



## **Foregrounding Aspects of Esiaba Irobi's Dramatic Techniques in Three Selected Plays**

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### **Abstract**

This essay on "Foregrounding Aspects of Esiaba Irobi's Dramatic Techniques in Three Selected Plays" attempts to decode the playwright's artistic vision and how it is deployed to realize his social vision. We adopted the sociological approach, precisely the Marxist theory as the basis for analysis. Evident in the plays is the playwright's use of foreshadowing/flashback, metaphors, allusions, imageries and appropriate language. The study shows that in spite of the high demands of his social vision, viz, arousing the consciousness of the audience to the appalling and sub-human conditions in which they live as well as calling for revolution, the three plays are not without carefully selected and equally carefully applied artistic embellishments which make them enjoyable and interesting. The study clearly identifies the playwright's efforts at growing the consciousness of the less-privileged with regards to the injustices which they suffer and as a corollary urge them to take their destiny into their own hands and rid the society of injustice. We adopted the qualitative research method which calls for careful reading of the three texts, use of the library and the internet. We have identified, and discussed in details, the playwright's use of a number of dramatic techniques, which engage the audience's sensory organs and arrest attention in such a manner that compels the audience to take side with the oppressed.

**Key words:** Foregrounding, aspects, Marxism, dramatic techniques, social injustice, revolt.

### **Introduction**

Drama is Literature and literature is communication of life's experiences. The implication of this is that literature derives its shape from the raw experiences of society. Logically, then, these raw experiences, these realities, should dictate the kind of literature which comes from a given society.

However, the fact is that though literature is the product of the realities of the writer's society, literature is fiction. If literature is fiction, then it is bound to be subjective.

Now, therefore, if literature is subjective, then the kind of literature that comes out of a given society is not just dependent on the society's realities and experiences, but, actually more so, on the writer's social vision, commitment and techniques cum style.

Every dramatist aims at talking to his audience or reader by the use of his creative imagination and language. His objective is to communicate in such a manner that would leave an aesthetic impact on the audience or reader.

Considering our assertions so far one can deduce that the socially conscious and committed dramatist aims at sensitizing his audience and persuading them to adopt a certain attitude towards, as well as apply a suggested solution to, the realities and experiences presented.

Thus, in interrogating societal realities and experiences, the socially conscious dramatist employs techniques and styles which will instigate the audience towards adopting his suggested solutions. What distinguishes literature from other disciplines is form. Form means beauty. The dramatist, like all other literary artists is not a historian or a sociologist. Therefore, he does not just document or record societal realities like historians and sociologists do. He brings his creative ingenuity to bear; he stamps his artistic judgment on what he communicates; he goes for an aesthetic impact upon his audience such that characterization, diction, tone, figurative language and all dramatic techniques become products of his artistic vision.

This essay highlights aspects of Esiaba Irobi's dramatic techniques in three of his plays, namely: *Nwokedi*, *Hangmen Also Die*, and *The Other Side of the Mask*.

## **2. Critical approach and theoretical framework**

This essay adopts and employs the sociological approach to literary analysis and criticism. In the words of Michael Meyer, "sociological approaches examine social groups, relationships, and values as they are manifested in literature" (1987). These approaches focus on the impact of social forces in shaping the work of literature both in terms of the issues and the writer's response to those issues. Put differently, sociological approaches adopt a two-pronged thrust: focusing on the social issues and focusing on the writer's response or attitude towards the issues. There are a number of ways that we can talk about the societal aspect of a work. One of such ways is the Marxist approach.

In addition to whatever else it does, Marxist criticism aims at revealing ideological issues, focus on class conflict and urge a correction or

an end to social injustice. As a result of this, Marxist criticism pays attention more to the content and themes of a literary work than to its form.

Thus, in this essay, our examination of aspects of Esiaba Irobi's dramatic techniques in the selected plays is with a view to implicating the contributions of his dramatic techniques to the overall thematic development of the plays.

### **3. Dramatic techniques**

This seems to be an opportunity to clear some conceptual issues. In spite of the extensive work done in the area of drama, particularly with regards to conceptualizing and operationalizing terms and concepts, there still exists a considerable level of misunderstanding.

There appears to be uncertainty about when to talk of dramatic aesthetics and/or dramatic techniques. Some are unsure of the distinctions between dramatic techniques, dramatic conventions and elements of drama.

It would seem to us that elements of drama or dramatic elements refer to those necessary parts of, or basic principles of, drama. These would include imitation, plot, (dramatic) action and dialogue. Dramatic techniques are those items of plot development which carry the playwright's stamp of individuality and style but which are not basic principles of drama. More than anything else, they are principles of form and form distinguishes literature from all other subjects. They are: characterization, foreshadowing, flashback, planting, deus ex machina, and play-within-a play. Then there are dramatic conventions. Playwrights strive to present the real world in their plays. In spite of these attempts, drama is drama and real life is real life. There are obvious limitations which hinder the possibility of presenting real life on stage. Hence, what the playwright is able to present is an illusion of reality. Prologue, epilogue, interlude, aside, soliloquy, dramatic illusion, the fourth wall, chorus/narrator, structure and the three unities of time, place and action make up dramatic conventions. Of dramatic conventions, Abrams says, "conventions are necessary, or at least convenient, devices, accepted by tacit agreement between author and audience, for solving the problems in representing reality that are posed by a particular artistic medium" (64).

