



Research Paper

## **Alienation as Catalyst for Dramatic Conflicts in Esiabalrobi's *Hangmen Also Die***

Dr. Olufemi Adeosun

Department of English and Literary Studies  
Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti

### **Abstract**

The growing concerns about the contradictions of existence, many of which are deeply rooted in desperation for survival, have had a profound impact on the conception and flourishing of existential drama. At the inception of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most playwrights, all over the world, have felt the urge to interrogate issues of human apprehensions in their works by depicting dramatic characters at the brink in the face of hopelessness, frustration and estrangement. It is, thus, against this background that the paper explores the theme of alienation in Esiabalrobi's *Hangmen Also Die*. Alienation, one of the sub-themes of existentialism is therefore conceived and deployed in this paper as a literary trope through which we deconstruct the dramatic characters' dispositions to actions and counteractions in the text against the backdrop of the situations and existential realities around them. In this analysis, the paper considers existential prompts such as "interest" and "survival" "anxiety as being fundamental to the generation and escalation of dramatic tension in the text. The study, therefore, reveals that the playwright depicts dramatic characters who, despite their existential predicaments, still prioritise survival by confronting their aggressors through actions and choices they freely undertake. It is within the ambience of these existential circumstances that the paper views the actions and counteractions of the characters in *Hangmen Also Die* as being motivated by a sense of survival.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Alienation, Choice, Survival, Dramatic Conflict

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The dire socio-economic situation of Africa, in particular, has placed an enormous burden on the shoulders of literature, theatre and the artist (Olorunjobi-Oju, 14).

The statement above succinctly captures the intricacies of the literary preoccupation of Esiabalrobi, as his works seem to encapsulate the trajectories of a radical dramatist who carried the burden of a failing nation in his heart like Hester Prynne, the central character in Nathaniel Hawthorne's seventeenth century, classic novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (2009). His works have been defined and fired by the pervading sense of disillusionment, alienation and hopelessness ostensibly orchestrated by the Nigerian ruling elite and other contending interests in the corridor of power. Although Irobi has been preceded in this mode of literary engagement by more established playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and Ola Rotimi, especially in his later plays such as *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988) and *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (1988), he was more radical in his approach to solving the inherent existential challenges that have engulfed the nation. Diala alludes to this ideological commitment when he avers that;

Disillusioned by the cynical exploitation of the Nigerian masses, the corruption of their self-centered leaders, and moreover their will to self-perpetuation in power, Irobi's basic concern as a playwright is the failures of the postcolonial Nigerian state. His temper demonstrably Fanonian, he aims at a popular uprising, a revolution in which the barely educated pauperized masses and the socially disinherited unemployed youths form the core of the revolutionary vanguard (235).

As evident in some of his plays, especially: *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), *Nwokedi* (1991); *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999) and *Cemetery Road* (2009), Irobi's dramaturgy and ideological vision are predominantly driven by the commitment to force radical socio-political change and transformation, albeit through violent overthrow of the existing order for equitable and egalitarian society that accommodates the interests of all Nigerians, irrespective of religious beliefs social standing and political leaning. Perhaps, this could possibly account for why most extant studies on his literary oeuvre, particularly *Hangmen Also Die*, which is the focus of this paper, have argued that his plays are usually imbued with revolutionary predilections (Diala, 2014; Amoyeze, 2012; Diala 2005; Binbai, 2013; Ver-OrKachii 2021). Even when Diala specifically also notes the absorption of his Igbo heritage, myth and tradition in his creativeness, they are often surreptitiously deployed to push for the "political rebirth of the Nigerian nation through violent methods" (Okiche 71). Echeruo also adds that, "Irobi rediscovers the inevitability of his own emerging commitment to the drama of public rite. *Nwokedi* and *Cemetery Road* are thus the (revolutionary) texts that mark Irobi's emergence (14). Little wonder the actions and counteractions of the major characters in his texts are often motivated by revolts against the nation's centrifugal forces. In his critique of *Hangmen Also Die*, Amoyeze argues that

Esiaba Irobi deliberately assimilates 'new' heroes into the old functional slots occupied by Oedipus et al. Irobi's heroes are rambling personalities with introvert proclivities and highly ambiguous roles as law-enforcers, ideologically subsuming their pride in their traditional culture and heritage and fighting an obscurant establishment and elite class propagating injustice (Ixii).

