

Article

Reading Nigerian Realities through *Hangmen Also Die*: An Extrapolative Analysis

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Abstract

One Nigerian playwright whose brief pilgrimage on earth has been blessed by providence to create enduring and provocative plays about Nigerian situations and who appears prophetic in his writing is Esiaba Irobi. In a greatly tumultuous, tragic play entitled Hangmen Also Die, Irobi in 1989, projected in the play that the flagrant abuse and misappropriation of the proceeds of crude oil, the major driver of the nation's economy, by greedy and unconscionable leaders will ostensibly exacerbate poverty and throw the country into a Hobbesian state of nature as people struggle to survive by all means. Leaning on the theory of prebendalism which Richard Joseph used to describe the nature of Nigerian politics where 'state offices are regarded as prebends that can be appropriated by officeholders, who use them to generate material benefits for themselves, their constituents and kin groups', the paper aims to dissect Hangmen Also Die, through close reading and content analysis to demonstrate that the current state of anomie faced by many Nigerians in the twenty first century, parallels the actions and utterances of the characters in the play. Because insecurity, kidnapping, youth restiveness and all kinds of oddities dramatised in the play, have continued to cause Nigerians to gasp for breath daily in an environment where human lives are no longer sacrosanct, as life appears to be lived on the crest of the waves owing to horrendous terrorist attacks and mass killing of ordinary Nigerians. This paper argues that Hangmen Also Die anticipates the 21st-century Nigerian crisis by dramatizing oil-driven prebendalist governance that disorients the social order into a Hobbesian state of nature. The paper concludes that the Nigerian failing condition needs to be addressed to avoid slipping into a Hobbesian state of nature.

Keywords: Extrapolate, Leaders, Hobbesian state, Nigerian condition, Prebendalism, Irobi, Oil

Introduction

Living in Nigeria has become increasingly opprobrious since everything that makes life meaningful and worthy appears to be progressively deteriorating. For example, the number of people living below the poverty line in Nigeria is quite disheartening. In an online article, "Nigeria: How do we expect world poverty capital to be safe?", Alikor (2022) states that Nigeria has maintained the infamous title of "World Poverty Capital", according to the World bank since 2016". He further notes that "the world bank has shown that four in every ten Nigerians live below poverty line of \$1.9 per day" (www.businessday.ng). One British Pound is now above two thousand naira in the parallel market, yet many State Governors are unwilling to pay the thirty-thousand-naira minimum wage. Roads in Nigeria are death traps, while social amenities are in short supply in many places, epileptic and are almost nonexistent in most of the places. Elections are brazenly rigged to perpetuate old, incompetent and self-aggrandising politicians in power. The quality of education is rapidly lowering as a result of poor and archaic facilities and unacceptable remuneration of academic and non-academic staff, which has led to multiple and protracted strikes, especially in the tertiary institutions.

"Unemployment is 33%, inflation 22%. Over 130 million Nigerians are living below the poverty line, while over 20 million Nigerian kids are out of school" (www.vanguardngr.com). All these indices of a failed state are attributed to bad leadership, mismanagement of the natural resources, especially the oil revenue, as well as a lack of industrialisation. Living in extremely harsh conditions has led to all kinds of social crises, including insurgencies and separatist agitations, wanton destruction of lives and property, kidnapping for ransom, rape and mass exodus of professionals, especially nurses, doctors and information technology experts out of the country to advanced countries in an unabated manner. Daily, Nigerians are bombarded with ugly, frightening and tearful news, which makes people gasp for breath everywhere.

Irobi (1989), in his greatly troubling play *Hangmen Also Die*, articulated the flaming and thunderous path Nigerians seem to be walking today due to oppressive economic laws and oil politics of self-aggrandisement, which have left millions of educated and uneducated youths floundering in diverse unventilated rooms of unemployment and poverty. In this play, the playwright makes it clear that when youths are not constructively engaged, they will follow the path of violence, which will erode both the state and human security. Thus, the researchers will attempt to vigorously and deeply interrogate the text, *Hangmen Also Die*, through close reading, to unravel how the playwright prophetically used the text to extrapolate the Nigerian condition.

