RE-IMAGED TRAGEDY IN MODERN AFRICAN THEATRE: ANALYTICAL READING OF ESIABA IROBI'S *HANGMEN ALSO DIE*

Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh & Obianuju Gladys Nwosu*
http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v18i1.7

Abstract

While classical Western tragedy focuses on individual hamartia and Aristotelian catharsis, and traditional African dramaturgy traditionally emphasizes cosmic harmony and communal ritual balance, these frameworks insufficiently capture the socio-historical realities of modern postcolonial Africa. Realties of the daily experiences in Africa will not be an exaggeration if likened to tragedy because daily, individuals romance with tragic circumstances as it regards to daily killings, poor infrastructure, economic hardship, kidnappings, political instability, bad leadership, drug abuse, rape cases amongst others; these result in unsavory living that can be likened to tragedy. This paper investigates how contemporary African drama re-images the concept of tragedy to reflect the material struggles of everyday existence. Hinged on the Hegelian theory of dialectics by Georg W.F. Hegel and Positive Heroism theory by Udenta Udenta, the paper investigated how contemporary African drama re-images the concept of tragedy to reflect the material struggles of everyday living. Using the content analytical approach of the qualitative research method, the study analyzed Esiaba Irobi's *Hang Men Also Die* as a viable case study. Through characters like the Suicide Squad and the executioner; Yekinni, the play demonstrated that systemic corruption, severe unemployment, and state neglect force citizens into desperate acts of resistance.

Key words: Tragedy, African Tragedy, Re-image, Positive hero, Insecurity.

Introduction

As the world evolves so does the perception of certain ideologies and these changes in ideologies cannot be exceptional in the case of the perception of tragedy. What would have been termed as tragedy between 18th and 19th centuries may have changed with the course of time. For instance, in traditional African setting, when one cannot have a child, it becomes a tragedy because there were no options for them other than to marry another woman and if it happens that the fault is from the man it becomes a double tragedy. This is portrayed in J.P Clark's *Song of a Goat*, in the play, Zifa could not perform his conjugal duties to his wife after having one son due to a curse from the gods, he was advised to allow his younger brother to perform the duties for him. Unfortunately, Zifa could not bear it and this pushed him into committing suicide. However, in modern times, one's inability to bear children is no longer considered an ultimate tragedy as there are many options available such as IVF, legal adoption of babies, and the option of having a surrogate mother among others. Aristotle in his time defined tragedy as stated in Britannica online dictionary; as an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude … through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions (1). A layman will simply attribute tragedy to that which causes sorrow, pain, sadness. 0 In all, tragedy is a serious action that can gestalt one into bitter reality.

The search for the meaning of human existence is central to creative art. As such, every creative endeavour is anthropocentric in helping man understand his place and purpose in life. Drama and theatre are creative expressions that reflect the human-centeredness of art through imitative actions that depict the struggles of man in a nebulous cosmos. As a medium of creative expressions, drama and theatre avail the creative artist(s) the necessary tools to interrogate the covert and overt cosmic forces that play significant roles in defining the struggles, survival, and sustenance of man in a given environment. They are both creative tools of introspection, and over the years have been involved in shaping the conventions of thoughts surrounding the evolving nature of man and society. Through careful observance of the existential realities of their time,

dramatists create stories that reflect the needs of their respective creative and cultural environments. Kelechi Ogbonna argues that "dramatists respond to dominant socio-political, economic and cultural issues in their environment with varying verves..." and this enables them "burlesque with the people's cosmological leanings and socio-political system to point ways forward..." (554). For example, the evolutionary trend in the origin of Western drama in Greece shows that the concern of the dramatists of the era was hinged on showing a cosmos driven by a theocratic order, and the challenges of mortal men towards the comprehension of themselves in a socio-political and cultural system that depended entirely on their conformity to such order. The dramatic oeuvres of earliest Greek playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides interrogate the issues of cosmic system of existence, belief and, manner of relationship between man and gods as encapsulated in the Greek worldview. Evidently, these dramatists reflect the socio-political and cultural leanings of Greece. The creative dependence on theocratic order as a muse of creation is not an exclusive preserve of Western dramaturgy because, in Africa and Asian regions, drama also reflects this serious concern. Hence, Alastair Niven affirms that:

> In ancient tragedy- whether it is Greek, Sanskrit or in the praises of Sundiata and Shaka - all human drama is enveloped in a cloak of impersonality" and revealed, "men" to be "the playthings of the gods, doomed to a cyclical re-enactment of folly and insignificance in the wake of divine justice and supremacy. (48)

Though the dual relationship between gods and men was the central focus of tragic drama, other issues considered less invocative also inspire dramatists to reflect the various human conditions of the era across different regions.

