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**CRISIS OF EXISTENTIAL SELF-APPREHENSION IN ESIABA IROBI'S  
NWOKEDI**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper interrogates crisis of existential self-apprehension in Esiaba Irobi's Nwokedi. Consequently, it explores a possible nexus between the playwright's existential experiences and the framing of his dramaturgy, particularly as it is mirrored in the violent dispositions of Nwokedi, the central character in the eponymous play and his Ekumeku militia group. The paper relies on existential revolt, a key concept in existentialist discourse that rejects all forms of limitations against individuals, especially in a world that tramples on the rights of others to a meaningful existence. The analysis is carried out at three interconnected levels. The first level examines how Irobi's existential anxiety (apprehension) is projected into the text through the dramatic characters he creates. The second level investigates the extent to which the pursuit of the characters' existential cravings predisposes them to different courses of actions and counteractions, leading to dramatic tensions that inevitably escalate into full-blown conflicts/crises at different levels with the others. The third explores the probable consequences of such actions and counteractions, not just on the dramatic characters individually, but also on their communal existence. The study discovers that most of the violent actions perpetrated by the characters in the text are a direct product of the playwright's sense of anguish and disillusionment about the socio-political structure of the post-colonial Nigerian state which has consigned the majority into a mode of helplessness, dehumanisation and hopelessness, in which they have no other option than to revolt.

**Keywords:** Existential Apprehension, Revolt, Anguish, Crisis, Freedom, Irobi.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

**1.1 Esiaba Irobi: His Life and Engagement with Drama Human struggles**

Intuitively, every individual wants to make his life predictable and certain that the steps he/she has taken would lead to an assured end. However, the individuals' inability to accurately grasp and predict life's contingencies often leads to existential apprehension and anxiety. This frustration usually manifests at two mutually related levels: first; when an individual sets some goals and timelines within which to realise same, but still experiences a tinge of emptiness even after achieving them; second, at the point of the realisation that life is the entire opposite of what an individual has hoped for. The sense of hopelessness arising from these botched expectations can be attributed to some of the crises that we have witnessed in human society. These crises often arise between two individuals, individual and the society and sometimes; individual and himself. These levels of existential apprehension manifest in Literature, particularly, drama, both at the spheres of the playwrights and dramatic characters. In the former, it occurs when playwrights deliberately reflect and project their personal apprehensions

through the dramatic characters at such manners in which they (the characters) interpret latent fears in the hearts of the playwrights. The latter reflects how the personal apprehensions predispose dramatic characters to different modes of actions and counteractions, thereby generating dramatic tensions that inevitably escalate into full-blown conflicts/crises at different levels with the others.

Esiaba Irobi is arguably one of the Nigerian's existentialist writers whose works mirrors their personal existential dispositions. Irobi was one playwright whose personal inclinations and existential experiences have had a profound influence, not only on his ideological vision, but also his craft. For instance, his life's trajectories (both as a person and writer) coupled with the symbolic implication of the sheer coincidence of sharing his birthday with that of Nigeria, have greatly influenced the direction of his craft, particularly in the way he frames and portrays his dramatic characters. Irobi himself attested to this mode of interpretation of his works as depicting the latent existential apprehension in his consciousness during with Ilagha when he declares that "the historical regor motis and political epilepsy of the country itself has left cracks on the mirror of the mind. Whatever has happened to the country has happened to me" (53). This statement presumably underscores the level of fondness that exists between the playwright and the Nigerian nation, such that the latter's socio-political and economic failings may be considered as his personal failings. Particularly, just like every other Nigerians, the inability of the nation-state to harness and effectively exploit her abundant resources and deployed them to the greater good of all, has evoked a sense of anguish, hopelessness and frustration in the mind of the playwright. Diala captures this entrenched feeling rage and disappointment when he equally notes that, "Irobi interpreted the striking coincidence of his birthday sharing the day of Nigeria's independence from Britain in terms of a destiny shared with the Nigerian nation, a destiny of agony and pain" (80). In the course of the analysis, the paper shall attempt to explore how Irobi interprets this "agony and pain" in the text through the characters he creates in relations to the others leading to the generation, escalation and degeneration of the dramatic conflicts. But before then, it would be instructive to further explore this issue of coincidence of birth, if only in passing for a better contextualisation of the argument the paper sets out to do.

