

On Degenerating Leadership and Cultural Regeneration: Lessons from Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*

Chinenye Amonyeze

Dept. of Theatre & Film Studies

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

The prevalence of socio-political disenchantment in contemporary Nigerian society specifically, and many lowly endowed societies around the world, have been traced to poor leadership and this situation has continued to attract the attention of committed creative artists. The main concern of this paper is based on the socio-political context of Esiaba Irobi's dramatic works, with particular interest in his play, Nwokedi, which projects a revolutionary vision of social change. The lackluster response to the ravaging COVID-19 global pandemic by the federal government in Nigerian and the evidenced very bad state of critical infrastructure such as basic and sophisticated healthcare facilities, further demonstrates the absence of development-oriented and visionary leadership in the face of huge budgets annually allocated to infrastructural development over the years by successive regimes. The social concerns of Irobi's play in context is portrayed in the roles played by the eponymous hero in the drama piece, named Nwokedi, who personifies a front-runner and a violent revolutionary figure, poised to overthrow the inept regime and entrench a better world order in Irobi's artistic universe. This paper examines the artistically recreated social backdrop to a complex, oppressive universe and the roadmap to revolutionary transformation that could usher in a better world order for the good of all.

Key words: degenerating leadership, revolutionary change, global pandemic, Esiaba Irobi

Introduction

For many world leaders the Covid-19 outbreak, which has threatened millions of lives globally, has served as a rallying point to address their constituencies and assure them of their government's readiness to safeguard lives and ensure social welfare. From China to the U.S., Britain and Uganda, national leaders have stood up to be counted and reinforced in the salient needs for good governance. In Nigeria, the Presidency's foot dragging to address the nation on the current health crisis which has caused a shutdown of business and social life has indicated alarm and

been most worrisome in the face of burgeoning anxiety by a demography forced to operate in a critical state of non-existent social infrastructure. The lack of reassurance is one of the indicators of the collapse of leadership especially when considered against the backdrop of insecurity, lack of power supply and depreciating national currency, the naira.

The swift concerted actions taken by other international leaders in response to the pandemic have buttressed the notion that the right leaders will come to the fore during times of crisis, even if there is no easy route through the malady or cure yet. Aside the difficult task of choosing the right course of action, leadership demands bracing up to the monumental task of reassuring the public and persuading them to follow through on government. A wrong move could erode trust and unleash unrest that exacerbates clear and present dangers. As Gikandi observes, "the problem with control, whether secular or spiritual is that it assumes there is some consensus on what is acceptable and what is undesired" (166). In confronting the centers of power in Nigeria and decadent leadership, Irobi's play, *Nwokedi*, avails the reader or the audience, as the case may be, a vivid alternative through the character of a young hero, Nwokedi, on the possibilities of radical eccentric leadership alive and responsive to its responsibilities.

As John Gassner avers, "tragedy may deal with uncommonly absorbing common men, but cannot be achieved with shadows any more than with heroic postures and stock rhetoric" (374).

We live in a society that has consistently over a long time, in the chequered history of its nationhood, been governed by a corrupt, brutish establishment that preaches fairness and equity that is never put into practice. The citizen is indoctrinated from childhood that combative and aggressive deviants would pay a social price of isolation and jail term. Society inundates the individual with the need to keep the peace but doesn't prepare him for self-protection when war breaks out. There is an existing war around us daily in the struggle to eke a living. Whether this war is internalized or externalized, it is in existence. Nwabueze surmises that "unfortunately, every society has people who are different who reject the solemnity of the values, and break the rules. These law breakers are considered deviants. The fewer the existence of such group in a society, the more the possibility of their annihilation" (8). These deviants could also bring fresh perspectives to understanding what leadership and accountability entails in a properly ordered society. Esiaba Irobi's plays

derive their inspiration from the diverse socio political, cultural, economic and moral situation confronting the typical Nigerian citizen. His plays arouse the consciousness of the Nigerian audience to his human condition and in this way articulate violent social revolution. The theoretical philosophy applied by Esiaba Irobi serves as a pointer to where contemporary dramatists, seeking new production forms of late, are inclined towards in the bid to express their imaginative ingenuity in the face of a frustrating democracy/despotism. These dramatic approaches attempt to demystify the classical prescription of tragedy and authority and rewrite the terms of negotiation between a virile theatre and a constantly evolving world.