However, the purpose and relevance of tragedy between the African and European climes differ. While European tragedy advances the course of an individual, African tragedy focuses on the communal essence rather than the individual sufferings of the tragic hero which is only a means to an end. Abakporo affirms this by noting that African tragedy recognizes in part the sufferings of the tragic hero and eventual fall from grace to grass, the predetermined nature of man's existence, and the death of the individual, however, it treats them in the light of their implications for cosmic harmony and balance (57). Hence, Canice Nwosu asserts that ideally "African tragedy does not emphasize the death of the tragic hero, but his regeneration and what the community gains from it" (202). This is based on the fact that cosmology is a key to understanding the vision of African tragedy (Pheto 8). African cosmic reality is premised on a tripartite worldview that fosters interconnectedness between the living, dead and unborn as popularized by Wole Soyinka in his theory of the *Fourth Stage*. Adade-Yeboah and Owusu explaining the African cosmic relationship in line with Soyinka's vision of tragedy note that:

> African cultures emphasize a belief in the continuity of life extending from the ancestors through the living to the yet unborn. It means therefore, that the practitioners of this type of culture believe in the conjoint experience of life with their ancestors. In light of this, misfortune can be averted from the path of the living and the yet-unborn, while sudden calamities can be demystified through divination. (37)

Therefore, African tragedy has a cyclical structure, a reversible action and a community-oriented hero (Adade-Yeboah and Owusu 37) whose duty is to ensure social and cosmic stability, and integration of the three planes of existence through self-effacing sacrifice that benefits the people rather than himself. Therefore, African tragedians always try to tailor their works towards a heroism that rather than serve the hero's personal interest as in the European example serves the interest of his society (Ngwoke 44).

Theoretical Framework: Positive Heroism & Hegelian Theory of Dialectics

Positive heroism is a theory that looks at the character and qualities of a heroic protagonist in the modern African literary space. It was propounded by Udenta Udenta in 2018, in the second edition of his book *Heroism and Critical Consciousness in African Literature* as part of his descriptive theoretical postulation

on revolutionary aesthetics in African literature. The core of the theory is on the construction of man (tragic hero) within the corpus of revolutionary aesthetics as a wholesome progressive entity "historically-rooted and conscious being who acts with others for the fulfilment of humanist ideals" (Udenta 53). African humanist ideals revolve around social justice, equity and harmony. Positive heroism was thus developed to address some factors that affect the development of these ideals in postcolonial Africa, especially with reference to economic struggle, leadership, and oppression. Generally, Udenta asserts that "the construction of the positive hero was done "out of the objective political and cultural circumstances of African colonial and postcolonial history" (60), that shaped the African tragic experience. The theory thus, avows for the creation of a positive hero based on revolutionary ideals to lead the process of change. To this end, a positive hero embodies the revolutionary challenge posed to the pre-colonial variant of post coloniality rampaging in the continent (111), and thus is a carrier of progressive change.

Understanding that African society places emphasis on the collectivist approach to problem solving than on individualist struggle, Udenta theorises that a positive hero(s) is

> ...essentially collectivist character(s), not in the sense of mechanical typification and generalization, where individual traits are distorted or underdeveloped but in their firm rootedness in the tradition of the collective as against individualistic struggles, in their love of humanity and in their ability to subsume their private interests and idiosyncrasies to the will of the majority, the will of the people. (34)

The positive hero is a product of the social and political malaises of his environment and understands the mechanisms that are working against the effectuation of collective social harmony, growth and development, and what it takes to challenge these mechanisms even if it leads to his tragic fall. The positive hero is thus:

