THE POLEMICS OF LANGUAGE 
IN ESIABA IROBI’S CEMETERY ROAD

Stephen E. Inegbe
Department of Theatre Arts, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria.
ingbesteve397@gmail.com

Bassey, Rebecca
Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Uyo
beckybassey61@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

In the culture of any group of people, language, as a potent means of communication, cannot be relegated to the background. Every good play reflects the people for whom it is written. Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road is not an exception. This essay, therefore, considers the employment of language as one of the major tools of revolt in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road in the dramatist’s attempt to restructure and build a new egalitarian society. The essence of this study is to reveal how Esiaba Irobi, has been able to deploy language as a revolutionary weapon in his play, Cemetery Road. The study, thus, showcases the ideological concern of the playwright in the play. The play is ideological because it takes a radical position on the issue of change in certain aspects of the Nigerian society. This essay, therefore, seeks to unveil the different aspects of language used in Cemetery Road. An examination of the text reveals that the dramatist employs macabre language or language of violence, persuasive language, wit, mockery and sarcasm, proverbial language, imagery, language of abuse and insensitivity, and language of despair.

KEYWORDS: Language, Social Change, Revolution, Violence, Esiaba Irobi, Conflict

INTRODUCTION

The art of artistic rebellion in order to bring about social change through language has always been part of the life style of dramatists. According to Brockett;

There are at least two reasons for the adverse judgment of Euripides by his contemporaries. First, he often introduced subjects thought unsuited to the stage and questioned traditional values…. Euripides’ characters often questioned the gods’ sense of justice, since they seemed sources of misery as often as of happiness. At times Euripides suggested that chance rules the world, and that human beings are more concerned with moral values than are the gods- at least as depicted in myths. (1991, p. 19)
The above submission by Brocket is to show that the employment and use of language as a revolutionary weapon did not start in contemporary times and society. In fact, theatre history is replete with the fact that at one time or the other, dramatists or playwrights, also known as poets in classical societies, employ language as a revolutionary weapon in their works. In the classical Greek society, Euripides was regarded as a non-conformist and a literary rebel because he wrote plays that attacked certain ideals of his society, that is, the 5th Century classical Greek society. His plays attacked the gods, discussed the fate of the commoners and brought traditional values into questioning. Aristophanes, one of the writers of satires in that era, elaborated on this when he tried to appraise the creative activities of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the three classical Greek writers of the 5th Century Athenian society. In his play, The Frogs, Aristophanes makes one of his characters to argue thus:

Well, when Euripides came down, he exhibited before the toughs, the sneak-thieves, and the pick-pockets and the safecrackers and the juvenile delinquents, and there’s a lot of that in Hades, and they listened to his disputations and his wrigglings and his twists and went crazy, and thought he was the cleverest writer. That all went to his head, so he challenged for the chair where Aeschylus was sitting. (1962, p. 70)

In essence, Euripides was seen as the one who debased the noble art of tragedy in his time by discussing commonplace issues instead of issues of universal interests. He ridiculed and diminished the heroic status of the gods in his dramatic writings, and even questioned their authority.

In East Africa, Ngugi wa Thiong’o had some of his plays proscribed by the then colonial government of Kenya because of their politically inciting contents. In South Africa, many playwrights were arrested and imprisoned for inciting violence in their dramas. One of such playwrights was Athol Fugard whose play, Sizwe Bansi is Dead, (1972), has become a classic. Back home in Nigeria, the man widely reputed as the father of modern Nigerian theatre, Hubert Ogunde, had his play, “Strike and Hunger” (unpublished) banned and refused performance in the Northern part of the country after its initial performance in the Western part of the country. The then colonial government considered the play as inciting and capable of rousing the people into a state of political awareness. According to Clark:

*Strike and Hunger* was the first opera that Ogunde produced alone, … The story of the opera at that time was extremely topical. It narrated the events leading to the famous general strike by trade unions for better wages, cost of living allowance and improved conditions of service…… The play was to catapult Ogunde to national prominence. He was banned from staging it in Jos, Northern Nigeria. (1979, p. 23)
Every society has been engulfed at one time or the other in a revolutionary process in its quest for change. The question may be asked; “what is revolution?” In the words of Okiche;