The last decade or so has witnessed huge changes in the awareness, perception and tools of the audience and participatory membership to the mainstream, and amplified viewers' voices. According to leading media scholar Henry Jenkins, whose 1992 book *Textual Poachers* is considered the founding text of fan studies, the scope and scale of the readership community has allowed for more mediated strategies of action as fans engage more actively with the materials of their culture in countless ways. The media and literature as exist today largely respond to modes of engagement modeled over the past several decades. In the face of tyranny and repression, writers have stood in the gap using creative imagination to interrogate social concerns and mediate key concerns of social constituents. Jenkins reviewing the connection between the writer and the reader or audience opines that the sense of ownership reflects the way humans have always engaged with stories since "we use stories to make sense of who we are; we use stories to debate our values, fears, and aspirations" (David Robson, n.p.).

Cultured Repression

Culture derives its properties from the existent economic and socio-political conditions located in its referent society. According to Stanley Baran, "Culture serves a purpose. It helps us categorize and classify our experiences. It helps define us, our world, and our place in it. In doing so, culture can have a number of sometimes conflicting effects (9). A society's culture and values can be described as patterned iterative ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. In this way, culture limits our options and provides standards for behavior. In a pluralist society like ours, the dominant culture, usually the mainstream culture interpreted as such by the central authority, holds sway and is not openly challengeable, expect when a courageous individual steps up to the plate and seeks the

enforcement of his fundamental rights. Culture in this light, defines individuals, and gives them a uniting identity beneath which thin veneer the roiling non conformist individual broods. Immanuel Kant once stated that "enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity"(Rudolf Makkreel, 5). A playwright is a cultural custodian because just like an anthropologist or historian he is a member of a society and an existing culture. He is conditioned by the operant culture of his society and if he is passionate about his society like Esiaba Irobi, his works will exude such sociological concerns. This is what makes the artist and his work human, since he gains understanding of the characters around him and documents the evidence of their plight and struggle in a dramatic form that can be a manifesto to action. As Ahmed Yerima declares,

The ideological contention of historical attempts towards an essentialism of art as a value product of social change within any given society has remained from the time of the Greek Philosopher, Plato, to the Russian thinkers, Leo Tolstoy and Plekhanov, and to the erudite African theatre scholar, Wole Soyinka. Art itself, a major part of the cultural consciousness of society, cannot be devoid of man's daily mechanism of existence. Modern art has gone beyond the argument of Plato's "imitation and truth" or Tolstoy's, "art as religion"(n.p.).

Yerima submits that in highlighting the issues of the relevance of the creative mind as reaction to the beauty of the social life and critical aspects of human existence, art has become more functional, more immediate, more realistic, more truthful in mirroring the social reality of a people. What makes things even more complex, however, is how these backlashes against the changing face of pop culture tend to feed into the wider culture war between conservative and progressive values – and vice versa.

Synopsis of *Nwokedi*

Esiaba Irobi's plays take their inspiration from the diverse socio political, cultural, economic and moral situation confronting the typical Nigerian citizen. His plays arouse the consciousness of the Nigerian audience to his human condition, in this way articulating violent social revolution. In the play, *Nwokedi*, Nwokedi Jnr the eponymous hero, returns to his family house in his hometown from the youth service orientation camp where

