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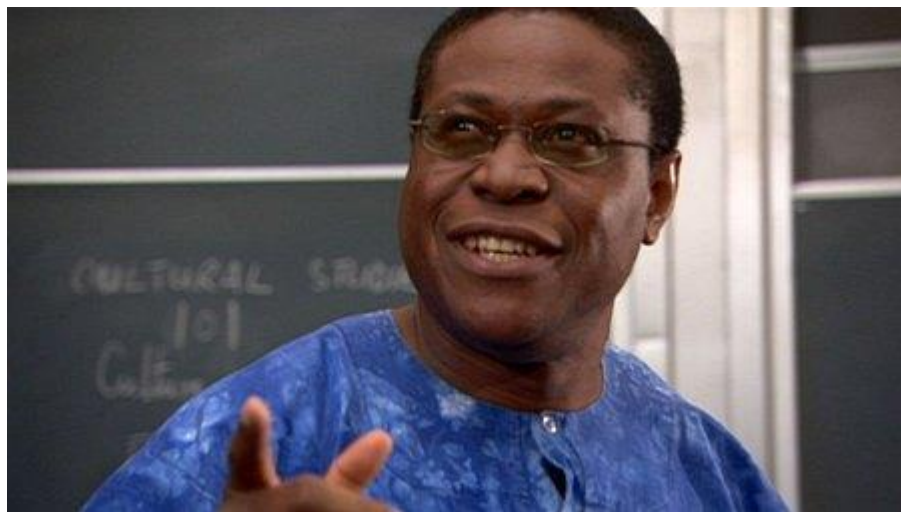
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Existence as Paranoia in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi*

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Esiaba Irobi (1960-2010)

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of existence as paranoia and the many shades of intrigues, primitive as they are intricate, they attract and dispel in Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi*. Amongst these are death and paranoia. While focusing on the phenomenon of existence, besides the lives and activities of all the major characters in the two texts which culminating in the question of how death and its haunting echoes affect them, this work studies those characters who miss the web of death only to be caught in the net of paranoia. Paranoia here is interpreted as madness. Paranoia alone, with death, or mostly with, but not limited to the burden of history, memory, and culture, serves as the remote and immediate reason for the activities of the characters, which take place within the super-structural and figural image of "time" in the form of the (old) year and the approaching new year. The explorations of these are further entrenched in the mainstream of literature comparatively, using the hermeneutical critical method which presupposes that the meaning derivable from any literary text must be propped by a majority of textual existents contained therein and supported by the entire body of the discourse of tradition. This article concludes that Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* are works of existential significance, where existence as paranoia plays out.

Keywords: Esiaba Irobi; existence as paranoia; *Hangmen Also Die*; *Nwokedi*; Nigerian drama

Introduction

Human life has to be directed toward some end. The end is invariably multi-dimensional in scope, depth and meaning. All these, as well as the inexplicable, engage in a skein of relationships called existence, an endemic problem and a major preoccupation for some philosophers. The existential or what it takes to exist could be very a very complex phenomenon. But as it pertains to *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi*, existence through paranoia stretches its signification beyond the conventional to include madness. A renowned authority on Esiaba Irobi studies and criticism, declares that Irobi's "deep anchorage in the oral tradition of his Igbo ethnic group, legends of enigmatic and daring deity-heroes, its love of the mysteries of life and transcendence of the human spirit, its rousing chants, masquerades, and dramaturgy remained the indispensable source of creative and critical thinking" (Diala 20). This is true, but also true is the fact that existence, of the intricate sort, also plays an important role in enunciating meaning in his works.

Absence of Paranoia and the Presence of Madness

In both texts, the absence of paranoia is the presence of madness and the absence of madness is the presence of paranoia. They engage in alternating substitutive rotation that nonetheless echoes each other. The fear of harm, of someone pursuing another with the intent to hurt, is a medical case of psychiatry. But there could be a metaphorical twist in the leanings of paranoia. A remote prompt of these is failure or failings. Man as represented in these texts is not a superman, but belongs somewhere in the realm of signification imposed on by meaning – the kind that Aiyejina believes is “manifestly an object with power” but “not endowed with unlimited power, for sometimes he failed so often” (1). Even when he achieves “the objects of his desires” it “was a matter of frequent experience” in order to master the technique of acquisition (1). Man’s failure, therefore, marks his descent into an existence that can be uncomfortably articulated paranoia where the unreasonable is seen as the reasonable and insensible the sensible. It is an uncomfortable situation, the sort about which Albert Camus says that in living naturally, “You continue making the gestures commanded by existence for many reasons, the first of which is habit” (13). The fact and the bearing of existence are the reason why there is “discomfort in the face of man’s own inhumanity” (21) and one of the various ways in which this fact is encountered is the idea of death.

