

ON ABSOLUTISM IN NIGERIAN DRAMA: THE ASPHYXIATED FREEDOM IN IROBI'S *THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MASK* AND ABBA'S *THE BLOOD PRICE*

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Abstract: Nigerian drama reflects the intrinsic human struggles experienced in everyday life. The quest for freedom is a continuous human struggle, fundamental to human existence and often enshrined in revolutionary activities. This study aims to analyse and assess the critical ideas of absolute freedom in Esiaba Irobi's *The other side of the mask* and Abba A. Abba's *The blood price*. It presents freedom as a double-edged sword – for liberation or destruction – and these two degrees of freedom occur at separate times. The negative side of freedom, which emerges in its excessiveness (entrapping liberty), manifest as absolute freedom. This foregrounds that absolute freedom incubates in its over-ambitiousness; the outcome of this transcended freedom is its destructiveness. Adopting a qualitative method and distinguishing itself from previous studies on these two plays, the study explores the Marxist and Postmodernist ideas of Terry Eagleton as presented in his book, *Holy terror*, to analyse absolute freedom in these plays by answering questions such as: At what point can freedom lead to destruction? What actions or events propel such a transition, and how are characters spurred into consciousness? In answering these questions, freedom becomes an effect and a cause, with absolute freedom as an effect that causes ruin to its possessor. While Eagleton's Marxist ideas dwell on conflicts that emerge from the pursuit of freedom and the need to maintain equilibrium in human interactions, his postmodernist ideas reflect a return to the endless state of the creator's concept of freedom and a change from modernist ideas that constrict human existence. In the plays, the two protagonists, Jamike and Agunwany, become victims of the freedom which they sought in their revolt against conservative practices that suppress humanity; instead of gaining freedom in its objective form, the seekers submerge into absolute freedom that leads to their destructive bondage. The paper concludes that absolute freedom constricts freedom and destroys the mind's rationality; self-destruction becomes the outcome of these characters' overambitious quest.

Keywords: Abba; absolute freedom; Irobi; Marxism; postmodernism

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1. Introduction

The Nigerian drama, like its macrocosm – African literature, prioritizes the depiction of Nigerian struggles and existence over entertainment. Such struggles are associated with the environment and different periods experienced over the years. Ekevere and Oboho (2025) aver that “Nigerian drama has evolved through precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial phases, consistently reflecting and shaping political and social realities. Its historical trajectory underscores its unique role as both an artistic and political form, making it a crucial medium for interrogating corruption and injustice” (p. 425). The postcolonial period, also referred to as the postmodern era, has explored various revolutionary ideas that agitate humans’ need to exist freely in society. Freedom is a necessity for existence and continuity, especially in the vicissitudes of life. As growth takes place in the life of humans, their social awareness develops; they take into cognizance the necessity of understanding self through consciousness, “the concept of self lies in the perception of personality traits that characterize a Being.

The self is an individual being in motion towards unravelling his/her potentiality which includes self-determination, development, and actualization” (Onyemachi, 2019, pp. 81-82). This implies that humans are already endowed with the fundamentals to know, understand, and realize the self. But at times, these basic endowments are not effortlessly accessible, due to an individual’s poor development or ignorance of his/her capabilities. In a bid to assess the basics for the actualization of self, one becomes aware of the subjugation in life; he/she develops the zeal to liberate oneself from these constrictions. This new understanding of self leads to parallel paths that often threaten the existing norms in his/her immediate environment, thus creating conflicting views/practices; freedom becomes an essential tool for liberation. Freedom, once acquired, becomes a new tool in the hands of its possessor. But like the double-edged sword, freedom functions in two ways. The first function is to liberate the self from bounds, while the second is to rebound the self; both are realized through one’s perception of freedom as an object or a subject. The enslaved nature of liberty somehow addresses Nietzsche’s question “how could anything originate out of its opposite?” (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 10). When freedom is possessed as an object, it becomes a means or tool for liberation. But when it takes the position of a subject, it is no longer wielded as a tool but becomes the centroid of existence whereby the self exists for freedom; thus, it re-enslaves the possessor and transits to absolute freedom.