Binbai and Ver-Or-Kachii in their separate analyses of the play situate the play within the Marxist-Leninist School of thought, an approach (Abba 2017, 183), describes as an "an aesthetics that see violence as a vehicle through which the oppressed seek justice. This ideology favours the dismantling of all forms of capitalism, preferring instead, a communist system whereby the whims and caprices of warlords, masquerading as leaders, both within the political and economic setups, will be replaced by the people through violent revolution. Both articles thus, interrogate this Marxist belief in *Hangmen Also Die* where the violence revolution being espoused in the play represents the dramatisation of the woes that attain the colonial and post-colonial African states where corruption and suppression of the voices of the ordinary people by the various repressive regimes reign supreme.

However, while these previous interpretations of Irobi's drama, particularly *Hangmen Also Die*, could be valid, especially to the extent of the parameters deployed in the analyses, they depart considerably from the kind of analysis that this paper sets out to undertake, because such mode of evaluations do not consider the existential underpinnings, promptings such as "interest" and "survival" anxiety which often impugn the actions and counteractions of the characters, thereby building and sustaining the dramatic tension that degenerates into existential conflict that usually leads into tragic actions. Thus, this paper goes beyond those established parameters of critical engagements by exploring those existential circumstances and the responses of dramatic characters to them. In one of his works, Ojoniye has argued that, actions and counteractions can be a product of "superficially reflective action or a deeply reflective action (23). Using this submission as a baseline, the paper then contends that when a character takes a superficial action, such action can be deemed to be arbitrary. The action is often considered as arbitrary when, arising from a pervading sense of anguish/alienation, a character decides to engage in violent action. This sense of frustration usually manifests at both the individual and communal levels. Thus, in this study, the paper links the source of the conflicts in the text to the alienation experience and a sense of anguish felt by the people of Izon State, a fictitious oil producing community in the Niger Delta region and their resolve to prioritise survival, even in the face of the seeming impossible existential realities around them. In the course of the analysis, attempts to answer the following questions: what motivate the suicidesquad into engaging in violent killing in the text? Why do Yekinni, the government paid executioner revolts against the state by refusing to hang the convicted felons? What are the consequences of such actions and counter-actions at both the individual and communal level? Just before then, it will be instructive to first have a bird's eye view of the text.

## **II. A QUICK GLANCE AT THE TEXT: *HANGMEN ALSO DIE***

The play opens with preparation for the execution of seven convicted felons who have been condemned to die by hanging for the murder of a yet to be identified man. However, the refusal of the traditional hangman, Yekinni, to hang the condemned criminals, leads to some other sordid details, including the identity of the person murdered and the circumstances behind his murder. This chain of dramatic events, ultimately sets the tone for the existential crisis witnessed in the play. First, through a flashback technique, it is discovered that the man killed is one Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs. He is accused of conniving with the Councilors and Local Government Chairmen to embezzle a three-million-naira cash donation given to the people of Izon State by the Federal Government as a compensation for oil exploration

in their domain. Second, from Yekinni's conversation with Doctor, a morbid anatomist charged with the responsibility of certifying hanged felons dead, it is revealed that Daminagbo, the Prison Chief Superintendent, is smuggled into the Prison Service by his godfather, the slain Commissioner, after failing his West African School Certificate. Through the adoption of post-modern technique of play-framing in which the plot oscillates through the time present and time past, a non-Aristotelian model of sort, the reader is led into the intrigues and the circumstances surrounding the impending hanging of the condemned felons, who are later known as the Suicide Squad. The circumstances that led to the formation of the dreaded group, the reason why Chief Erekosima was killed and the chain of actions and counteractions that mark out the play as existentialist drama in orientation, are also brought to light.