Hermeneutic Analysis

We shall go about the analysis of these texts under study using hermeneutics because of its capabilities of always managing to bring so many textual existents into consideration as a critic arriving at an interpretative scheme, namely that of existence. Ricoeur defines hermeneutics as the “art” that discerns “the discourse in the work” (*Hermeneutics* 139). But one must “understand” the work through interpretation and appropriation. Interpretation, a central problem of hermeneutics (165), takes place fully where the notion of textual autonomy is a foremost requirement. Appropriation, on the other hand, is “understanding at and through distance” of the author whose intention as regards the text is totally unnecessary” (143). This independence, that is textual autonomy, is the situation that makes understanding, as it follows the dynamics of the work from what it says to that about which it says to that about which it speaks, to constitute the hermeneutic circle. The fusion of horizon as a result of this circle discloses and discovers a world of illusion which is “metaphoric because it is false with regard to the object” it seeks to represent (Derrida 227). This is the mode of analysis throughout this paper.

Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi*

Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* are veritable works demanding critical attention especially with regards to the above stated realm of analysis. Until May 4, 2010 in Berlin, Germany where he died of cancer, Irobi was a professor at New York University, Towson University, and Ohio University's School of Theatre. Though the works which form our subject of analysis have not won an award, his play, *Cemetery Road*, won the prestigious World Drama Trust Award for playwriting in 1992. Yet the artistic power evidenced in these works is yet to be discovered let alone their literary relevance to the Nigerian literary tradition.

Modulations of Existence

Reading *Hangmen Also Die*, we stumble upon the fact of existence in a statement made by its hangman character. In carrying out his job, Yekinni in response to a surprise question put to him by Doctor whether the young men waiting for the hangman's noose attacked him or not, replies that:

Even with their hands chained, they swung them about like axes, like swords. Two wardens were wounded. Doctor, that was when I knew that these young men do not want to die. They don't deserve to die. Doc, can't you see? *They are too young to die* (*Hangmen Also Die* 12).

The interpretation of death proceeds from this section and brings the two texts into its sphere, showing how the characters are, remotely or by proximity, involved in one mighty bowl called existence.

Yekinni is only referring to the RIP, Mortuary, Tetanus and Accidental Discharge and the other three whose lives he has been mandated by his superior officer and, covertly, by the means of his livelihood, to take. But the dialectic of their qualification for death remains arguable. Death's call in this instance must not be answered. The killing of Commissioner Erekosima was accidental. Though there is a willed intent to so do, it was never systematically carried out with thoroughness and precision. Twice, he is let loose and has to die off-stage outside the descriptive landscape of the text. Well, the reason for this slack-handedness could not be far-fetched. They, the Suicide Squad, have always been used to petty stealing of household electronic gadgets, even things so demeaning as a woman's bras and underpants. Tamara's infused and induced idealism and revolution is to be aborted in its improper carriage. Their lapse is quickly made up, analogously, for by the Ekpe age group in *Nwokedi* as Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr meet their ends in the hands of Nwokedi whose act appears to have a trait of "the rough beast" (Akwanaya and Anohu 153).

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Motives

The motives behind these two strains of action in the both texts appear to be ideologically – at one extreme, and at another extreme, cosmically – impelled. In *Nwokedi*, Arikpo and Nwokedi's father have been accused of stealing the future of the youths – a generation of unemployed youths – through the non-fulfillment of election promises. They rather accumulated wealth to themselves and their families. In the case of Arikpo, he has not even acquired it for his family, but for himself alone, as we are told he burnt his wife and three children for the flimsy reason that she has been pestering him not to partake in gun purchases and in the evil of politics. He, Arikpo, confesses as much:

I never went into the Senate to make arguments for anybody's betterment. ... I only went there to graft some skin on the scar itching on my psyche. The scar of poverty and its attendant inferiority complex. Nwokedi, I went into the Senate to hang my portrait on the walls of the Senate (72-73).

Arikpo's intent is, therefore, aptly summarized in the above quoted remarks of his. We glean that whatever would attempt to hinder this mission would then be removed through whatever means. A similar remark had also been poured out by Nwokedi Snr. But unlike Arikpo's which is flat, terse, unrepentant and unremorseful, his makes us feel the confusedness that induces and engulfs human decisions and actions in moments of confrontation with hard facts of life and in the earnest appeal for understanding. We hear him:

Torn between two angry civilizations.... blinking from the dust of the clash of their hooves. Political hybrids, we are a confused generation.... We failed because we were selfish. We failed because we thought only for ourselves, our families and our tribes. That is why we are where we are today. That is why we are trapped like prisoners in this narrow porch of history ...we had no vision... But at least we created a system (77-78).