Esiaba Irobi was born on October 1, 1960 in the then Eastern part of the country, the day Nigeria gained independence from the colonial overlord, Britain which had, for many years, ruled and controlled all the facets of her life.. It is therefore, expected that, with the transfer of power to the nation's political class, the country would witness a period of rapid socio-economic and political development. Arguably, anyone whose birth coincides with this major landmark in the nation's checkered political history is naturally expected to exude some pride at this sheer providence. However, just like most other Nigerians, the failure of the Nigerian postcolony to match expectations with deliverables was a source of existential frustration for Irobi. He gives expression to this embroiling feeling of anger in his profile as a research fellow at the International Research Institute, Germany. He writes that "Esiaba Irobi was born in the Republic of Biafra and has lived in exile in Nigeria, the Uk and the USA" (quoted in Diala 2). Thus, it is within the ambience of these existential experiences that the paper situates much of Irobi's literary interventions. Two possible inferences that could be drawn in relation to his authorial ideology: first, he was livid, frustrated and disillusioned by the repression and alienation of the vast majority of the people that constitute the underprivileged class from the socio-political and economic structures of the country; and second, he was obsessed with the quest to change the status-quo and the narratives, albeit through violent revolution. It can, therefore, not be considered a sheer coincidence that trappings of these existential dispositions of the playwright are visible across his works.

For instance, whether in *Hangmen Also Die* (1989); *Nwokedi* (1991); *Cemetery Road* (2009), most of Irobi's protagonists often exhibit such deep sense of alienation, despair, disillusionment, estrangement and existential anguish. Again, Irobi corroborated this mode of interpretation during an interview with Azuonye thus:

*What is needed is methodical and strategic insurrections. Insurrections aimed at change. Permanent change. What the Irgun Stern gang did in Israel to the British. What the Mau Mau did in Kenya. Kamikaze pilots. Suicide Bombers. Coups. Against Nigerian leaders. What Nzeogwu did. What Sankara did. What Jerry Rawlings did. For example, Obasanjo and all the ministers and senators and local government chairmen and cheer women should be shaved upstairs and downstairs and put into a leaking boat and pushed into the Atlantic Ocean. Or members of the top military brass should be invited to meal/feast and fed from a pot laced with generous quantities of cyanide (interview 2003).*

This is the kind of tendency, the raving anger that drives the actions and counteractions of Nwokedi in the eponymous text, *Nwokedi*. Ultimately, revolt may constitute an appealing existential option whenever individuals are deprived of the necessary agency through which they can see redress. It is, thus, against this background that the paper considers the violent disposition of the dramatic characters in the text as a consequence of action which can be traced to the existential apprehension of the playwright.

## 2. CONCEPTUALISING EXISTENTIAL REVOLT IN LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

This paper deploys existential revolt, a key theme in existentialism, to interrogate the crises of self-apprehension in Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi*. Mohammad defines revolt as "an expression of pent-up feelings of angst, dissidence and notions of self-reflectivity" (89). The concept, particularly, in respect to literature, manifests as a form of defiance against the "super-ego" of society that often prioritises the culture of conformism to the socio-political constructs that are largely skewed in favour of the ruling elites and their willing collaborators in the corridors of power. The "super-ego" in this context is conceived to comprise the powerful forces within the socio-political and religious set-ups who set standards of behaviours and equally enforce same solely by their whims and caprices. Mohammad seems to stretch this position further when he avers that "one imminent fallout of revolt is estrangement" (88) which is a product of a serious feeling of detachment and disenchantment against any repressive system. Brustein categorises theatre of revolt into three, namely: messianic, social and existential (20). Explaining further, he argues that while messianic revolt happens when a dramatist rebels against God and tries to take His place; and social revolt occurs when a dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals, values or a social organisation, existential revolt occurs when a dramatist rebels against the conditions of his existence. One key point that is common to the grouping is that revolt is synonymous with existence because to be human is to be constantly confronted with deterministic forces.

