

## **Stylistics of violence: Incendiary diction in select plays of Esiaba Irobi**

Chike Okoye

### ***Abstract***

*The engaging nature of Esiaba Irobi's drama beyond the warps, wefts and intricacies of Igbo ritual and Western performance indices and adventurous theatre syncretism, is most importantly for a linguist and language artist, hinged on his deft manipulation of diction to accompany his stage and mime craft. Using the textual approach of literary stylistics specifically, this paper examines his often explosive and combative use of words that galvanize characters and actors and also excite the mind. His style with language has been found to be the distinguishing quality of his literary creations that enables them produce lasting and memorable effects as he vigorously pushes for change and a better society.*

**Keywords:** Stylistics, Violence, Defiance, Revolution, Drama

### **Introduction and the concept of stylistics**

Any reader who encounters the works of the now late Nigerian playwright and writer, Esiaba Irobi, is certainly going to be held spellbound by his choice and applications of language. Concerned with change in a revolutionary and Soyinkaesque manner, he does justice to his thematics by applying the commensurate and fiery diction most apt to ferry his mindset wholesomely to the reader. His special use of language becomes therefore, one of the most interesting and easily noticeable stylistic devices he applies. This paper attempts to analyze what it describes as his incendiary

diction in selected lines of three of his works concerned with defiance, change, and revolution, namely, *Hangmen Also Die*, *Cemetery Road*, and *Nwokedi*. The justification for this specific selection lines in the fact that they have to do with difficult but necessary positive change(s) for a better and just society – and in this case, Nigeria.

As he is preoccupied with defiance and revolution in his dramaturgy, a text-oriented approach such as stylistics will yield interesting results if properly applied to the language of his plays. This, of course, is in addition to any context-oriented approach that will help explain the peculiarities of his milieu and why he wrote the way he did. However, this paper is concerned with the first consideration—a look at his deft manipulation of words and use of particular language register in order to convey his meanings more effectively. This is more or less the domain of stylistics.

According to G. W. Turner, “Stylistics means the study of style, with a suggestion, from the form of the word, of a scientific or at least a methodical study” (8). Major ideas from the field of linguistics are also applicable in the stylistic analysis of literary texts; and before the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson on stylistics, the development could be traced to Russian and French Formalism and even further back to the Greek and Roman fields of rhetoric. (Krishnaswamy et al, 133). Stylistics generally tends to be split into two major tendencies, the French and German schools; and while the French is more aligned to linguistics, the German applies more to “... literary criticism, philosophical idealism, psychological attitudes and history” (Krishnaswamy et al, 135). This is further broken down to these categories:

*Linguisticstylistics*, based on linguistics, streams off into structuralism and Structuralist Stylistics, The Prague School Stylistics, the Neo-Firthian Functional Stylistics, Transformational Stylistics and so on. Literary Stylistics, as advocated by Spitzer and his followers in the 1940's is more subjective than objective, more literary than linguistic. (Krishnaswamy et al, 135)

At this point, having seen that there many variants of linguistics, a most suitable one is what is needed in this paper. A general definition proposed by Peter Verdonk which says that “Stylistics, the study of style, can be defined as the analysis of distinctive expression in language and the description of its purpose and effect” (4) will suffice. The operational words in this succinct definition are ‘distinctive expression’, ‘purpose’ and ‘effect’. To a large extent, the disagreements among scholars and schools of thought about stylistics mostly cluster around “... how such analysis and description should be conducted, and how the relationship between them is to be established” (Verdonk, 4).

