts does not obliterate them from reality. There are conditions where human beings often prefer death to life. It is the position of this paper that the protagonists of *Hangmen Also Die* have touched that limit. In this article, attempt is made to demonstrate that this explosive play does not benumb our moral faculty. Rather, it is viewed as a hyper-intensive response to the challenges arising from poor implementation of Environmental Impact Assessment vis-à-vis oil exploration in the Niger Delta, as well as the unhealthy political climate in the country.

Environmental Impact Assessment

According to Uche Okpoko, “the field we now refer to as Social Impact Assessment (SIA) or Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) emerged in response to the United States’ National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, which took effect in 1970 (2004:91). Okpoko cites Freudenburg as positing that this environmental act is necessitated by “the society’s increased concern with environmental degradation, and the social implications of technology” (91). Environmental Impact Assessment, therefore, deals with policy-guidelines on how to regulate and/or ameliorate the frightening and materialistic havoc of technology. This is imperative because technology now appears to over-determine where and how we live, as well as our basic health conditions. Herbert fill argues that “technological development has drifted since its beginning, advancing not so much to foster true human progress as to perpetuate” (1974:61) physical and mental breakdown. EIA is “anticipatory and should give planners useful information for selecting an alternative in the light of economic, social or security implications of human actions” (Okpoko, 2004:91).

To pay lip service to the global concern on environmental degradation due to human actions on the natural environment, Nigeria established Federal Protection and Environmental Agency (FEPA) in 1988. FEPA is charged with the responsibility of restoring, maintaining and enhancing

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the ecosystem and ecological processes essential for the functioning of the biosphere. The policy equally spells out guidelines for safeguarding fishes, forests and wildlife, as well as modalities for the establishment of certain infrastructural facilities to mitigate the hazardous effects of toxic emission, and solid wastes. However, Okpoko argues that "Nigeria's environmental arrangements are good in principle, but poor in practice" (2004:105). For him, "the only lessons Nigeria learned from the United States appear to be in procedural and legal provisions for the implementation of EIA/ SIA" (105). He concludes that the enforcement of the provisions in Nigeria is found wanting in many respects (105). Okpoko's assertions above are quite correct because:

Since the discovery of oil at Oloibiri more than four decades ago, the Niger Deltan people have continued to watch helplessly as some multinational oil firms despoil their land, water and aquatic lives. This damage of the people's traditional means of livelihood has brought untoward economic, as well as socio-cultural and psychological hardships upon the people (2004:106)

However, the degradation of the natural habitat of the Niger Delta people is used in the play as a metaphor for the apparent decay and crises that bedevil Nigerian political landscape. Indeed, what the playwright attacks vehemently in the play is the politics of self-aggrandisement, which creates a disturbing gap between the Nigerian people and their aspirations. As it is in the play, the Nigerian youths are the most affected group in the unhealthy power relations in the country. Sound education no longer guarantees employment for them. This makes them feel unwanted. The agony of being alienated from one's own country compelled Irobi and many of his contemporaries to flee from Nigeria. In a brief bio-data placed on the Internet, Irobi is described thus, "Esiaba Irobi was born in the Republic of Biafra and has lived in exile in Nigeria, Britain and USA". The playwright's denunciation of Nigerian citizenship is a reflection of his total rejection of the unhealthy power relations in Nigeria. His identification with Biafra is significant in two ways. Firstly, even though Republic of Biafra is utopian, Irobi believes that it is better to dwell in an utopian world than to live in Nigeria and suffer socio- economic and political hardships, as well as anguish of the soul. Secondly, Biafra is a symbol of rebellion. And rebellion against the status quo is the hallmark of Irobi's dramaturgy. Through *Hangmen Also Die*, the playwright attempts to incite the Nigerian youths to pick up arms against their uncaring leaders.