Many existentialist writers have problematised and explored the concept of revolt both in literature and philosophy. In general, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett, have had profound influence on the existentialist notion of revolt and its manifestations. For instance, Brustein (15) argues that Nietzsche remains the most seminal philosophical influence on the theatre of revolt. This position is, perhaps, valid especially against the backdrop of Nietzsche's audacious work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1961)

where he vehemently argues that in the absence of any deterministic force, including God, to interfere in the affairs of the world, mankind is free to choose their values and live authentically.

While he may not have overtly addressed the issue of revolt, his declaration that individuals must embrace life, prioritise values and experience existence, points to the fact that they are predisposed to existential options. Nietzsche's position as the paper has argued above underscores the compelling significance of the concept of "freedom of choice" to the understanding of existential revolt. This is in light of the fact that to revolt for individuals, is to explore one of the various existential options that are available to them. These existential options are discussed subsequently in the section of the analysis. However, Sartre's conception of freedom of choice differs from that of Nietzsche. For instance, while Nietzsche conceives freedom of choice in absolute terms; freedom, for Sartre attracts corresponding responsibility.

Perhaps, Albert Camus's position on revolt remains is daringly elaborate. In his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1979), Camus sets his mythical hero, Sisyphus up against the gods to espouse his ideals of an absurd. In the original myth, Sisyphus is presented as a Greek hero, who as a king of Corinth became infamous for his general trickery. He is said to have cheated death twice. For his brute force and uncompromising dispositions, he was condemned to eternal punishment of rolling a stone in the depths of Hades by Zeus, a Greek God. The more he rolled, the more the stone rolled back on his chest to the base. But as a mythical character in Camus's essay, Sisyphus is presented as a metaphor for strength, perseverance and defiance. By choosing to face his "stone" with equanimity, Sisyphus explores his existential option which is revolt. In the same essay, Camus has also hinted on the three existential options before an individual. To summarise the three options, Camus says: first; individuals may commit suicide under the weight of existential struggles; second they may adopt an inauthentic approach, in this case, assume that the problems do not exist, and third; they may choose to revolt against them. Camus, however favours the third option. In another of his work, *The Rebel*, he talks about the attributes a rebel must possess and including the various existential circumstances that can breed rebellious predispositions. According to him "Being a rebel is about revolting against a government that would subjugate people to its will (13). He also contends that there is always a premise for any act of revolt, arguing that, "the rebel is never without a cause; they always have their reasons (19). This validates the position of this paper as it argues that some of the violent acts perpetrated by Irobi's alter-ego, Nwokedi and his militia group in the eponymous play, are borne out of resentments, the existential feelings that are manifestations of the sense of frustration, hopelessness and disillusionment that are arguably traceable to the playwright's crisis of self-apprehensions which then predispose the actions and counteractions of his dramatic characters leading to the generation, escalation and degeneration of existential conflicts.

### 3. NWOKEDI AT A GLANCE

The events that culminate in the decamping of Nwokedi from the Youth Service Orientation Camp sets the tone for the existential crisis that we encounter in Irobi's play, *Nwokedi*. His rebellious act, which manifests in the attacks on the camp officials, coupled with his disdain and blatant disregard for the Service earns him an extension of the service year by additional six months. He, subsequently, arrives his village to the warm embrace of his mother. His arrival at the village is not fortuitous: like Eman of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, and Elesin Oba of *Death and the King's Horseman*, Nwokedi arrives to fulfil the call of duty that is associated with his lineage. A part of his propitiating duties is to slaughter a ram with a single stroke of the machet to celebrate the year's Ekpe festival. The Ekpe festival is an annual communal ritual that is celebrated by the community to terminate an old year and to pave way

for a new one. It is an event that Nwokedi and his Ekumeku age-grade anticipate with so much relish as it is believed that their survival as a people rests solely on the communal essence of the ritual.