From the foregoing, it is clear that, though these concepts may not be rigidly mutually exclusive, a discussion of dramatic techniques should not be misconstrued to include dramatic elements and dramatic conventions.

The same is applicable to dramatic elements and dramatic conventions. However, the terms dramatic aesthetics or style are concepts which cut across and cover these three concepts at once.

This paper, therefore, is an examination of an aspect of dramatic aesthetics in the three selected plays by Esiaba Irobi, viz, dramatic techniques. Invariably, a discussion of a given playwright's dramatic

techniques in works is a discussion of style. Scholars are often hard-put to provide a concise definition of style. Indeed, the word suffers from an over-definition. Leech and Short aver that, "style itself like many semi-technical terms has suffered from over definition" (11).

Style is idiosyncratic in nature. Perhaps, it is for this reason that some scholars, like Buffon and Fakuade say "style is the man". Harmon and Holman simplify it when they say, "style combines two elements: the idea to be expressed and the individuality of the author" (503).

#### **4. Aspects of Esiaba Irobi's dramatic techniques in the selected plays.**

Dramatic techniques are used by playwrights to enhance the emotional, aural and visual experience of the reader and to help add layers of meaning that people experience when reading or watching a story. Irobi in his works makes use of a couple of them to engage his reader's mind and drive home his point.

##### **4.1 Foreshadowing/Flashback**

Foreshadowing is one of the most powerful literary techniques. It has been variously explained as the organization and presentation of events and scenes in a work of fiction or drama so that the reader is prepared to some degree for what occurs later or what has occurred before the present scene in the work. To foreshadow means to give clue or hints that suggest events that will occur later in the story while flashback is used to reveal past events which have invariably led to where the action is at the moment. These events could be positive or negative, obvious and subtle and can be weaved into dialogue or description and reactions of the characters. Among other purposes, they help increase the interest of readers and get them involved in the events of the play.

In almost all the plays in this study, Irobi makes elaborate use of these devices to drive home his points. He uses them as a means of evoking revolutionary tension in the plays. *Hangmen Also Die* is narrated in flashback. In the beginning of the play, we are presented with a horrible scene where life is about to be snuffed out of some young men who have been accused of the murder of the Chief Erekosima and therefore, sentenced to death by hanging. The play starts with questions by the Superintendent thus:

Superintendent: Is the scaffold ready?

Warden: Yes, Superintendent.

Superintendent: And the hanging squad?

Warden: We are all ready sir.

Superintendent: Where is Yekinni?

Warden: In there, Superintendent.

Superintendent: And the doctor?

Warden: Waiting over there, sir.

Superintendent: Where is the list of the condemned men?

Warden: Here, sir.

Superintendent: How many are they?

Warden: Seven

Superintendent: And handcuffed?

Warden: Of course, Superintendent

Superintendent: March them in. (9)

The hanging scene itself as presented foretells terror, violence and eventually death which bring about revolution. According to Pavis “flashback is an interjected scene that takes the narrative back in time from the current point the story has reached” (151). As already established earlier, it is used to fill in a crucial back story. The revolutionary disobedience of Yekinni, the prison hangman to hand the young men sparks off a stream of flashback as it reveals to us the story of the Suicide Squad who were about to be hanged because they decided to take the law into their hands to exact justice on the man they felt has oppressed them and kept them in a sorry situation. This is seen as Yekinni tells the doctor what led to the hanging sentence on the young men thus:

Doctor: Why did they kill the man?

Yekinni:... you see, some time ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which as you know is a riverine state, the sum of three million naira as a compensation money for the oil spillage which has ruined their farms, their homes and their lives. But the man they killed, one Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, connived with his councilors and Local Government Chairmen to confiscate the 3 million naira. The Councilors 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 single kobo. That was when these men stepped in... (23).

At the end of the story, light comes again to the hanging yard where we find Yekinni still on his knees reading the contents of the newspaper and the Superintendent then says: Yekinni, now that you have faced the facts, go into the hanging room and hand those boys (124).

From these excerpts, it is evident that the whole play is told in flashback whereby the scene of the hanging was set before the revelation of the reasons for their sentence. The use of flashback here becomes necessary at the outset of the play as it gives a proper explanation to the events that follow afterwards. Irobi also uses flashback to relay the story of Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegebe who almost turned the seven young men into thugs, thieves

and murderers for his selfish political ambition. Though it is a flashback as it is told by the leader of the Suicide Squad, Acid, his death by their hands foretells and foregrounds the manner by which the corrupt leaders who Chief Erekosima represents will be wiped out eventually (111).