### III. ALIENATION IN EXISTENTIAL DISCOURSE

Alienation is one of the sub-themes of existentialism. The term, according to Saleem, "emerges as a natural consequence of existential predicaments, both in intrinsic and extrinsic terms" (68). Stretching this position further, Elimelekh, in his explanatory note to his paper: "Existentialism in the Works of Abd al-Rahman Munif" cites the views of two major existentialist philosophers (Kierkegaard and Sartre) to problematize alienation as a major existential crisis confronting humanity. According to him, while Kierkegaard in his classic essay, *Fear and Trembling*, regards man as alienated from the world and from reality, Sartre believes that the individual is isolated from others by an unbridgeable abyss.

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus, who took an absurdist position on alienation, also noted that "a world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and light, man feels an alien, a stranger" (19). Fernandez also adds that "the main focus of existentialism includes alienation and despair" (43). Mkandawire, in "Alienation and Despair in Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain*", quotes Rothwell thus:

In atheist perspective of existentialism, alienation is characterised as the separation of man from the society or from himself either because of himself or because of society. Man alienates himself from the society and others insofar as he is drawn up with himself and ceases to relate to other or his place in society (2364).

Here, alienation is conceived as a nebulous concept that derives its essence from a state of mind that is driven mainly by existential conditioning such as survival, estrangement, displacement, hopelessness and angst. The concept, thus, manifests at three major levels. First, as an existential crisis that manifests due to man's inability to comprehend existence. Two, an interpersonal crisis that can arise between individuals, an individual and the society and this usually takes the form of binary opposition in which prioritising survival becomes an existential option. Third, an intra-personal crisis that usually occurs when an individual "becomes prey to lusts and starts living a life of irrationality...and thus becomes controlled by forces outside of himself" (Jenkwe 19). Considered from a broader perspective, individuals can experience a deep sense of alienation as a result of their inability to fully comprehend the world, predict and dominate it. According to Ojoniye, the inability to meet our expectations, realise our dreams and reach our goals is the source of alienation" (39). Thus, individuals experience anxiety, estrangement, despair, alienation and frustration when they are confronted with the stark reality that some of these lofty desires cannot be attained, even if attained, cannot be held in perpetuity. This seems to be the central theme in *Hangmen Also Die*. In the text, we encounter existential characters who prioritise survival in the face of frustration and alienation.

### IV. ALIENATION AS A PROMPT FOR VIOLENT ACTIONS IN HANGMEN ALSO DIE

In *Hangmen Also Die*, the socio-economic and political imbalances in Izon State, presumably a fictitious oil producing state of the Niger Delta, creates a binary situation; the stupendously rich who control the economic base of the nation at the centre, and the marginal, the low economic class, who live in grim and exist at the behest of those who constitute the centre. This appears to be the springboard for the existential crisis that permeates the play. Izon is an oil rich state where many multinational oil companies engage in oil exploration activities in commercial quantities. While this oil deal translates into billions of naira in earned revenue to the Federal Government and the oil companies, the people from whose "veins" the crude oil is scooped are neglected and made to bear the brunt of the environmental hazards arising from oil spillage. This spillage has not only constituted health hazards for the people in the community; it has also dealt a crushing blow to their means of livelihood, farming and fishing and caused displacement and isolation for many more who are dislodged from their natural environment.

While a few members of the privileged class represented by Chief Erekosima connive with the Prison Superintendent, Daminagbo, local government chairmen and councillor to pocket the three million naira paid by the Federal Government to Izon State to ameliorate the pains arising from oil spillage and the destruction of their ecosystem, the ordinary people, typified by Yekinni, the widows and the army of unemployed youths who

constitute themselves into a suicide squad, are left in a state of frustration, estrangement, hopelessness, isolation and alienation. Thus, these existential conditionings constitute the major prompts for the actions and counteractions of the major characters in the play. Of course, the issues of "choice" and "personal responsibility" are very significant in this analysis. Here, the characters are confronted with two existential options: they either succumb to frustration, displacement and alienation or choose to revolt against them. "Choice", Sartre argues, is incumbent to dramatic characters because, in any situation they are confronted with, they are condemned to making a choice among the available ones before them. However, like the lepers in Ola Rotimi's *Hope of the Living Dead* who revolt by exerting their will against the government, alienated characters in *Hangmen Also Die* prioritise existence even in the face of hopelessness and abandonment.