The philosophical examination of freedom in Nigerian drama (literature) is one area not yet explored by critics as most of them tend to study revolutionary works based on socio-economical and political view point; this is what this study undertakes This study examines the possibility of freedom to emit its opposite in excessiveness through the analysis of the protagonists in Esiaba Irobi’s *The other side of the mask* and Abba A. Abba’s *The blood price*. It posits freedom as a subject that transcends absoluteness, brandishing its negativity and producing an adverse effect. The concept of freedom is derived from the Marxist and Postmodernist ideas of Terry Eagleton as presented in his book, *Holy Terror*, which scrutinizes the dictatorship present in the Nigerian society, especially in institutions where humanity ought to be glorified and preserved, as the cause of the quest for freedom. The effect of such a quest is revolution, which shows the mind actively adopting desperate measures to combat tyrannical acts of the ruling class. Such an effect engages absolutism, propelling the catastrophic fall of the protagonists.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reviewed Literature on Irobi's *The other side of the mask*

Irobi's *The Other Side of the Mask* has been studied mostly from the sociological viewpoint critics. While examining the social disparagement present in the text, Binebai (2013) asserts that the artist, Jamike, is "noticeably presented as the symbolism of a farsighted artist in quest of ingenuity and the celebration of artistry through his art, yet incongruously damned to the judgment of society. Once again, Esiaba Irobi subjects the judgment of society to social criticism. He has used his works to unearth the ills and evils of his society" (p. 2). Binebai acknowledges Irobi as a social crusader whose revolutionary stance is expressed in his plays; his plays serve as a call for social reformation in Nigerian society.

Okiche (2016) explores the changes made through the revolutionary act of the protagonist in the play. In his article, "Violence and Revolutionary Aesthetics in Esiaba Irobi's Plays: A study of *cemetery road* and *The other side of the mask*," Okiche interprets *The other side of the mask* as a reflection of the political and socio-economic realities of Nigerian society. Through the characters, the play reveals a Marxist social class structure that depicts inequality, thus yielding revolution as:

Jamike[s] use of violence to achieve the change he desires is actualized alone. Animalu who epitomizes corruption is violently killed by Jamike, this might be to discourage the practice of corruption in the society. It is through the use of violence that the anticipated revolutionary change Irobi seeks to actualize is realized in the text. (p. 74)

Also, Okiche (2016) points out that the revolutionary acts come to life through "Irobi's lucid use of language" (p. 75). For him, Jamike's revolt is present through verbal utterances, and "Jamike's verbal utterances symbolize that he is an epitome of change, the change he seeks to attain is violent in nature. The much we know about the tragic hero, Jamike and his desire for violent revolution is revealed through his verbal utterances which are provoking" (p. 75). While Okiche (2016) faults the characteristics of Irobi's characters as paranoid, tyrannical, and unlawful, he resolves that change is achieved more through non-violent revolution especially in the Nigerian society that is made up of different social/religious groups. Affiah and Elekwachi (2018) relate Jamike's situation to social injustice. Social injustice is depicted in the relationship between the two social classes, the upper and lower classes. Affiah and Elekwachi (2018) opine that "the play portrays the societal frustrations of the young elites in pursuit of their career irrespective of their artistic ingenuity" (p. 14). They refer to Jamike's predicament in the hands of the judges as a blatant disrespect to humanity. Dr. Animalu's attempt to take pictures of Jamike's works for his gratification after discrediting his work as one of the judges portrays "exploitation of the common man's resources" (p. 15). Affiah and Elekwachi (2018) maintain that such exploitation is matched with revolution by the exploited and it corroborates Irobi's personality where "through his dialectic perspective of time as a concept, he believes that change and revolution are a matter of urgency if justice must be attained for the oppressed and so, he advocates for a 'now action'" (p. 17). For them, Jamike's situation is metaphorically embedded in Irobi's notion of class stratification and revolutionary ideology.

Diala (2005) examines the richness of Igbo rituals and myth in Irobi's tragic plays. Diala acknowledges Irobi's exceptionality in his ability to recreate these rituals and myths to address contemporary subject-matters:

On the other hand, in transforming ritual into drama, that is, a secular performance with a deep infusion of religious implication, Irobi apparently aims to highlight its sacredness and efficacy, to revive and revalidate the faith that nurtured and sustained ritual while fundamentally transforming it with an eye on secular roles. Recuperating Igbo myths and occasionally recreating them to endorse his preferred ideological position, Irobi transforms the chief participants in the ritual event into towering symbolic figures in his drama of elemental forces. (pp. 89-90).

Diala (2005) positions *The other side of the mask* as Irobi's best work, which portrays the Igbo conception of arts as related to society and the complexities of the artist. He acknowledges Irobi's protagonists possessing the same character traits. They are "gifted but deluded, indeed neurotic, characters, contemplating themselves in the divine and invariably overreaching themselves with tragic consequences" (p. 99). While comparing the play with *Nwokedi*, Diala points out that the protagonists in both plays have a background in Western education; this strengthens their performances in their traditional rituals. Also, Diala acknowledges Irobi's creativity in infusing realism in his tragic heroes:

If *Nwokedi* and *Jamike* even in their failures and in spite of their excesses still retain a measure of the affection of the audience, the reason is that both aspire to worthwhile human ideals, one an egalitarian society, the other human acclaim; each, moreover, is great though flawed. (p. 105)

Irobi's recognition of verisimilitude as an essential element for creativity enables him unravels the intrigues of human nature.