due to his rebellion to camp officials, his one year compulsory national service had been extended by six months, to meet his mother and brother-in-law, Senator Arikpo. Nwokedi learns of the death of his twin sister, Uloaku, Arikpo's wife, information which, to his chagrin, has been suppressed from him for sometime by his mother, Mrs Nwokedi for fear of his reaction due to his bond to Uloaku. Nwokedi is immediately suspicious of Arikpo after he recounts details of Uloaku's death by arson and upon close analysis of her incinerated remains, confirms that Arikpo is complicit in her death. Nwokedi is restrained by Mrs Nwokedi as the drums of the traditional New Year rites of the Ekpe festival throb in the background reminding Nwokedi of his role as the village's heroic sacrificial ram slayer. Nwokedi goes in to rest while Mrs Nwokedi and Arikpo plan a way out of the dangerous situation mindful that Arikpo is restricted to the village due to the ban on movement during the festive period. To complicate matters Nwokedi Snr., Nwokedi's ex senator father, returns and upon discovering that Nwokedi, who cost him his parliamentary seat, is within fumes for a fight. Mrs. Nwokedi and Arikpo deceive him into thinking that Nwokedi has agreed a deal to return him to power and Nwokedi Snr. is elated. Nwokedi comes out from the bedroom and coldly tells his father and Arikpo about his contempt for their generation and leadership and his plan to violently take power. Nwokedi's father leaves the house to celebrate the misleading information his wife gave him earlier on not minding Nwokedi's rant while Nwokedi prepares for the festival after taunting Arikpo with his machete. The Ekumeku, Nwokedi's age grade, arrive to take him to the shrine for fortification and general preparation for his role later in the evening as 'the one empowered by the land to slaughter the sacrificial animal'. Nwokedi alerts them of his plan to swap Arikpo with the sacrificial ram. Soon news breaks about the overthrow of the civilian government by the military and Arikpo is left reeling from the turn of events amidst Mrs Nwokedi's extraction of his confession about Uloaku's murder for money ritual. There is no moment of respite as the Ekumeku abducts him to the shrine where Nwokedi is about to slaughter him when Nwokedi Snr, seeking to intervene, lays across Arikpo's body. Nwokedi, unblinking in one stroke, decapitates his father and raises the machete again to decapitate Arikpo as well. The play ends with the Chief priest's incantation, willing the old year away and a regenerate year in.

Irobi's plays have a prevalent fixation with rebirth themes, reflecting the playwright's belief in cultural regeneration. He sees revolution not as an

abstract construct innovated by alien agents, but as a concrete idea internalized in the masses that must be liberated from the stain and corruption of the establishment and leadership. In this way, his hero subjectively refuses to abide with the rules and norms made by the establishment to govern the society. The problem of the dejected social class is the gospel Esiaba Irobi seeks to proselyte his audience. The oeuvres of his artistry seeks to set out a new religion, in the form of a more combative approach to followership. His works verge on the historical and seek to inform the audience or hand down knowledge of past events with abrupt interspersed current events as if the writer is attempting to suspend the audience in a time tunnel of two worlds: the imaginary and the real. Nwokedi displays this psychotic rhythmic in the play to evoke the chthonic chords in the minds of the audience. This internal rhythm in the midst of chaos is a distinguishable feature of Esiaba Irobi's heroes.

Although socialization is powerful and profoundly affects us all, we have a self. Established in childhood and continually modified by later experience, the self is dynamic. It is not a sponge that passively absorbs influence from the environment but a vigorous, essential part of our being that allows us to act on our environment (Henslim, 68). To rebel against the repressive establishment is a natural instinct for the artist. An ideological stance can arise from a salvation motivation to correct social ills, perceived injustice against the downtrodden, execute vengeance or to gain a social status or identity. The aim might be self-based or communal but usually the effect of the rebellion is felt in the hero's family, political environment etc. with far reaching distensions. A rebellion that is not addressed timely, mishandled or brutally repressed usually ends up in violent insurrection. Irobi's heroes are monochromatic, seeing the world from a survivalist shade where negative forces take up the shapes of everyone and so they have to address the contrary element through any legitimate or illegitimate means. No amount of force used in their struggle to get accountability is reprehensible to the hero's ethical plumb since his Machiavelian principle is unapologetic to anyone and self serving. Irobi never allows his heroes become victims of the gods or so called constituted authorities rather they become rebels manipulating the gods or power centers to achieve their goals. Their visions have clarity with clearly defined objectives just as Nwokedi does to perfection using the Ekpe festival as subterfuge to execute his bid to waste Arikpo. Irobi's heroes have already come to terms with their imminent fate.