Revolution is the overthrow of a particular social order in favour of a new system. It entails a fundamental change in the way people think or visualize something. In addition, revolution is the transformation of political organization, especially the overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another government by the governed. In other words, this change can be socioeconomic or radical. The word revolution originates from a Latin word ‘revolutio’ meaning ‘turn around’ (2016, p. 71)

Goldstone is of the opinion that revolution is “an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that undermine authorities” (1980, p. 15) So many issues bring about revolution but at the bottom line of such issues lies disaffection. Therefore, negative issues like frustration, economic recession, aggression and discrimination have often been the causes or reasons behind the occurrence of a revolution. To Hagher, the issues that could lead to revolution and radical protests are “social injustice, insecurity of life and property, territorial ambition, national pride, religious intolerance, ideological differences” (1997, p. 14) Many forms of revolution are carried out through acts of violence. This is because in most cases, the oppressors do not want to let go of their grips on the oppressed. A prominent African author, wa Thiong’o supports the use of violence to remove corrupt and authoritarian leaders, asserting that; “violence, in order to change an intolerable, unjust, social order, is not savagery; it purifies man” (2007, p.28). In some other cases, revolution has been known to have been achieved through a non-violent means. In history, the former Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi is widely reputed as an advocate of a non-violent approach to the issue of change.

African literature has advanced and developed tremendously in terms of themes, one of which is revolution. Literary works have, thus, embraced themes like protests for freedom from colonial masters, a struggle for an egalitarian society, corrupt leadership, political and social decadence as well as gender issues among others. Plays have been written to canvass for change in the values of people from one generation to the other. It must be noted and emphasized that societal values are never the same; they are dynamic in nature. To achieve a change in any society, parties involved may have to experience a kind of demonstration. Usually this leads to conflict and revolt for a better restructuring of society. Conflict is an essential factor if change must take place. This is why Burton insisted that “Conflict, like sex, is an essential creative element in human relationship. It is the means to change; the means by which our social values of welfare, security, justice and opportunities for personal development can be achieved…” (1990, p. 136) Revolt is the product of conflict. Revolt can as well be viewed as a situation that has degenerated to the use of protest to effect the needed change. To revolt, according to Schwarz et al “is to rise to opposition, to cause radical change and revolution against unacceptable conditions” (1990, p. 12) Revolt is an age-long tool used in kicking against exploitation, oppression and domination. Revolt,
therefore, is borne out of depression and other oppressive tendencies within the minds of the oppressed. To achieve their dreams of revolution and protest against the injustices meted on them, awareness must be created. This can be done through verbal art, which is possible through language. Language, then, is an indicator of a people’s times, dreams and conditions. It is a medium through which a people’s beliefs and values are communicated and transmitted from one generation to the other. According to Udoh;

Language is an extremely important aspect of a community, as well as an important index of identity: and it is used for all communicative functions that a community requires. It also serves as a repository of a people’s culture, history, exploits, etc. In fact, it is language that differentiates the homo sapiens from other animals. (2013, p. 38)

This position agrees with Moore’s assertion that to “choose a language is to choose a world” (1967, p. 8) Playwrights understand the potency of language in their creativity; they see it as an instrument capable of contributing to the social and cultural development of their societies. Therefore, they employ it in their creativity for the creation of national consciousness. Language is a significant cultural aspect of any given society. This essay thus, considers the employment of language as one of the major tools for revolt in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road in an attempt to restructure and build a new egalitarian society. The essence of this study is to reveal how a Nigerian playwright, Esiaba Irobi, has been able to use language as a revolutionary weapon in his play, Cemetery Road. The study, thus, showcases the ideological concern of the playwright in the play. The play is ideological because it takes a radical position on the issue of change in certain aspects of the Nigerian society. This essay, therefore, seeks to unveil the different aspects of language used in Cemetery Road. We shall examine this from the aspects of macabre language or language of violence, persuasive language, wit, mockery and sarcasm, proverbial language, imagery, language of abuse and insensitivity, and language of despair.

