



BURDEN OF CHOICE AS EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA IN BAKARE OJO RASAKI'S *ROGBODIYAN*

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Abstract:

One of the enduring existential challenges confronting humanity is the burden of choice-making. Although freedom of choice is synonymous with human existence, the inability of individuals to predetermine the consequences of freely made decisions often engenders anxiety, conflict, and disorder. The dilemma, arising from that limitation, constitutes a recurring motif in Nigerian drama, where playwrights frequently create dramatic characters that grapple with the consequences of such actions or inactions. Anchored on existentialist concepts of "Freedom of Choice" and "Responsibility", this paper interrogates how dramatic characters' avoidance of existential accountability generates conflict at both individual and collective levels in Bakare Ojo Rasaki's *Rogbodiyan*. Through close textual analysis, the study observes that the people of Ilu koroju, exercising their freedom, abandon the long-established tradition of consulting Ifa in the selection of a new king. However, when the consequences of this choice threaten the communal stability, they paradoxically return to the same divinatory system in search of redress. The paper argues that *Rogbodiyan* departs from the existentialist ethic that authentic freedom necessarily entails responsibility, as the playwright portrays characters who exercise choice with awareness, yet are ultimately absolved of the consequences of their actions.

Keywords: existentialism, burden of choice, dilemma, responsibility

1. Background to the Study

Critical engagements with Bakare's *Rogbodiyan*, as with his other dramatic works, have considerably foregrounded the playwright's thematic concern with the socio-economic, political and structural dysfunctions that have come to define the Nigerian postcolonial nation-state, a geopolitical space perpetually marked by instability and flux. In *Rogbodiyan* Bakare explicitly invites critics into a parodic reading by depicting a dramatic

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setting that is engulfed in intrigue, uncertainty, and endemic corruption, trappings that are mainly associated with Nigeria's successive military regimes. In particular, the play mounts a scathing critique of the aborted 1992 transition programme under the military administration of General Ibrahim Babangida, whose authoritarian rule spanned 27 August 1985 to 26 August 1993. The playwright, himself, alludes to this mode of interpretation when he notes that;

"Rogbodiyan, written in 1990 but published in 1994, is a prophetic satire of the transition programme of the Ibrahim Babangida Administration. It was written on what to expect from the promises and efforts of the Babangida military junta to hand over power to democratically elected leaders in 1992. By the time the political events of 1993 ended in annulment, the prophecy in this play had been fulfilled." (32)

Consequently, it is not hard to find a nexus between Babangida's state-imposed two-party system—represented by the centre-right National Republican Convention (NRC), the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the Regent's restriction of the contest for the Obaship stool to two ruling houses in the play, namely Gbadegesin, symbolised by the horse, and Asagidigbi, embodied by the eagle. Significantly, while the horse served as the emblem of the SDP, the eagle was featured prominently in the NRC's iconography. Thus, in most analyses of the text, critics have followed the interpretive cues provided by the playwright. For instance, Mbachaga, in his analysis of *Once Upon a Tower* (2001), *This Land Must Sacrifice* (1991), *Rogbodiyan* (1995), and *The Gods and the Scavengers* (2006), asserts that "*Bakare lucidly and fearlessly captures socio-political events that expose corruption, leadership ineptitude and economic failings in the Nigerian state*" (173). Mbachaga's position is made in the light of the strong socio-political statement made in the texts

Similarly, Hammed links the play's setting with Nigeria's political reality, contending that Ilukoroju, loosely interpretable as "*a community in turmoil*", is emblematic of a nation in search of its missing ribs. He argues that, "*Metaphorically representing Nigeria as Ilukoroju (a town in disarray or turbulence), the two political parties created by the regime to dictate the direction of party politics and choice of candidates are symbolically captured in the two ruling houses of Asagidigbi and Gbadegesin, symbolised by the eagle and the horse respectively*" (2139). Olokodina also foregrounds the theme of power abuse in the play, noting that Bakare's critique becomes more decipherable when situated within the political exigencies of the transition period. According to him, under such an administration, particularly that witnessed during Babangida's military dictatorship, "*no one dared question the position of the powers that be, since the incumbent authority determined who ruled next*" (338).