From the opening stages of the play, the feeling of alienation that pervades the text is already palpable. For instance, Yekinni's audacious altercation with the Superintendent Daminagbo over his refusal to perform his role of hanging the condemned criminals reveals the morbid and sobering details of his frustrating experience. He has not only become despondent about the recurring task of hanging condemned criminals, he has gone totally disillusioned about the society's hypocrisy and insensitivity to the plights of the ordinary citizens. In a nostalgic manner, Yekinni takes Doctor through his heartrending journey of displacement and isolation:

Yekinni: (with feeling) You see, Doctor (pause) I was once a fisherman. A fisherman living by the power of my paddle and the weight of my net. My wife was the sea and it sustained me and my family with the fishes I caught day by day. I knew the joy and the calm, the peace of mind of sailing out into the belly of the ocean to rescue from the depths of its gullet, what belongs to ma. (a glow comes to his brow; the glow of a lost life). Sometimes I paddled to the horizon where the sky merges with the sea and everything is blue. There, (emphatically) I saw the navel of the rainbow! There...I saw the ceiling of heaven! There I saw the face of God! (Pause). And Doc, I was happy. A very happy man. A joyful man. A contented man (his face furls. The agony returns) But one day, on Saturday, I remember very well, in 1965, that Superintendent, that Peketubo Daminagbo, that obtuse being shaped like a water pot, came to my stilt hut at Forcados and said to me, "Yekinni, my brother-in-law, I done find job for you. Better job, government job. Warden's job. You will be warden. And be paid a salary every month (pause) I didn't even ask him how much. I was overjoyed. I dropped my paddle and my net and followed him like a fish follows fattened worm, not knowing that the worm conceals a metal hook. The hook of death. I followed him to Port Harcourt, thinking it was a decent job. Doctor, I never knew it was hanging other people! And since that day I climbed into these uniforms and put on this black glove on my right hand, and started to turn the handle of useless hanging machine, something in me has been dying. Dying daily. Doctor, for everyman I hang, a part of me dies... (17-18).

From the excerpt above, we can immediately feel, not only the sense of frustration, confusion and isolation arising from his divorce from his fishing occupation, his environment which he romanticises, but also his growing feeling of anger (anger being one of the manifestations of alienation) at the unjust killing of the people who revolt against the centrifugal forces in the society. His emotional attachment to his fishing occupation further reinforces his sense of alienation when he says... "my wife was the sea and it sustained me and my family with the fishes I caught day by day" (17). Mkandawire, citing Rothwell, describes this type of alienation that Yekinni experiences in the play when he submits that, "in atheist perspectives of existentialism, alienation is characterised as the separation of man from society or from himself either because of himself or because of society..." (2364). In this case, Yekinni's experience of alienation is occasioned by the society.

One of the possible emotional and psychological effects of alienation is hysteria. This trait is also exhibited by the hangman, Yekinni. He is bothered and tormented by the fear of the consequences of his action, as he constantly imagines being confronted by the ghosts of those he had hanged before, who now infiltrate his mind and thought, day and night. He admits this state of mind drives him into excessive alcohol consumption, possibly as a way of escape from the full weight of his action and the reality of his situation. Describing his state of mind after each of the execution he undertakes, Yekinni says to Doctor: "You see, every day we have hanging after hanging; I drink four bottles of stout and take four tablets of Valium sleeping tablets" (25). But when Doctor likens his state of mind to exhaustion, he discountenances it, insisting that

...if it was exhaustion, then I should sleep like a corpse. But I know it is not exhaustion. You see when I close my eyes, I see the faces of all the people I have hanged. Once I close my eyelids, I see them. All of them. Some will be

sneering at me. Others will be grinning. Some will be smiling with two of my children by my sides. One on my left, the other on my right (25).

