

DRAMA AS AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE: A CURSORY LOOK AT ESIABA IROBI'S *HANGMEN ALSO DIE*

By

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Abstract

In every epoch of human civilization, drama has been employed as an agent of social change and transformation. The above premises spur an interrogation of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* as a dramatic text that addresses issues of social change and transformation in society, especially in the Nigerian nation. It is noted that a society or civilization devoid of social commentary and inquiry will not only be docile but also mutated and retrogressive in its deeds and actions. It is on this assertion that playwrights such as Esiaba Irobi and others employ the instrumentality of drama as a veritable platform that queries human and social foibles towards the attainment of social change in society. In realizing the aim and objectives of this research, it becomes imperative to engage the theory of social change as a catalyst for critical examination of the topic under study. In this case, the work employs Karl Marx's Marxist theory which examines issues of class struggle, societal transformation and inequality amongst other variables inherent in society. The work reveals that oppression and social disaggregation are factors that constitute social crisis in society. It is, therefore, the modest recommendation of this work that playwrights should be encouraged to expose social problems and other inadequacies that deter peace and social harmony in human society through their dramatic works.

Keywords: Drama, social change, theatre, agent and transformation

Introduction

Drama has across different civilizations and societies, remained one of the veritable creative and artistic modes and media that reflect societal issues and realities and thus influence social change and transformation. Power & Wagoner (2023) posit that "social change" refers to transformations in a society's value systems, social organization, and practices. What may appear a radical idea at one moment in history can become a taken-for-granted norm at another. In various epochs of human cultures and historical eras, dramatists have used the instrument of dramatic performances to investigate issues of oppression, social injustice, inequality, and class struggle in human society and thus seek socio-political and moral rejuvenation. In Africa in general and Nigeria in particular,

drama as a social catalyst goes beyond mere social enlightenment and entertainment by serving as an instrument for socio-cultural expression, information, ideological exposure, and education among the people. Through proper characterization, thematic thrust, satirical inquiry, and conflict, a playwright investigates the cultural and socio-political concerns bordering on the progress of the masses and thus spurs public awareness that triggers social change in society. Issues such as corruption, leadership gaps, social violence, and inequality, among other social problems, are a ready recipe that lures playwrights into action and social commentary.

It is a known fact that in the Nigerian theatrical and literary spheres, many playwrights have, as a matter of fact, employed the instrumentality of drama as a ready revolutionary tool in questioning the oppressive government and system that deter growth and development in the Nigerian nation. To this end, Akanmode (2016) explains that:

Not quite different from what art helps do in society. It is climate and time that often impose compelling artistic tasks. We may say that in the 21st century Nigeria, there is enough discontent in the polity or affairs of the nation that is more engaging for the artist (p. 153).

In the course of the above assertion, the playwright seeks and promotes social cohesion and justice. In this direction, it is a fact that Esaba Irobi is among those whose dramatic work exposes and questions socio-political realities of post-colonial Nigeria. His nature and characteristics of radical post-test and satirical bent on bad governance and social inequality are deeply rooted in *Hangmen Also Die*. In this play, Esaba Irobi sees theatre not just as a performance but as a tool or weapon for social criticism and change. In furtherance of the above explanation, it is important to categorically posit that the importance of drama emphasises the need for entertainment, social mobilisation, education, and sensitization of the audience. Very often, it must be re-emphasised that dramatic and theatrical performances create emotional and intellectual concerns that push human society to critically reflect on issues of social conditions that bedevil the society. This paper is saddled with the responsibility to discuss drama as an agent of social change with particular emphasis on Esaba Irobi's *Hangman Also Dies* as a critical reference for examination.

Synopsis of Hangmen Also Die

Set in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the play epitomizes the issue of marginalization, oppression, and economic deprivation of the people. The story unfolds as money was given to the Riverine people of Izon State as a token for compensation for oil spillage in the environment. Unfortunately, the money was criminally diverted by some unscrupulous individuals. It is noted that the money was given to salvage the suffering of the people due to the ecological damage of farmlands and fishing ponds. Instead of making the money available to the affected individuals, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a commissioner for local government, rural development, and chieftaincy affairs, took the entire three million naira. The play further reveals that the councilors took one million naira and shared it among themselves, thereby leaving the masses that were supposed to benefit from the money to suffer in penury. Those who dared to question the whereabouts of the funds, were threatened with death.

To this end, it takes the bravery and effort of some unemployed university graduates who unfortunately resort to stealing for economic survival to bring Chief Erekosima to book. It is at this juncture that they vehemently pronounce jungle justice on Chief Erekosima and consequently hang him in their hideout in the forest. As luck may have run out for them, they were arrested by the mobile police force, who handed them over to the government for possible prosecution.