Meanwhile, his sudden discovery that his brother-in-law, Arikpo has gruesomely murdered his twin sister, Ezinna and her three children in cold blood, triggers a chain of counteractions that turn a communal event to a murderous spree. Coincidentally, Arikpo seeks shelter at his brother-in-law's house at Osisioma after being forced out of his village Ugel, by some irate youths who insist he would not be allowed to re-contest t/he Senate seat. In a bid to lift the lid on the circumstances that led to the death of his twin-sister and her three children, Nwokedi confronts Arikpo and they engage in some arguments which degenerate into frayed nerves. In the chain of actions and counteractions that follow, Nwokedi who is already possessed by a bout of murderous instinct, subsequently substitutes his father, Nwokedi Snr and Arikpo, his brother-in-law for the designated sacrificial ram by beheading them. to a thunderous applause by the Ekumekus.

#### 4. CRISIS OF SELF-APPREHENSION IN NWOKEDI

In *Nwokedi*, we are immediately confronted with the glimpse for the interpretation of the text as embodying the playwright's feelings of existential frustration, disillusionment and anger at the Nigerian state in the portrayal of his dramatic characters and in the framing of his dramaturgy. Most of the characters' actions and counteractions in the text, particularly that of the protagonist, Nwokedi and his militia age-grade group, Ekumeku, are driven by existential despair that is traceable to the playwright. Apart of the reign of rage, violence and hate in open display, Irobi also intentionally heightened the sense of anguish, frustration and estrangement by depicting an atmosphere of menace throughout the play. For instance, the height of Irobi's resentment against the post-independence Nigeria is brought to light at the Youth Corps Orientation Camp, Bakalori, where Nwokedi, his alter-ego, challenges the authority of the Service represented by Regimented Sergeant Awado. We can recall that, at the end of the fierce battle of secession between the Eastern region and the Federal Government of Nigeria, popularly known as Nigeria-Biafra war, the then Military Government headed by Gen Yakubu Gowon, had, as part of post-war peace building processes, established the NYSC programme in 1973, to foster the spirit of cohesion and togetherness among the young people of Nigeria. Thus, any rebellious act against such a Programme, just as we encounter in the actions of Nwokedi, can be interpreted as a direct revolt against the Nigerian State. The altercation between the Corps members, led by Nwokedi and the representative of the Service, Sergeant Awado, would reveal the existential nature of the crisis:

*Awado: Come here! Why you no dey for parade? (Nwokedi ignores him). No be you I dey ask? Why you no dey for drill?*

*Nwokedi: Matching deflects a man's thoughts, deflects his reasoning, turns him into a zombie.*

*Awado: (bristling) Na me you dey call zombie? (26).*

The altercation does not stop there. When Sergeant Awado calls for reinforcement to apprehend Nwokedi and bring him to submission, he continues to maintain a stoic defiance. Even when Habiba, her colleague corps member, senses danger and urges him to run to avoid the military officers' rage, he refuses to give in. This tensed moment is captured in the conversation below:

*Habiba: Please drop those things and run.*

*Corper : Run for your life.*

*Nwokedi: Run? Why should I run? Why? (fierily) This is our moment. Our moment. When we must gather our strength and*

*energies into the demands of a revolution. This is the moment when what makes us young men and women must muster us to the last and supreme sacrifice. The supreme action. The greatest decision. This is the moment of revolt. We must cross the threshold now. All of us!*

*Corper: Who are you?*

*Nwokedi: (assertively) I am Nwokedi!*

*Habiba: Nwokedi?*

*Nwokedi: There is a magic in my name*

*Corper: (to Habiba searchingly) Nwokedi?*

*Nwokedi: A stubborn dog dies barking, his eyes bloodshot, a symbol of his times*

*Habiba: (agitatedly) Run, Nwokedi, run...*

*Corper: The soldiers are coming!*

*Nwokedi: (angrily). We must revolt against those disembodied godheads, those spotted scavengers of the Sahel Savannah who have plundered this nation like a conquered territory. We must revolt (28).*

Again, Habiba shows her admiration for this defiant disposition of Nwokedi, hailing him for the audacity to attack the Nigerian flag which is the symbol of the Nigerian state.