> ...Created out of the complex articulation of socio-historical phenomena that determine and sometimes over-determine environmental effects. The positive hero emerges out of concrete social circumstances and expresses an attitude and disposition, not of all the human forces that drive historical transformations, but of the progressive working people whose class identity and loyalty he or she shares. (51)

Hegelian dialectics theory is a counter-discursive paradigm on the Aristotelian tragic vision aimed at evolving a new thesis for tragedy that is based on ethical justification of equal rights, which Rachel Falkenstern notes is "embodied in the drama's heroes" (1) rather than mere depiction of the suffering of the tragic hero. Proposed by the German philosopher, Georg W. F. gHegel, the thesis of Hegelian dialectics according to Mark Roche in *Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy* is on "the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth" (12). In *The Greatness and Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy: A Companion to Tragedy*, Roche further explains that this conflict of equal rights leads to a collusion "when a hero courageously asserts a substantial and just position, but in doing so simultaneously violates a contrary and likewise just position and so falls prey to a one-sidedness that is defined at one and the same time by greatness and by guilt" (51). Unfortunately, the conflict that ensues from the ethical stance of these two opposing forces can only be resolved "with the fall of the hero" (Roche *Introduction*...12). The fall of the tragic hero thus produces a moment of resolution and reconciliation. Resolution, according to Salvatore Russo, is achieved through the destruction of the exclusive claims of provincial individuality that imperils the whole community by its isolated self-sufficiency, subjectivism, and self-seeking nature (138).

Hangmen Also Die; **A Synopsis**

Hangmen Also Die tells the story of seven members of the Suicide Squad who are incarcerated and convicted for killing the paramount ruler of Izon State, and a commissioner for Local Government, Rural

Development, and Chieftaincy Affairs Chief Isokipiri Erekosima. The play begins in the hanging yard of the Nigerian prison where Yekinni defies the order of the Chief Superintendent to hang the seven convicted members of the Suicide Squad; R.I.P, Mortuary, Dayan, Khomeini, Acid, Tetanus, and Accidental Discharge for committing murder. Yekinni's refusal to execute his job as a hangman opens up the underlying reasons behind the conviction of the Suicide Squad. The convicted criminals are university graduates whose inability to find jobs years after graduating from school resolved to take up arms for survival. Meanwhile, Tamara is embittered by the conferment of Amatameso on Chief Erekosima, a political criminal that sequestered the sum of Three Million Naira given to the community by the Federal government as compensation for oil spillage. Though she is against the menace of the Suicide Squad and even threatens to kill her son if he dares to join them, she hires them to disrupt the coronation of Chief Erekosima and to force him to bring out the remaining balance of the compensation fee which he confiscated. Unfortunately, Chief Erekosima had expended all the money. Frustrated by the Chief's arrogance the Suicide Squad decide to hang him to death. The Suicide Squad is rounded up by the police, tried, and condemned to death by hanging

The Re-Imaged Tragedy in Esiaba Irobi's *HangMen Also Die*

In *Hangmen Also Die,* the playwright shows an aspect of the societal ills faced in the country which is the problem of unemployment and embezzlement of public fund. Chief Erkosima embezzles fund for the people and is not able to refund it when he is asked to because he has expended the money on his personal interest. Based on this, the suicide squad takes law into their and decides his fate by hanging him to death. The tragedy in the play is the failure of the leaders to create employment for the masses which is one of the obligations of the state leaders. As a result of this pitfall by the government young talents were lost to crime. Not taking the interests of the masses into consideration is tragic, judging from the template of what tragedy is in African perspective as discussed earlier which stated categorically that the interest of the community supersedes individual's interest. The characters that make up the gang members are considered positive heroes because they were pushed into crime by the circumstances inherent in their environment that are considered activists for social change according to positive heroism theory that states that the characters are "historically-rooted and conscious being who acts with others for the fulfilment of humanist ideals". Also, bring to light the Hegelian theory of two individuals is right at the same time wrong. The members of the suicide squad were actually shaped by the experiences they were facing in their society and some of these experiences includes unemployment, hunger, inability to afford the basic essentials of life such as medical treatment are considered to be tragic factors.