Theoretical Consideration

The theory of prebendalism was propagated by Richard Joseph in 1987 and later validated in 2013. (Ezeugwu, 2022) explained that the theory seeks to highlight scenarios where (s)elected political office holders assume unauthorised power over state and national treasury, government revenues and income, which they loot to enrich themselves, benefit their families, cronies, and party loyalists, to the detriment of the impoverished masses. Similarly, (Abada et al, 2019) submit that the theory posits that state offices are regarded as prebendal that can be appropriated by political office holders who use them to generate material benefits for themselves and accomplices. The theory provides a framework for examining the issue of corruption and corrupt practices within the Nigerian government. (Ezeugwu, 2022) added that prebendal theory captures in vivid terms, the state of affairs in Nigeria where corruption and embezzlement have become the order of the day, in Nigeria, and this is captured vividly in *Hangmen Also Die*.

Synopsis

Hangmen Also Die (1989) is Irobi's attempt to prophetically and in dramatic garbs, according to Lenin (1970), "cognitized and problematized the contradictions and alienation in human and social relationships emanating from bourgeois ethics and psychology". It examines the problem of unemployment and oil politics in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. (Eze, 2000) in an article entitled, "Meaning and Significance in Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*", succinctly explains that:

In this play, located in an imagined Izon State, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a son of the soil and Commissioner for Employment, Chieftancy Matters and Rural Development, is hanged by the unemployed graduates of Izon State, who constituted themselves into a suicide squad because he embezzled the three million naira made out to the people by the Federal Government to compensate them for oil spillage. In the end, the associates of the dubious Commissioner get the members of the suicide squad arrested, tried and hanged.

This scenario of attempting to suppress the youths each time they try to fight against injustice also played out during the 2020 #EndSars protest. Ezeugwu et al (2021) explained that “during the peaceful protest, the Nigerian government, instead of paying attention to the root cause of the protest, responded with force, violence, bloodshed, indiscriminate arrests and imprisonment...”. In a society where the rule of law exists, the government should have looked into the reason why the Commissioner in the play was killed, instead of a hurried trial and hanging of the youths to death.

Textual Analysis and Interpretation

The play, *Hangmen Also Die*, depicts the nature of social relationships between the oppressed and the oppressors who use the resources of the land to serve only their own interests while the masses grope in abject poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment. It dramatises the clash of wills between the frustrated youths and the politicians who, through horrifying and reckless abuse of power, have continued to keep the people poor and perpetually downtrodden. As the play opens, we are immediately confronted by the youths shown to be well-educated but are unemployed for more than the number of years they spent in the university, even with sound degrees, ready to be hanged by the agents of the government. In phase two of the play, the character code-named MORTUARY tells us by way of introduction that:

I am Waritimi Tamuno, alias Mortuary. I hold a first-class degree in Statistics and have been unemployed for the past six years (Irobi, p.49).

The implication of the above is that even a first-class honours in the university, which is coveted in many countries, is not a guarantee that someone will secure a job in an oil-rich but deracinated world or country of the play. Apart from the fact that there are no ready jobs for the youths, they have to face the government deceit and pretence that its Directorate of Employment is giving loans to graduates who want to start small-scale businesses of their own. Acid, another character in the play, reveals that they visited the Directorate of Employment “seven times a week”, and even on non-juridical days-Sundays, but “we never got a kobo” (Irobi,p.45). This unmasks the government’s hypocrisy and insincerity in their numerous stories about job creation.