The concept of foregrounding, an idea which according to Verdonk was borrowed from the visual arts, is central to the field and practice of stylistics. In this concept, literary, poetic or special language is considered to ‘stand out’ from the bland everyday language that forms the background by means of deviation; that is, by deviating from the norms of conventional language. Another concept that is germane to stylistics is parallelism. Parallelism, which is the repeated syntactical

similarities in a text for rhetorical effect, is another tool for foregrounding. Paul Simpson explains:

*Foregrounding* refers to a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary-aesthetic purposes... foregrounding typically involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from a linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition or parallelism. That means that foregrounding comes in two man guises: foregrounding as ‘deviation from a norm’ and foregrounding as ‘more of the same’. (50)

Foregrounding normally occurs as a noticeable deviation from rules or conventions of typography, graphology, sounds/phonology, morphology, syntax/grammar, semantics, diction, lexicon, etc. According to Verdonk “other potential style markers are repetitions of some linguistic element, and deviations from the rules of language in general or from the style you expect from a particular text type or context” (6)

However, there is an important aspect of stylistics which is informed by perspective – more aptly, social perspective. Ideologies influence people and most judgments are subject to or stem from ideological perspectives. This means that one could, for instance, stylistically analyze a word by singling out words and deviations that denigrate womenfolk if one is a feminist, or do same if the foregroundings in a particular work do not favour the suffering masses, if one has a Marxist bent. This is where the

revolutionary ideology of Esiaba Irobihas to be factored into this paper. Since his works especially the ones selected for this study have revolutionary undertones that border on violence, we will be mostly treated to foregroundings that have violent and revolutionary underpinnings as his incendiary dictions serve him the purpose of driving his messages home. Verdonk understands the link between ideology and emotion and the need to select the most germane deviations when he says: “in making a stylistic analysis we are not so much focused on every form and structure in a text as on those which stand out in it. Such... hold promise of stylistic relevance and thereby rouse the reader’s interest or emotion” (6).

### **Esiaba Irobi’s disposition and the source texts**

As dramatist and poet, Esiaba Irobi’s revolutionary plays are geared towards fighting established and corrupt institutions, especially of government and politics. He fights oppression through his works and galvanizes his protagonists into action, defiance, and sacrifice for sake of ideals, common good and a better society devoid of corrupt and devious elements. He especially singles out unemployment of the youth and the avaricious nature of corrupt politicians and technocrats who are backed by tyrannical leaders, as the major oppressive elements militating against the attainment of a just society.

The three plays to be used in this paper are *Hangmen Also Die*, *Cemetery Road* and *Nwokedi*. The major conflict in *Hangmen* centres on a prison hangman who refuses to hang a group of unemployed graduate youths who murder a politician that misappropriates and embezzles the finance, resources, and commodities of the people. A charged atmosphere of defiance pervades the play. The same could also be said of *Cemetery Road*

where the thespian university don, Mazeli, sacrifices himself fighting an oppressive government and its paramilitary and military apparatus backed by subversive western forces. He is defiant to the end and tragically loses out to the same institutionalized oppression he was fighting. In *Nwokedi*, the protagonist Nwokedi (Jnr) is a belligerent hot-blooded firebrand who is traditionally laden with the mystic ritual duty of wiping away the community's sins yearly by decapitating a ram. He takes his duty many notches higher as he overcomes all sorts of huddles and ends up decapitating both his father and his brother-in-law; both being poster children for gross corruption and greed. Once again, defiance and the spirit of revolution, laced with violence pervade the three plays as Irobi applies all techniques possible to drive home memories of the grotesque, the macabre, the violent and the revolutionary.

Commenting on Irobi's revolutionary fervour and spirit, Isidore Diala says that Irobi "(diagnosed) the cause of (Nigeria's) 'political epilepsy' and locates it in the corruption of the Nigerian leadership — politicians and soldiers alike." ("Tribute", 21). This fervour, energy, and exuberance is naturally felt in the language he uses in his plays, and he brings the violent version to bear in some of them; especially the three under study here. In *Esiaba Irobi's Drama and the Postcolony*, Diala says this, "Typically the dialogue of Irobi's play is characterized by the lyricism, *exuberance of language* and fecundity of phrase that give such enormous power to his poetry" (23) (emphasis mine). The art he applies in his manipulation of language that help set the tones of these plays and forcefully drive his messages home is the concern of stylistic analyses that follow next.