The entry of the members of the Ekumeku age grade which prepares the eventual entry of their leader Nwokedi which the playwright describes as “a violence of villagers”, “blood smeared machetes” and led by three Ekumeku members, Obidike, Amadike and Ukadike “flashing cannibalistic grimaces at the audience” (*Nwokedi*, 1) foreshadows Nwokedi’s reign of blood that does not quench till the end of the play. Also, a flashback to Nwokedi’s undergraduate days reveals his life as a cultist and how he murdered a fellow cultist, Dafinone (Mad Ahab) for “looting the stockade” (40). Dafinone appears to Nwokedi calling him a murderer and asking him to tell people how he murdered him. Nwokedi asks him to tell the story by himself and so Dafinone speaks:

Dafinone: No, murderer, you tell them. But if you’ve forgotten, I’ll remind you. It was way back 1979. Then we were in school. We joined the Buccaneers. You were called Belzeebub. And I Captain Ahab, Mad Ahab, I was the Capone. One evening, we went out to sally. To sally on the beach... runnels of rum were running through our veins when you syphilitic seadog incited other gentlemen of the fortune to mutiny against me.

Nwokedi: Why?

Dafinone: Cause I melted the gold in the stockade. Melted it to mould my scimitar. I had the right. I was Capone! I was Capone!! I was Capone!!! (40).

With the chants of “murder the bum”, “kill the beast”, “cut his throat”, “spill his blood”, Nwokedi takes it upon himself and executes “judgment” on the Capone. His fearlessness to carry out the murderous action of killing the Capone is revealed in the excerpt below:

Ishmeal: Nwokedi!

Huckleberry Fin: Nwokedi. You’ve stabbed him.

Ben Gunn: He is bleeding...

Sir Walter Raleigh: Nwokedi didn’t you know we were only playing?

Belzeebub: Playing? But he looted the money belonging to the confraternity.

Ishmeal: Is that why you stabbed him?

Belzeebub: Why shouldn’t I?

Sir Walter Raleigh: He’s dead. (*Nwokedi* 44-5)

This flashback gives us a clue as to why he fearlessly beheads his father, Nwokedi Snr. and his brother-in-law, Senator Arikpo. It reveals how daring Nwokedi is and his ability to successfully spearhead and execute a revolution.

Disappointed by Jamike's strange behavior and lack of care for himself, Kamuche recalls Jamike's excellent performance thus:

Kamuche:...O, lady, if only you had known this young man when he was young and nimble... if you have seen his report cards when he was in elementary and secondary schools. Made a distinction in his First School Leaving Certificate. Six aggregates. A1 in all the subjects. Made first class honors in the bachelor of arts degree exams. In fact, he was the best in his faculty, the best graduand in the entire university. O, I remember the hour of his honor. I remember that moment he walked step by step, rung by rung, until he mounted the great podium of academic excellence... then, we thought the sky was the limit. Then, we dreamt he would be the brightest star in the sky... (26-7).

Since the play does not cover Jamike's school days, Irobi uses flashback through the voice of Kamuche to reveal his academic achievements and by that, pointing out how such a brilliant person could end up being exploited and frustrated to the extent that he almost loses his mind.

#### **4.2 Metaphor**

A metaphor is a figure of speech which makes an implied or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated but share some common characteristics. According to Lakoff and Johnson, "...metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect- it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound etc." (235). The use of appropriate and suitable metaphors appeals directly to the senses of the audience, sharpening their minds to imagine and comprehend what is being put across to them.

In his works, Irobi uses metaphor for two main reasons- to show the class stratification in the society and to preach his revolutionary ideology. Metaphorical expressions abound in the plays and will be looked into so as to explicate on his intentions of use as stated above.

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi uses some metaphorical statements to explore and discuss the selfish nature of the "privileged few" who are actually meant to protect the interest of their people. In this conversation between Nwokedi and his father, Nwokedi Snr., he describes them as: ... You rats that bite and

blow. Trousered apes, bloated by rancid crude oil. Kings that rule by deceit... jackals, Vandals, Cannibals, Carnivores, Scavengers, Culture Vultures! (77). Just like the words used imply, they are self-centered and insensitive. They feed and exploit the people and practically add nothing to the lives of these people to make it better. Through the character Nwokedi, Irobi exposes the ugly side of the people who claim to care for the citizens whereas in truth, the citizens are being oppressed, exploited denied their rights and resources and fed upon by these leaders. As a result of the corrupt acts of the self-centered leaders, we see the dehumanized nature of the masses. In Nwokedi's speech to his fellow corps members, Irobi infuses a metaphorical speech which describes this condition. He tells them that: "...My generation, what are we now but beggars groveling, fawning, scrounging with supple knees for the husks of life from the hands of full fed beasts who ravaged our future...we are beggars..."(Nwokedi, 30). This statement in effect reveals the sufferings of the masses and even their hopelessness for the future because of the actions of the few that are privileged to be in the corridors of power. What the citizens should get as dividends of democracy is now being begged for while the ruling class stuff and enrich their pockets with the commonwealth of the nation.