While these readings provide grounds for interpreting the play primarily as a political allegory of Nigeria's aborted transition programme, they tend to privilege the macro-politics of state power at the expense of the micro-politics of individual agency. What appears largely underexplored in existing criticism is the extent to which political action in the play is simultaneously an existential act, one that is grounded in choice,

responsibility, and the instinct for survival. Within this framework, political manoeuvres are not merely viewed as responses to structural coercion, but are also expressions of individual freedom freely exercised. Drawing on existentialist thought, particularly the emphasis on choice, responsibility, and the ensuing burden of freedom, this study argues that *Rogbodiyan* dramatises politics as a theatre of existential struggle. The characters' decisions and choices of actions are, in this analysis, considered as being motivated by the desire for self-preservation and the need to assert meaning within a collapsing moral order. As it will be shown in the analysis of the text, these choices are never neutral; rather, they generate ethical consequences that reverberate beyond the individual to imperil communal cohesion. By foregrounding the existential dimensions of character motivation and conflict, this paper shifts critical attention from *Rogbodiyan* as merely a prophetic satire of military rule to a drama of existential responsibility, where the survival of the community is continually threatened by the weight of individual choices.

2. Freedom of Choice and Existential Responsibility

The existentialist dictum "*existence precedes essence*," one of the central tenets of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy as articulated in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness*, provides a crucial philosophical and literary foundation for understanding the intertwined concepts of freedom of choice and personal responsibility. This assertion rejects the idea of a pre-determined human nature or essence, proposing instead that human beings first exist and subsequently define themselves through conscious choices and actions. Within this existential framework, freedom is not an optional attribute but an inescapable condition of human existence.

Sartre's position denies the presence of any external authority, divine, metaphysical, or moral, that prescribes meaning or purpose to human life. Meaning, therefore, is not discovered but created through individual choice. Human beings, conceived as *Being-for-itself*, are perpetually engaged in self-definition, and are wholly responsible for both their actions and inactions. This radical freedom inevitably engenders existential responsibility. Summarising this philosophical stance,

Adeosun observes that the principle of existence preceding essence:

"Proceeds from the attempt to further stretch the ideal of the primacy of mankind over God by insisting that there is no pre-given essence and that human beings are solely responsible for their actions and inactions freely undertaken as a Being-for-itself. It arises as a form of anguish at the inability of humankind to grasp and comprehend certain issues surrounding their existence. This existential claim questions the existence of God, arguing that if truly there is God, He could not have allowed certain things to happen." (43)

Rather than merely dismissing transcendence, this existential claim seeks to remove any external moral tribunal capable of justifying or excusing human action. In doing so, Sartre intensifies the burden of freedom placed upon the individual. For Sartre, the human being exists first and only later defines himself through action. Consequently,

no individual can credibly claim that their choices are determined by forces beyond their control. As Sartre asserts:

“Man is completely alone and unaided when he makes his decision, and he himself is responsible for what he does and what he is today. Thus, man is nothing more or less than what he makes of himself.” (28)

This position underscores Sartre's insistence that freedom is inseparable from responsibility. Thus, in the absence of a higher evaluative authority such as God, individuals must assume total accountability for their choices. Hence, Sartre further maintains that: Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be (22). However, Sartre does not conceive of freedom as arbitrary or consequence-free. On the contrary, freedom is intrinsically linked to responsibility, anguish, and moral consequence. While individuals are free to choose their actions, they must also confront the implications of those choices. This position is further elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre famously declares:

“I am condemned to exist forever beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limit to my freedom can be found except freedom itself—or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free.” (461–462)

Within the context of this study, responsibility is therefore conceived in two interrelated ways. First, responsibility is understood as duty, the ethical obligation individuals owe to others as co-existing beings whose own freedom must be acknowledged and respected. Second, responsibility is viewed as a consequence, the moral and existential burden that arises from recognising that the individual alone bears the outcomes of freely made choices. This dual conception foregrounds the existential dilemma in which the individual realises that nothing external can either obstruct or redeem the choices they have elected to make. Grounded in this conceptual framework, the analysis of Bakare's *Rogbodiyan* foregrounds the burden of choice-making as a central existential condition, particularly as it structures Ilu koroju's collective crisis in the quest to elect a new king. The study thus examines how acts of choice, shaped by character, agency, and competing freedoms, generate consequences that extend beyond individual character in the text to threaten the moral and political destiny of the community.

3. Data Analysis

The existential conflict in *Rogbodiyan* is fundamentally rooted in the problem of choice and the inescapable consequences that attend it. At the heart of this conflict lies an existential anxiety generated by the characters' struggle for survival. This survival instinct shapes the choices they make and predisposes them to inevitable clashes, as each individual seeks personal preservation, often at the expense of others. The characters are therefore confronted with moral dilemmas that foreground the burden of choice and the

responsibility inherent in human action. As argued in the course of this study, choice-making constitutes a profound existential burden because of the uncertainty surrounding the consequences of freely chosen actions. Human beings desire not only the freedom to choose but also the assurance that they can predict and control the outcomes of their decisions. The impossibility of such certainty generates anxiety, which Kierkegaard famously describes as “*the dizziness of freedom*”—a leap of faith into the unknown. Although Kierkegaard articulated this idea within Christian theology, its implications are universally applicable, since individuals often wish to act freely while evading the consequences of negative outcomes.