2.2 Reviewed Literature on Abba's *The blood price*

Unlike *The other side of the mask*, Abba's *The blood price* is yet to attain much critical assessment. Profiled as an emerging young postcolonial African author whose plays are yet to gain critical attention, Abba Andrew Abba is an astute creative and critical writer who has won several awards and fellowships for his writings. His creative works include *The ugly queen*, *Lunatic on the throne*, and *The blood price*.

In a review of *The Blood Price*, Ogaga (2018) forwards the text as "a dramatization of the complexities of matrimony predicated on the tenets of tradition and sustained by cultural meaning and the yearning for a kind of change that is not narcissistic but that serviced by love for the nation" (Cover page). This places marriage in the text as a patriarchal construct that subjugates the female gender and empowers men. Morbe (2018), in a commendation on the back cover of the play, acknowledges the author's creativity in capturing patriarchy and the bestiality of the female body through intriguing suspense. Morbe (2018) avers that "His critique of the [ludicrousity] of masculinity which his female protagonist exploits to protest against demagoguery and greed authenticates the assumption that African feminism is in varied ways the vocation of both African women and men" (Back page). Change, therefore, is a common necessity and not ascribed to a gender. In few illuminating words on the back cover of the play, Ojaruega (2018) reviews that "the conclusion in *The Blood Price* also demonstrates that life remains a puzzle and its vicissitudes cannot be fully overcome" (Cover page). The uncertainties of life enable the writer to engage the suspense, surprise, and outcome in the text.

Though *The other side of the mask* and *The blood price* were written in different centuries and nineteen years apart, both texts depicts the similar perspectives that freedom constitutes its opposition when it is excessively expressed. Through Terry Eagleton's concept of freedom, constructed on Marxist and Postmodernist ideas, this paper examines the gradual transition of freedom and its destructive side as desired by the protagonists.

3. Methodology

The study adopts the qualitative research method; it uses Eagleton's concept of freedom as an analytical tool to assess freedom (in its positive and negative form) as a cause and effect.

3.1. Eagleton's Concept of Freedom

The Marxist idea builds from the zeal to reconstruct society, creating equilibrium between the dominant and dominated groups through revolutionary actions that interrogate the functionalist perspective. Singh (2024) points out that at the centre of the social, economic, political, and environmental changes present in the world today, "Marxism remains a pertinent analytical tool in addressing ongoing societal challenges" (p. 134). The need to examine human struggles and societal changes in the postmodern era necessitates the use of Eagleton's concept of freedom as an analytical tool for this study.

Eagleton (2005) in a chapter titled "Fear and Freedom," documented in his book *Holy terror*, interrogates the origin of freedom through a description of the creative and destructive nature of freedom which he likens to the god – Dionysus, who alternates between an angel and a demon. He analyzes the pre-modern notion of freedom that counters the idea of freedom emanating from itself. According to him, the pre-modern concept of freedom is founded on the history of creation. Such a concept posits freedom as proceeding from creation, the life of man sprouts from God, and "the life of God was nothing but freedom," thus, the foundation of freedom hinges on God (p. 69). This concept proffers a rhetorical objection to the origin of freedom in God as it upholds that "Nothing could go further down than God, who was a bottomless abyss of being" (p. 69). Unlike the pre-modern idea of freedom, the modern concept of freedom presents it "as pure self-determination ... a secularized version of the Almighty, who has now descended to earth as an anarchist" (p. 70). This implies that freedom no longer resides strictly in the Almighty but has been decentralized and made available to humanity. It resides within human and "should be understood positively as a certain autonomy of being, a certain independence of being, a belonging to oneself on the ground of a 'to be' which is his own and thus not generated" (Ebo & Okewu, 2024, p. 39). Though it is not generated, it is sought in self-awareness. The focus on humanity explains Durkheim's concept of freedom which he reveals as a necessary desire, "nothing but individuals' act of imputing to a certain state of affairs a worth and desirability, which they lack in their factual existences. The desire and freedom to intervene in the social order are needed if the social order is to be made more equitable" (Barmaki, 2014, p. 77). The need for equity and actualization situates freedom as essential for all existents to exist. But in seeking freedom, rationality is a parameter needed to avoid absolutism. Eagleton (2005) observes that as limitation is an attribute of humans, "the idea of absolute freedom is bound to be terroristic," and in Hegel's view, such freedom incubates death; such freedom devours itself (p. 71). Though he acknowledges freedom as very valuable, essential, and to be defended at all costs, he upholds that once freedom is sought in its endless state, it becomes absolute. Absolute freedom first sheds rays of positivity until it manifests itself into negation.