Jamike refuses to see his brother Kamuche when he comes looking for him and we see the reason in the words of Zhipora when she tells Kamuche with a bit of metaphor that:

...He sees you as a philistine. As some uniformed obscenity who can neither appreciate the purpose of his toil nor give him the peace to pursue the laurels of his illusion. He sees you as Goliath... you are to him what king Saul was to David, when the evil spirit fell upon Saul and David had to play his lute to him only to be applauded by a libretto of javelins aimed at David's skull. Yes, you are to him a figure of authority. And artists do not like authority. Especially vulgar authority...that, again, is why I do not think he may want to see you. (*The Other Side of The Mask, 16*)

He uses these words to describe the suffocating nature of the privileged few who do not want to see others succeed and be like them. They can afford to stand in the way of the helpless masses just to ensure that they remain where they are and not make progress in life. Again, Jamike refers to the panel of judges as "carrion flies" (68). He also refers to them as beasts and brutes-mad men and lunatics who defile his works and mock him to his face (82). He angrily also puts it to Prof. Njemanze that he is the hand that denies him his destiny (83). Irobi in his use of these statements tries to portray the dehumanizing effect of the actions and inactions of the ruling

class on the poor masses that are at their mercy. Awards are given by sentiments and partiality (83) and mediocrity are the order of the day and are encouraged by their corrupt acts of judgment (84). Jamike's carvings are also used as metaphors to reflect the state of the nation which invariably, reflects the condition of the people. In interpreting the carving, he tells Dr. Animalu: "...this is Africa. The black continent. Those are her children starving through the seasons...this is the sahara desert. This woman has reached menopause" (57). This, metaphorically reveals the piteous and stagnant situation of the people who should have been liberated from the shackles of slavery that was existent during the time of the colonial masters but their situation is worsened by the rule of their own people who care less about them and rather, live for themselves only. Going deeper to reveal the true reality of the situation of the people as portrayed by the carvings, he puts forward this question to Dr. Animalu: "...don't you find reality horrible? Aren't you shocked by the killings, the massacres, the progroms, the murders, the executions. The letter bombs! And what else do you expect from the sculptor except to ask questions with his chisel. What is the quality of the life we live?..."(59).

Depicting the insensitivity of the ruling class with regards to the people's plight despite their efforts to eke out a life for themselves against all odds, Jamike metaphorically asks:

... but do they know what it costs the body and soul to wade into the forest, fell the tree with a saw, chop it into chunks with an axe and drag the lumber like dead bodies into the house. Do they know what it costs the muscles and the mind to chisel these chunks of wood and breathe the breath of life, like fire, into them? Do they know what it costs the spirit to polish these surfaces until they glint like human faces smeared with blood in the humid shade of a green garden? Do they understand the torture and the labor, the anguish and pain? Do they?... and there he comes again to eat into the woods decay. Termites, there he comes again with his cynical mandibles to devour what is left of the wood. There he comes again...Bite, termite, bite...(72-3).

His words show that these people, just like Jamike, work themselves out, put in all their best to make ends meet yet they are not recognized rather they are exploited and the little they have is deceitfully taken from them. They live in abject poverty as they are denied their basic human rights.

The title, *Hangmen Also Die* is a metaphoric statement around which other metaphors found in the work revolve. It thoroughly evaluates the socio-political situation in the Niger Delta in particular and Nigeria at large. It depicts the aimlessness and hopelessness of the living conditions of the masses and the level of opulence the ruling class exhibits. The sole idea of the title as a metaphor simply suggests that the only constant thing in life is change which Chief Erekosima experiences in the hands of the Suicide Squad towards the end of the play. Thinking that he has the game in his hands, the table turns and he painfully exchanges his life for the liberation of those he once marginalized and exploited. Also, the state of the poor people is revealed in this metaphoric statement as revealed by R.I.P, "sewage of the gutter" (37). The common man is compared to the sewage. They are treated with much disdain and the unwanted things are pushed to them because the ruling class feels that they do not deserve the best in life. The bourgeois sees the common man as 'others'. The crocodile which Erekosima chose as the symbol of his party is a metaphor which symbolizes his idea of oppression and exploitation.

Tamara putting it to him tells him that the only way he can feed just like the crocodile is by opening his mouth against the tide and letting fishes drift into his jaws (60). This metaphorical statement clearly reveals his mindset which affects his action towards those whose interests he should seek to protect. By using the metaphor, "big name dey kill small dog" (8), the playwright frowns at the level of mediocrity and sycophancy in our contemporary society, a practice that encourages corruption and irresponsibility on the part of the bourgeoisies. When they throw around the money meant for the people or carry out projects out of their "goodwill", their seemingly good works are magnified and saluted meanwhile, the poor have nothing to show that they are part of that society. This is what the playwright warns against by making such a statement.