### **Analyses of selected lines in the texts**

As hinted earlier, this critique takes the text-oriented approach and adopts stylistics as it searches for stylistically foregrounded features that suggest, conjure up or invoke images and empathies of violence or violence related feelings in the reader or audience. The foregroundings in the characters' dialogue are necessitated because of deviations or parallelisms, and they naturally stand out and apart from the rest of the 'commonplace' text which conform and adhere to conventional rules.

### ***Hangmen Also Die***

1. **R.I.P.:** "He used words like *a loaded pistol*. He knew how to hit the target of your heart with his *verbal bullets*." (38)
  - It is easy to feel and see the intense allusion and comparisons in the statement. The imagery of a loaded pistol stands out as it conjures violence and death in the mind. The adjectival 'verbal bullets' becomes a metaphor; having developed from the simile in the first sentence. The simile and metaphor are used to foreground imagery that naturally has nothing to do with speech.
2. **Acid:** "It occurred as the accumulated grievances the common man. *It explodes like gunpowder*." (39)
  - Here, revolution is replaced by 'it'. But revolution does not in the real sense of common knowledge, explode. It is not a chemical with explosive properties. There is a semantic deviation here that is applied as an exaggeration in order to underscore the seriousness of violent insurrection – hence, explosion like gunpowder.
3. **Acid:** "*Pierce* their eyes. *Cut* off their arms and tongues. *Hang* them by the neck. *Spill* their blood."(40)
  - The active voice is greatly emphasized here by the use of verbs that inflict injury and cause harm. The active voice is

taken to a jarring degree and suggest immediate and present action; making violence more pungent. The parallelism of the repetitive formula is foregrounded.

4. **R.I.P.** “We are the hunters”

**Chorus:** “We are the hunters”

**Dayan:** “We are the suicide squad”

**Chorus:** We are the suicide squad”

**Acid:** “We are the kamikaze”

**Chorus:** “We are the Kamikaze”

**Tetanus:** “We are the leftovers”

**Chorus:** “We are the leftovers”

**Khomeini:** “We are the renegades”

**Chorus:** “We are the renegades”

**Discharge:** “We are the murderers”

**Mortuary:** “We are the Cadavers”

**Chorus:** “We are the Cadavers” (48)

- The SVO order sustained in more than ten consecutive lines repeatedly emphasize to a great degree, the active voice that underlines the poignancy of who the characters are and what they are capable of. The predicate parts of the sentences contain varying degrees of dangerously violent transformations and assumptions. In all, the parallelism inherent foregrounds the whole text.

(5) **Khomeini:** “Now I have only an axe and overfed necks to battle with.” (50)

- The stark and antithetical juxtaposition of a heavy, hard and sharp cutting axe and a soft, fleshy, overfed neck jolts the mind harshly, creating the picture of violence. It makes the idea of doing battle with a sharp, blunt-force weapon (axe) with fleshy targets (overfed necks) create a gory scene of violence.

(6) **Acid:** “Like *panthers* and *tigers* ...like *hyenas* after *carcasses* ... we *growl* like *beasts*, and *prowl* like *ghosts*...we *grope* like *ghouls*, like *jaguars* on the scent of *blood*, we *crawl*, we *creep*, we *slink*...” (53)

**Discharge:** “And out, we *flash*, like *canines*, our *knives*. We *flash* the *blades* across your tender throats or plant them between your ribs, or ... *stab and draw* and *stab and draw* and *stab and draw* again...”(54)

**Mortuary:** “Yes, like hangmen we come, our wrists as ropes, our hands groping for your neck, our fingers itching for the grip, the grip on your neck...and once our *talons* find their target...”(54)

**Khomeini:** “We wring your neck like a chicken’s neck, yes, like a wet towel, we *twist* and *twist* and *twist* until the bone breaks *behind the neck*, and the spinal cord snaps *behind the back*, until it snaps, snaps like a twig between...”(54)

**R.I.P:** “We lurk in the dark and wait to wound. We hide like Death and clutch at your life. We crouch in ambush and sniff like *jackals*. We sway, we sing, we pounce *like apes* and roll *like dogs* and stand *like snakes* hissing through our tongues. *We are a brood of vipers.*”(54)

