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Displacement, Anguish and Revolt in Esiaba Irobi's *Cemetery Road*

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Abstract: *In Cemetery Road, Esiaba Irobi reconstructs the forceful eviction of the Bakolori farmers from their ancestral homes to expose the alienation of the marginalised and critique the postcolonial Nigerian state dominated by predatory hegemonic structures. This paper adopts an existentialist-dialectical framework to contextualise the existential tension arising from this displacement, foregrounding the resultant anguish as the major prompt that shapes the characters' actions and counteractions. Through this mode of analysis, the play is conceived as one in which conflict emerges from opposing interests intensified by the anxiety of survival. The study, therefore, argues that the farmers' precarious and unsettling condition, together with Mazeli's personal disillusionment with the nation's colonial residue, precipitates the revolt that drives the play's dramatic conflict. It concludes that despite the stark imbalance of power between the dispossessed farmers and the ruling elite supported by foreign interests, the subalterns assert their right to "authentic" existence, an existential stance that embodies the enduring historical forces that often inspire revolutionary actions across different contexts.*

Keywords: *Postcolonial, anguish, displacement, revolt, Esiaba*

1. INTRODUCTION

Displacement, anguish, and revolt are deeply intertwined on an existential plane. When individuals are displaced from their ancestral homes and stripped of their means of survival, they often experience profound sense of anguish. Drawing on Ashcroft's et al argument on the intertwine nature of "self" and "place," Saha submits that;

human subjectivity is constructed on the basis of its surrounding environment and place. If one is displaced, one's subjectivity becomes fragmented. It happens because psychological development is linked with [one's] lived place (319).

The trauma and anguish caused by displacement, as Saha has succinctly captured above, can either condemn individuals to a life of helplessness, which Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1962), characterises "as an inauthentic mode of existence" (307), or predispose them to what Jean-Paul Sartre, in his seminal essay, *Being and Nothingness* (1945) categorises as an act of revolt. This revolt as an existential option, in Sartre reckoning, thus becomes not merely a political act, but also a confrontation with the very meaning of being, especially when the individual survival is under severe existential threat.

Although, the issue of displacement was initially conceived as a consequence of colonialism, the phenomenon has assumed a more intense and precarious dimension in many postcolonial nation-states. This is, arguably, so because decades after attaining political independence, many African nations have continued to grapple with the predatory socio-political and economic structures that have consistently relegated marginalised groups to the precipice where they must either prioritise survival or resign themselves to a life of "inauthenticity." This possibly explains why several writers portray the prevailing anguish and disillusionment in postcolonial African societies in their works. Busuyi Makusi captures this predispositions when he argues that, "African literature has continued to lament the post-independence disillusionment that followed the evaporation of hopes for better leadership under the indigenous order that succeeded the colonial masters" (23). Particularly, in Nigeria's postcolonial drama, the theme of displacement is poignantly articulated through characters who struggle with the

trauma of losing their homes, communities, and social structures to the ruling elite and their collaborators in the corridors of power. These experiences often result in profound feelings of isolation, disorientation, and alienation, reflecting the broader socio-political and cultural fragmentation that typify post-independence Nigeria, a nation that is skewed in favour of the ruling elite who privilege the interest selves over the others often classified as the subaltern.

This theme of displacement has been variously captured by pioneer writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Ola Rotimi in their works. For instance, in *The Strong Breed* (1971), Soyinka explores the ritual of scapegoatism, where an outsider is chosen to bear the collective guilt of the community, thereby underscoring the marginalisation of the individuals in the face of societal expectations. Similarly, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) thematises the trauma and dislocation caused by colonisation and the consequent erosion of traditional Igbo cultural values. In *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971), Rotimi captures the existential anguish of identity in postcolonial societies through the character of Odewale, who embodies the tension between determinism and personal freedom. Foretold from birth that his fate is sealed by the gods, Odewale's every attempt to escape that fate paradoxically leads him closer to its fulfilment. Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence offers a useful framework for understanding Odewale's existential crisis: his anguish stems from an awareness of being trapped between inherited structures of fate and the potentiality for self-realisation.