From the metaphorical analysis of the texts, we can safely say that Esiaba Irobi plainly rejects surface optimism but rather creates plays that are akin to his perception of a degenerated nation and his real hopes of revolution and change.

### **4.3 Allusion**

In Abram's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, allusion is defined as "a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place, or event, or to another literary work or passage" (10). Allusion can therefore be said to be a literary device in which the writer or speaker refers either directly or indirectly to a person, event, or thing in history, or to a work of art or literature. It connects the text to a larger world and calls to

mind the idea and emotions associated with a well-known event. The allusions in the plays are mainly historical, biblical and so refer to some celebrated individuals. In his imitation of Dr. Ogbansiegbé's speech, Acid makes use of allusion thus:

Acid: ... terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all down-trodden people seeking to combat oppressive governments. Without terrorism by the I.R.A would the republic of Ireland have gained its independence today? Without terrorism by the Mau Mau, would there be Kenya today? Without terrorism by the Irgun and Stern gangs, would there be Israel today? Without terrorism by the Algerians, would the French ever have agreed to leave North Africa in 1962? Without terrorism in South Africa, do you think apartheid would ever be dismantled? I am asking you! (39).

Here, Irobi makes use of historical allusions to point out his belief that revolution surely brings about freedom. The people are therefore called upon to stand and fight for what belongs to them. Taking it further, Acid reminds the Suicide Squad that:

...the world is always willing to forget and forgive the terrorism and in fact honor those it once called criminals provided the terrorist has sheathed his knife and washed blood off his hands. Think of Menachem Begin, Jomo Kenyatta, Fidel Castro, Yassir Arafat, Malcom X, Maummar Ghadaffi, Mengistu Haile Mariame, Jerry Rawlings, Samora Machel, Augustino Neto, Sam Nujoma, Chukwuma Nzeogwu...(40).

From the above, it is pointed out and noted that revolution is not an all-time event. It is actually meant to correct societal anomalies after which normalcy should return when the aim of the revolution must have been achieved.

Irobi uses allusion through the words of Tamara to ginger and spur on the Suicide Squad into becoming true revolutionaries instead of being petty thieves and terrorizing the common man. Referring to them as 'cowards' and 'rejects of the earth', she challenges them thus:

...your mates in other parts of the world are guerrilla fighters, fighting for the liberation of their country. Haven't you

heard of the red brigade of Italy who kidnapped their prime minister and murdered him because he could not find them jobs? Haven't you heard of the FRELIMO of Mozambique? The M.P.L.A of Angola? The A.N.C of Azania? The Mujahudin of Afghanistan? The Mau Mau of Kenya and the SWAPO of Namibia? Young men dying for their land. Here you hide in the bush and burgle people's houses in the night... (85).

The allusion used by Irobi here is to bring to our knowledge the fact that revolution has never been done out of selfishness. People revolt so as to call to order the excesses of the ruling class and to create a classless society where everyone is equal and as such, is treated like that.

Speaking to Nwokedi on the dangers in daring authority, a corps member asks:

Corper: Dared? My friend, it is not just enough to dare. Never start what you cannot finish...have you heard of a country called Biafra?

Nwokedi:... I saw Biafra with the eyes of a child.

Corper: Do you know how many million lives it cost Biafra to dare? How many young men as daring as yourself who perished in that revolt.

Nwokedi: My family contributed two...

Corper: Two lives. Did you hear that? Two lives. Yet he wants to dare again.

Nwokedi: A man must dare. He must go on daring, until he dies. (29)

With the above excerpt, Irobi is making a statement that in as much as revolutions are very costly both in human and material resources, although millions of lives may be lost in the revolution, yet, it must be carried out if the conditions of the people have to be bettered. A habitable environment must be created for future generations. So, revolution, when necessary is inevitable.

Still revolution, Zhipora using biblical allusion explains to Kamuche why his brother Jamike refused seeing him. She tells him that: "He sees you as a philistine... you are to him what king Saul was to David, when the evil

spirit fell upon Saul and David had to play his lute to him only to be applauded by a libretto of javelins aimed at David's skull..." (16). Irobi with this is pointing to the fact that the rich have no regard whatsoever for the poor and so, the latter will always be exploited and oppressed by them. Making allusions to some individuals, celebrities and inventors, Zhipora defends Jamike's alleged eccentric and strange behavior. She tells Kamuche: "... well, he is eccentric in his own individual way. Most creative artists are like that. Michelangelo wore the same clothes for three weeks when he was painting the 'Last Judgment' on the alter wall of the Sistine chapel in Rome..." and goes further to tell Kamuche when he asks who Michelangelo is: "Michelangelo is one of the greatest sculptors who ever lived..." (18). This is an indication that revolutionaries forego their personal comfort in order to achieve success which invariably, will change not just their lives but that of the masses. It also goes further to mean that revolutionaries even when they are long gone earn enduring fame and recognition.