Again, part of the youths’ dreams is to get involved in the politics of their country as citizens, but they are not given any chance in politics, except as thugs, which is a weapon of political vendetta. In fact, as Acid recalls in the play, “The constituent Assembly is filled with the same faces of the same ancient chimpanzees” (Irobi, p.46). This is a reflection of a major blot in the Nigerian political landscape where

the same politicians who have messed up the country continue to fraudulently hold on to power, even when they become very senile and insentient. In his very small but frequently cited book, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Achebe, 1983, p.1) posits that, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership". He added that, "The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of the leaders to rise to the responsibility, the challenges of personal example which are the hallmarks of leadership. Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, who represents the political class in *Hangmen Also Die*, exemplifies leadership failure. He is portrayed as a Machiavellian who feels that politics has nothing to do with morality. He even cites chapter eight of *The Prince* to the members of the suicide squad in phase six of the play to demonstrate that all his actions are consciously driven by the Machiavellian principles of politics. Instead of distributing the compensation money to his people, whose means of livelihood and health have been badly affected by the oil spillage, Chief Erekosima embezzles the money. After using part of the money to shut the local government authorities up, he uses some to renovate his palace in readiness for a chieftancy title and to sponsor his children's education abroad, specifically at Cambridge and Harvard universities. Training their children overseas is one of the major reasons government officers pay oblique attention to the development of education in the country.

Furthermore, Chief Erekosima is used in the idiom of the play to typify the squandermania mentality for which the Nigerian leaders are known. According to Okolo (1994, p.22), "squander mania mentality is a cultural fact, a habit which places undue emphasis on material social values as a way of life of a people". He further states that its major feature is "unproductive spending". Erekosima's coronation ceremony is a means of wealth exhibitionism. Ibiwari tells Tamara in the play that because Chief Erekosima will be crowned the Amatameso 1 of Izon state, he bought two trailer loads of cows and rice, precisely "sixty cows and one hundred bags of rice" (Irobi, p.38). It is this outrageous and unproductive spending in Nigeria by the elite that has been festering mammon worship, which (Obiechina, 1983) describes as a major reproach in Nigerian social life, and he captures it thus:

The man afflicted with this disease will adopt any method, fair as well as foul, honest no less than criminal... To such a one, no institution is sacred to be degraded, no value too precious to be pulled down by the mammon worshipper in the promotion of a squalid, obsessive egocentricity.

The implication is that while the people languish in unemployment, underdevelopment and poverty, the political elite use the wealth of the country for ego-massage. They weaponise poverty to make ordinary people grovel and clash for the crumbs that fall from the masters' tables.

Furthermore, the most troubling condition, according to the character, Khomeini, is that the "mineral wealth which we could have used to build this nation and fortified the future for posterity and ourselves for four generations" (Irobi, p.47) has been squandered by wretched souls, leaving the people groping in dark alleys and the abyss of poverty and hopelessness. The wealth talked about here is the crude oil wealth. The discovery of oil and its exploitation in the Niger Delta region, which is the setting of the play, has led to what Enekwe (1990) refers to as "Rich land, poor

people". As the play suggests, while the proceeds from oil are completely hijacked by the multinational oil companies and government officers, as well as a few local leaders, existence becomes nightmarish for the ordinary people who have no access to the oil wealth. To make matters worse, oil spillages, as the play shows, constantly devastate their land, water and air, which endanger the people's means of livelihood and health. (Ibeanu, 2008) in explaining the antimonies of crude oil exploitation in the Niger Delta states:

Ironically, those from whose land it is taken are always on the negative side of the inherent paradoxes-they are poor, insecure and underdeveloped. They only hear of its values in stories of big cities it has built... its ever-soaring price in stock exchanges around the world... Many Nigerian leaders will smile to bank... because of their access to the devil's excreta, while millions of other ordinary Nigerians in the creeks of the Niger Delta will drown in it and have their livelihoods wiped out by oil spillage, and reckless discharge of effluents of crude oil mining and refining into the ecosystems.

In the play, Ibiaye, who represents the ordinary people whose health has been impaired by oil spillage, gives a pathetic account of how he became blind:

Ibiaye: It was morning. We woke up to see the sea heaving. The sea was roaring, its face black with anger. The sea was something black... It surged like lava from the armpit of the ocean until it embalmed our little creeks. Covered it, conquered it, cordoned off the mouth of a freshwater spring from which we daily drink. Our plants began to die... We fled. In canoes. But somewhere before Opukiri, our canoe capsized in the ambush of water hyacinths. Everything we own was lost except our lives. We swarm... Three days later, I could no longer see the sunlight... And now, I who once showed strangers the way through the creeks, I am now being led by the hands (Irobi, pp.96-97).