There is the tone of self-confession and appeal for understanding – a quality reluctantly makes him worthy of death. He contrasts from nearly all angles with Chief Erekosima whose tongue has just one sole purpose – the outpouring of venom and threat to the Suicide Squad. Even when he attempts to make confessions as to the whereabouts of the compensation money he stole, he does it care-feely, and

only after he has been harassed, coerced and beaten. Of the three, only Nwokedi Snr has the potential for nobility; the rest being villains.

Circumstantial Events

The so-called circumstantial burning of Arikpo's house at Ugep which leaves his wife and three children dead in *Nwokedi* evokes empathy. Although Arikpo has purportedly faked sullenness and sorrow until a thorough examination of their ashes alters his mien and finds him guilty. The contrast in colours in the supposed ashen remains of the burnt family brings the truth to the fore: the colour of furniture is black and the colour of burnt human remains is grey.

There is something in daring that brings about negative consequences. This appears to be the cord that Arikpo seems to be tugging at, starting from his declaration for the senate when he has been severally warned not to. And when Nwokedi disowns his father and subsequently handpicks Ozoemena Nwakanma to replace his own father in the senate, he also dares. This appears to foreshadow worse things to come, including death. Nwokedi Snr could not see them, but Arikpo does, for he says the "... the times are bad" (54).

As for Arikpo he pays with the death of his father and mother. Although six months extension of the service year is all Nwokedi gets for daring to be different at the passing out parade ground, where he rejects all counsel to go to field, he is only saved from the clubbing of the military personnel by a hair's breadth. A string of such fortune where one dares and survives is also found in Major General Dogon Burra who takes over the reins of power by force for a flimsy reason. He says he wants: "to save this nation from religious fanaticism, economic sabotage, murder by letter-bombs, and political tyranny... in order to restore patriotism, discipline, peace and stability to the nation" (89).

Peace and Stability?

But if "peace and stability" is to be one of their ultimate goals, then, by extension, we do not see them in the lives of Captain Ahab and his buccaneering and 'sea-dogging' friends, for he defies them and confiscates the money meant for the confraternity for personal use. They quickly gave him mock resistance that eventually leads to his death, his haunting ghost thereafter notwithstanding. What he fails to achieve while alive, he is unable to achieve while in ghost form: vengeful killing of

Nwokedi. Here, the cultural belief in the world of ethics finds itself deflated in the text where a supposed all-powerful ghost amazingly loses all potency and vengefulness.

So when this Nwokedi, who is untouchable and beyond harm to military men, the ghost, and the confraternity “Capone”, comes to Arikpo, welcoming his head as the substitutive and paschal lamb, Arikpo could not help but *yield*. Like Nwokedi, Yekinni dares and lives thereafter in *Hangmen Also Die*. Although unlike Nwokedi, he feels repentant and remorseful for the death blows he has dealt to many by virtue of the discharge of his money-earning duties – hanging men. In fact, it is this repentant stance that makes him dare even when the warden in a routine command of those in authority says: “I will make you do it” (6). To the warden, he replies: “Nobody, I say nobody, nobody in this world not even the Head of State can make me hang those boys”(6). And when the Superintendent eventually comes, he pulls and hurls his uniform at the superintendent of prisons, accompanying it with “I shall return to the sea. I shall return to my paddle and my net” (93). He is, in earnest, referring to his first and former occupation – fishing.

The Suicide Squad

The Suicide Squad also dare. Initially, they are a rag-tag group, resorting to pecuniary stealing in the neighborhood. Of course, the victims of this kind of stealing are the poor people in the vicinity while those which ought to be their target, those who had robbed them of their future, are treated with kid gloves. Tamara injects life into the group. From the point of their meeting with her to the point when the policemen intervene in the palace, the venue of a coronation, they have been noble. The confusedness of Ibiaye due to his handicap makes the mobile policemen shoot him thinking him to be in full possession of his faculties and provoking the heroism in Tamara and consequently, Dimeari. Tamara rises, disobeying the order to lie flat when she sees that Ibiaye has been shot. She gets shot too. The son, seeing his mother shot, rises to offer her some help and he gets shot as well. This singular incident of three deaths and two in family brings about the conclusive annihilation of a family whose breadwinner has died. They dare and die. Theirs is severally different from the daring of Chief Erekosima who confiscates three million naira and distributes it according to the convenience and the dictates of his own heart, leaving the rest for his further selfish and personal enjoyment.