Theoretical Framework: A Review of Marxist Theory of Social Change

This work is primarily focused on interrogating drama as an agent of social change thus the need for analyzing and reviewing its correspondence, Marxist theory of social change. This theory as it were, basically explains how and the reason why societies transform over time with regards to politics, culture, economy, religion and education amongst others. [Shuprio](#) informs that:

The word "change" denotes a difference in anything observed over some period of time. Social change, therefore, would mean observable differences in any social phenomena over any period of time. "Social change may be defined as modification in ways of doing and thinking of people. "Social change involves alteration in the structure or functioning of social forms or processes themselves." ... "Social change refers to any modification in established patterns of inter human relationships and standards of conduct.

The cardinal objective of the Marxist theory of social change is to enable researchers to unravel and thus understand the elements that cause development, contradiction, reform, and conflict in human society. It is worth noting that Karl Marx is the originator of the Marxist theory of social change. In his argument, Marx posits that economic factors are the basis of society while emphasizing that changes in the economic system will automatically lead to changes in human social structure, such as culture, social relations, religion, and politics alike. The theory further argues that social change happens through disagreement between various social classes, such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In Esaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, the inherent contradiction between the rich (bourgeoisie) and the poor (proletariat) constitutes the nucleus of analysis in unraveling the importance of drama as an agent of social change and transformation in society.

Drama and Society: A Review

Drama and society are always interrelated. This is because drama reflects the realities inherent in society as it emerges from the happenings in society. "Drama is a mode of fictional storytelling that is meant to be performed for an audience. Drama can also be viewed as the portrayal of fictional or nonfictional events through the performance of written dialogue (either prose or poetry). Drama can be performed on stage, on film, or on the radio. Drama is typically called plays, and the one who creates it, is known as a playwright or a dramatist. Okoh (2007) emphasizes that drama serves as a mirror to society, allowing audiences to engage with and reflect on complex social issues. By addressing themes such as love, conflict, and morality, drama can provoke thought and inspire change within communities.

From the Greek word 'drama,' simply means action. It is an imitative action in the sense that it is a reenactment of human actions. The concept of mimesis, or imitation, is crucial to the core meaning of drama... Drama is also a method of expression for the playwright, who tries to give order and clarity to human experience (p. 21).

Drama reflects the culture, philosophy, religion, economy, and political activities in society. It is claimed that "drama has long been a powerful and dynamic medium for storytelling, reflection, and social critique." It has allowed societies to explore human nature, challenge political

ideologies, and establish cultural identity across different historical periods (Fattah, 2025, p. 1). It is at this instance that we can say that drama encapsulates and reenacts the realities in society. Similarly, society supplies the dramatists the ‘raw materials’ (social facts) to reenact. While society provides available dramatic data to the dramatist, it is the responsibility of the dramatist to examine and query the information (data) in a dramatic experience. It is opined that:

A society is a group of individuals involved in persistent social interaction, or a large social group sharing the same spatial or social territory, typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations. Societies are characterized by patterns of relationships (social relations) between individuals who share a distinctive culture and institutions; a given society may be described as the total of such relationships among its constituent of members.

It is on the above assertion that it is revealed that drama is not created in isolation; hence, it comes from the human experience, such as beliefs, conflicts, and values in society. Following this, it will be right to state that the relationship between drama and society cannot be overemphasized. This is because drama and literature generally reflect social realities as they examine human experiences and societal conditions. In this instance, the playwright draws inspiration from the activities, events, and cultural practices, among other social facts and realities in society. Also, many playwrights use the instrumentality of theatre and drama to satirize injustice, bad governance, and oppression and thus advocate for social reformation.

Social Change: Conceptual Clarification

Change is a ubiquitous and necessary tonic that must occur in society. It is noted that society is always in a state of flux, and thus no human civilization is static and lasts forever. This implies that human society is always evolving from one stage of development and growth to another. Therefore, social change, as it were, is the alteration, modification, and transformation of behavior, philosophy, institution, or organization over time. It is noted that “social change” describes the transformations of a society in terms of value systems, social organization, and practices. What may look a radical idea at one moment in history can become a taken-for-granted norm at another” It basically involves remarkable changes in social institutions like education, culture, politics, family, and economy, among others. It is claimed that social change is a continuous activity; hence,

no society remains entirely static. Social change can occur gradually and radically, depending on the variables influencing the society. Factors such as education, war, technological advancement, religion, globalization, and economy, among others, are recipes that cause social change in society. In this paper, the focus is on interrogating the importance of drama as an agent of social change in society with a particular reference to *Hangmen Also Die*. In dramatic works, social change is always reflected through themes of oppression, social reform, and corruption, as is evident in Esaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*.