R.I.P: We have no jobs
Acid: Therefore, we have no money (…)

Their actions were geared towards purging the society of corrupt individuals and as way of advocating for the sacrifice of the guilty rather than the sacrifice of innocent individuals. In Africa most times the blood of the innocent is used to cleanse the land as seen in Wole Soyinka's the strong breed.

Irobi in this play highlights the consequence of economic exploitation and exclusion of the youths from the socio-political development in the Niger Delta region. The Niger Delta has the highest deposit of crude oil in Nigeria. Since the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity in the region, issues of unemployment, leadership, social exclusion, poverty, and youth restiveness among other national issues have remained the problems dragging the development of the region. Irobi explores these problems in the play as issues that form the base for tragedy. The tragic conflict which is central to Hegelian tragedy and evident in the structure of this play is seen as tragedy begins early in the play to show the ethical strife that ensues between Yekinni and the Warden over the former's dissidence against the absolute authority of the state. Yekinni joins the services of the Nigerian Prisons through his brother-in-law Pekeletube Daminagbo, a

Superintendent of Prisons. Metamorphosing from a fisherman to a hangman, his duty remains to turn the handle of the Guillotine on convicted criminals condemned to die by hanging regardless of the psychological risks associated with this type of job such as alcoholism, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and nightmares, and the poor remuneration he receives monthly which he complains is inadequate to cater for the needs of his large family of nine. However, his refusal to hang the seven convicted members of the Suicide Squad becomes at first, a source of worry to the Warden but consequently an act of insubordination that turns into a fistfight between them with the prison Doctor intervening to settle the situation. Yekinni's altercation with the Warden reveals the rebellious nature of Yekinni which has been concealed by his humility and adherence to his duty over the years despite the numerous challenges the job has on his mental health and social status. Through the character of Yekinni, Esiaba is able to portray the suffering of the masses which includes hunger, poor remuneration and not having jab satisfaction. Yekinni's taciturnity thus irks the Warden who is shocked by the blunt disobedience of a junior staff in carrying out a universal order from the state to execute condemned criminals. Implicitly, Yekinni exudes the character of a Hegelian tragic hero, known for antagonizing instituted laws, especially when such law undermines or contradicts his vision and commitment to personal ideals and goals that are predicated on humanism. It is on this innate characteristic that Yekinni does not only challenge the Warden's command but also the authority of the Head of State to heighten the conflict that exists between his personal ideal and the universal order that is germane in the apprehension of the Hegelian tragic theory. The dialogue between the Warden and Yekinni below shows the conflict between the universal and the particular as Hegel conceives it.

Warden: Yekinni, I am ordering you, as your superior officer, to go into the hanging room and...

Yekinni: Do wetin?

(*He moves to the pavement of the Hanging Room*, *sits and begins to snuff*)

Warden: (*irate*) Yekinni, look, if you don't move into the hanging room, I will go and report you to the Chef Superintendent.

Yekinni: (*Snuff in his nose*) Superintendent? Who be Superintendent? Why not report me to the Director-General of Prison Services or even the Head of State?

Warden: Yekinni, I will...

Yekinni: Why you dey waste your time? (*He stops*) I don tell you say I no go hang those boys. No be so? (*Stands*) look, Warden, as I don take my mouth talk am, as Yekinni don talk am (Snuffs) Nobody, I say nobody in this world not even the Head of State can make me hang those boys. (14)

Undoubtedly, the standard operating procedure in a work environment like the prison is hierarchical. Yekinni being a junior staff though older in age is bound by law to obey the last order which is universal regardless of the age difference between him and the Warden as the Doctor eventually reminds him that "you can be his father, Yekinni, but he is your superior officer", as such "You have no locus standi to disobey him" (16).