What we can make out from the excerpt above is that Yekinni is merely trying to engage in emotional and mental restitution, presumably of a kind that would relieve him from his state of psychosis which he has relapsed into as a result of his past actions. He is perhaps overwhelmed by the circumstances and consequences of his actions. The seven convicts (members of the Suicide Squad) who are placed on death row owing to their complicity in the death of Chief Eresikoma can also be described as alienated characters in the play. These are ideologically vibrant, intelligent and highly educated young men who are plagued with existential predicaments brought about by the political elites in which they must prioritise existence. Karl Marx's view on this form of alienation, as quoted by Saleem, is very instructive

The state does not care about Individual's existence, in a society without communion between people and that individual in his relation to such a state does not experience a feeling of solidarity, he is only able to relate himself to it as an isolated monad. Man's inner life is divided in world split up in such a way (70-71).

This is the situation that the members of the Suicide Squad find themselves and this is presumably responsible for the sheer acts of rebellion that they perpetrate in the play. They loot from the rich and the poor; kill and maim at random without any sense of guilt or remorse. Right from their university days, they have been confounded with a lopsided socio-economic and political structure which has confined them to a life of lack and hopelessness. Their lives also seem to be devoid of purpose because, after having endured poverty at undergraduate days, they had hoped that having good degrees and good grades would place them at an advantage in securing gainful employment. But the realities of their hopeless situations soon dawned on them when they are abandoned to the vagaries of a society that has no plan for them. This sense of existential anguish experienced by the Suicide Squad can be argued to represent the anguish the playwright feels about the failure of the Nigerian postcolonial state. This sentiment is echoed by the Chorus when it says "We have been marginalised out of existence" (47). In a play within play scenario in which the gang members assume different appellations, they dramatise their hopeless situation:

R.I.P: (pointing at the picture) Here we are...

Dayan: A generation of young men and women who have nowhere to turn to.

Acid: Who are not sure of where our next meals are coming from?

Mortuary: Handsome minds with furrowed faces.

Discharge: A generation born into an epoch when nature gave us mineral wealth.

Khomeini: Mineral wealth with which we could have built the nation and fortified the future for posterity and ourselves for four generations to come.

But some wretched souls squandered the riches...

Tetanus: Who squandered that wealth and left us now in penury? Who?

Chorus: Where are the fragments of our future? (47-48).

From the above extract, we can infer that members of the Suicide Squad are driven by existential frustration. These are intelligent young men fired by survivalist ideology, but whose counteractions in the face of the contradictions in their lives can be deemed irrational. Without any feeling of remorse, the gang members justify their recourse to stealing, maiming and killing because, according to them, they are the rejects without a life of purpose. Speaking through the chorus, they wilfully brag that, "And we do what we do because we know we have no future, because we know that no matter what we do, no matter how we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us..." (91). This statement is an expression of deep existential frustration about the unjust system in the country. Despite his wealth and position in the society, Erekosima also has his own share of the experience of alienation. But unlike the other characters discussed above, Erekosima's existential condition is self-induced. Jenkwe describes this level of alienation when he says that a person becomes a prey to his lusts and starts living a life of irrationality" (19). According to him, an individual may experience self-alienation when he lusts after worldly possessions to an extent that he no longer has control over such a lust thereby losing his sense of self. Even when he is being tortured by the Suicide Squad, Erekosima still basks in the euphoria of his deeds and boasts that "politics is the art of what is possible. It is the art of survival. Personal survival! Morality does not come into it" (p116). At another instance, he says:

I prefer to maintain touch only with kings and rich men. I don't want to be soiled by the filth of poverty. My own greatness is different. It does not tolerate meddling with the creatures of swamp. The Crabs, the Mudskippers, and the Periwinkles (116-117).