Social Change in *Hangmen Also Die*

To say the least, social change in any dramatic work occurs when there is a change in the situation or behavior of characters in a play. Esaba Irobi uses the character of Tamara as an authorial voice to interrogate and query the excesses inherent in the society. In the play, social change is exemplified through the role and character of Tamara and the Swamp children (unemployed university graduates). As a fearless personality, Tamara condemns the fraudulent activities of Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, who is a commissioner for local government, rural development, and chieftaincy affairs. After confiscating the three-million-naira compensation money given to the people as a result of the oil spillage that damaged the people's farmland and fishing ponds, Tamara boldly calls Chief Erekosima a thief and consequently advises the community to boycott his self-acclaimed chieftaincy ceremony.

Furthermore, social change occurs in the play wherein Tamara brings social justice upon Chief Erekosima as she makes the swamp children see Chief Erekosima as an enemy of the community. This singular action spurs the boys to abduct and, consequently, execute Chief Erekosima. In this case, if our religious and royal fathers take a firm stand on the activities of bad government and political leaders, as in the case of Chief Erekosima, there will be constant transformation and social change in the socio-economic and political sphere in society.

Thematic Thrust in *Hangmen Also Die*

The play presents three basic themes such as corruption, exploitation and neglect and nepotism.

- **Theme of Corruption**

It is evident that theme of corruption and its attendant consequences is prominent in *Hangmen Also Die*. This is demonstrated in the character trait of Chief Erekosima whose stock-in-trade is to confiscate the money given to the masses. As a self-acclaimed leader, he ensures that he indulges in corrupt practices such as oppression and embezzlement of money meant to salvage the suffering of the people. It is on this note that Tamara reveals his corrupt nature and calls him names:

Tamara: ... I told him and so many other citizens who will not come for this ceremony today that Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, is a thief... He is crowning himself the Amatemeso I of Izon State for the spillage that has embalmed our lives. (p. 94).

- **Crime and Criminalities**

Although similar to the theme of corruption, the play parades the theme of crime from the beginning of the dramatic action to the end. Revealing the characteristics of crime and criminality, it asserted that “criminality is the social quality or state of “being” criminal and/or engaging in illegal activities, often accompanied by social stigma. Thus, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima and his councilors epitomize criminalities inherent in the Nigerian nation in particular and Africa in general. They embezzle the money given to the community and thus leave the people in abject poverty and total deprivation. This is revealed in the dialogue of Ibiaye:

Ibiaye: ... someone must pay with his crown, if not his neck or his head for the 3 million naira which the Federal Government gave to us as compensation for the oil spillage which blinded me. Whoever stole it, must pay with his head. (p. 93).

- **Theme of Exploitation and Neglect**

The untold hardship that befall the people in the play is as a result of deliberate exploitation of their means of livelihood. This injustice is fueled by the reckless attitude and looting of the people’s funds by Chief Erekosima and his cohorts. This unhealthy and condemnable situation

spurs Tamara to instigate the swamp children to agitate for their rights in order to stop the exploitation by the ruling class.

- **Theme of Nepotism**

It is evident in the play that Chief Erekosima and his cohorts such as the Local Government Chairman and the Councilors connived and share amongst themselves the money earmarked to cushion the suffering of the people as a result of oil spillage that occur in the Izon state. Sadly, Chief Ogbunabali extols him instead of criticizing his notorious activities:

Ogbunabali: Seated on that throne is a man who embodies himself, the spirit of seven other men. He is a man who was destined by birth for greatness. He was destined to be a king. His father after all was a king, the most powerful in the Delta province. His grandfather is the great king Pepple of Bonny. This man seating on that throne has won the highest honours and medals in this land. M.O.N., CFR, N.T.A., A.C.B., C.C.B., U.B.A., U.N.N., U.S.A., U.S.S.R... (103).

Character and Characterization in *Hangmen Also Die*

To do justice to the sub-heading, the following characters in the plays such as chief Isokipiri Erekosima, Tamara and Yekini will be discussed and analysed accordingly.

Chief Isokipiri Erekosima: He is a corrupt politician and Commissioner for Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs whose interest is to amass wealth to himself at the detriment of the general public. He stole the three-million-naira oil spill compensation given to the Izon state. Tamara reveals this when she says:

Tamara: He will be crowned. But the crown will refuse to stay on his head... Tell it. Tell it to the wives of the Chiefs who steal our destiny. Tell it to them! (p. 95).

Dimeari: Where is our money?

Erekosima: Which money?

Dimeari: The three million naira... where is it?

Erekosima: Thieves, you will only get that money over my dead body

Tamara: Why don't you tell where you hid our money and save your life? ... (p. 108).