The study examines Irobi’s Cemetery Road in relation to language as a weapon of revolution. This textual examination is intended to help discover the diverse ways in which the playwright has used language as a revolutionary weapon in the play and this agrees with Brasser that “language is the primary sign system whereby we structure our world” (2003, p.82) Irobi used language in this play as a revolutionary weapon and calls on well-meaning people in the society to wake up from their lethargy and defend their rights or whatever they believe will make society better, using their last blood.

EARLIER STUDIES ON IROBI’S CEMETERY ROAD

This section of our work reviews earlier studies on Irobi’s drama text. The essence is to establish a base for our study. It must be noted, however, that not much literature on Irobi’s Cemetery Road are available for review. The few available ones are either unpublished projects or online publications on the internet. A few of them are examined here.
In Okiche’s “Violence and Revolutionary Aesthetics in Esiaba Irobi’s Plays: a Study of Cemetery Road and The Other Side of the Mask” (2016), the author employs Marxian dialectics as a theory to “investigate the violent revolutionary attributes inherent in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road and The Other Side of the Mask.” The study is a comparative discourse with emphasis on heroic roles of the different tragic characters in both plays. The study approached the issue of revolution in both plays from a purely Marxist perspective insisting that the changes sought for in the plays are political, social and economic. Okiche reveals that “Irobi adopts African oral tradition in expressing his violent revolutionary vision in his plays by employing, cultural forms such as mask, music, chant and many other stylistic trends.” Primarily, Okiche’s essay is interested in thematic analysis and the question of relevance in both plays. This is the point of departure from our work which concerns itself on the use of language as a means of protest.

The second essay is Ebekue’s “The Haves, The Have Nots and Class Politics in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road and Nwokedi” (2018). This study also employs Marxism as a theory in its discourse. The emphasis of the author is on Class politics which he said “has been an age long reality in most nations of the world.” The study reveals that there is a constant struggle for power and relevance between the different social classes.” This work is also different from our essay because it understudied “the dimension of the relationship between social classes in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road and Nwokedi.” Our study is on the use of language as a means of protest in Cemetery Road.

Oku’s research is also on the issue of class struggle. Titled “Marxism in Tess Ownwueme’s Then She Said It and Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road” (2016), the essay is a comparative discourse and attempts to compare how the issue of class struggle is handled in Tess Ownwueme’s Then She Said It and Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road. Emphasis of the author is on the question of theme with special focus on social stratification and social classification in both plays. To the author, Ownwueme and Irobi “advocate for a classless society that is free from oppression and exploitation.” For this to be achieved, all oppressed parties must be involved in the struggle. In this essay, the emphasis is not on language use but on thematic interest of class struggle.

Esiaba Irobi- A Critical Profile

In the field of drama and theatre in Nigeria, Esiaba Irobi has distinguished himself as a playwright, actor, theatre director and critic. He was born on the first of October, 1960. This was the same date and year that Nigeria attained nationhood as an independent country. For his studies, Irobi read Dramatic Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. From there, he proceeded to the University of Sheffield and the University of Leeds, both in England for his Master’s and PhD degrees respectively. He taught and practiced theatre in his alma mater, Nsukka, for a while. While there, he wrote and published many plays and poetry collections. Apart from drama and theatre, Esiaba Irobi has also distinguished himself in the aspect of film studies. His professional career has also taken him to universities like Leeds, Liverpool and J. Moores (all in Englad), and New York University, Townson University, Ohio University and Athens, all in America. Before his death of Cancer in a German hospital on May 3rd, 2010, Irobi was on a Fellowship at Freie University, Berlin, Germany. Among his published works are The Colour of Rusting Gold (1989), Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh (1989), Hangmen also Die (1989), Nwokedi (1991), The Other
Side of the Mask (1999), The Fronded Circle (1999), Cemetery Road (2009) and Sycorax (an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s The Tempest) (2013) Sycorax was published after his death. Apart from published plays, Esiaba Irobi has also published a good number of poems. His published volumes of poetry include Cotyledons (1987), Inflorescence (1989) and Why I Don’t Like Philip Larkin (2005)