*Habiba: He was defying the old order. He had seen beyond the façade of anthems and pledges. He understood the foolery that inspires the annual independence circus show. That is why he defiled the anthem. Nwokedi! The defiant one! Defiance! And that again is why I admire him (48-49).*

While Irobi's particular reference to "those spotted scavengers of the Sahel Savannah" can be interpreted as a reflection of his deep animosity against a certain section of the country, presumably the North, his framing of the character of Nwokedi to challenge the Nigerian flag, the stamp of authority of the State, is perhaps a reflection of his disillusionment about the failed nature of the nation's independence. A nation which, despite the abundance of her human and natural resources, has remained stagnated with a greater percentage of her people, especially those at the lower rung of the ladder, wallow in abject poverty owing to the misgovernance of the ruling elite. Even while many critiques of the play have attempted to interpret it as an exploration of the tradition of societal regeneration just as Soyinka succinctly captures in his ritual-based plays (*The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*), Irobi perhaps, does that as a decor to mask his disillusionment and the frustration of his ethnic stock against the Nigerian State.

Amoyeze captures Irobi's existential frustration when he writes that, "the retaliation he recommends for his heroes is appropriate for him since he (the hero) has already been brutalised mentally by the oppressive establishment and its cohorts" (xxxii). While he also contends that the playwright often interprets his own vision of the society through the characters he depicts, he further points out that "this distorted thinking is largely the major reason for the inappropriate anger exemplified by his heroes which eventually leads to the murder of their victims" (xiii). It is, possibly, against this background, that most of the violent actions perpetrated by Nwokedi in the text can be said to have been mainly driven by rage and a sense of disillusionment. In essence, this can also be seen as a reflection of his existential dilemma-the dilemma that presumably arises as a result of his inability to accept his limit as an existential being. To paraphrase Camus' use of the acceptance of limit, he means that as human

beings we must be able to accept that there are things that are beyond human comprehension, and that there are very little we can do to change some circumstances in our lives. It is, thus, the inability of Nwokedi to admit his limit, own up to it and face it that drives most of his actions and counteractions in the play.

For instance, whether in Irobi's portrayal of characters such as Nwokedi Snr and Arikpo, who feed fat on the stench of the nation's woes and would rather contrive various means, including engaging in ritual, to perpetuate themselves in power, or in his messianic characters typified by Nwokedi and his fiery Ekumeku militia gang, who, blinded by idealist predilection, would engage in an orgy of violence, the playwright's resentment against the Nigerian State has been made manifest. Only in a state of nature, perhaps of Thomas Hobbes's reckoning, that human beings would be decapitated in a broad daylight such as Nwokedi did in the text. Under any disguise, his violent action becomes even more distressing, bestial and abominable when such lives brutally mowed down are those of his own father, Nwokedi Snr and his brother-in-law, Senator Arikpo. Little wonder this mindless killing evokes sordid feelings from the villagers as reflected in the Ufo-Bearer's dirge:

*A man never sees the lightning that strikes him down. The eye never sees what flies into it. The axe man has felled the tree we climbed to touch the sun.... The fiery-blooded panthers, desperate in pounce and paw, have torn to pieces the carcass of the tiger (93).*

Just like every other existentialist drama, we also witness conflict of choice making in *Nwokedi*. Here, dramatic characters are either primed to face the frustration they encounter by revolting against it or choose to capitulate under its weight.. Thus, unlike Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* who choose not to do anything about their hopeless situation, but would rather wait for the elusive Godot on whose shoulder they base their hope and salvation, Nwokedi chooses to confront the corrupt politicians represented by his father, Nwokedi Snr and his brother-in-law, Arikpo. Nwokedi manifests this Sisyphean's attribute when he says: "A man must dare. He must go on daring until he dies." (29), asking fellow corps members some rhetorical questions during a confrontation with the Camp officers, thus:

*Have you ever asked yourselves why they are drilling us like soldier ants? Why they are panel-beating us into zombies? Why they terrorise our lives daily. Why these little Hitlers parade on our skulls day and night with oversize iron boots? Have you ever asked yourselves what vision they have for us? What vision have they ever had? What is the vision of a grey-haired generation that ruptured the future of their offsprings and tore it into shreds? (He displays Awado's cap). This is our future! This is our tomorrow! Friends, where is the life we have come to live? (30).*

Just as Camus said of his Absurd Hero that, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (70) to salute his sense of bravery at confronting the gods who wanted to consign him to perpetual agony in a bid to make him commit suicide, Nwokedi's killing of his father, Nwokedi Snr, and Arikpo, his brother- in-law, is greeted with wide jubilation by his Ekumeku group despite the mournful ending of the play through the dirge by an Ufo-bearer. Chorus: And blood is the rain that falls upon the land (93). This seems to be in line with the revolutionary inclination of the playwright, the conviction that only an act of insurrection can dismantle the old order that has held the nation by her throat, even to a point of atrophy.