What drives Yekinni's strange disobedience is an awakened consciousness of the reality of his job which he has for long tried to suppress. As a hangman with exceptional skill in executing condemned criminals, he comes to the realization that the job robs him of the wholeness of being and the ability to retain his humanity. Therefore, as he confesses to the Doctor, "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 that useless hanging machine,

something in me has been dying. Dying daily! Doctor, for everyman I hang a part of me dies...” (18). In addition to the morbidity of his existence, he also recognizes that the condemned criminals “are also human beings” (20) like him, and even though some of them are masked with guilt others like the seven members of the Suicide Squad do “not deserve to die” (22) owing to the circumstances that led to their arrest and conviction as murderer deserving of death by hanging. To Yekinni, therefore, the only way of manifesting his cognition of a new consciousness of being is by going against the universal law of the state that had guided his operations before, even if it means losing his job to regain his sanity. While his resolve is to ultimately oppose the law that validates his portfolio as a hangman the Doctor reminds him of the enormity of the crime committed by the Suicide Squad;

Doctor: Look; Yekinni, you are not the law. Neither did you make the law. They broke the law. They killed a man. They have to pay. And with their lives. They killed a man, a fellow human being (22).

Yekinni’s disregard of the law is one of the attributions of the Hegelian and positive heroes, who despite their knowledge about the consequences of their actions dare to, contravene the imperialist laws of the state to effectuate their idealistic fervour for the purpose of evoking the humanism of revolution that is driven by empathy for the oppressed irrespective of the crimes committed by the peasants in their bid to survive the harsh reality of their existence. As a beneficiary of institutionalized oppression, Yekinni believes that the idea of retribution does not substantially hold for these seven criminals whose crime was necessitated by the desire for justice. Therefore, Yekinni’s refusal raises the question of the ethical substance behind the killing of Chief Erekosima for which the seven members of the Suicide Squad must pay with their lives.

Political and economic factors are responsible for the fall of modern African society. African society in the postcolonial era is heavily polarised by the conflict between the proletariats and bourgeoisie over the control of resources. While the bourgeoisie dominate and control all the means of production and distribution of resources by instituting a structure of hegemony to continue to exploit the peasants, they latter evolve various means of revolting against their oppressors, and in most times through violent means. Driven by the exploitation and oppression of the peasants by the political elite, the Suicide Squad evolved as a measure of responding to the social and political inequality, exclusion, and repression in their social environment. The Suicide Squad is made up of seven university graduates who for lack of jobs and the pressure to survive resort to arms to eke a living. As undergraduates, youths were pregnant with ideas, dreams, and ambitions to change their nation, but confronted with the harsh reality in society after graduation, especially unemployment-which is a central theme in the dramaturge of Irobi-that collapsed and condemned their dreams, they are led to a life of dissident that further exposed them to social vices with significant adverse effect not just to their lives but the lives of the members of their community whose peace and sleep are stolen by the heinous operations of the Suicide Squad’s as Tamara notes;

Tamara: you are the excrement of bandits who will not let us sleep at night. You come in your various disguises plundering everything we have including our peace (79).

As rejects of society and products of a failed system that fails to recognize the importance of their youth, they affirm that what they have become and do with their lives is because “we know we have no future, because we know no matter what we do, no matter how much we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us” (55). The above line depicts clear loss of hope. An individual without hope is negative and considered tragic because youths are considered the labour force and future of a society. Lamenting further on their exclusion from the process of development, we are made aware of the effects of economic and political survival in the existential question and the tragic implication of the continuous denigration of the youths from the corpus of their existence.

R.I.P: We have no jobs

Acid: Therefore, we have no money

Dayan: Which means we cannot marry

R.I.P: And consequently, cannot have children

Chorus: We are rejects of the world

R.I.P: (*violently*) So, if today, we have turned to violence as the only weapon to redeem our destiny redeem our fate, our future and our manhood. It is because...

Dayan: We have no place in the politics of this nation (46).

Violence ultimately becomes the only means of survival in a harsh economic environment that is manned by corrupt politicians and public administrators like Chief Erekosima and Pekeletubo Daminagbo, the Chief Superintendent of Prisons whose command to execute the Suicide Squad is radically rebutted by his in-law Yekinni, after learning the truth about the reason for the conviction of these youths from his usual routine valediction with convicted crimes before their death.