Synopsis of *Hangmen Also Die*

Hangman Also Die, which is set in the oil rich Niger Delta, is

compartmentalized into six phases. In phase one, it is hanging day for condemned prisoners," but Yekini, the male convicts' hangman refuses to do his job. He finds it difficult to hang the youths, whom he feels are right in murdering Chief Erekosima for embezzling the money given to their community in compensation for the oil spillage that destroyed their land.

In phase two, members of the suicide squad are already toughened into brutes by the traumatizing condition of years of joblessness. They double both as assassins and thieves because they believe that to live without jobs is to live a lifeless life. In phase three, these unemployed youths argue that there is a thief in all of us, and that the thief "creeps out when the plague of poverty and hunger falls upon the land like a blanket of darkness" (p.46). In phase four, Tamara, a very strong and powerful priestess and teacher, stumbles on the group in their bush-hideout and convinces them on the need to recover the compensation money from Chief Erokosima. In phase five, the suicide squad disrupts the ceremony, where Erokosima is to be crowned the Amatamaso 1 of Izon state, and gets the Chief kidnapped. In phase six, the boys are apprehended for hanging Chief Erekosima when he refused to surrender the remainder of the compensation money. In phase seven, we are back again in the prison yard as in phase one. Yekini is sacked for refusing to hang the boys. Ekpenyong, the female convicts' hangman, is used to dispatch the youths to the beyond.

Hangmen Also Die as an Impact Assessment Study

Elsewhere, this writer argues that, "in its articulation of now an actual historical phenomenon, which at its period of composition and publication (*Hangmen Also Die* was first staged and published in 1989) had remained a secret to history, *Hangmen Also Die* is most prophetic" (2000:35).

Hangmen Also Die is eminently prophetic, not only because its action, in actuality, has been paralleled by the hanging of the Ogoni environmental activists, led by Ken Saro Wiwa, in November 10, 1995, but also because it foreshadows the current youths' restiveness in the Niger Delta, due to the continual degradation of their natural environment by oil firms, and government's poor implementation of the provisions of Environmental Impact Assessment in respect to oil exploitation in the region.

In the first place, one of the measures, which ought to be taken to assuage the anger of a people whose land and traditional means of livelihood have been destroyed would be to guarantee them an alternative source of employment. But, as the play indicates, this is not to be. In spite of their sound degrees, the youths remain knights without shining armour. Their encounter with the Directorate for Employment speaks eloquently about their frustrated attempt to engage themselves in worthwhile means of livelihood:

R.I.P: Seven years later, we met again. This time at the office of the

Directorate for Employment---which claims that the government is giving loans to the unemployed graduates who want assistance for self-employment for small-scale industries.

ACID: We were there seven 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: So, there, on the corridor of the Directorate for Employment, we remembered Dr.Oghansiegbe's speech on the uses of terrorism (p.30).

The problem of joblessness is quite excruciating, and this triggers off in the handicapped youths, a feeling of worthlessness. According to Eze:

The suicide squad is a child of depravity, a child of necessity, formed as a means of walking out of the terrains of neglect, poverty and futurelessness. The members of the squad do not merely want to exist, they want to live, and living means having all the paraphernalia of living, namely, good jobs that can assist them to build their own houses, marry and, therefore, bear children (2000:34).

Maanem and Bennis express the view that "feeling such as love, hate, honor, envy, pride, anger, elation, warmth, shame and sorrow are fundamental, not peripheral to the understanding of interpersonal dynamics" (1979:2). This implies that it is difficult to "amputate feelings from the study of social life" (2). In spite of their talents, the members of the suicide squad are tossed into the social heap of nothingness by the same society that expects so much from them. The group's acts of vandalism, violence and crime, which produce psychic fear, should be seen as normal behavior expected of a desperate people in society. Though crime and violence are reprehensible acts, they are, in certain conditions, the only palpable means of protest. I think that in their violent disposition, the suicide squad wants to be seen as a contagious disease so that immediate effort can be made to procure remedy.