Tamara: She is a mother to Dimeari, one of the gang members of the swamp children who agitate for justice and freedom from the oppressive nature of chief Erekosima and his cohorts. Tamara is a young lady in her thirties. She is an outspoken and fearless woman of substance. In her boldness, she calls chief Erekosima a thief for stealing the people's money.

Tamara: I told him and so many other citizens who will not come for this ceremony today that your husband, Chief Erekosima, Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, is a thief! He is crowning himself the Amatemeso I of Izon State for the spillage that has embalmed our lives. (p. 94).

In furtherance of her agitation to liberate her people, she encounters the wives of Erekosima and vehemently tells them that Ibiaye, a man who got blind as a result of oil spillage was deprived of their compensation money by their husband – Chief Erekosima.

Hear her:

Tamara: Do you know this man?

Chorus: Ibiaye

Tamara: Was he always blind?

Orusoso: How can we know?

Sotonye: Are we his wives?

Tamara: Ibiaye, were you always blind?

Ibiaye: No, Tamara... it was one morning. The sea was boiling, it surged like lava from the armpit of the ocean until it embalmed our little creeks... We fled in canoes, everything we own was lost except our lives... but little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the rancid crude oil... the next day I scratched throughout the night. Three days later, I could no longer see the sunlight. (97).

Yekini: He is a man of good conscience who refused to execute the children of swamp such as Atiemie Waribo, Tarila Iganima, Tekena Iketubosin, WaritimiTamuno, Labomie Allagoa, Konji Amakarama and Fubara Igoniko who were alleged to have killed chief **Erekosima:** He works at

the prison as an executioner. His dialogue tells us his encounter with his superiors when he refused to execute the prisoners thus:

Yekini: Listen to me. You see, every day we have hanging squad, I always go in the night to see the faces of the condemned men...

Doctor: To do what?

Yekini: To talk with them... but do you know what I saw last night when I looked at the faces of these boys in the moonlight?

Doctor: What did you see?

Yekini: Defiance... I went in and asked them “What did you do? They said they killed a man. I asked them “why did you do it?” ... They said, “We did what we did because we believed in it. We have no regrets.” (20)

Yekini believes that the children of the swamp did what needs to be done, therefore, he refuses to lay his hands on them even when the prison superintendent threatens him thus:

Superintendent: Yekini, I want you to bear in mind that if another hangman hangs those boys, you will be retrenched without your gratuities and pensions. Without your retirement benefit.

Yekini: I don't care... superintendent! Their blood is on your head. (124).

Conclusion

Drama has been used as vehicle of communication, entertainment and social criticism in various epoch of human societies. In the Nigerian nation, notable dramatists such as Esiaba Irobi amongst others have employed the instrument of drama to criticise social maladies such as corrupt practices, leadership gaps, ethnicity, socio-economic inequality and embezzlement of public funds amongst other inadequacies in society. In Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, the thematic thrust centres on oppression and embezzlement of funds set outside to cushion the suffering of the masses as a result of damage of farmland and fish ponds due to the oil spillage that occurred in the land. Unfortunately, few corrupt individuals such as the Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs and the Councilors shared the money among them at the detriment of the poor

masses. To satirize those involved in the criminal activity, the playwright uses the instrumentality of drama as an agent of social change to seek a change of attitude and behaviour, and thus seeks social transformation. It is believed that if adequate attention is given to the opinions of the playwright (Esiaba Irobi), the society will witness social tranquility, harmony and progress. This is why the paper strongly advocates for social change in society through the medium of drama and dramatic/theatre performances as possible drivers of unity, social transformation and order.

Recommendations

Having analysed and discussed drama as an agent of social change with a focus on Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* as a reference point, the researcher puts forward the following recommendations:

- ❖ It is recommended that playwrights should be encouraged to employ the instrument of satirical drama as a tool for ridiculing and exposing social vices, injustice, oppression, corruption, and other anti-social vices that deter socio-economic advancement of society.
- ❖ The paper is of the opinion that citizens should as a matter of fact be encouraged to inculcate the values of justice, accountability, self-controlled behaviour and socially collective interests showcased in drama as panacea for peace, harmony and sustainable development and national cohesion in society.
- ❖ It is further recommended that dramatists, theatre practitioners, scholars and other relevant stakeholders should promote the study and dramatic performances of social drama in order to stimulate public awareness and sue for progressive social transformation.
- ❖ The paper recommends that government and other spirited individuals in society should create employment opportunities to the university graduates in order to reduce crime and criminalities in society.
- ❖ It is also the modest recommendation of this paper that opinion leaders and political office holders should be discouraged from indulging in corrupt practices and thus be responsive in their actions in order to promote peace and equitable distribution of available economic resources to the masses.

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