It is, therefore, not surprising that Chief Erekosima would pocket three million naira paid as a compensation to a whole community, leaving the ordinary people that the money would have made some impacts in their lives, to wallow in poverty. We, indeed, have a replica of the character of Erekosima within the African political landscape where we have sit-tight leaders whose lure of power is raised above their personal safety and health. Erekosima eventually loses his hold on power as he gruesomely loses his life in the hands of the Suicide Squad.

Of course, it is not only the army of unemployed youths that are affected by Erekosima's obsession for material acquisitions. His conduct also affects Ibiaye who is made blind by the environmental hazards arising from oil exploration in Izon State. Ibiaye also recounts his journey of displacement, existential frustration and virtual impairment to Tamara, who herself, like some other women in the community, has been widowed by the unscrupulous activities of a privileged few:

Ibiaye: It was one morning. We woke up to see the sea heaving. The sea was roaring, its face black with anger. The sea was boiling. On its blue surface was something like mus. But it was oily, oily like petroleum jelly. 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 the fresh water spring form which we daily drink. Our plants began to die. Our roots to rot, our seeds shriveled. We fled. Me and my children. We fled. In canoes. But somewhere before Opukiri, our canoe capsized in an ambush of water-hyacinths. Everything we own was lost except our lives. Our lives and our arms. So, we swarm. On to the shore. But little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the film of rancid crude oil where we saw our faces as we swam. We stopped at Gborokiri, and settled there. In a tent built with stilts. On the first day my eyes were only itching. The next day I scratched throughout the night, three day later, I could no longer see the sunlight. My eyelids were swollen. And my hosts said the nearest hospital was at Port Harcourt. And where was the money for the speed boat fare to Port Harcourt? And where was the money to pay the hospital bills? Seven days later, the darkness fell. And now, I, who once showed strangers the way through the creeks, am now led by the hands... (p. 97)

Here, Irobi is using Ibiaye's existential experience to foreground the seeming contradictions in human existence. Ibiaye is made blind due to environmental hazard associated with oil exploration activities, and he could not assess good healthcare, not only because he is poor, but also because healthcare facilities in Izon State are not placed at the disposal of the common man. Thus, he does not only suffer displacement; he also experiences economic alienation that is driven by poverty. The sea, as pictured by Ibiaye, is symbolic of abundance, tranquility and comfort. It is, however, ironic that this natural resource is manipulated by man to cause discomfort to a fellow man as it is vividly captured in the play.

## V. CONCLUSION

The paper has deployed one of the existentialist literary tropes, alienation, to interrogate the crisis of survival in Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*. The study identifies frustration, hopelessness and estrangement as the main existential drivers that influence the responses of the characters in the play, in a dramatic situation that is reflective of binary opposition that eventually develops and degenerates into dramatic conflict. Individuals experience a deep sense of alienation when they encounter life in its grim reality in which their hopes, fears and desires fade away in the midst of the uncertainty of the world. The analysis, therefore, reveals that the characters in the text are alienated by the existential circumstances that are triggered by the despoliation of their environment through oil exploration activities and embezzlement of the compensation fee from the multinational oil companies by a few elite in connivance with government officials. It is this sense of failure and the responses of dramatic characters to it, that precipitate the existential crisis witnessed in the play. Consequently, the analysis finds that whether in Yekinni who is disillusioned with the task of a "hangman" and chooses revolt, the members of the "Suicide Squad" who express their frustration at the greed of the elite and corruption in governance by resulting to self-help, or Erekosima, who is outdone by his own lust and suffers self-alienation, Irobi presents dramatic characters who are caught up deep in the middle of existential crisis in which they must prioritise survival. It is, therefore, within the ambience of these existential circumstances that the analysis locates the actions and counteractions of the characters in *Hangmen Also Die* as being motivated by a sense of alienation, that which not only affects the individual characters in the text, but also that which threatens the communal existence of the people.

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