The idea of unleashing terror on the presumably innocent people is to cause a major psychological shift, to force other people to feel themselves, their own kind of fear and anguish, and to compel the government to realize that they are leaders of victims. In examining the protagonist of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which is analogous to Irobi's protagonists in *Hangmen Also Die*, David H. Karrafalt argues that:

If the condition of despair in which the individual finds himself is accompanied by the discovery that he is alone in recognising the degree of man's failure, and alone in feeling the pain of this recognition, then the possibility appears a way out of both isolation and the despair. This possibility is to have others recognize the same kind of pain (1970:80).

This is exactly what the suicide squad seeks to achieve through its numerous harassment and thieving activities. Fraser argues that "an intuitive sympathy only occurs when one believes that one knows with reasonable precision, how the victim is himself perceiving and judging

what is happening to him" (1979:59).

Furthermore, Chief Erekosima's saga in *Hangmen Also Die*, represents a clear manifestation of the oil firms' hypocrisy and lack of genuine consultation with the communities in their interest and desires. Almost all initiatives are paternalistic and generally initiated from the outsider perspective (Okpoko, 2004:107).

Instead of dealing with the people's representatives, oil firms often relate directly with government officials, who are usually not interested in the affairs of the masses. The play suggests that Chief Isokipiri Erekosima belongs to a royal family, the family of "the great King Pepple of Bonny" (p.75), who in the past had maintained control in the Delta province. Like most Nigerian politicians, Erekosima gets into both civilian and military regimes through royal influence, not mainly as a result of his people's choice. This is the reason he does not see politics as an institution for responsibility, or care for the welfare of the people. When Tamara reminds him that "a great man is he who drinks with kings and still maintains the common touch" (p.86), he promptly replies:

I prefer to maintain touch only with kings and rich men. I don't want to be soiled by the filth of poverty. My own greatness is different. It does not tolerate meddling with the creatures of the swamp: the crabs, the mudskippers, the periwinkles (p.86).

The foregoing underscores the tragedy inherent in the Nigerian political environment. While the leaders themselves consider poverty as a contagious disease, and flee from it by all means, they encourage its widespread among the common folk through mass rooting of public funds and squandermania mentality.

Chief Erekosima is a symbol of cancerous leadership that has continued to plague Nigerian politics. Through him, the playwright paints disquieting picture of Nigerian leaders, "the type of people they are, their life-style, values and the type of image they create for the people" (Okolo, 1994:82). His coronation with the public money indicates that like a typical Nigerian politician, Erekosima does not conceive power as service to the people, but a great opportunity for self-aggrandisement and financial showmanship. Through him, Irobi depicts the Nigerian politician as a brute Machiavellian, who does not see any relationship between politics and morality. As it has been demonstrated by many Nigerian leaders, and succinctly expressed by Erekosima:

Politics is an art of what is possible. It is an art of survival. Personal survival. Morality does not come into it (p.85).

In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi juxtaposes the ostentatious life-style of Chief Erekosima with the plight of Ibiaye, the blind beggar, in order to palpably reveal the huge gap between the "self-possessed and the dispossessed" of the land. Even with stolen money, Erekosima wants to be made a deity, but Ibiaye who lost all he has to the spillage, including his sight, is seen as a disembodied entity to be pushed to the street, to suffer

and grope for food. Of course, Ibiaye symbolizes ordinary Nigerians whose honesty and hard work hardly pay any dividends. His presence at the coronation scene demonstrates how the helpless masses often resort to the humiliating tendency of feeding from the crumbs under their oppressors' table. Ibiaye is fully aware of Erekosima's untoward behaviour. He realizes that "someone is reaping where he did not sow" (p.67), but the necessity to stay alive compels him to attend the coronation ceremony. Hear him out:

I who once fed people, I am now fed. And why else would I be here? If not to find some crumbs for my empty stomach. Why else would I be here, at this festival of foolishness, if not for this little one (p.71).