The prologue of *Rogbodiyan* establishes the foundation for the existential conflict that unfolds through the characters' choices. This crisis manifests at two interrelated levels: the communal and the individual. At the communal level, the fictional town of Ilu Koroju, presumably located in south-western Nigeria, is embroiled in a contentious kingship struggle, caught between two rival claimants, Asagidigbi and Gbadegesin. The community's dilemma lies in choosing between these claimants, a choice fraught with existential and moral consequences. At the individual level, Asagidigbi's actions as king-elect constitute a parallel crisis of choice, as he grapples with the burden of responsibility arising from decisions he freely undertakes.

Much like Elesin Oba in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, whose existential crisis of duty and destiny underscores the profound impact of individual choice on communal survival, Asagidigbi is confronted with the moral tension between freedom and a sense of self. He becomes ensnared in the conflict between his erotic desire, an expression of aesthetic indulgence, and his sacred duty as custodian of communal values and tradition. According to Kierkegaard, the aesthetic individual is impulsive and pleasure-driven, particularly in libidinal pursuits. Asagidigbi's prioritisation of personal gratification over communal responsibility reflects his failure to transcend the self, a failure that precipitates a chain of actions and counteractions culminating in existential catastrophe. Ultimately, this failure costs him his throne and plunges Ilu Koroju into collective ruin.

The resolution of such existential conflict demands reflective responsibility. As a being-for-itself endowed with consciousness and choice, Asagidigbi ought to have acted like characters such as Ifajuyigbe in Bakare's *Ifajuyigbe*, who chooses honour over self-preservation by dying alongside his guest, thereby preventing ethnic violence and preserving communal harmony. Similarly, Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* sacrifice himself for collective survival, while Eman in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* willingly becomes a carrier to save the unwilling Ifada. These characters exemplify authentic existential commitment, where freedom is inseparable from responsibility.

Although Asagidigbi's insistence on sexual freedom aligns superficially with Sartre's conception of radical freedom, his actions lack ethical responsibility. His reign begins on a morally compromised foundation, foreshadowing disaster. Having bribed his way to the throne, he surrounds himself with sycophants who shield him from existential realities. Two interconnected missteps define his tragic trajectory: habitual intoxication and the pursuit of illicit sexual gratification. Excessive alcohol consumption

dulls rational judgment and unleashes repressed desires, culminating in his manipulation of the oracle's authority to select the Arugba Oge and his violation of the sacred code of seclusion. Despite repeated warnings from Agogo, the palace adviser and voice of wisdom, Asagidigbi remains defiant:

"Agogo.... Kabiyesi, before you, I had served three kings in this palace, and my eyes have never seen what they are now seeing. (moves gradually towards Kabiyesi). You know, Kabiyesi, that you are supposed to be in seclusion during this period according to tradition. You are supposed to be in communion with your an-cestors but here you are, at this time of the night, drunk!..." (34)

His defiance culminates in the sacrilegious defilement of the Arugba Oge, an act that violates both divine injunction and communal morality. Agogo's caution regarding the dire consequences of such an act goes unheeded, and Asagidigbi arrogantly dismisses divine authority in matters of sexuality. He cautions:

"Kabiyesi, Arugba Oge, the sacrificial carrier, must be a virgin till the day she carries the sacrifice to the shrine. She has been in seclusion for the past four days. Kabiyesi, I beg you, be patient. Three days more. Don't defile her, Kabiyesi. The consequences are too grave to be complicated." (37)

The king not only spurns Agogo's advice, but he also claims that the gods have no role in matters of sexuality. Rhetorically, he asks:

"And is it the wish of the gods, at this time of the year, at a time when the cold dry winds gnaw at bones...tell me, is it the wish of the gods that a normal man should be without a companion which makes him a man?" (36)

In asserting his will over that of the gods, Asagidigbi invokes a fundamental Yoruba existential principle: *Eniyan lo wa ni idi oro, ti oro fi n ke*—the belief that divinity derives meaning through human agency. Yet this assertion of agency, unaccompanied by responsibility, proves disastrous as the king's action in defiling the Arugba Oge, as Agogo earlier foretold, portends great danger both at the individual and communal levels: he lost his throne, and the entire community is left in ruins as a result of various ailments and deformities they have no power over.