Dimeari even dares to join the Squad ready to take in his stride all that might come his way, including death. He says he needs “something violent” (51). After the beating that nearly blinds him,

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he still musters the courage to be hidden away when his mother comes searching, an illustration of his resolve. What would have been an intellectual furnishing of what daring means and what it takes to dare, finally condescends from the apex of glory to the valley of ignominy when Dr. Ogbansiegbé, with the impeccable suffusion of Marxist creeds, stages a political comeback. His rugged antics of arson and killing, learnt from unlearned political opponents, rebounds through his own brought-ups. He is, therefore, old enough to die. He dies because he ventures to dare using his own human instruments as though they were machines unknown that as subjects, the burden of memory, history and culture are far from their grasps as mere instruments in the hands of bad times.

The Burden of Memory, History and Culture

The metaphoric use of the word “burden” and its consequent meaning is at stake in this section. Memory and history are interconnected and related to this metaphoric usage. History, an issue that is as aporetic as it is somewhat inexplicable, has memory at its service because time drags it far into the past as the instant, the moment keep pulling it into the present. Ricoeur declares that “the analysis of time is set within time” (*Time and Narrative* 3:5).

He continues that experience as compilation is the “relation of indebtedness which assigns to the people of the present the task of repaying their due to people of the past – to the past” (157). The analysis of its “immanent structures” (158), and condensation of actions which have taken place within a moment, building up into several moments, and consequently, stretching out to become history, make memory history and culture to be born. But memory becomes a burden when the past weighs fatally on the actions of an individual or a group, leaving them practically at its mercy. Because of the magnitude of memory’s power, it has the potential of enacting, re-enacting and configuring history and culture, and it is at their service, either through the individual or by the group, and always in contention in wanting to “to be thought” (Ricoeur, *The Conflict* 288).

Infected with Socio-political and Cultural Spasms

The time in which human activities take place in both *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi* is a period infected with socio-political and cultural spasms. Entire societies suffered reverberations in all corners of the universe. In *Hangmen*, Yekinni’s memory of the past life cleaves to him. That which is Peketelubo’s doing becomes the dual undoing of both himself and Peketelubo’s. He has been done a favour to take up a position in Prisons’ service as a Hangman and he has discharged this meritoriously.

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But the past never leaves him – his fishing and the serenity that follows the carriage of his duties are all gone. When the Jeremiad mood catches hold of him, he holds it in return with his clasp even stronger. He tells the doctor that ill-advises him:

I was once a fisher man, a fisherman living by the power of my paddle and the weight of my net. My life was the sea and it sustained me and my family ... 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 man Sometimes I paddled to the horizon where the sky merges with the sea and everything is blue. There, ... I saw the navel of the rainbow! ... I saw the ceiling of heaven. There... I saw the face of God ... I was happy. A very happy man. A joyful man. A contented man (*Hangmen Also Die* 8).

Past versus Present

Although he further remarks that the call to serve in the prison is an event that brought more than joy to his life when he took up the job, that feeling was to depart from him leaving him to be oppositionally juxtaposed both in contents and what these contents provoke. A cursory look at some phrases shows that he is in dire need of those inchoate experiences and meaning which everyone in the texts is in search of and have failed to have. Amongst them all, who could be referred to as having got “joy,” “calm,” “peace of mind,” “the ceiling of heaven,” “the face of God,” or could be said to be “happy” and a “contented man” and woman? None. Of the two texts, Yekinni appears a hero because he identifies what he wants, differentiates the past from the present, and damns any consequences to go for them. Against or beside him, every other character stands or falls; even at this moment, not all can be compared to his degree. The doctor of the prisons, blackmailing him to throw away the nonsensical ideal that comes to naught cannot stand with Yekinni. Hear what he says: “Yekinni, you have suddenly lost your nerve, your iron nerve” (8). And again, “If you go on like this, Yekinni, you’ll be sacked” (9). To which, he replies “I don’t mind” (9). It is this iron resolution that the Warden ascribes mental derangement, the type he calls “Afternoon madness” (20), by which he stresses its acuteness, periodicity, intensity, and duration. Even the Superintendent when he is called does little to make him do his blared orders. Rather than witness immediate obedience as usual, Yekinni tells him: “I shall return to the sea... I shall return to my living as a fisherman ... the sea is life! (92-93).