The death of the youths in the play paints the true picture of the kind of measure, which the government has been taking to "assuage the justifiable indignation of the youth in the Niger Delta" (Osakwe, 2002:10). In the words of Jimor Osakwe, "all we hear and read from the media is about enlarging, training, arming and compensating the security forces to contain, maim, and kill the protesting youths" (2002:10). Although the establishment appears to have won in the play, Osakwe rightly argues that as far as the Niger Delta conflict is concerned, the:

murderous orientation and approach by the government cannot provide a reasonable solution to the crisis. It is the usual predatory, piratical, capitalist and imperialist disposition to the plight of innocent, weak, exploited, dehumanized and humiliated people who are struggling for their birth, social and economic right (2002'10).

Osakwe rightly suggests "that the enormous financial resource allocated to training, arming and compensating the security personnel is more than enough to train and equip the same personnel to create sufficient condition favourable to the social-economic advancement of Nigerian youths throughout the country" (10).

Realizing the objective of Environmental Impact Assessment depends largely on adequate attention being paid to the plight and welfare of the masses, whose daily living depends on the natural resources around them, which are constantly dissipated. But from Ibiaye's experience, which is similar to what the masses pass through daily in the Niger Delta, we observe problems of displacement, shortage of food supply, poor state of drinking water and acute problem of accommodation. Worst still, people whose health is impaired often do not have adequate and nearby hospitals for prompt medical attention.

From the analysis above, this writer agrees with Laing and Cooper that "ambiguous facts are evident when we view a person from different perspectives with different conceptual frameworks" (1971:18). If the protagonists of *Hangmen Also Die* are examined from the perspective of

criminal psychology, we will certainly see despicable beings who have crossed the boundary between the human and the monstrous. But if, on the other hand, they are viewed from the perspective of frustration-aggression theory, we will see normal human beings, who are psychically deeply wounded, because their "future projects" appear to leave them "forever short of fulfillment" (Roth and Sontage, 1988:203). It is this feeling of unfulfilment, this blockage of goal-oriented effort that makes the suicide squad never to be at rest, but to risk their lives in dangerous activities. Hegel argues that "It is by risking life that freedom is attained," and that "the individual who has not staked his life, may no doubt, be recognized as a person" (1901/1967:223). It is, therefore, to give eloquent testimony to the primacy of feeling that Irobi created the suicide squad. His aim is, at least, to paint an authentic picture of civilization and its discontent. Today, the youths' restiveness in the Niger Delta, which *Hangmen Also Die* foreshadows, is a clear sign of the people's bitterness about the poor implementation of the provisions of Environmental Impact Assessment *vis-a-vis* oil exploration and exploitation in that area, as well as a painful state of socio-economic and political affairs in the whole country.

Conclusion

In this paper, the writer argues that *Hangmen Also Die* does not benumb our moral faculty, as some critics would want us to believe. It is argued that the play dramatizes certain philosophical truth about man's existence, and that is, that man hates constraints, and can do anything to liberate himself. G.W.F. Hegel posits that any condition that chains man and makes it impossible for him to actualize himself, is a "violent ordinance of the world, and that any means employed to resist it is justified, so long as the goal is to do away with the suffering it brings about"(1901/1967:393). Irobi does not merely juggle up ideas about constraints and resistance, he allows them to issue forth in action. It is the writer's view that *Hangmen Also Die* is an impact assessment study, a hyper-intensive reaction to the negative effect of oil technology in the Niger Delta.

More importantly it is argued in this article that 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. This writer is of the view that the playwright's anger as expressed in the play, is in place. Irobi, no doubt, knows that "the Nigerian, like everyone else, can think, invent or discover something worthwhile if he has sufficient rewarding incentives for his toil; if, for instance, he has public recognition and respect for his effort; above all, if through his thinking and discoveries, he can adequately feed himself and his family" (Okolo,

1994:94). But *Hangmen Also Die* suggests that poor incarnation of values by the Nigerian leaders renders Nigerian intellectuals and their talents impotent, and oftentimes, turns vibrant youths deviants.

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