“We *strike* like *mambas* and leave on your flesh, the mark of our *fangs*, the *sign of your venom*, the *insignia of our grief*. We leave on your skin, in the language *of your blood*, the anthem *of our fury.*”(55)

- The preponderance of special lexicon denoting wild animals with canines designed to rip flesh e.g. hyenas, jaguars, dogs, panthers, tigers, etc; the use of words such as ‘knives’, ‘canines’, ‘blades’, ‘talons’, ‘prowls’, ‘ghosts’ etc are foregrounded because of their cluster in a short space of

text; and their fear-inducing violent connotations are stylistic devices that enhance imagery, intent and meaning. The parallelism and repetition of the clause ‘stab and draw’, and the phrase ‘behind the’, coupled with the word ‘twist’, the fragmentary similes ‘like apes’, ‘like dogs’ and ‘like snakes’ which culminate in the insidious venom of the pungent metaphor: ‘We are a brood of vipers’, drive home the functions of the deliberately foregrounded imagery and syntactic manipulations. Again, ‘strike’, ‘mamba’ and ‘fangs’ collocate to form a complete picture of venomous violence. Meanwhile, there is a juxtaposition of phrasal structure that enhances balance: ‘of your’ balances antithetically with ‘of our’, and this repeats again thereby forming parallelism.

### *Cemetery Road*

1. **Second Voice:** “We shall shoot you in the privacy of your private parts if you don’t open the door immediately.”(10)
  - In this active voice sentential order, the use of ‘private’ in two word classes and modes suggest depth and reach as the first ‘private’ (privacy) acts on the second in order to emphasize depth and degree. As it juxtaposes noun and adjective, it is also a sort of parallelism.
2. **Third Peasant:** “Red! Like blood spurting from a shivered vein. Red! Like blood on a plate of rice!” (25)
  - The imagery of blood on a plate of rice suggests gory violence. The harsh juxtaposition of blood and food especially their redness and whiteness gives off effect because of the deviant association of blood and rice instead of stew and rice.

3. **First Peasant:** “Torrents upon torrents upon torrents of venom...”(28)
  - Repetition of the synonym for flood (torrents), suggesting violent and unchecked flow of venom and blood is enhanced by the ideophonic and suggestive rhotic alveolar trill /r/ that culminates in the /v/ in venom.
4. **Mazeli:** “If you mention my career again I will *smash your skull* with this tape and watch your wretched upper-middle-class brain *surge out* like *rotten yoghurt*.”(46)
  - Violence and gore are foregrounded in the intensity of the italicized lexicon. The violence of ‘smash’, ‘surge’ and the spectacle of ‘rotten yoghurt’ all stand out as intense deviations from normal everyday words.
5. **Mazeli:** “The President will simply order his guards to *perforate* you with *bullets* like armed robbers or coup plotters bring *shot* at the *stakes*.”(112)
  - The gory picture of bullets ‘perforating’ invokes a detached and distant lack of feeling that makes the horror more poignant and disturbing. The deviation is lexical since ‘perforate’ is more associated with inanimate objects.

### ***Nwokedi***

1. **Arikpo:** “They have *burnt my car* and *burnt my life*. They have *butchered* me like a sacrificial animal. They have *torn my flesh* limb from limb. What you are looking at is a *pillar of ashes*.” (3)
  - The sudden transformation to shock in the second half of the parallelism ‘burnt my life’ from the milder and more plausible ‘burnt my car’, the confirmed hyperboles ‘butchered’, ‘torn my flesh’, and the metaphor ‘pillar of ashes’ are all foregrounded to build a picture of desolation.