Yekinni is not alone in the group of persons whose pasts like disoriented ghosts, are haunting them, we have the Suicide Squad headed by R.I.P. They are the renegades of Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe. They are called “The COMRADES” (24). The era of comradeship continues, but this would have far-reaching effect on their future such that by the time they are to meet seven years after graduation, they quickly reorganize and fall back on the past. RIP says: “So, there, on the corridor of the Directorate for Employment, we remembered Dr. Ogbansiegbe’s speech on the uses of Terrorism ...we formed this outfit: the Suicide Squad” (30,31). To which Acid responds in an expatiating manner, “Terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all down-trodden people seeking to combat oppressive governments” (30). It is this illegitimate tactic that is used by the squad in terrorizing their neighborhood for a very long time. The memory of Campus is brought to functional use in this circumstance.

Immoral Tactic against Immoral Tactic

The question to be asked is how downtrodden are they? And what kind of oppressive government are they fighting or to use their own words “combating”? If, according to Acid’s exclamation, their tactic belongs to the downtrodden, how many of the other downtrodden in Izon State resort to it? None. And the reason is not because they are richer, but because they have chosen not to meet the immoral with an equally immoral tactic in order to wrest from the immoral what he has immorally acquired. Take Tamara, Dimeari’s mother and Ibiwari, Waritimi’s mother, for example. These are widows with an only son each. But their moral levels are as high as the Squad’s is low. Tamara, as a widow, is offered a hundred thousand naira but she refuses – she dares to. It is needless to say much about Ibiaye, blinded by an oil spill and the consequent conflagration and loss of two sons. Even when it is granted that they are poor and frustrated, the degree of awareness and education they have got would have made them do otherwise. Could it not be seen as the instance of excessive villainy in “picking the fleas from the armpits of the poor” (62), that is, “petty thieves” (62). In the end, they steal: a colour television, stereo equipment and a hanger of dresses, a car tire, a radio cassette, and a suitcase. In fact, here is what we call an extreme case of madness, a case of exemplary captions of history and memory of the lives lived on campus.

They are not fighting oppressive governments as they claim. It might appear that what they as a group of dejected young educated men fail to do is quickly done by the same class of people in *Nwokedi*, yet not without the echoes of the past bearing down much upon them, too. The Association

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of Unemployed Youths make fruitful their resolve to unseat people who have quashed their future, shed some of those powers, as Ekumeku, nominates Ozoemena Nwakanma, a jobless graduate to represent Osisioma in the Senate instead of Nwokedi's father. The latter is beaten "with more than 10,000 votes" (*Nwokedi* 13).

Comradeship Based on History

Like the Suicide Squad in *Hangmen*, where memory builds up from history, we see members of a campus confraternal comradeship. Nwokedi, in whose hands we see the architect of the fate of the Erekosima's likes, is also a member of a confraternal group – the buccaneers. It veritably serves as history's tap of experiences, training him for his eventual future role in dealing with injustice, especially in a brutal manner. There is somebody whose case serves as example. He is the revered mad Ahab, the leader and "Capone" of his confraternity (42). His description is given by Ishmael, a fellow-member.:

Sailed the savage Seas all my life. Seen ship loads of Capones, but never seen one as mad as Mad Ahab. And as greedy too. Ahab's lost his humanities, pure and clear. He's not a leader of men (*Nwokedi* 42).

It is to tackle this man, whose irascibility is akin to madness, that Nwokedi engages in a mock duel that eventually turns out to be a lethal duel. When he is accused of taking it too far, he replies, "But he looted the money belonging to the Confraternity" (41). With the death of Mad Ahab, nothing happens to him, the prop and the strategic bearing of history upon his life has become sure, fighting injustice anywhere it is found and at anytime, even with the rashest of measures. With this boldness in his kitty, he contravenes the rule to remain at attention when the National Anthem is sung on the Parade ground. When Captain Ahab's ghost haunts and tells him that it is: "To remind you of your past" (40), he replies: "I am not ashamed of my past" (40). He fires back a closing dismissal, "Dead men don't bite" (40).

Therefore, when in the shrine of Ekpe, his machete descends twice sending the Senators Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr rolling away from their torsos, we are not surprised. We already knew that the foreboding atmosphere surrounding his entire bundle of acts would lead to something of this sort, if not more.