Synopsis of Cemetery Road

To understand the play, Cemetery Road, the opinion of the panel of judges that adjudged the play as winning the $50,000.00 LNG prize is apt:

Cemetery Road is a play about living, loving, and dying for the things we hold dear. It reveals the narrow purviews of the Nigerian nation, constructs deeper insights out of our social logjams, relates with the residual heritage of the nation and rises above the penchant for tragedy which the socio-economic situation in our country predisposes every concerted consciousness. It is socially relevant in an ironically refreshing way. The dialogue crackles. Its theatricality is variegated. (blurb)

From the opinion of the panel of judges, it is clear that Cemetery Road treats issues of human interests where the rich and the powerful in the society will continue to employ all available means to remain relevant and maintain their positions. Therefore, the only alternative left for the struggling masses to wake up, become conscious of their situation and make positive moves to correcting their lot.

The play, Cemetery Road, treats the issue of class and dictatorship in a typically military environment. In such an environment, tyranny is the order of the day as any perceived enemy of the state is quashed all in the name of state security. The favoured members of the society are the military and those who are in one way or the other associated with them. These favoured few protect the interests of the state at all costs, and as an extension, their own interests. The story thus begins with oppression where we see the military wielding its might on a poor university lecturer, Mazeli, and his pregnant fiancée, Somadjna, a journalist, over a controversial missing tape which belongs to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and which was seized by Mazeli. The BBC Correspondent from whom the tape was seized had reported the matter to the military intelligence unit. The military, fearing that this might lead to a declaration of war by Britain if the tape is not released, resorts to state terror and brutish acts all in an attempt to retrieve the tape from Mazeli. The captain explains why they must have the tape by all means: “We have to come because we do not want trouble with the British government” ( p. 18).

In the play, two British correspondents are in Africa for a documentary, using students in an unnamed university to carry out a Community Theatre Project under the direction of Mazeli. On the surface, they claim they are to use the documentary to show how the poor are being maltreated in the Nigerian society. In actual fact, their intention is to present Africa as a backward
continent; a place still very far from civilization. But Mazeli, the leader of the documentary project seizes the tape having realized what the true intentions of the British correspondents are. He tells the soldiers: “it has to do with the image of Africa in a post-modern world” (p. 12). In an attempt to cause the tape to be released, Mazeli’s home is not only ransacked but vandalized. Even Somadjina who is in a critical state of pregnancy is left unattended unless Mazeli would agree to release the tape.

Lawani, a one-time friend of Mazeli who is presented as a radical and a vibrant Marxist in the university abandons his Marxist principles because he wants to get rich and belong to the powerful, ruling cabal. In his own words, “I made up my mind to become a millionaire. And you know in this country, the easiest way to make money is to join the armed forces. That way, you make millions and still remain where power is” (p. 89). The action of the military is sacrosanct. They do not respect fundamental human rights. When Mazeli opts to plead his case against the British agents, he is told by the Captain: “as far as the State Security is concerned, and by that I mean the Federal Military Government, by which implication means or includes the President, what is happening now is the only hearing this case will get anytime, anywhere, anyplace” (p. 16).

In terms of structure, the play begins with a funeral procession: in fact, it is presented like a flashback and Professor Madubunjoala, Mazeli’s Head of Department, is presented as belonging to the superior rank because he has decided to make himself a despicable intellectual who bootlicks the dictators and betrays the articulate crusaders of freedom and justice. He makes a mockery of the funeral procession because his bitterest enemy, Mazeli, dies at the end of the play. His funeral speech is thus laden with sarcastic humour and irony.

**Language as a Revolutionary Weapon in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road**

Esiaba Irobi makes use of language in different ways in Cemetery Road to create diverse moods and persuasions. Certain factors are manipulated to enhance free flow of language and to create suspense. Importantly, the use of language in the play is violent, clear and concise. On the blurb of the text, Isidore Diala captures the general mood of the play by saying that Cemetery Road “plays dangerously between the sacred and the profane, the macabre and the hilarious…” It is through language deployment that this is revealed. In terms of division, one can see macabre language (which we also want to refer to as language of violence), language of persuasion, wit, mockery and sarcasm, proverbial language, imagery (in the description of the pathetic state of the Nigerian society), language of abuse and insensitivity and language of despair. It is from the above perspectives that we intend to consider the issue of language in Cemetery Road and a few excerpts will suffice in each case as illustrations.