In a perceptive article entitled "Environmental Impact Assessment and the Dramatists: A Conceptual study of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*", Eze (2007, pp.46-54) argues that, "Irobi juxtaposes the ostentatious lifestyle of Chief Erekosima with the plight of Ibiaye, the blind beggar, in order to reveal the huge gap between the self-possessed and the dispossessed of the land".

The deprivations which the youths face in *Hangmen Also Die*, like disorienting storms, are life-threatening and, therefore, the root of their indignation and nihilistic tendency toward society and especially the political class. In a paper, "Meaning and Significance in Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*", Eze (2000, pp. 24-40) expresses the opinion that, "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". As the play illuminates, unemployment can be disorienting and scary, for it turns intelligent people bubbling with ideas into persona non grata. The playwright employed the suicide squad to show how fatal unemployment can be if not checked. As they endure years of unemployment, the graduates who see their dreams melting away like a burning candle become increasingly disquieted with a feeling of being marginalised out of existence, which compels them to pick up dangerous means of livelihood to survive-kidnapping, assassination, stealing and

even hanging perceived offenders. They become angry with society for rupturing the dreams and hope it instils in them through education. The suicide squad articulates their fears thus:

Tetanus: Our plea is the cry of the antelope pleading his innocent cause between a tiger's bleeding paws.

Mortuary: Every dream we have, you have stolen from us.

Discharge: Every hope we had; you have also taken from us.

Dayan: Everything we have, you have taken from us.

Khomeini: And even that which we do not have

Chorus: You have taken from us (Irobi,p.52).

So, if the members of the suicide squad, "hide like Death and clutch at your life",

or "clutch in ambush and sniff like jackals" (Irobi,p.54), it is because they have "no solid earth to stand upon" (Irobi,p.52). As R.I.P notes, "If today we have turned to violence as the only weapon to redeem our destiny, redeem our fate, our future", it is because, as Dayan retorts, "we have no chance to help in shaping the destiny of this nation" (Irobi,p.46).

Chief Isokipiri Erekosima is hanged in the play because of his pride in coming from a royal family and for belonging to a government which life-style he must sustain through blatant unwillingness to see things from the perspective of the suffering masses. His stubborn refusal to surrender the remaining part of the compensation money to the youths, even as death stares him in the face, symbolises the unrepentant politicians' unreadiness to relinquish power to the younger generation. His recalcitrance demonstrates that the leadership of the country moves farther and farther away from reasoned argument and rational dialogue, making confrontation like no other inevitable. Even while at stake to be hanged, Chief Erekosima remains pugilistic in his utterances; neither words of healing nor reconciliation came from his mouth. Rather like the heartless Nigerian politicians, his mouth is filled with arrogant talk. When he is reminded by Tamara that "a great man is he who drinks with the kings and still maintains the common touch" (Irobi, pp.116-117), he uttered:

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 creatures of the swamp. The Crabs, the Mudskippers and the Periwinkles.

Chief Erekosima's perception of life, as he expresses above, is the reason he and his political types, according to Eze (2018, p.276), "subordinate social welfare" to unprofitable philandering and profligacy" (Challenging Impediments to Climate Change Initiatives).

Today, the condition of Nigeria, as extrapolated in *Hangmen Also Die*, has been terrifyingly exacerbated. Everything written in the text has been correlated with actuality. The eventual hanging of the members of the suicide squad by the agents of the government finds its parallel in the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni environmental activists by General Abacha's regime on November 10, 1995. Each scenario is propelled by oil politics. Eze (2000) had observed that Ken Saro-

Wiwa and his group were hanged on “the pretext that they instigated the murder of some of their kinsmen who allied with the military junta to further dehumanise a people crying out against the destruction of their land” (Meaning and Significance 34-35). The death of the suicide squad in the play and Ken Saro-Wiwa and his fellow activists in Nigeria is foregrounded by oil politics in the Niger Delta, which has continued to widen the gap between the ‘haves and the have-nots’ and constantly breeds mistrust and violence against the people and oil installations, thereby making the oil-rich region an unresolvable war zone.