Criminal Ways

The two senators are not left out from the alliance of memory and history in complicating the courses of their lives. The first of the two senators, Arikpo sets Eririnma, her three children and the whole building of his ablaze. He brings the ashes of burnt furniture willfully supposing them to be the ashes of his wife. Although the reason for the dastardly act is inconclusive, he nonetheless hopes to convince his in-laws that it was accidental. The effect of guilt and memory makes Arikpo confess snippets of revelations and clues of complicity which Mrs. Nwokedi does not identify. On one occasion, he says of Nwokedi: “He may even think that I used his sister and three children for ritual sacrifice ... As some heartless politicians do ... to stay in power” (52). With such several double-talks and, sometimes, veering into esoteric prophecies, he gives himself away as the prime murderer of his own family during Nwokedi’s interrogation of him. Even when he fails to accept it despite proven evidences, it takes the alluring words of Mrs. Nwokedi to get to the truth. She begins thus:

They say a criminal is always drawn to the scene of his crime. Tell me, if you did not slaughter my daughter why is guilt written in capital letters all over your face? Why have you been so hysterical? Why has your every sentence been punctuated with the word “murder”? (87).

To which he replies that guilt drove him to his in-laws. He caps it with: “My political opponents made me do it They are the price a man paid for power” (88). It is ironical to note here that this is the same power her never gets. Along with Chief Isokipiri Erekosima and his acolytes in *Hangman Also die*, they never get what they pay dearly for. For Chief Erekosima, it is the crown and the title “Amatemeso I of Izon State” for which he pays with the confiscation of the 3 million naira compensation money for the whole of Izon State and the less privileged including those maimed by oil exploration. A primary victim is Ibiaye. Death truncates his ambition. These and many other minor characters like Tamara, Ibiaye, Sutonwu and so on, are those on whose behalf, memory and history are playing primal roles as they shape their lives. Ibiaye, echoes *Oedipus Rex*’s Teresias. Like in *Oedipus Rex*, he says “someone is reaping where he did not sow” (68). The relation that brings these two characters created by different poets of different ages is similar to what we are told that it is possible for “poets who have never lived together, and who have different backgrounds” “in different poems” to express “identical worries or concerns about the same issues” (Otagburuagu and Okoro xi).

Burden of Memory

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The burden of memory as culture brings it about also effaces itself in the texts, what Izevbaye describes as the intentional effort toward the “recovery and rehabilitation of the African past and of the identity and self-respect of Africans in the wake of the colonial assault on the African cultures” (16). Nonetheless, in *Nwokedi*, the burden of memory as culture has a totalizing effect, governing the structure of the entire work. We notice the bearing of the mystic and patrilineal age-long tradition of severing of a ram’s head by a special breed whose job it inherently is at the end of a solar year. We hear the father say: “I was once the Sun.” And the son replies: “yes. Father, you were once the Sun.... But now, I am the Sun.” we hear echoes of presence and the potency of I AM in these speeches. The depth of meaning and symbol behind their speech can be gleaned thus. The sun, an object of brightness, gives light to the whole of mankind and more essentially, places itself at the core of time creation. Its movement or the movement of the earth around it causes the day to be, an activity needed for the elongation of time from eternity to eternity. It is the symbol of creation of events and the elapse of time, the background of ancestors and the shadow of the future. Without it, everything will fall into morbidity and timelessness, generating chaos and non-chaos. It is the especial definition of life and being. It is being itself and so is Nwokedi (Nwokedis?) and what prefigures him (them?). All these we see as well in *Hangmen Also Die* with all the characters.

Clues to Nwokedi’s Behaviour

Like the Sun, “rams”, “year”, and “culture” are enough echoes – all engagements in “the activity of naming” (Akwanya 132), the esotericism arising from charged atmosphere brings forth a dialectic. The little explanation that we can offer we glean from the text through Nwokedi and the Ekumeku group. Against this background, clues to reasons behind Nwokedi’s behaviors are manifest. Amadike states: “This is his seventh year at the feat. A slippery year. She knows what enormous sacrifice this house will offer to mother Earth if Nwokedi fails to sever the head of the ram with one stroke of the knife” (18). What Nwokedi loses in his father and his father’s generation, he gains in the youths of his generation. It is not altogether “gain” in the real sense of the word but say, in the matter of company and association. The one from whom he would have gained really is his father. He doubles as both a source of inspiration and the arrow-head of the team. The “ram” whose head must be severed “with one stroke of the knife” is an image of mythical culture, as old as man’s first recognition of higher powers which he must court to his aid. It is the apical term of reference for sacrifice. Of equal reference is Soyinka’s Emman in *The Strong Breed*. We have Emman taking full possession and discharging uncommon responsibilities. The major difference is the media of sacrifice. While in **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014 Chukwumah, Ignatius, Ph.D. and Ihentuge Chisimdi Udoka Existence as Paranoia in Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* and *Nwokedi*

Emman, we have the effigy as the medium that must be taken round the community; we have ram only, tied to the Ekpe shrine until the hour of severance.