**Macabre Language**

Macabre language means the language of violence or the language of threat. Several instances are prominent in the play. First Soldier and Second Soldier employ macabre language in an attempt to compel Mazeli to release the seized BBC Correspondence’s tape. A good example is seen at the beginning of the play.
Mazeli: Do you realize, whoever you are, that you have no right to intrude into the privacy of my house?
Second Voice: Dr. Anyanwu, we shall shoot you seven times in the privacy of your private parts if you don’t open this door immediately. (p. 10)

This is followed up by a series of gun shots as the door is riddled with bullets and violently forced open. The house is vandalized and the property inside destroyed all in the name of searching for a missing tape. Even the pregnant Somadjina is not allowed to be attended to at a crisis period until the tape was released but the equally stubborn Mazeli would not be bothered. Macabre language is not only a language of violence but also a language of threat and in many instances in the play, threats are issued by the oppressor to the oppressed. Another instance of macabre language is seen in the judgment passed by Sarki, the Sharia Judge on the government official who is presented as ripping off the people:

Sarki: I have never tried a case like this before. Such stupendous greed! Castrate him. Cut off his genitals. Use your knives and cut off what remains of his shrunken penis. (p. 37)

The picture created from Sarki’s judgement is not only macabre in nature but tends towards barbarism even though it is for a just course. The government official is asked to pay fifteen thousand naira to each of the community members whose lands were forcefully taken for so-called government projects but the official pays the community members a hundred and fifty naira each while making them to sign for fifteen thousand. This violent brutalization of the government official during a documentary recorded by Hazel and Douglas reveals Irobi’s penchant for violent forms of revolution. The official represents the imperialist, capitalist and is an oppressor of the masses. Mazeli calls him “a noon-day thief. An armed robber” (p. 35)

Language of Persuasion

Language of persuasion is seen in the play when Somadjina pleads with, and tries to convince Mazeli to cause the tape to be released to the brutal soldiers even without knowing the contents of the tape. Persuasion becomes a powerful tool in the hand of First Soldier in an attempt to prove that he is a civilized man of the law. In his own words;

First Soldier: Listen Dr. Anyanwu, in the animal kingdom there are lions and there are hyenas. I am not one of those pregnant generals who joined the army in the forties and fifties when all the qualification you needed to join the armed forces was to fail your O levels comfortably. I have a first degree in Political Science. (p. 12)
However, Mazeli is quick to point out to him that the havoc already caused in his apartment by First Soldier and his colleague did not reveal him as a civilized soldier. First soldier employs persuasive language after realizing that Mazeli would not be cowed by their threats. To portray his level of civility, First Soldier restrains Second Soldier from forcefully trying to rough-handle the pregnant Somadjina under the excuse of searching for the missing tape, and goes ahead to apologize for all that happened in Mazeli’s apartment. Curiously, it is the same First Soldier that prevents Mazeli from attending to his pregnant fiancée, thus, revealing him as insincere. In the end, they promise to return the following day to collect the tape but not until Second Soldier has promised to send a grenade to them as a wedding present, a threat which was actually carried out later in the play.

Wit, Mockery and Sarcasm

Irobi also employed the language of wit, mockery and sarcasm in the play as the only defensive instrument available to the oppressed against their oppressors. Mazeli cynically rubbishifies the military when First Soldier tells him that they are from Military Intelligence. Mazeli says: “The military and intelligence. What a paradox! It reminds me of two pregnant women trying to embrace each other” (p.12) Their activities, much later, portray them as lacking in intelligence: they are not ready to see the act of patriotism in what Mazeli did by seizing the tape. They are more interested in getting the tape and returning it to the BBC Correspondents because they do not want the Nigerian government to have any issue with Britain. In fact, the confession of First Soldier is not only sad but revealing: “we have come because we do not want any trouble with the British Government. If those correspondents were from Cameroun or Congo Brazzaville or Burkina Faso, we can kick them out of the country and say, as we kick their arses, ‘to hell with you’ “ (p.18) As far as First Soldier is concerned, the British government must not only be feared but revered. It is better to have issues with an African government because in his thinking, no African nation can withstand Nigeria.