Moreover, unemployment, which frustrated the graduates and caused them to indulge in criminal activities in the play, has reached a frightening and unacceptable height of 33% in Nigeria. This exponential and widening gap of youth unemployment has currently led to multifaceted criminal activities in the country. Kidnapping for ransom, organ harvesting, bombing, rape, and all kinds of insurgencies that daily decimate human lives in their numbers, properties and means of livelihood, have made the country one of the unsafe places to live and do business in the world today. This has continued to cause unabating youth migration out of the country, as well as the relocation of many business enterprises to neighbouring countries like Ghana, where it is safe to do business.

The politics of self-centeredness we see in *Hangmen Also Die* has become the hallmark of Nigerian politics. Whether during the era of military dictatorship or the current multiparty democracy, the Nigerian political landscape has been largely marred by selfishness and tainted by corruption. Through Chief Erekosima in the play, Irobi allegorically depicts the asymmetrical power structure and relations in Nigeria, where a few people who wield power do so with reckless colonial mentality and lack of accountability and fellow-feeling. Political office holders who parade themselves as demigods use the proceeds from national resources to fortify their political spaces and to maintain only their self-interests and those of their cronies and praise singers, while the masses are abandoned to wallow in extreme poverty and self-pity, as we see in Ibiaye and the unemployed youths in the play. The political class shows enormous disregard for the well-being of the people. The picture painted is that the current state of underdevelopment and poverty in Nigeria is driven by greed, selfishness and corruption by the politicians who gain and retain power through dubious means against the wishes of the people. The politicians engage in abysmal stealing of the resources to weaponise poverty to get the people to pander to their base taste; thus, prebendalism has become the order of the day. Even though the character, Ibiaye, who is blinded by the oil spillage, is fully aware that Chief Erekosima stole their compensation money, he nonetheless joined other poor people in the play to attend the Chief’s coronation ceremony. As he laments to Tamara:

I, who once fed people, 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, (Irobi, pp. 97-98).

Conclusion

In this paper, we made an attempt to explore how Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangman Also Die*, hypothetically, through basic facts of the moment of his writing, provoked thought

about the future of Nigeria. The playwright is clear that unemployment and poor management of oil resources and the environment where they are derived, if not properly handled by the political elite, will lead to social cataclysms that may be fatal to the corporate existence of the country. The play is not calculated to soothe the nerves; rather, it is created to affirm vigour, strength and brute force to give expression to Artaud's (1958) view that, "The actions of the (cruel) theatre, like that of a plague, is beneficial, for impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall off, reveals the lie, the slackness, the baseness and the hypocrisy of the world". The text shows that self-aggrandising politics is the reason the country is not industrialised to create employment for the teeming Nigerian youths. In fact, all that Irobi envisaged in the play has been trifled with by the current happenings in the country. Invoking the spirit of the suicide squad, "the consciousness and feeling of being victims" (Federalism, oil politics 160), compels the youths in the Niger Delta to form diverse militant groups, whose activities have continued to erode both state and human security. As Chidi-Igbokwe and others (2023, p.192) have reiterated, "a sense of victimhood" due to unbearable poverty and unemployment is propelling the youths in some parts of the country to start forming all kinds of insurgent and separatist groups with a view to making people gasp for breath. The poignant feeling now in Nigeria is better expressed in the words of Fill (1974):

Depressive conditions, from the subtle agonies of passive discontent to the cold gloom of suicidal despair, have now reached epidemic proportions. And everywhere we turn are the horrors of rapidly rising mental disturbances labelled antisocial personality disorders: defacement, vandalism, shoplifting, fraud, theft, robbery, mugging, assault, rape, torture, kidnapping, hijacking, murder and mass assassination. We are surely witnessing the mental breakdown of a nation.