Governance and Leadership Crisis

Journalist and presenter of the popular @Kakaaki Social on African Independent Television (AIT), Ohimai Amaize, fled Nigeria last year. His exile last year was not unconnected with threats of his arrest for treason and incitement by the Muhammadu Buhari government for daring to air social media posts that lampooned the fumbling federal government and its disconnection from reality. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) had threatened to revoke AIT owners DAAR Communications' license over tweets from Nigerians shown on @kakaaki social anchored by Ohimai Amaize and on June 6, 2019 followed it up by suspending DAAR's license claiming the sanction was rendered owing to failure of the station to abide by the broadcasting code. Beneath the smokescreen was the apparent truth that degenerate leadership had been called out through a platform that gave voices to ordinary Nigerians who otherwise could not have got access through the mainstream media. This never sat well with the junta which described the Kakaaki social edition of May 22, 2019, as "treasonable rhetoric". It has become obvious that the Nigerian federal government has long lost any capacity to neither maintain security nor provide welfare. The rampant cases of marauding herdsmen also serve as sign of a failing state where lack of governance is glaring and repression of opposition is the trend. As Shehu Sani notes:

Good governance, Leadership and National development are intertwined. To understand a nation's underdevelopment, simply take a closer look at the level of good governance at play and the leadership driving it. Exceptional Leadership (positive leadership) and Toxic Leadership (negative leadership) account for development and underdevelopment of any nation. Histories of nations are essentially stories of men and women who have led them, how they led them, how the masses responded to them and the indelible positive and negative marks and imprints that they left as legacies (n.p.).

With the recent COVID-19 pandemic social critics have called out the Nigerian federal government's failure to have a robust welfare response for its citizenry. Indeed it is absurd that while House of Representative members are taking delivery of four hundred brand new 2020 Toyota Camry cars valued at twenty five thousand naira each, the government is

finding it hard to purchase ventilators valued at seventeen thousand naira each to save lives. The same government has not made provision for health intervention equipment is relying on test kits donated by Jack Ma, the Chinese billionaire owner of the online retail outfit Alibaba, and other multinational corporations and foreign nations. Nigeria is highly beset by the crude oil curse, rent-seeking and elite state capture. Despite having earned an estimated four hundred billion dollars in oil income since independence sixty years ago Nigeria has experienced numerous military coups, a civil war, being led by a renegade bunch of unqualified military men and faced poor economic development occasioned by a pilfering minority which has laid waste to its enormous wealth. Corruption pervades all levels of government and the citizenry faces a much bleak prospect presently than it did decades ago with each year being worse than the previous one. NORAD (2010) states that the population experienced some political will to fight corruption and improve governance in the early years of the century. The condition for macro-economic growth is today the best it has been for the past 20 years (Inge Amundsen, n.p.). This is one of the reasons why Irobi's reactionary heroes believe that power cannot be negotiated with people who have erstwhile abused it rather it should be snatched violently.

In Pita Ejiofor's opinion "the good examples and leadership of the elders is essential in strengthening the formation of young people"(89). An ideological difference appears to be major problem of the elders in governance and the youth who are a majority in the followership. These perverted elders who are custodians of the nation's wealth view leadership as an opportunity to amass wealth and engage in cronyism, while youth like Nwokedi, representative of the constituency of unemployed graduates, illiterate Almajiris, unskilled Niger Delta youths etc. view the bleak future and engage power as an opportunity to choose a creditable leader with the interests of the common man at heart. We are no more in a jet age but a Polaroid age where people want quick solutions to the problems facing them; and, Irobi's hero is no exception. Strange people with different ideologies from different locales surround him and he is forced to pay attention to the happenings around him and examine his response to these conflicts as they arise. These experiences come to him with no sense of perceptible shape and he cannot seek for help from those in governance since they are allied with his problem and most times are the aggravators. The political ideology of Irobi's hero is shaped by a value

judgment determinant on the will of classes withal and multifarious level within.

Toxic leadership, which is the kind of leadership that corrupts and degenerates, can only set a nation or an organization backward while exceptional leadership will do exactly the opposite. If Nigeria has been retrogressing in quantum leaps and bounds to the point that all the basic justifications for the establishment of government have all been eroded and outsourced back to the citizens at their own peril and cost, it goes without saying that Nigeria has been saddled with toxic leadership more than exceptional leadership over time (Sani, n.p.). This is the exact reason why the provisions of most basic social amenities appears unattainable to Nigerian governments. As Sani identifies, the indicators of good governance are basically: voice, empowerment of civic spaces and accountability, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Good governance has eight major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law. Good governance is responsive to the present and future needs of a country.