However, it is instructive to add that, while a parallel can be drawn between Nwokedi's action in revolting against the weight of the confounding existential realities that he grapples with and Camus's mythical hero, Sisyphus for defying the gods, the former fails as an ideal absurd, existentialist character. He can, at best be regarded as a revolutionary hero. This is, presumably so because existentialism and its second half of the coin, absurdism, abhor bloodletting. Of course, it is for the refusal of Sisyphus to kill his wife as dictated by the gods, that he was condemned to the endless task of pushing a stone atop the hill to only to have it slide down. From the extract from the Chorus above, it can be argued that even the people of Osioma community are aware of the ominous signs of an impending doom that may possibly arise with the action of Nwokedi which seems to violate the age-long tradition of killing a goat to celebrate Ekpe festival, a yearly cultural event that terminates the old planting season and usher a new one. Ordinarily, when rain falls upon the land, it symbolises abundance, good health and everlasting peace. However, when "rain" is substituted for "blood" and gloom as we witness in the wearing of sobering mood of the people in the community, it portends a serious danger to the community.

It is, however, important to note that any ideal that is built on the foundation of frustration, violence and estrangement as witnessed in the violent conduct of some major characters in the text, hardly ever achieve its desired goals. This can be likened to why most of the military interventions, dressed in the garb of revolution, have often failed to usher in the expected peace, development and good governance. While it is common for most coup plotters, especially across the African countries, to cite widespread corruption and bad governance as part of the reasons they often seize the rein of power, they soon, upon settling down to governance and enjoying the spoils of office, begin to follow the beaten tracks of the past as they also manifest the worst version of that which they had denounced. For instance, in *Nwokedi*, the rendering of Ekpe festival as an alternative political approach that is rich in African tradition and value system, falls flat on its face because it is turned an abattoir where human being are slaughtered for sacrificial purposes. It reeks of hypocrisy to condemn a given approach at a certain breath and perpetrate same at another in whatever shade. The justification given by Nwokedi for rallying his colleague corps members into an insurrection against the authorities of the NYSC is to dislodge "Hitler" structure, which in his reckoning, represents the old order that has constituted that has put the country in economic and political mess in which it tries, vainly to extricate itself from. He, in the process, engages in an orgy of violence that culminates in the killing of his father and his brother-in-law. This circle of bloodletting has never sufficed for an ideal nation that is desirous of peace and progress. This, in the view of this paper, is why Irobi's protagonists in this play and in such plays as *Cemetery Road* and *Hangmen Also Die* often fail to achieve their set revolutionary agenda.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the analysis of *Nwokedi*, the paper encountered three layers of existential crisis as we are confronted with how Irobi's experiential anguish, both at the personal and collective levels, profoundly manifested, not only in the framing of his craft, but also in the portrayal of his dramatic characters, especially in shaping their motivation for actions and counteractions. The paper reveals that Nwokedi, the protagonist of the text is a deliberate framing by the playwright to interpret the various contradictions in his life's trajectory, especially his disappointment and vaulting anger against the ruling elite and their willing collaborators in the corridors of power who steal and plunder the nation's resources with reckless abandon. It is, thus, against the background established above that the paper captured the orgy of violence and the act of insurrection perpetrated by the protagonist and his cohort in the play. It also

discovered that Irobi imbues in the character of Nwokedi, a pseudo-messianic trait, the inclination that makes him (just like the playwright) assume that he has a higher stake in the nation than any other person. This could, presumably account for why Nwokedi, just like Irobi's protagonists in other of his texts fails to attain his set revolutionary agenda.

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