Absolute freedom is independent and represses freedom, “liberty itself becomes suffocating, compulsive, unfree. It becomes a prisoner of itself” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 75). It shackles its possessor. Eagleton (2005) notes that absolute freedom is its own source and does not depend on anything outside itself for “it constitutes the very kernel of identity, it is what we are prepared to die or kill for. Since whatever is boundless is a potential source of terror...” (p. 79). It stretches beyond the walls of freedom and glory in its excesses and “as a species of permanent transgression, it exists only in the act of bucking the law, shucking off curbs, and kicking over traces. Because it is purely negative it is without a body...” (pp. 80-81). By stretching itself, absolute freedom structures its destruction; it is a threat to itself and “it drains the world of inherent meaning, so that it can offer less resistance to its designs upon it” (p. 83). It destroys equity and constricts freedom itself.

Absolute freedom, when acquired, is maintained by destroying whatever threatens its absoluteness, including freedom of other people, “It knows no inner constraint” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 86). It derives its absoluteness from eliminating obstacles and boundaries: therefore, thriving in negation, it builds itself into destruction. This concept is evident in the lives of protagonists in *The other side of the mask* and *The blood price*. These protagonists, Jamike and Agunwanyi, exhibit daring minds not seen in others as they initially sought freedom from conservative cultures that constrict their existence but keel over absolutism to destroy the architects of such cultures. This corroborates Eagleton’s perception that “if most of the foregoing tragic protagonists carry a sense of the dangerous as well as the liberatory potential of the forbidden knowledge, this is because the knowledge that is forbidden so often reveals the alarming, underlying proximities of evil to good” (Dollimore, 2004, p. xxxiv).

4. Discussion

4.1 Constituting Freedom in Adversity

Irobi’s *The other side of the mask* depicts the complexities of the life of an intelligent young man, Jamike, who finds his strength in his creativity. His artworks depict a repository of freedom to create in abstraction; still, the quest for due appreciation of his art is thwarted by those in authority, thereby producing a tragic effect. Those who are supposed to appraise his works fail to acknowledge the genius in his creativity, continuously rate his work below its capacity, thus constricting his freedom to create, until their actions evoke Jamike’s wrath; he ends up committing murder and suicide. While describing what tragedy entails, Aristotle points out that “the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect” (Butcher, 2000, p. 16). The tragic effect in the play birthed from Jamike’s expectations generates both a cause and effect, and as Abba (2015) asserts, “man, trapped in the tragic abyss continues to demand justice and an order with which he can live... and without the visibility of such order and justice, he forfeits his humanity, destroyed by the hideous gap between his illusion and the intolerable reality” (p. 41). Jamike’s inability to distinguish between illusion and reality invigorates his quest for excessive freedom and plunges him into self-destruction. Likening Jamike’s fate to Irobi’s life, Diala (2005) affirms that “Irobi has been preoccupied with the frustration and dispossession of the Nigerian youth by the country’s leadership, military and civilian alike, and by the passionate espousal of a violent ethic as a resolution to the corruption of Nigerian politics” (p. 91). Politics in Nigeria builds on the imperialist structures which suppresses the native or indigenous foundations.

Said (1993) points out that “imperialism is still without question a most powerful force in the economic, political and military relations by which the less economically developed lands are subjected to the more economically developed” (p. 282). This oppressive foundation ignites absolutism in *The other side of the mask* as seen in Jamike, whose quest for a just appreciation of his artworks plunges into absolute liberty/freedom, which is “bound to

be terroristic” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 71). In his quest for freedom, Jamike assumes the role of an opposition and rewrites his reality – from a creator to a destroyer. In seeking freedom, he embarks on a creative drive, but when his quest shifts towards absolutism, he assumes the role of a god and destroys that which he feels impedes his freedom. Jamike’s penchant for queer artistic creation distinguishes him from other artists but denies him the expected awards. Through his brother, Kamuche, Jamike is portrayed as a caged being who lives below his intelligence and family’s expectation; “humiliated by life into living like some decadent and nihilistic twentieth century artist in Paris – at the wake of the Second World War” (Irobi, 2009, p. 27). But this representation of Jamike is countered by Zhiphora, his muse, who sees Jamike’s artistry as a passion that emanates from deep inside and encapsulates his entire existence:

This is his “C” period! (ecstatically) This is the moment. The moment when his spirit soars when his mind travels its distances. The interior distances. And it must travel in silence or on the wings of music.... At moments such as this, I see him in his full splendor, the splendor of a sculptor, a carver, a god, a god chiseling chunks of wood into shape, giving them hands and feet, and breathing life and fire into them. (p. 8)

Zimphora sees Jamike as a complete reflection of the creator, a god whose primary power is to create. Jamike’s sacrifice for the arts depicts the innateness of his creative mind where “no art exists ... that is not nourished by some deeply natural drive of humankind” (Crombez, 2008, p. 141). It is this drive that makes him crave the freedom to wield his creative power. Freedom, for Jamike, is conceived during his “Creative” period, when he has power over every other thing and assumes the role of a creator. For Jamike to realize this moment, he restricts the movement of Kamuche and Elesie (his wife) into his house because “as long as there are others, there are always potential threats. Freedom can never be complete except in pure solitude” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 72). While Zimphora sees Jamike’s solitude as necessary for a creative mind, Kamuche sees it as a possible deficiency of physical needs as he compares Jamike’s creativity to his father’s:

Listen, woman. Our father was a carver. A renowned carver. He carved the finest doors and masks in our village. He was a celebrated artist. But he never starved himself to be ... What did you call it... Spiritually buoyant! (Paused) Are you sure Jamike does not do this out of poverty? (Irobi, 2009, p. 17)

Zimphora rebukes such interference, saying that “He sees you as a philistine. As some uniformed obscenity who can neither appreciate the purpose of his toil nor give him the peace to pursue the laurels of his illusion” (p. 16). Berlin (1969) acknowledges that “the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others,” just as Jamike restrains the interference of his liberty (p. 4). Thus, liberty emits constriction. Jamike abandons his family and betrothed wife, pursuing artistic freedom “like a hunger striker, the revolution begins to consume its own body” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 72). Some days, he goes without food so that “his reflexes become sharper. His intuition deeper. His consciousness more visceral and his vision more urgent.... that is when his spirit takes flight and soars above the mundane, beyond the profane, into the profound, the sublime, into the realms of the sacred...” (Irobi, 2009, p. 18). At this profound moment of unceasing yearning, “the freedom which modern civilization prizes as its spiritual essence is also a kind of vacancy at its heart (Eagleton, 2005, p. 75). Jamike’s desire to freely recreate without human interference and his zeal for self-recognition without limitation lead him to the other side of freedom, absoluteness.

In *The blood price*, Agunwanyi, whose society has reduced her to a pawn or trophy in the face of an intricate patriarchal practice, seeks freedom in a radical manner. The play centres on the patriarchal culture that permits a forceful possession of women, debasing love and consent to nothing. While this culture objectifies women, it also disadvantages the men who are unskilled in wrestling; it is a survival of the fittest where the strongest go home with their trophy (woman). As a woman who has been passed down to different men without her consent, Agunwanyi decides to liberate herself from such patriarchal-stringed tradition by collaborating with Okeke, who disguises himself to rescue her from the hands of a predator, Agunze. Abba (2018) recreates an archetypal African society that objectifies females by reducing them to mere possessions. Umuakaba clan upholds the tradition of men forcefully snatching desired women from their counterparts, like Beauvoir (2010) points out “Woman is no longer passed from one clan to another through marriage: she is radically abducted from the group she is born into and annexed to her husband’s; he buys her like a head of cattle or a slave, he imposes his domestic divinities on her” (p. 117). This tradition favours strong men and dispenses fear in the society as people live in constant “terror” (Abba, 2018, p. 8). These men brag over their excesses as the number of women snatched showcases the magnitude of their strength. Ichie Agunze boasts that “of the thirty women in my possession, twenty men had sad stories to tell. Eight were slaughtered by machete, six went mad, four went into self-exile, while two came to apologize. Those who had the chance to limp were the luckiest” (p. 10). While the strong men boast, the weak/defeated men cry over their losses and, at times, detach themselves from society. Okeke laments his loss since Agunwanyi is snatched from him, “for weeks, I have hovered around his house to get a glimpse of you until I heard that Ichie Agunze himself had murdered him and took you away” (p. 20). Agunwanyi is described as a beautiful woman; hence, the multiple contests by men to have her to themselves. For someone who has been snatched multiple times by strong men, Agunwanyi seeks freedom from such oppressive tradition:

I want them to prepare a charm that will be sprinkled in the four corners of our clan to stop men from killing fellow men, just to take away their women. I think that this is the most urgent charm we need today! We need it Now! Imagine this senselessness. A man wants a woman but finds that she is already another man’s woman. All he needs to do is kill him and drag the woman home, like a trophy. And in most cases, while rejoicing home with his prize, someone else suddenly appears, and slugs him to get her away from him. Humans need not live like that. Like beasts. (p. 21)

When a situation becomes so oppressive, change becomes a subject, and “Change, through destruction, clears the way to reap the benefits of creation. This destruction is costly in the short term” (Dalton and Logan, 2024, p. 64). A change from oppressive tradition and the birth of a non-oppressive tradition is what Agunwanyi perceives as freedom. As Ogaga (2018) avers, the freedom sought by Agunwanyi encompasses both individual and collective liberty. Unlike Jamike, who maps out freedom before encountering interference from his relatives, Agunwanyi seeks freedom in the face of tyranny. She decries the degeneration of humanity where man deteriorates to an animal, a woman reduced to prey, and society reduced to the jungle. She questions the primordial tradition that embeds such acts by voicing, “who says it is the lot of man to live in murderous competition?” (Abba, 2018, p. 22). She rejects such tradition and pursues freedom through revolution, even when discouraged by her previous husband, Okeke, who believes that liberation can only be achieved by staying far away from the bestial men. But the freedom sought after needs to be sustained since it is “a conveniently ambiguous idea” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 77). In a bid to sustain their freedom, both Jamike and Agunwanyi renegotiate freedom as a subject rather than an object, thus, reverting to the negative side of freedom, its absoluteness.

4.2 Negotiating Absoluteness through Terror

When freedom becomes a subject, that is, the aim of existence, it becomes a cause and gradually transcends to absoluteness; terror becomes the means of quenching the voracious hunger for freedom. As Eagleton (2005) asserts, “absolute freedom is never far from the melancholy of a Faust, whose achievements turn to ashes in his mouth. It is affronted by the blemished, unfinished nature of matter, and enraptured by the purity of annihilation” (p. 82). Both Jamike and Agunwanyi transit to this negative part of freedom differently. The actions of these characters corroborate Eagleton’s perception whereby “to redeem humankind, they are ready to break into its flesh in order to lay violent hands on the ghostly idea which secretes itself there” (p. 76). Also, as Eagleton (2005) points out, “When power lacks resistance it sinks quickly into narcissism and delusion, like a fabulously rich celebrity or a pampered dictator” (pp. 84-85). At some point, the freedom brandished by Jamike and Agunwanyi lacked resistance.

Absolute freedom is inherent in Jamike’s actions; he unleashes terror due to his excessive cravings to be “the next great artist” as he sees his creativity as second to none (Irobi 21). Eagleton (2005) warns that “Freedom of this kind is a despotic force, which like an autonomous work of art is loyal only to the law of its own being” (p. 80). Jamike’s unbridled quest for freedom transitions to a narcissistic outlook. Zimphora points out the premise from which Jamike’s narcissistic precept sprouts:

He is a harassed man. A harassed soul. Harassed by the world. For the past six years, he’s been entering for an art competition. A national competition. And every year he hopes to win but when the result comes out, what happens? The prize goes to some other person who is a great name in the eyes of the judges. Or someone who is a friend of the secretary of the Organizing Committee for the competition. (Pause) But he, he, the unknown artist, he gets what the judges call a special mention or some other miserable and polite pseudonym for mediocrity. (Irobi, 2009, p. 22)

The type of freedom craved here is not only founded in Jamike’s creativity but also his fervour for recognition as the best artist, “and that ambition has reached a point of obsession” (Irobi, 2009, p. 23). His quest has pushed him to the extent that he “lives in his head. He lives a mental life. Feeds through his eyes” (p. 31). Diala (2005) posits that “Jamike's anguished consternation at the source of the relentless futility that haunts his life is Irobi's poignant allusion to the malevolent forces capable of interfering with human destiny” (p. 101). Jamike’s self-admiration is perceived as he tells Animalu that “I am a genius. I breathed the fire from the mouth and the mind of a genius into these works. This is why they are all masterpieces. That’s why they are all milestones of greatness.” (Irobi, 2009, p. 56). While he praises himself, Animalu sees his creativity as mediocre, “images that neither stabs the mind nor stir it into action” (p. 61). Though Animalu’s expression of Jamike’s artworks is defective as the former relies on the same work for personal gratification, Njemanze sees Jamike as infected with narcissism, questioning him, “Why do you indulge in this dreadful disease? Why?” (p. 79). Jamike’s response is an affirmation of his self-love, “because I love myself, Prof. I love myself. That is why I am able to create. I love myself deeply and sincerely. (Resolutely) I will never compromise that love...” (p. 79). Jamike further elucidates his ingrained creative prowess – his source of self-love:

I find the ecstasy that I need in this liquid testament of fluid souls. Spirits who soared beyond the boundary of death. Minds who transcended both time and age. Artisans who pushed the frontiers of their art beyond the deaf walls of their times. Master! (erratically) Prof., I am possessed by what possessed my master. I am possessed by the power that ends in rituals, the ritual that ends in magic, the magic that re-enacts the birth of life from the fingers of the cosmos. Prof., I am possessed. I am possessed! (p. 113)

In his possessed state, he rates himself higher than other artists and thirstily craves laurels. Diala (2005) opines that “attention is also drawn to his vehement self-acclamation as a master (the name Jamike itself means “Exalt my greatness!”) As well as his equation of dedication to art with religious worship and the winning of laurels with the attainment of salvation” (p. 100). Jamike imagines winning the competition in Paris and sees his name carved on “a plaque of gold” (114). But as his imagination wanes and reality sets in, he cries out, “But then, I am only a man. As diminutive as dust. I am only an artist and miseries of ordinary life depress me. I am only a sculptor. A carver! I carve because I must transcend life. Transcend the status of man. Then and only can I be a master! (p.114). To exceed the status of man requires the elimination of obstacles; it is a transition from freedom to absolute freedom. At the peak of absolute freedom, “everything implodes into its opposite;” the possessor of such absolutism, Jamike, bounds self with it (Eagleton, 2005, p. 85).

Jamike plays the role of a creator and a destroyer; while the creative role radiates freedom, the other is acquired in absolute freedom. Jamike emphasizes this as he says, “I want to transcend life. As an artist, I must transcend life by creating life. But if the world will neither let me create life nor appreciate it even when I have created life, then I must destroy life. To destroy life also makes me transcend life” (Irobi, 2009, p. 73). By transcending life through destruction, Jamike transits to the terrain of absolute freedom. He believes his inability to win the award emanates from the hatred and neglect of judges such as Animalu and Njemanze. They become a hindrance to his success, thus, emitting anger and anguish in him. He sees himself as “a neglected genius” and feels he can negotiate liberation only through terror:

...man has turned murder into an art. Murder is now art. The world is retrogressing into primitivity. The world is disintegrating. Is it a crime that I gather its grisly fragments with these hands cupped in grief and anguish? (p. 93)

Murder in art is the negative side of art, the side that is necessitated by the quest for absoluteness; it is like “a hollow side. Ugly and grisly. Grisly and sordid” (p. 94). And since “absolute freedom knows no inner constraint” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 86), Jamike unleashes terror by transcending the sphere of human being and assuming the position of a supernatural being, *Amadioha* - “the god of thunder” to dispense justice by killing Dr. Animalu for intrusion and deceit (Irobi, 2009, p. 101). Osu (2011) reiterates that Animalu “has to be murdered by Jamike when the former becomes a clog in the wheel of the latter’s progressive artistic pursuit” (p. 156). Feeling devastated, Jamike could not stand the sight of his injured muse – Zimphora, stabbed by his fiancée – Elesie, so he commits suicide with his chisel – initially used to create but now transformed to a weapon for destruction. By killing himself without waiting for the Paris result to announce him the next great artist, he relinquishes absolute freedom, and “to reject absolute freedom is to assent to one’s death” (Eagleton, 2005, p. 73).

Said (1993) asserts that “those people compelled by the system to play subordinate or imprisoning roles within it emerge as conscious antagonists, disrupting it, proposing claims, advancing arguments that disrupt the totalitarian compulsions of the world market” (p. 335). Agunwanyi in *The blood price* emerges as a “conscious antagonist” as she initiates absolute freedom by smiting the guard who caught her with the disguised Okeke. She flees away with Okeke to seek liberation from the long-practiced “woman snatching” tradition that objectifies women and animalizes men. By running away, she recognizes the temporality of the gained freedom, since the pivots of terror still roam free, “liberty itself becomes suffocating, compulsive, and unfree. It becomes a prisoner of itself” (Eagleton 2005: 75). Agunwanyi challenges the basis of such tradition: “How do we verify if these beliefs and practices are actually the will of the gods? For instance, the jungle practices which we are running away from?” (Abba, 2018, p. 30). She perceives this practice as a collective malaise that leaves the people in terror and renders her society a chaotic charade of communality:

We are running away from a culture that has kept our clan in the grips of darkness. We are running away from a tiger of terror.... So much bloodshed is taking place daily because of women. You live in terror every day. (p. 32)