Chief Erekosima and Daminagbo are representatives of the oppressive class that take advantage of their position in society to misappropriate the commonwealth of the people and also impose inhibitive laws that further suppress the flowering of the peasants. The Niger Delta region, where the play is set is notorious for biodegradation and other adverse social effects of oil mining since the discovery of oil in the region, some of which include, poverty, hunger, food shortage due to chemical contamination of farmlands, and agricultural products, displacement and dislocation of people from their communities and gross underdevelopment of the rural areas. Such is the plight of Ibiaye, who lost not only his sight but his two sons to oil mining in the Niger Delta. Despite these challenges affecting the people, their representative in government Chief Erekosima, and his ilk further deny them the only compensation for their loss. The subversion of the funds paid to the community by the government to assuage their pain and loss leads to the tragic death of Chief Erekosima and the incarceration and conviction of the Suicide Squad, as Yekinni explains to the Doctor.

Yekini: ...Some time ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which as you know is an riverine state, the sum of three million naira as 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 councillors and local Government Chairman to confiscate the 3 million naira. The councillors 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 young men steeped in...

Doctor: I didn't know this side of the story.

Yekinni: And that Commissioner they killed is Superintendent Daminagbo's godfather. He smuggled Daminagbo into Prison Service after Daminagbo failed West African Scholl Certificate in 1962. He also gave him N200,000 out of his own one million.

Doctor: I didn't know this side of the story.

Yekinni: That Commissioner who they killed was also responsible for Daminagbo's rapid promotions in the Prison Service. That is why, when all citizens of Izon State petitioned the Governor asking him to commute the death sentence of these boys into life-imprisonment, Chief Superintendent Daminagbo went to the Governor's

> house and spoiled his mind. He told the Governor that these boys were armed robbers, criminals, head hunters, terrorists, everything.

The tragedy of the people's existence and the agony of their exclusion from the dividend of their commonwealth which Chief Erekosima and other political representatives of the people covet naturally bestow on the people the right to demand their share of the money. However, the greedy nature and arrogance of Chief Erekosima make it even more apt for the members of the Suicide Squad to demand justice even in its most cruel form, having lost hope of any form of redemption. More so, Yekinni's revelation above also exposes the corruption pervading the process of employment where qualified graduates like the seven members of the Suicide Squad are sacrificed for the employment of unqualified personnel like Daminagbo for the protection of the hegemonic institution of oppression and suppression of the truth while exposing the qualified graduates to the life of penury where violence is the only means of survival and identification. Even though the Doctor claims ignorance of the part of the story that he is not privy to him, Irobi uses his ignorance and support for the law against the truth to enforce the ethical collusion that is driven by the hero's one-side reason that leads to his downfall.

Yekinni's fixity of thought and resilience to hold on to a truth based on sentiment as the Doctor informs him, and not on reality and facts as Superintendent Daminagbo also reminds him raises the question of what is true and real, and the place of truth and fact in the development of the tragic collision. Yekinni's resolve to turn against the same system to which he belongs and had worked for many years ultimately enforces the collision of an ethical substance between two equal rights; that is, his right to refrain from what he believes stains his new self-consciousness, humanism and sanity, and the right of the state to exterminate criminals whose existence poses a serious threat to humanity. Undoubtedly, Yekinni's trait is the extension of the psychological state of the members of the Suicide Squad who conceive that the only way to imprint their angst is to turn against the society they belong. Their ethical rectitude to determine the value of life, by taking the position of God to act and restore justice to humanity as R.I.P underlines in a mantra that underscores Irobi's tragic vision, "when man waits and waits for God to act and God does not act, man takes up the role of God and acts", is seriously questioned by Chief Erekosima who believes as Tamara affirms that the Suicide Squad lack the legitimate compass to judge and execute judgment on him because "there is a thief in all of us" (120). As such the ethical stance on which the angry youths desire to exert their justice is smeared by the amorality of their operations in their community, ranging from the lesser crime of stealing "television sets to pants and singlet and braziers hung out on the washing line" (61) to serious crimes like having "the licence to kill" (52) those who transgress their jungle ordinance. To Chief Erekosima, therefore, the morality of their desire is faulted by the impurities of their activities that negate the universal law of the state. Hence, he queries Tamara, the architect of his fall

> **Erekosima**: Why should they take my life. Why? What right have they to sit in judgment over me? (120)

Unfortunately for Chief Erekoisma, the youths see his death as the ultimate price to be paid for this ego, arrogance, and total disregard of the people's wish for justice and development. Like Yekinni who is not afraid of losing his job for failing to obey the state law, the youths "are not afraid of death" (79) because there is more consolation and redemption in death than in life, which they fear the most. Life, therefore, means trauma and uncertainty of a future that is ruptured by unscrupulous politicians like Chief Erekosima.