Proverbs as Markers of Protest and Persuasion

Proverbs are also used in the play as a means of protest. On page 19, it takes the place of obscene humour and vulgarism. After repeated attempts to coerce Mazeli to release the controversial tape failed, Second Soldier says: “Na small shit wey dey spoil nyash” (p. 19) Though vulgar, the proverb is presented as a language of threat to Mazeli. It is Second Soldier’s own way of saying: ”we have tolerated you enough and are now ready to apply brutal force to recover the tape. Therefore, Mazeli should respect himself by producing the tape” Earlier on, the same Second Soldier, through the employment of a proverb, says; “Who dash monkey banana?” (p. 19) to show the poverty stricken situation of the Nigerian intellectual. Mazeli had insisted that the tape belonged to him and in response, Second Soldier retorted with the proverb to show him that it is not a man of his low status that buys such a tape. An important proverb that echoes the voice of resistance in the play is the one by Mazeli. Reacting to the threat made by First Soldier who said; “Exactly, Dr. Anyanwu, like this night. The sun will set on your life” (p.21), Mazeli employs this proverb as a response: “The sun never sets. It is only (a) man who walks away from the light”
This proverb shows resistance, resilience and determination to move on with the struggle, certain that even if he loses his life in the process, his students in the Community Theatre Project will carry on with his ideas.

**Imagery**

So many imageries are captured via language in the play. In the description of the pathetic state of the Nigerian society, Lawani tries desperately to make Mazeli see reasons as to why he has to compromise and jettison his childhood dream for a service to the state:

Mazeli: So you joined the SSS, Lawani. What happened to the dreams we shared at school?

Lawani: They decayed in the compost heap of reality. Of unemployment.

Of poverty. Both of you come from middle class families.

Somadjna’s father was a permanent secretary. Yours, a minister.

Remember, my father was a labourer until I got this job. Did you expect me to go on chewing palm kernel all my life? (p. 142)

The picture created by Lawani is that of despair and hopelessness for the commoners. The imagery of “chewing palm kernel” shows how difficult things are with the common man in the society. Little wonder then that Lawani has to find a way of becoming relevant in the class of oppressors, seeking to join them if he cannot beat them.

Also, there is strong use of imagery when the peasants narrate their ordeals in the hand of government because they would not let go of their land for government use. This land is their only means of livelihood and government is forcefully depriving them of its use, preferring to give it out to foreign expatriates otherwise known as investors. The scene reminded one of the killings at Odi in Rivers State during the Olusegun Obasanjo regime in Nigeria. According to the peasants, because they refused to let go of their lands, soldiers, policemen and mobile policemen invaded their land “and it rained. It rained on our heads, our chests, our bellies and down our legs. Stranger, it rained like it has never rained here before. Everything we call our lives was eroded in that flood” (p. 28) Indeed, “it was a flood of blood” (p. 28) The imagery of rain showed the extent of blood flow; innocent lives were wasted by government soldiers in the name of protecting the interests of government.

**Language of Insensitivity**

Language of insensitivity also features prominently in the play. In all the instances where it is employed, it is always by the oppressor to the oppressed. For instance, in spite of the claims by First Soldier to civility, he values an ordinary tape to human life when he prevents Mazeli from attending to his sick, pregnant fiancée. Meanwhile, Second Soldier who is more uncivilized tells Somadjna: “Until we finish our search, you no dey go anywhere, you hear me? If you want to feel alright, you can lie on the floor with your stomach, flat like a lizard with a bellyache. (to her face) You lizard, na me tell you to swallow wasp?” (p. 14) In fact, his last statement is an insult and it
reveals him as not being only insensitive, but callous and hardened. To him, unarmed civilians are nothing but “lizards” Little wonder then, that he makes them a promise later on, of a grenade as a wedding present.