Common Culture of Sacrifice

It is the culture of sacrifice that holds the text together and tempers it with a tragic note. Aripko has earlier uttered: “I feel harassed. I feel like a ram bleating at the shrine. A helpless animal surrounded by thousand glinting knives” (51). Here “mystical knowledge” is demonstrated (Mercial 7).

Nwokedi, armed with this kind of knowledge, tells his father, at the height of esoteric manifestation, “Father, an evil year is passing, crawling slowly on its thousand scales like an over-fed python. An evil year is passing, dragging its crippled prey within its bloated belly. And evil year is dying. Who wants to die with it?” (82-83). With a vivid image of a typical predator-prey relationship, he paints the picture of his father’s foreseeable death. The word “prey” is presented to us with double sense. The prey is not in reference to the ram; it is imbued with a reference to an Other, the *pharmakos* as the sacrificial victim. That Nwokedi Snr does not know he is going to die, which is understandable – it means he is no longer the Sun. A chunk of knowledge comes to use here. Once there is a successful transfer of “Sunship” to another, say father to son, the power, enigma, nobility, and knowledge of futurity are also transferred making the transferor a potential victim of sacrifice, if circumstance dictates, to the transferred-to. In Nwokedi Snr’s case, there is metaphysical substitution. This is how Nwokedi narrates how his father is to die, in a matter-of-factly manner:

It was at the festival. The drums were pounding and the voices dirging for the old year. The earth crackled under the thunder of our thousand feet. The music banged in my brain with the obstinacy of blood. I was possessed. They brought out the ram. I peered at the ram. I could not see the ram. I only saw you there bleating like a ram.... But my knife was already in the air. Its glinting edge descended on your neck. Your head, severed with that single stroke, fell off that way. Your body this way. And, blood! Blood drizzled from your body like rain. It drizzled on and on until the contour of the earth was covered with a garment of blood” (83).

The same concept of the Sun works through the structural delineations of *Hangmen Also Die*, creating time which created the incidents that overtake the text: the joblessness of the Squad, the **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014
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stealing of compensation fund and others. Beyond these, a shaft of meaning opens to us, the intertwined existence with madness or paranoia, or how the absence of paranoia and madness leads to and is tinged with existence.

Existence: Ordained by the Mythic

A few mythic figures have influenced the actions and activities of the characters in these works. Indeed, these figures have ruled their existence by virtue of the inter-permeation of qualities embodied in vital inanimate object, concepts and apparent contradictions. Nwokedi's "madness" (29), is symbolic of his existence. Nwokedi Snr's assertion: "If the butterfly must fly, the caterpillar must die" appear to implicate ironical metaphysical ordination ruling over their affair which would manifest through "the descent of the machete!" (79, 93). It appears that ecstasy, heritage and ideals combine in interlacing the tragedy of *Nwokedi*. As the image of the "Sun", it changes its possessor from generation to generation and once a sun always an ex-Sun, who cannot be accorded respect again by the present Sun. The ex- could be, in an extreme case, dealt with in the same manner he has dealt with previous rams. It is usually rams that are used – a step lower from the primitive yore of human sacrifice. Only extremity, hatred for the political class, the usage and frustrations arising therefrom, and so on lead Nwokedi to the usage of and resort to, a level of barbarity of *status quo ante*, using humans as "the rite" that has been his "family right" (79).

The Sun is the birth of time and the progress of it at the same time. In a sense, along with the Nwokedis, we could group Ekpe, the old and the new years, the Ekumeku, Arikpo and all other characters to be found in the *Hangmen Also Die*. Despite the affinity between time, sun and the Nwokedis, it is still surprising why Nwokedi Snr himself is "eaten" up.

As Nwokedi dances with his father, they speak in macabre jolting riddles. There are enough bloody and deathly images in their seeming 'playful' discourse to suggest the result of it. This is in constant use throughout this text. These ghoulish images were to presage the deaths of Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr – men "without hubris" who "would have humbly acquiesced in" their fates and let events unfold as they would (Sewall 52).