#### **4.4 Imagery**

Imagery in a literary text is the author's use of vivid and descriptive language to add depth to the work. It appeals to human senses to deepen the reader's understanding of the work. Imagery usually engages all the senses; smell, sight, touch, taste and sound. Imagery uses words that create a visual representation of ideas in the readers mind. It helps develop a mental image of the story in the literary work. It is what helps draw readers into the work and helps them identify with the plight of the people. Mrs. Nwokedi uses the imagery of the yams and barns to describe the level of hardship and discontent of the people through the year and so, she tells Senator Arikpo, "... a year in which the rafters in our barns were filled with shriveled tubers and the husks of life" (*Nwokedi*, 16). Also, imageries of violence due to ruptured souls are seen in the plays. All through the plays, the imageries created are gruesome and have the tendency of death in them.

In *Hangmen Also Die*, the Suicide Squad chants: we stab and draw, and stab and draw, and stab and draw, and stab and draw again... to hear the froth of blood (90). R. I. P continues saying: we sway... we swing... we prow! We Prow!!! We Prow!!! And pounce like apes. And roll like dogs and stand like snakes, and hiss with our tongues. We strike like mambas and leave on your flesh, the marks of your blood, the anthem of our fury... (91). This is similar to what we find in Jamike's word when he tells Dr. Animalu: "... do you realize that when the creative juice is neglected it falls like a fruit and ferments. And when it ferments, it evaporates into the vehicle of violence?" (*The Other Side of the Mask*, 53). Irobi uses these images to talk about the neglected souls seeking for a way of escape by adopting a violent stand to retaliate against their oppressors. Zhipora tells Jamike: blood is the ink of

history (*The Other Side of the Mask*, 75) and Nwokedi tells Habiba... because it is blood that renews the earth... (*Nwokedi*, 45). These images create mental pictures of violent revolution. They show Irobi's advocacy for the termination of the human life if possible in order to liberate themselves from the shackles of their oppressors. An imagery of violence is seen in this conversation between Jamike and Prof. Njemanze:

Jamike: A diamond? I am not a diamond! I am the mud itself! Honestly, there are times when I wish all the world was made of mud, so I can scoop it into the hollow of my palm, sculpt it, potter it into shape, into a beautiful picture, take it to the river, fill it with water and returning, smash it on the jagged boulders along the river's slope!

Njemanze: Jamike!

Jamike: And there are other times when I wished the world was a log of wood so I could chisel it into shape like a beautiful figurine...

Njemanze: And do what with it?

Jamike: Shove it into the fire like a faggot.

Njemanze: Jamike! Why all this demonic nihilism? ... (*The Other Side of the Mask*, 88).

Nwokedi, brandishing his machete, tells Senator Arkipo: "soon, your skull will bounce on the surface of the earth like a coconut blown down by the wind... and your cunning brains will gush out on the ground like congealed milk. Yes, Senator Arikpo, any moment from now your cruel blood will purge this land you desecrated with your political witchcraft. (*Nwokedi*, 72). In the same light Suicide Squad uses lots of imageries in their chants to bare their tortured and subjugated minds. They chant:

Chorus: Some drug-song of murder!

Discharge: And out, we flash, like canines, our knives. We flash the blades across your tender throats or plant them between your ribs, or... stab and draw and stab and draw again...

Chorus: To hear the froth of blood.

R.I.P: We kill, we maim, we massacre...

Chorus: We are the masters of mayhem.

Mortuary: Yes, like hangmen we come, our wrists as ropes. Our hands groping for your neck, our fingers itching for the grip on your neck... and once our talons find their target....

Khomeini: We wring your neck like a chicken's neck, yes, like a wet towel, we twist and twist and twist until the bone breaks behind the neck and the spiral cord snaps behind the back, until it snaps, snaps like a twig between...

Chorus: ... our fingers of steel

R.I.P:... we lurk in the dark and wait to wound. We hide like death and clutch at your life. We crouch in ambush and sniff like jackals. We sway, we swing, we pounce like apes and roll like dogs and stand like snakes hissing through our tongue. We are a brood of vipers. [*Hangmen Also Die*, 53-4]

Irobi also uses the imagery of an insect to pass across his violent revolutionary message. Nwokedi tells his father, "Father, if the butterfly must fly, caterpillar must die" [*Nwokedi*, 79]. This talks about the stepping down of the old for the new to manifest even if the old must die. In *The Other Side of the Mask*, the dramatist uses imagery to foretell danger and eventual bloodshed is seen in his description of Elesie's dressing which is pointed out by Zhipora and is also observed by Dr Animalu. Zhipora tells Elesie: "... yes, there you are all dressed in red. Red. Red. Red. You come all dressed in red to do what? Red dress, red shoes, red lipsticks, red fingernails. What, for the sake of sanity, does the color red suggests to you?" (*The Other Side of the Mask*, 35-6). It is worth of note to state that Irobi's use of repetition in his application of imagery is very important. He uses that means to impress a particular picture in the minds of his readers. In all, application of imageries reveal the gruesome and tortured state of mind of the common masses who are discontented with what their society has overtime offered them and their resolve to fight back. It also paints the picture of an impending danger and doom in a class-strata conscious society.