Language of Abuse

Language of abuse is employed in the play by both the oppressed and the oppressor. When employed by the oppressor, it is to serve as an insult to the oppressed, but in the hand of the oppressed, abuse becomes the only weapon they can wield to boost their ego as humans and assert their self-worth. Examples include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mazeli</th>
<th>“…distinguished idiots. Zombies. Carrion flies” (p. 16)</th>
<th>Used to describe the military who are presented as callous, heartless and insensitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarki</td>
<td>“…What did you steal, you overfed beast with the obscene backside of a pregnant camel?” (p. 36)</td>
<td>Employed against the government official who was ripping off the people by making them to sign for fifteen thousand naira while je paid them one hundred and fifty naira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazeli</td>
<td>“That means he owns a lot of land. And by implication is a modern feudal arsehole” (p. 43)</td>
<td>Employed against Douglas and his class for refusing to support the cause of the poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazeli</td>
<td>“You don't have the intelligence God gave a dog” (p. 44)</td>
<td>Employed against Douglas whom Mazeli felt is trying to rubbish the image of Africa in a BBC documentary for a project to showcase suffering Africans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examples of Language of Despair

There is language of despair when the peasants are narrating their ordeals in the hand of government simply because they are trying to protect their land, their only means of livelihood from foreign expatriates otherwise known as investors. The scene reminded one of the killings at Odi in Rivers State during the Olusegun Obasanjo regime in Nigeria. Flying bullets which bring about a decimation of the people are captured in the light of “rain” This is made evidence on p. 28 of the play text:

Lead Singer: “and it rained. It rained on our heads, our chests, our bellies and down our legs. Stranger, it rained like it has never rained here before. Everything we call our lives was eroded in that flood” (p. 28)

The employment of the word, “rain”, showed the extent of blood flow among innocent peasants whose lives were wasted by government soldiers in the name of protecting the interests of
government. According to the peasants, because they refused to let go of their lands, soldiers, policemen and mobile policemen invaded their land and what they experienced after the invasion of so-called “law enforcers” “is a flood of blood” (p. 28) The imagery of “rain” shows the extent of blood flow; “it rained like it never rained here before” (p. 28)

In the same vein, Mazeli represents the oppressed of the society, those considered as inferior. He is a lone voice crying in the wilderness even though his reason for seizing the tape is borne out of patriotism and national interest. He is tortured by those in the superior rank but he refuses to succumb to the ways of the oppressors. He fights for the peasant farmers whose fertile farmlands have been seized by the colonialists. Meanwhile, the BBC correspondent who the Nigerian state is trying to protect, Douglas Powell, does not regard Nigeria as anything. To him, Nigeria is hell and as far as he is concerned, “I came here to collect the tape and get the hell out of this fucking country immediately” (p. 118). Irobi has simply told us that the Western world does not have any regard for the black people yet we regard them as lords and masters, and we do everything, including destroying our own just to please them.

In all, the pervading sense of language in the play is that of violence and protest; violence on the part of the oppressor since the status quo must be maintained, and protest, on the part of the oppressed who must re-assert their humanity with the hope of a better tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

This essay is an attempt to show that the deployment and use of language is a powerful tool of protest as showcased in Esiaba Irobi’s Cemetery Road. It is established in the analysis of the play that violence, an offshoot of protest, is a subject of class struggle. The revolutionary activities and verbal utterances in the texts are achieved through Irobi’s use of language. Irobi pays much attention to his choice of words during the verbal utterances between Mazeli, the tragic hero in Cemetery Road, and his oppressors. Language is therefore one of the methods used to indicate and identify the various classes in the text. It is through Irobi’s stylistic use of words that Mazeli is able to convince the peasants of their exploitation, thereby encouraging them to adopt violent form of revolution against their oppressors. The tone of Mazeli’s verbal utterance is inciting. Illustrations were drawn from the text to reveal the above. In conclusion, this essay submits that violence, in all its ramifications, is an ill wind which blows no one any good. Granted that governments and those who occupy positions of power may not readily carry the poor and downtrodden along, dialogue is a better alternative to violence. It is because Mazeli did not consider an alternative option to the issue of change that he meets his unfortunate end in the play.
REFERENCES