2. **Arikpo:** “Murder marches in their *minds* with *militant* feet”  
**Mrs. Nwokedi:** “They are murderous”  
**Arikpo:** “Violence roils in their veins like viruses.”(8)
  - The phonological foregroundings of the bilabials and labiodentals /m/ and /v/ as consonance contribute to the force that is associated with violence and murder.
3. **Mrs. Nwokedi:** “We are the last human frontiers to the *marauding* monsters and *bleating* *beasts* devouring our loves daily...”(11)
  - The closely placed consonances and assonances in the lines create more haunting imagery through the ideophonic sounds suggested. Their deliberate placement is foregrounded as they form a parallelism of sounds.
4. **Nwokedi:** “Why these *littleHitlers* parade on our *skulls* day and night with *oversize ironboots*”? (30)
  - The allusive metaphor ‘little Hitlers’ and metonymies ‘skulls’ and ‘oversize iron boots’ are aptly foregrounded as they evoke and represent images of forceful military-like oppression and connote violence.
5. **Nwokedi:** “The *hand* that wields the glinting knife”  
**Fingesi:** “Nwokedi!”  
**Nwokedi:** “And slashes at the *heels* of an inclement season”  
**Fingesi:** “Nwokedi!”  
**Nwokedi:** “I am *time*. Time that trips tyrants!”(39)
  - The metonymies ‘hard’, ‘heels’, metaphor ‘time’ and the violence-laden verb ‘slashes’ complete the picture and message intended as they are not used in their normal, conventional meanings.
6. **Habiba:** “Men within whose hearts rebellion roils and the thunder of their resolve crackles day and night.”(50)

- When an abstract quality such as ‘resolve’ is hyperbolically imbued with the elemental quality of thunder and also ‘crackles’ (like fire), conventional meaning becomes outrightly deviant and the occurrence, foregrounded. The dominant imagery of bustling fire (thunder and crackles) is that of forceful and fiery violence.
7. **Mrs. Nwokedi:** “...he will smash my head against the walls and watch my *illiterate brains* surge out *like congealed milk.*”(68)
- Nwokedi:** “How would you like your blood to froth out from your fat neck *like tomato puree?*”(73)
- The personification and metonymy contained in “illiterate brains” and the highly imagistic similes ‘congealed milk’ and ‘tomato puree’ are aptly foregrounded in the sentences.
8. **Arikpo:** “In-law, these soldiers will *rupture* what is left of the future like a virgin’s *hymen*. They will *perforate* it with *bayonets* and plant *bullets* within that *womb.*”(89)
- The harshness of rupture’, ‘perforate’, ‘bayonets’ and ‘bullets’ are incongruous in collocation with the tenderness and procreative nature of ‘hymen’ and ‘womb’. The jarring imagery is foregrounded and violent and the incongruity is deviant. Again, the oxymoronic ‘plant bullet’ stands defiantly out as planting is a life-giving action while bullet is naturally associated with death.

So far the most effective expressions and words associated with violence in three of his plays have been analysed using literary stylistics and have been found to be foregrounded in line with the effects intended by the playwright. Other colourful and dramatic expressions abound in the works but none have the potentially incendiary qualities of these ones analysed.

## **Conclusion**

Esiaba Irobi's preoccupation with revolution for a better society is palpable. His choice of drama and theatre has proven effects that appeal to the audience with that special thespian power. Irobi's art readily brings to mind the fiery revolutionary Amiri Baraka (LeRoy Jones) and his seminal and controversial piece, "The Revolutionary Theatre", and Irobi himself seems to have aligned his revolutionary works after Baraka's postulates – force, violence, and change, for a better society. Baraka's essay is quoted here:

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change. The Revolutionary Theatre should EXPOSE! Show up the insides of humans... The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths. It must crack their faces open to the mad cries of correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness... but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments. The Revolutionary Theatre must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked. It must ...because it is a theatre of victims. Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are brothers of victims, and that they themselves are victims.... (4-6)

Irobi believes in this and has applied all the jolting and galvanizing tools known to man; and in this context, carefully

chosen words to accompany the acting. He employs fiery, violence-laden and incendiary diction carefully manipulated to achieve the ultimate goal of awakening in us all that is humane and human in order to engender and foster a positive and mutually beneficial society where oppression is minimal and equity and fairness reign supreme.

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*Chike Okoye is an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.*