This study has argued that Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, written at the close of the 1980s, remains a prescient and provocative mirror of Nigeria's political and economic trajectory. Read in light of the historical moment of its composition, the play does not merely stage a confrontation with corruption and oil mismanagement; it performs a rigorous diagnostic of how resource wealth, when monopolized by a self-serving political elite, corrodes the social contract and threatens the very possibility of collective political life. Unemployment, environmental degradation tied to oil extraction, and the misallocation of national patrimony converge in Irobi's dramatic world to produce a social weather system in which ordinary citizens are compelled to improvise survival strategies—often through force, coercion, or subterfuge. In this sense, the play dramatizes not only a Nigeria of the moment but a Nigeria-to-come, one that can only be anticipated through an unflinching illumination of present failures.

Central to the argument is a reading of the play through the theoretical lens of prebendalism, as articulated by Richard Joseph, and the broader frame of the Hobbesian state of nature. Irobi's characters operate within a polity where offices, resources, and social belonging accrue as spoils to be distributed among a shrinking circle of kin, allies, and patrons. The consequence is a social order in which

legitimacy dissolves, state capacity erodes, and violence becomes an ordinary means of bargaining. By foregrounding oil—Nigeria’s economic lifeblood and political fulcrum—the drama exposes how crude wealth can become a corrosive force, transforming governance into a contest over plunder rather than public service. The work thus aligns with a long-standing scholarly concern: that resource abundance, when coupled with weak institutions, generates predatory politics and social disorder.

The play’s abrasive vision of social life resonates with the contemporary realities that scholars and observers have catalogued in the early twenty-first century. The so-called “suicide-squad” consciousness among Niger Delta communities—an expression of victimhood born from persistent poverty, environmental harm, and limited opportunities—illustrates how grievances crystallize into militant formations that challenge both the state and the social fabric. Poverty and unemployment become engines of insurgency and fragmentation, complicating attempts at national cohesion. Relatedly, the broader climate of insecurity—kidnapping, intercommunal clashes, and recurrent mass violence—epitomizes a social field in which life is precarious, and citizens negotiate survival amid fluctuating hierarchies of power. Reading *Hangmen Also Die* against the backdrop of these dynamics reveals that Irobi’s drama is not a period piece but a sustained commentary on the mechanisms by which wealth, power, and political choice shape the fate of a nation.

A crucial implication of this reading concerns the ethical and political urgency of governance reform. If the play’s indictment is correct—if self-aggrandizing leadership, opaque oil governance, and environmental mismanagement imperil Nigeria’s social order—then the path toward a more humane and resilient future requires structural reforms that reimagine political incentives, strengthen accountability, and redefine the social contract around resource wealth. This entails not only anti-corruption measures but also policy commitments to diversify the economy, invest in human capital and environmental remediation, and empower communities most affected by oil extraction. In this sense, *Hangmen Also Die* offers a theatre-instrument for public reflection and reform: it compels citizens, policymakers, and scholars to confront the costs of predatory governance and to imagine alternative futures grounded in transparency, inclusion, and sustainable development.

From a methodological perspective, the study foregrounds the enduring value of close reading anchored in historical context. The textual analysis demonstrates how a late-1980s Nigerian play can illuminate persistent patterns in contemporary state formation, offering a bridge between literary critique and political economy. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches our understanding of Irobi’s work but also contributes to broader debates in postcolonial dramaturgy, where dramatic form becomes a site for testing theories of state, economy, and society. By integrating literary analysis with political-theoretical concepts and contemporary empirical observations, the study highlights how drama can animate complex issues—oil politics, prebendalism, collective insecurity—without sacrificing the texture and force of aesthetic experience.

Finally, the conclusion returns to a hopeful if urgent note. If Nigeria is to avert a descent into a Hobbesian state of nature, it must translate critical insight into concrete action: reforms that align governance with public interest rather than private advantage; robust institutions capable of managing extractive resources transparently; and inclusive development pathways that create meaningful opportunities for Nigeria's youth. *Hangmen Also Die*, in its visceral critique and uncompromising vision, serves as a reminder that art can not only reflect reality but also press for a more just and resilient social order. In that sense, Irobi's drama remains a clarion call—not only to interpret Nigeria's past and present but to imagine and enact a different future.

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