To resolve a coated conflict that can endanger the authority of the state, Yekinni opts to resign willingly from his role as the hangman to allow the state to take its legitimate cause. His wilful resignation deflates his fixity of thought, while his failure to ultimately assert his will on the fate of the condemned members of the Suicide Squad produces harmony and reconciliation which are the constituent parts of the Hegelian tragic resolution.

Aristotelian concept of tragedy lays emphasis on royalty, making use of embellished language and that every tragedy must incorporate element of pity, fear and catharsis – the purgation of emotion. This concept also states that the hamartia of the tragic hero brings about his down fall. This was clearly illustrated in Sophocle's play *Oedipus Rex.* King Oedipus in his quest to find a solution to the calamity that has befallen his community runs into a discovery that he killed his own father and married his mother really shattered him. In the process of purgation of emotion, he plucked out his eyes and it is his pride (hamartia) that pushed him into the cruel discovery and harsh reality of his life.

Arthur Miller on his part came up with another concept of what tragedy should actually be. In his concept, tragedy and the common man, Miller is of the opinion that anybody can be a tragic character and must not come from a royal family. He articulated that tragedy is as a result of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly. It has to do with an individual that is making efforts towards getting his rightful position in his society. He argued further that tragic flaws is not a trait that is peculiar to elevated or royal characters alone. Miller vividly buttressed his idea of tragedy of a common man in his play *Death of a Salesman.* Willy Loman who is an ordinary individual without an elevated position, he is seen struggling through life and his pride (hamartia) brought about his down fall because pride did not allow him take up the job offered by friend Charley but was bent on achieving his dreams of being an established business man.

Africans have a world view that believes in the existence of cosmic world. This cosmic world is made up of three orbs – the living, the dead, and the unborn. Basically, laws that constitute the African traditions are constructed solely to maintain a cyclic balance between the three orbs. Traditional African societies believe that the individual is part of a cycle of life which is a product of time and space and that African identity is usually sought out tribally, communally, and by kindred because traditional African communities do not hold the same myth, beliefs and social systems; Princewill states that "communalism is the hallmark of Africanism" (59) and Burnett in his own opinion states that "African traditional societies place a very high premium on communities. Obligations to family and the wider community (clan or tribe) supersede personal needs. Major decisions are made communally. "Individualism is despised" (6). Tragedy therefore, in traditional African society is when an individual does what will jeopardize the peaceful harmony and safety of the community and also, when the harmony that exists in between the three orbs are disrupted.

John Pepper Clark's approach on the discussion of tragedy is quite different from Irobi's approach. John Pepper Clark tackled tragedy from the angle of regeneration as portrayed in his play *Song of a Goat.* In the play, the character of Zifa could not perform his conjugal duties to his wife after having one son due to a curse from the gods, he was advised to allow his younger brother to perform the duties for him; Zifa could not bear the thought of it and then resolved to commit suicide. At present, one's inability to bear children in this 21st century can no longer be considered a total tragedy as there are many options available to abate such challenges and these options include IVF, legal adoption of babies, and the option of having a surrogate mother, among others.

Wole Soyinka's approach tackled it from the angle of maintaining cosmic balance between the three orbs in his play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, the King's Horseman delayed in completing his duty of accompanying the spirit of their king to the ancestral world, Olunde his son knowing the implication of such action dies in his father's stead. These attempts are to save the cosmological balance between the world of the living and the world of the ancestor and by extension not to cause a problem for the yet unborn.