#### 4.5 Language

Irobi uses a unique language to communicate his ideals and dramaturgy. His language though filled with revolutionary aesthetics is poetic and this is attested to by comments at the back covers of most of his plays, for instance as seen at the back covers of *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*. At the back of *Nwokedi* Ola Rotimi comments that "... his puns are stunning. His language is like listening to music" and at the back of *Hangmen Also Die*, The Guardian comments that "... and the language is unassailable". For Nnorom, Irobi is the minstrel, a powerful wordsmith who uses words like a "loaded pistol". When mixed together and shaken, his words would produce the effect of an atom bomb powerful enough to eradicate Nigeria's terminal diseases who populate the country's past, ruling or aspiring leadership ("Revisiting Esiaba Irobi", 28).

Irobi's use of poetic language in his plays is very vivid and this makes his plays very musical, exciting and highly enjoyable. Nwokedi in his response to Senator Arikpo after the offer of a cheque by Senator Arikpo tells him: I want the future. And nothing but the future. Yes, I want the future. And not just my future but the future of my entire generation. We gave you our future to hold in trust for us but you tore it into tatters and left us in rags... (80-1).

The conversation between Nwokedi and Senator Arikpo also has this lyrical tone in it.

Arikpo: Blood?

Nwokedi: Yes, Blood.

Arikpo: Whose blood.

Nwokedi: Yours.

Arikpo: Yours.

Arikpo: Your vision is blurred.

Nwokedi: Yes, by your blood...(73)

Irobi makes the statement lyrical so that the reader does not only get the message but also, enjoy its poetic and lyrical nature. Also, while declaring the set time for the sacrifice as the festival procession is heard, Nwokedi tells his father: father, "the sun is ripe! The sun is ripe!! The sun is ripe!!!..." (82) As important as the statement is, the reader could still enjoy its lyrical nature. As the harbinger of the Ekpo masquerade enters the arena indicating the arrival of the Ekpo masequered, the Ufo-bearer comments:

So, ancient spirit, the seed is the seedling, the seedling is the plant. The plant is the tree, the tree is its branches. Its branches are its leaves. Its leaves bear the flowers. The flowers blossom into fruits. The fruits ripen and fall. They fall and rot into seeds. The seeds grow into seedlings. And the seedlings into trees... this is the spirit of our life. This is the cycle of our life. This is the journey of our soul; the road from life to death and from death to life again... (92).

Though Irobi uses this to make a revolutionary statement that the society cannot experience any new lease of life and the younger generation cannot live freely in a classless society except the old generation is violently overthrown, if possible, we can still enjoy the poetic nature of the statement. In the midst of the seriousness of the action, the reader still finds a level of satisfaction discovering the lyrical aspect of the statement.

At the death of Senator Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr., the Ufo-bearer continues: "... hands stronger than a single hand have broken the stronger hand. Fiery-blooded panthers, desperate in pounce and paw have torn to pieces, the carcass of the tiger" (93). In her narration of how she cursed Chief Erekosima for confiscating the three million naira compensation money from the Federal Government to Izon State, Tamara tells Ibiwari:

I said to him, Isokipiri Erekosima, if this evening you don't give us back our money, may you disintegrate from madness... and bay at the moon like the homeless dog. May your children be fatherless like mine.

May they inherit the ruins of this palace which you are renovating with our money. May your crown tumble in the dust. May your wives become widows like both of us. May the twelve plagues of Egypt fall upon your household. May the swamp swallow you." (59).

In her explanation to why Jamike fasts very often, Zhipora tells Kamuche: "... when he has fasted for about three days, without food and water mind you, his reflexes become shaper. His intuition deeper. His consciousness more visceral and his vision more urgent. Yes, that is when his spirit takes flight and soars above the mundane, beyond the profane, into the profound, the sublime, into the realms of the sacred..." (*The other Side of the Mask*, 18). In an attempt to take a picture of Jamike's art work which they have always condemned over the years and at Jamike's refusal to allow him take a photograph of his work, Dr. Animalu tells Jamike: "You see, Jamike, in spite of the non-committal, nebulous and vaporous quality of your works, there is certain awesomeness in it that I find amusing and exhilarating. A certain intriguing cosmetic spirituality. That is the mystique I want to use to mesmerize the Westerners" (55) In further argument with Jamike on the insensibility and illogicality of Jamike's works, Dr. Animalu points out: "that is why an artist like you, whose mind has been hibernating like a mudskipper's, whose consciousness is sealed up like a snail in a shell, cannot but select redundant symbols, vaporous metaphors, misanthropic similes and important images, images that neither stab the mind nor stir it into action. And I don't see why a decadent artist should complain when he is neglected or refused laurels" (61).