Although one cannot really tell how much Arikpo and the society contribute to his fate, as part of his existence becoming paranoia, Arikpo is nonetheless a culprit of his misdeeds judging from his

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guilt. It is even more so when, according to Edeh, evoking the possibility of the other-worldly, affirms that:

there must, therefore, be a world other than this visible world where the ancestors are dwelling and from where they exercise some influence on the goings and comings of the living ... the good spirits respect the freedom of men. Thus, if a man repeatedly opts to do evil, then good spirits automatically withdraw their protective power. The man then falls victim to the evil spirits who take hold of him and confirm him in evil ways. He eventually dies a bad man to join the company of the evil spirits in their invisible domain (77).

Perhaps, he explains it himself. It is an evil year, which could allow jolting disruptions of metaphysical conventions and system. Here, Nwokedi's actions remain on the fringe of madness.

The images of movement, death, evil and so on are used to qualify the old year and it is mandatory that something (or somebody) should die for it. Yet "Ekpe is a festival of life" as Nwokedi Snr. Says. By extension, the public service was thought to be a festival of life, bubbling with possibilities to Yekinni when Daminagbo first mutes it to him in *Hangmen Also Die*. He is later to be referred to as having "gone mad" (7) by the Prison doctor because he refuses to hang members of the Suicide Squad. In him, paranoia *qua* paranoia and madness collapse into one and find habitation. He is seen as being mad because he can no longer bear the pressure and the condition of paranoia occasioned by the vagaries of his job. He has been eking out his existence. He now wishes to change the foundation of his serene, humane and ancestral call, fishing. What he fails to discharge to the Suicide Squad members, Nwokedi accomplishes *Nwokedi*.

Nwokedi in *Nwokedi*, acting true to the nature of the Sun, lives out a chronic state of madness as his existence. Although there is the absence of paranoia *qua* paranoia in his life he subjects others to it making himself a victim of it. Though remotely, he manifests a state of madness when he refuses to sing the national anthem on the National Day and disobeys the Sergeant Major's orders on the parade ground when all other members of the NYSC obey, he remains an enigma. The ensuing fight is an image of his fight with the state and the state of affairs. He pays for it. He does not win. The six months extension of the service year pushes him further to the apex of activities of rebellion and madness – killing two senators. The comradeship that evolved into the Suicide squad, repeatedly say that they "have the license to kill" (*Hangmen* 38). They kill Dr. Ahitophel and make a jubilant

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confession of evil done. This jocular confession of a heinous undertaking is a first-hand sign of a mind that is out of track, the cradle of madness.

The effrontery with which Chief Erekosima Isikopiri challenges the Suicide Squad while at the same time at their mercy is another instance of non-reason. He is not new to non-reason and madness. Otherwise what would make a single individual to arrogate to himself the compensation money meant for a whole state and squander same within a moment of time in order to be crowned the Amatemeso I of Izon State? He neglects the people for whom the compensation is meant, people like Ibiaye. Ibiaye recounts to Tamara:

...our canoe capsized in an ambush of water hyacinths. Everything we own was lost except our lives. Our lives and our arms. So we swam. One 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.... I could no longer see the sunlight.... The darkness fell (71).

Ibiaye had earlier lost two sons to oil explosions in the creeks. Now a beggar, he deserves better. But he never sees it until he dies because Isikopiri refuses to give the money to those for whom it is due. Having seen these possessors of sad stories of a sad life, he goes ahead to waste their only hope, reposing on the unsure base of non-reason and madness.

Although in his blindness he foresees the death of Chief Erekosima, he does not, like Chief Arikpo, foresee his own. Ibiaye says to all: "it is not a festival.... All I know is that I hear tiny voices in my head telling me that this ceremony will end as a funeral" (67). In a kind of mad irony, Ibiaye recalls with a tone of tragedy that unfolds as *Nwokedi*. When the two *Nwokedi*'s dance, relishing the echoes of yore, there is a strong wish in *Nwokedi* to go back home, there is the presence of Ekumeku procession and all other activities that overtake the entire community of Ossisioma. When all these take place, a funeral rather than a festival has commenced, burrowing through the edgy atmosphere and leading to the eventual deaths of the rich and the poor in both texts. Their deaths reflect an overall magnitude of superseding madness and non-reason.

These leave us with some thoughts. If "literature is a representation of a people's existence and worldview, their experience past and present and in some cases the future" and by "future" meaning **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:5 May 2014
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the evocation of the un-lived, necessitated by the lived in order to make it alive, then existence as paranoia will never cease to abate, but will stretch forth through eternity (Awhefeada 369). We will be right to note that, in several respects attributable to séance, their paranoia, madness and non-reason are all part of existence represented in literature of various traditions.

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