Conclusion

Having established the revolving concepts of tragedy both from the Western and African point of views, this research categorically states that tragedy in our present times has metamorphosed into more delicate and complicated aspects. Tragedy has gone beyond the purgation of emotion, it has gone beyond the interruption of the peaceful coexistence between the orbs as discussed in previous chapter. For tragedy at present, reflects the activities of man against his fellow man. It is the neglect of our traditional African culture which makes man disregard his basic cultural and social values surmounting to the ills experienced in the present day living which includes incessant kidnapping, negative ritual killings for wealth. The

unstable economic situation within the country which propels most of the country's qualified and talented citizens to migrate to other countries in search for a more stable economy. The political menace in our today's African society possessed with individuals who openly loot public fund with no remorse is indeed tragic. This research therefore, make bold to state that the concept of tragedy in African should be re-imaged in order to accommodate the contemporary subject matters being experienced daily. The selected play of Esiaba Irobi justifiably presented the problems we experience and face today which includes – unemployment, insecurity, economic instability, poor infrastructure, poor health care facilities among other numerous ills. As Nigeria grapples with prevailing economic, political, and social instabilities, modern African tragedy delves into these profound human and social circumstances while emphasizing the significance of tragic heroes in advocating for social change that will benefit society. This research has observed that the tragic factors in our current times include poverty, corruption, unemployment, misappropriation of public fund by elected and appointed civil and public officers, insecurity and youth restiveness. This simply highlights that Modern African tragedy originates from the decay of societal values and the necessity to reinstate social justice and fairness. Tragedy has metamorphosed beyond maintaining cosmic balance or a conscious attempt in maintaining peace between the supernatural and natural, therefore, tragedy in the contemporary society can be said to been re-imaged to be the activities of men, the actions of men and the erosion of total social values; because man in today's world has no regard for norms nor taboos, this is the modern day tragedy.

***Prof. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh**
Department of Theatre and Film Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Anambra State, Nigeria
traciechima@yahoo.co.uk

***Obianuju Gladys Nwosu**
Department of Theatre and Film Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Anambra State, Nigeria
og.nwosu@unizik.edu.ng

References

Abakporo, Princewill Chukwuma. Tragedy and African Cosmic Reality: Readings in Wole Soyinka's *Death and The Kings Horseman* and Esiaba Irobi's *The Fronded Circle*. *English Language, Literature & Culture* 7.2(2022): 57-61. Accessed 20/10/2022. http://www.sciencepublishinggroup.com/j/ellc

Amonyeze, Chinenye Ogboo. The New Humanist Ideals: A Hermeneutic Study of Esiaba Irobi's Freudian Heroes. A Dissertation of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2012.

Asuamah Adade-Yeboah and Edward Owusu. *The Tragic Hero of the Modern Period – The African Concept*. English Language and Literature Studies; Vol. 3, No.4;2013. Published by Canadian Centre of Science and Education. ISSN 1925-4768 E-ISSN 1925-4776.

Diala, Isidore Okeawolam. *Dionysus, Christ, Agwu and the African Writer*. Enugu: Victojo Production, 2019

Falkenstern, Rachel C. *Hegel's Theory of Tragic Heroes: The Historical Progress of Subjectivity*. A Dissertation of Temple University, 2016. Accessed 31-1-2023. https://scholarshare.temple.edu/handle/20.500.12613/1187

John Pepper Clark. *The Song of a Goat.* Ibadan: MBARI, 1961.

Irobi, Esiaba. *Hangmen Also Die*. Enugu: ABIC, 1989.

Ogbonna, Kelechi Stellamaris. "Looking Inwards: Cosmological Aesthetics as Change Indicators in Selected Plays of Esiaba Irobi." *Theatre, Culture and Change*. Book of Proceedings: Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA) 29th Annual International Conference. Ed. Nkemakonam Aniukwu. Awka: Fab Anieh Nig Ltd, 2016. 554-564

--- Online dictionary. https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature/theory-of- tragedy. accessed on 19th November, 2021.

Pheto, Rakgomo. *Perspectives of Tragedy in Black South African Drama: An analysis of Selected Plays by Zakes Mda, Mbongeni Ngema and Maishe Maponya*. A Dissertation of Potchefstroomse Universiteit virChristelike Hoer Onderwys, 2002

Roche, Mark W. Introduction to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy. *PhaenEx*. 1.2 (2006): 11-20. Accessed 31-01-2023. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237627102_Introduction_to_Hegel's_Theory_of_Tragedy

Udenta, Udenta O. *Heroism and Critical Consciousness in African Literature*. Second Edition. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2018.