“The fate of the Nigerian state and the Nigerian youth is intertwined. One cannot survive without the other! For both to survive we must begin the task of evolving and deepening a national philosophy, a national ideology and a national value system”(n.p.). Without belabouring the point, the type of leadership where the leader symbolizes “moral agent”, that “turn their followers into leaders” Okunade (18) is hard to come by. The question of leadership in Irobi’s plays remains complex and handled through different situations. Leadership in this dramatic setting is a monstrous contraption that must be controlled or it would throw off its rider. The political thrust of postmodern texts exemplified in Irobi’s works constitutes the cannon, a representational method which foregrounds itself through various self-instinctual devices like language, sarcasm and finally violence. His plays do not always give clear cut answers to questions, rather, they pose many questions and project multiple deducible meanings. His plays are tragedies of resistance in their socio-political characteristic to challenge status quo. Conflict arises when an antagonist’s set of beliefs infringe negatively on the protagonist’s sphere of belief resulting in physical, financial or emotional suffering, felt as disappointment, anger or frustration. Conflicts repressed into the sub-

conscious mind tend to be contained in transient surely to reappear occasionally. To prevent this slip, the individual unconsciously produces various defense mechanisms which, with time, become an essential part of that individual's character. Geert Hofstede states that

In interpreting people's statements about their values it is important to distinguish between the desirable and the desired: how people think the world ought to be versus what people want for themselves. Questions about the desirable refer to people in general and are worded in terms of right/ wrong, agree/disagree or something similar. In the abstract, everybody is in favor of virtue and opposed to sin, and answers about the desirable express people's views about what represents virtue and what corresponds to sin. The desired, on the contrary, is worded in terms of 'you' or 'me' and what we consider important, what we want for ourselves, including our less virtuous desires. The desirable bears only a faint resemblance to actual behaviour, but even statements about the desired, although closer to actual behaviour, should not necessarily correspond to the way people really behave when they have to choose (9).

What distinguishes the desirable from the desired is the nature of the norms involved. Norms are the standards for values that exist within a group or category of people. In the case of the desirable, the norm is absolute, pertaining to what is ethically right.

Nwokedi, the eponymous hero of the piece, is manipulated by the playwright to fulfill his vision of ritual sacrifice to cleanse the land and regenerate it. Nwokedi is an unstated political activist with no intention of seeking elective post himself. He is a powerful traditional symbol in his society because he is the hand that cuts off the head of the sacrificial ram; a hereditary act he must execute with one stroke. Irobi's hero's thinking usually precedes action and re-surfaces in contemplation in the aftermath. Anger generates energy and motivation to react to a threat. It produces energy through a fight or flight reaction in the hero, and increases his

focus on his needs and wants. As the hero's anger increases, the desire to eliminate the threat increases and he is liable to use any means at his disposal to satisfy this craving. Anger operates by inducing pheromones of confidence. They raise the hero's feelings of righteousness and legitimate right to action. Sometimes anger distorts thinking and creates an imaginary threat. Anger can be a strong defense mechanism as it works on the character's mental process to reduce awareness of the oppositional powers in the face of danger. The idea of fighting fair is a non issue in this contemporary period when fighting dirty has become an art form.

The ideal of fighting rationally in a gentleman fashion originated from organized warfare, even though in some traditional instances, war was not fought in such a refined manner. The traditional notion of a battle is a situation where two contending parties decide to sort out their differences at a particular location and a given time. Bernard Shaw ridicules a fair war and points out that war is attacking your enemy when he is most vulnerable. In this disorganized age where society is prone to all manner of upheavals, and the government is unyielding the hero has no need to fight a fair war because he decides what the word 'fair' means. Everyone is quite aware of the Marvel comic heroes, Superman, Spiderman, Iron Man etc. and how they take the law into their hands as self appointed avengers of crime victims. These heroes very much like Irobi's heroes set up their own court, try and convict the supposed villain.