This would, of course, lead us to the other level of choice-making. The playwright has hinted through his narrator at the prologue of the play that the disasters that befall Ilu Koroju are self-inflicted. In this case, he seems to be saying that the problems they are facing emanate from the choices they have made. In the selection of the new king, the kingmakers are bribed to side-step tradition in picking Asagidigbi. The narrator's earlier warning reinforces the consequences of such actions:

"Yes, a catastrophe brought upon oneself by oneself. When the child does what he is not supposed to do, his eyes see what they are not supposed to see. They are now victims of self-inflicted disaster, because the people dine and wine with injustice." (7)

Ironically, the community that once rejected divine authority is compelled to seek divine intervention for healing. The playwright suggests through Fadele, the diviner, that the only way the community can be cured of the afflictions is to drink water collected from the River Awogbaaarun. This choice of solution also puts the people of Ilu Koroju in a precarious situation, as the king, who is expected to be at the centre of the supplication, has been struck by a strange blindness, certainly a consequence of spitting in the face of tradition. This contradiction exposes a tension in Bakare's ideological vision. While the play foregrounds human agency and freedom, its resolution relies on ritual propitiation, thereby diluting existential responsibility. As argued earlier, authentic existential responsibility entails not only awareness of consequences but also the courage to confront them without evasion. Asagidigbi epitomises this evasion. Unlike King Odewale in Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, who accepts responsibility through self-exile and self-punishment, Asagidigbi attempts to suppress the truth and evade culpability by trying to prevent the diviner from disclosing the cause of the afflictions in the land of Ilu koroju. He says:

"Wait (Kabiyesi takes a long pause as if lost in thought. He later speaks). Okay, forget about the atrocities. Forget about who did what. Just tell us what we shall do to heal ourselves. I need my sight, Fadele. There is no time for long stories. The cleansing of the land and ourselves is the most important thing now, not why we suffer." (45-46)

The King's act of self-denial, which is akin to acting in bad faith, does not end at that; he also tries to explain away his actions by alleging that the accusation that he defiles the Arugba is a contrived plot by his opponent, Gbadegesin, to truncate his reign and destroy him with a view to usurping his throne. Such denial mirrors the posture of postcolonial African political leadership, particularly in Nigeria, where leaders routinely deflect blame and refuse accountability. Through this portrayal, Bakare offers a trenchant critique of political irresponsibility and its devastating consequences for communal survival.

5. Conclusion

This study has offered a fresh perspective on the critical engagement with Bakare's *Rogbodiyan* by foregrounding how individual characters' existential choices, and the dilemmas attendant upon those choices, generate dramatic conflict that threatens not only personal survival but also communal existence. While existing scholarship has predominantly interpreted the text as a political allegory of the aborted 1992 transition programme under the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, this study has not sought to invalidate such readings. Instead, it has argued that political action in

Rogbodiyan is inseparable from existential action, since all political decisions are grounded in freedom, responsibility, and the will to survive. From this perspective, politics in the play is not merely a response to structural coercion but a field in which individual agency is asserted and tested.

Anchored on existentialist philosophy, particularly its emphasis on freedom, choice, and responsibility, this study has established that *Rogbodiyan* portrays politics as a theatre of existential struggle. The characters' decisions and courses of action are found to have been essentially driven by the desire for self-preservation and the need to assert meaning within a collapsing moral order. These choices, as we have seen in the play, are never neutral; instead, they generate ethical consequences that extend beyond the individual to imperil communal cohesion. For instance, the abandonment of the long-established tradition of consulting Ifa divination in the selection of a new king, and the subsequent manipulation of the process that leads to Asagidigbi's emergence, are shown to be acts motivated by the perverted interests of particular groups. Similarly, Asagidigbi's defilement of the *Arugba Oge* to gratify his erotic desire constitutes an exercise of freedom, underscoring one of the central existentialist tenets: that human beings are agents of their own choices.

However, this study has also identified a fundamental tension in the play's ideological structure. By invoking supernatural intervention to shield Ilu Koroju from the consequences of freely made choices, Bakare arguably undermines the existential logic his narrative initially establishes. Existentialism insists that freedom is inextricable from responsibility, and that no transcendent force can absolve individuals or communities of the outcomes of their actions. The narrative's attempt to offer redemption without accountability, particularly in absolving the community for circumventing the oracle, constitutes an evasion of existential responsibility. Thus, the tension between human freedom and the ethereal forces in the play aligns with what existential philosophy identifies as bad faith. Many of the characters embody this evasion of responsibility, resulting in a text that profoundly dramatises existential choice, while simultaneously retreating from its ethical demands.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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