While discussing his art with Prof. Njemanze, Jamike tells him that:

When that music caresses my soul, I have visions of things that have never existed. Music draws back the veil across new delights. It opens up new world for me. Universe: Portals! Thresholds! Doors open beyond which I catch a glimpse of the infinite... I can see Paris! And the judges in council! I can see them admiring my masterpiece. Heaping accolades on the shaping spirit that tames the clay. I can see them selecting the laurels. Selecting golden laurels and hanging the finest on the neck of my masterpiece. I can see their ecstatic finger writing my name on plaque of gold. A plaque of gold! Where neither wind nor rain can erase it. You, I can hear the future howling my name in deafening decibels into the ears, the wings, the corners and the ceilings of the hall of fame... but then, I am only a man. As diminutive as dust. I am only an artist and miseries of ordinary life depress me. I am a sculptor. A carver! I carve

because I must transcend life. Transcend the status of man.  
Then and only then can I be a master! (114).

The passages shown above are very poetic and lyrical! They possess the sound of language organized in lines. Most of these passages have rhymes and rhythm that makes them melodious. There is economy and intensity of expression that pack emotions into the lines. Thereby producing delightful rhapsody that keeps one's sense at an alert. The passages also possess some level of beauty and impression that dazzle the senses by its variety.

Furthermore, Irobi's language assists the reader's imagination and emotional flow. In his role as a social combatant, he uses heavy words to address the socio-political situation in his society. His language mainly relies on music and dance. He as well, turns his words into incantations and utilizes movement and rhythm to form a unified expression of his thoughts and intentions. An expression of this is seen in the song of the Suicide Squad, *Alagba Die Fie* which later tapers into a chant. They sing:

R.I.P:                W are the headhunters  
Chorus: We are the Headhunters  
Dayan:              We are the suicide squad  
Chorus: We are the suicide squad  
Acid:                We are the Kamikaze  
Chorus: We are the Kamikaze  
Tetanus: We are the leftovers  
Chorus: We are the leftovers  
Khomeini:         We are the renegades  
Chorus: we are the renegades  
Discharge:        We are the murderers  
Chorus: We are the murderers  
Mortuary:         We are the cadavers.  
Chorus: We are the cadavers. (*Hangmen Also Die*, 48)

In *Nwokedi*, the Ekumekus use chants and songs to spell out their messages. Though written in an indigenous language (Igbo), their chants and songs still carry in them a revolutionary message. Throughout the play, they employ songs and chants to drive home their desire for social change. One of their chants titled "Ndi Ole Nwe Ala Na" is a good example of what Irobi can do with language. The chant goes thus:

Solo:                Ndi ole nwe ala na?  
Solo:                Who are the owners of the land?  
Chorus: Anyi nwe ala na.  
Chorus: The young are the owners of the land.  
Solo:                O bu Arikpo nwe ala na?  
Solo:                Is this land Arikpo's own?

Chorus: Mba

Chorus: No.

Solo: O bu Sinator nwe ala na?

Solo: Does this land belong to Senators?

Chorus: Mba

Chorus: No

Solo: O bu agha nwe ala na?

Solo: Is it the properties of soldiers?

Chorus: Mba

Chorus: No

Solo: Ndi ole nwe ala na?

Solo: Who truly owns this land?

Chorus: Anyi nwe ala na.

Chorus: The Ekumekus own this land

With these, he subtly hands over power to the Ekumekus who are the representatives of the people instead of the corrupt and wicked politicians and military men. The song of Ted Hughes which Zhipora sings for Jamike is the story of a man who is frustrated and so, takes it out both on himself and on things around him. Zhipora demonstrates as she sings:

He got a sharp rock and gashed holes in his face. Through the blood and

the pain he looked at the earth.

He gashed again deeper and through the blood and pain

He screeched at the lightning, the frost and time.

The lying among the bones on the cemetery earth. He saw a woman singing out of her belly. (*The Other Side of the Mask, 94*)

After the song, Prof. Njemanze tells Jamike: "...there is something nihilistic about that poem" (94). The language through songs and chants is used to drive a revolutionary movement all through the plays. They may appear vulgar, heightened and dangerous but Irobi deliberately uses them to show a strong penchant for social reformation and the use of violence if possible.

##### **5. Conclusion.**

The selected plays by Esiaba Irobi interrogate social injustice in society, man's inhumanity to man. The plays xray poverty, unemployment and the like in the mindst of plenty. The elites are implicated in the miserable plight of the oppressed and exploited. In the face of all of these, the playwright urges the oppressed and downtrodden to rise and take their destinies in their hand.

Literary analysis and criticism usually focuses on the content and style of the chosen text(s). This essay has focused primarily on the playwright's

style in the selected plays. Our examination of Irobi's style foregrounds the careful application of artistic vision towards the realization of social vision . It shows a blissful marriage between social vision and artistic vision for the realization of a work with artistic clarity and beauty.

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