The state lays holds monopoly and legitimacy on violence or force and claims exclusive right to use that violence to punish any deviant individual who uses violence. This is where the interests of Irobi's heroes clash with the establishment because Irobi's heroes rebel from allegiance to the corrupt state and locate loyalty only to primordial traditional authority, based on customs and sacred entity of the ancestral society. The perception of Irobi's hero is one that is very practical and social-based. This practical model examines the level of wisdom, rank, courageous qualities and behavioural attitude of the hero against the backdrop of his beliefs and prevalent social realities. In transference the hero displaces or acts out an active recall, transferring the key components of his character's fantasies onto the audience. Nwokedi, for example, is a stereotype of the modern man who is aware of his humanity and avoids becoming like his neighbours i.e. both undergraduates and moronic youths on one year national service. In the national youth service camp, Nwokedi is convinced

that camping depicts the dejected state of humanity, controlled by a ruling ant hill mentality.

Nwabueze in his NICO lecture titled, 'Democratization and the Dialectics of Culture in Contemporary Nigeria', argues that "unfortunately every society has people who are different who reject the solemnity of the values, and break the rules. These law breakers are considered deviants. The fewer the existence of such group in a society, the more the possibility of their annihilation" (8). William Sumner asserts that "we see that under a regime of liberty and equality before the law, we get the highest possible development of independence, self-reliance, individual energy, and enterprise, but we get these high social virtues at the expense of the old sentimental ties which used to unite baron and retainer, master and servant, sage and disciple, comrade and comrade" (104). Sumner opines that as long as a nation has not lost faith in itself it is possible for it to remodel its institutions to any extent. If that polity gives way to sentimentalism, or sensibility, or political mysticism, or molds its institutions in order to round out to a more complete fulfillment somebody's theory of the universe, it may fall into an era of revolution and political insecurity which will break off the continuity of its national life and make orderly and secure progress impossible (104). Leaders should offer a rapid recognition of the danger and, ideally, the necessary infrastructure and procedures should already be in place to quickly gather data once the crisis has hit. A leader's response to a crisis ought to be more than speeches and his messaging should play a key role in obtaining public trust and co-operation.

Irobi's *Nwokedi* presents a pastiche of how orderly and secure progress could be realized in the face of psychological oppression. He identifies the great engine of political abuse which has always been political mysticism. This abnormality, prevalent in the eighties when Irobi's seminal piece was written, is still contemporaneous and valid in this age when unethical persons continue manning the affairs of state. As Sumner concludes, "...under a regime of liberty and equality before the law, we get the highest possible development of independence, self reliance, individual energy, and enterprise" (117). The absence of the above listed rights would precipitate revolution and breed fearless young heroes no matter how long tyrannical forces suppress the movement. This is the paradigmatic substance of Irobi's *Nwokedi*, a pragmatic step to effectively respond to degenerative leadership and all its appurtenances and restore a culture of

social responsibility. We are led by the worst of our kind, but the beautiful ones lie in wait in the wings.

Conclusion

This paper discussed Irobi's *Nwokedi* which dramatises a vivid picture of the strategies of revolutionary transformation of society by mapping the socio-cultural backgrounds, social trajectories and possible motivation that could serve to energise the oppressed into persistent agitations that would set society on the road to violent change for a better world. From Tunisia to Egypt and the entire Arab world, young Iraqis, Lebanese, Algerians, Sudanese etc. are not just demanding better societies; they are actively creating them at protest sites. These agitators have confronted brutal despots and converted once heavily policed spaces into fortresses of dissent and popular participation in governance. This play is analysed as a workbook and a rehearsal that young revolutionaries could use for encouragement, empowerment and for vehement against oppressive regimes. The play in its creative trajectory recreates a posture that must be taken up by the energetic youth as the gauntlet in their resolve to shake off the lethargy of political realities and invigorate the temperament for confrontation against generational emasculation. Irobi's heroes analysed above interface some possibilities for change as was socially witnessed in Arab world in recent history. Indeed Nigeria's leadership, well aware of the mobilization ability of the social media and its primary youth constituency, have attempted to emasculate the social space by mooting the 'hate speech' bill and anti social media bill to out rightly restrict the activities of dissenters. Irobi's play written in 1991, before the influx of social media, informs the direction any revolutionary realignment of the ethical landmark of Nigerian leadership should take and proffers strategies and drivers that could be activated for the realization of such lofty revolutionary vision.

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