For freedom to take place, fear must disperse as hope becomes the source for optimistic actuality. Agunwanyi expunges fear as it hinders her absolute freedom. Unlike Jamike, who relies on his chisel to bring judgment of destruction, Agunwanyi fortifies herself with powerful charms before eliminating Ichie Agunze to rid her fellow women and men of such bestial culture that reduces human lives to jungle experience. Her zeal to attain her purpose encounters resistance from the custodians of the barbaric culture, such as Ichie Agunze, Ichie Ubom, Ichie Omeife, and even a woman called Ndudi. In such a case, when freedom encounters strong resistance, the seeker resorts to terror to actualize freedom; but opposing resistance through terror yields negation, and freedom obtained through negativity can only be absolute freedom. Like Jamike, Agunwanyi eliminates that which restrains her freedom:

Agunwanyi: Good! This night of fury! And if you are not full of fury, you do not belong here. This is a group of very angry women. If you look at my dressing and the weapon I carry, no-one would inform you that this is an angry individual ... I travelled across many streams to prepare myself for this dangerous mission, I've been cooked and cooked for the purpose of this mission, so I have been equipped to change things in this clan. The man with whom I went there left me and fled. I was taken to the horrible Ogwugwu Akpu Shrine of Okija where you would march on decomposing corpses and dilapidated coffins before you get to the chief priests. Not everyone can stand it but I did. I cannot tell you all I went through to prepare myself for this task. So, if there is anyone among us who is lily livered, such one should back out now. Now or never. We can no longer accept this situation. As we have earlier agreed, we must do something about this tonight. (pp. 49-51)

Agunwanyi had to accomplish terrible tasks to gain absolute freedom. Resistance matches with resistance; power matches with power, thus, yielding conflict. Agunwanyi and her fellow women commanded their liberation by raiding and murdering the men who as posed obstacles to the collective freedom Agunwanyi calls “Freedom to humanity” (p. 58). Such freedom remains collective as individual interests are in unity for communal uplift and to the glory of humanity.

Eagleton (2008) postulates that “if the tragic protagonist is not at all responsible for his or her downfall, then the effect is merely shocking; but if she is very much responsible, then she loses a fair bit of moral credibility” (p. 4). Jamike and Agunwanyi facilitate their tragic ends through terror. Like Jamike, Agunwanyi does not enjoy the absolute freedom craved and sought after. Okeke chooses another wife and rejects her; he attributes this to a warning from the Chief priest “that your hand is tinted with blood and that no man who desires to live can marry you” (p. 78). Agunwanyi did not foresee this while embarking on such furious liberation “because this form of power lacks a body, it is not forced to feel the wanton damage it wreaks” (Eagleton 82). Unlike Jamike, who could not withstand the doom of absoluteness, Agunwanyi does not commit suicide, but she laments her loss:

I am the flutist that excluded himself in the ceremony of life. I'm the candle that burnt itself to death trying to lighten the dark world; the soap that must lose its being cleaning the dirty world. They have used me and dumped me in a pile of goat dung. This colour of freedom is fearful.... (Irobi, 2009, p. 79)

In seeking absolute freedom, she liberates her society from the barbaric cultural practice of wife snatching, but ends up binding herself and becoming a casualty of freedom; the colour of freedom to her is self-destruction.

5. Conclusion

The study establishes that freedom possesses its negation in *The other side of the mask* and *The blood price* as analyzed through the Marxist and Postmodern ideas of Terry Eagleton. It affirms that by nature, humans seek freedom, but the type of freedom that should be contained by morality or ethics; freedom based on social rules of the sacredness of human life, to contain the deviations of absolutism. The following key ideas have emerged through critical analyses: the nature of humans militates against any constriction to their Being or realization of self. Freedom, which functions as object and subject, is an effect and a cause that plunges the protagonists into a destructive end. Objectively, freedom can be used for rational self-exaltation. The obsessive hold on freedom by Jamike and Agunwanyi amplifies freedom as a subject, thereby revealing the calamitous characteristic of liberty – destruction. The excessive freedom sought with all they represent becomes a detonated grenade in the hands of the possessors, thereby chaining them in the shackles of freedom slavery; and thus, resulting in their loss of selves. While Jamike's quest for freedom ends with his suicide, Agunwanyi becomes abandoned in a lone ruin. That which they crave much remains unrealistic as they destroy the foundation of existence, the mind. Their minds, which seem to gain liberty through terroristic acts, topple to a state of absoluteness. In its urge for absolute freedom, the mind loses its rationality, thereby plunging into destruction, affirmed in narcissism, which Jamike translates as greatness, while Agunwayi perceives it as heroism.

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