Rotimi's exploration of the theme of displacement and existential anguish takes on a more radical form in his later play, *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988). In this play, a group of leprosy patients housed at the General Hospital in Port Harcourt revolt against their forced eviction from the facility. The lepers were not assembled at the facility out of compassion for their leprosy existential conditions; they were gathered as objects of experimentation. But their collective resistance becomes an act of reclaiming agency and asserting the primacy of existence against the dehumanising forces of institutional neglect and societal abandonment. This radical mode of resistance is equally mirrored in Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), a play that explores the endemic issue of armed robbery in Nigeria. Osofisan presents this crisis not merely as a criminal phenomenon, but also as a socio-political symptom of the alienation experienced by the marginalised majority. Despite the awareness that armed robbery carries the ultimate penalty of public execution, the four robbers embrace it as both an act of rebellion and a desperate claim to a purposeful existence. In both plays, the protagonists navigate contradictory and dehumanising realities, yet they forge a path of resistance that underscores the primacy of survival even in the face of systemic neglect. It is against the backdrop of the premises already established above that this paper investigates Esiaba Irobi's *Cemetery Road* as both a depiction of theme of displacement and a critical exploration of how the dispossessed negotiate existential crises that mirror the postcolonial struggle for the "transformation of Nigeria's repressive socio-political order" (Osakwe 1).

2. Conceptualising Dialectical Materialism in Existential Discourse

This study approaches Irobi's *Cemetery Road* as a dialectical–existential drama, situating the play's central conflicts within an interlocking frameworks of Marxist and existentialist philosophy. While most critical readings of Irobi's work (Akigbe 2014; Ebekue 2018; Okiche 2016) have primarily deployed Marxist theory to interrogate class antagonisms, foregrounding the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor as the major source of the conflicts, this paper argues that such material conflicts are imbued with a deeper existential crisis: the anxiety of being, survival, and self-affirmation in a world replete with human-induced contradictions akin to Darridan's free play of signs (Ojoniyi, 2022. The dialectical, therefore, is not merely socio-economic but ontological, reflecting what Heidegger (1962) terms the human condition of *being-in-the-world*. From this perspective, the dialectical tensions in *Cemetery Road* are animated by what may be described as existential anxiety—the fear of non-being and the instinctive drive toward survival that define the human experience. The impulse to survive becomes the latent force that generates and sustains material struggles, transforming economic and political contradictions into lived existential dilemmas. Material conflicts, in this sense, are expressions of the primordial struggle for existence, manifesting as contests of interest, power, and agency. Afolayan and Adeseke (111) lend credence to this argument when they note that "the continual conflict between the two classes usually lies in the interest of the bourgeois to perpetually emasculate the proletariat and reduce them to mere slaves who do not have any say in social decisions." Such class antagonisms, when read through an existential lens, transcend the Marxist schema of historical materialism to reveal an ontological battle for recognition, autonomy, and meaning.

Dialectical materialism, traditionally conceived as the engine of historical and social transformation, thus rests upon a prior existential condition—the struggle of selfhood amid other selves, a contest of beings striving for affirmation within constraining material structures. The individual's confrontation with oppression, exploitation, and alienation, therefore, mirrors the existential struggle of "being-in-the-world" in search of authenticity and purpose. Marx's assertion that material conditions play a decisive role in shaping human relations (Ayuba 45) can, in this light, be seen as corresponding with the existentialist view that human beings must act, choose, and take responsibility within the limits imposed by their situations.

Jean-Paul Sartre provides a bridge between these two traditions in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), where he envisions Marxism and existentialism not as contradictory but as complementary. Sartre posits that "it is a way of understanding history, social relations, and collective actions that preserves the existential insight of freedom while acknowledging the material and historical conditions that shape it." His reconfiguration of the dialectic transforms it from Hegel's abstract logic into a historical process rooted in lived human struggle. In reconciling existential freedom with material constraint, Sartre articulates a framework that accounts for both the objective conditions of existence and the subjective drive for self-determination. As he later affirms, "we were convinced at one and the same time that historical materialism furnished the only valid interpretation of history and that existentialism remained the only concrete approach to reality" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 21).

Consequently, this study interprets *Cemetery Road* as dramatising the convergence of these two philosophical strands. The play's dialectical structure—its opposition between domination and resistance, corruption and morality, life and death—simultaneously unfolds as an existential meditation on human survival, agency, and authenticity. The characters' struggles are not only class-based but ontological; they embody what it means to exist, act, and affirm one's being in conditions that deny meaning and freedom. This synthesis of Marxist and existential insights enables a more holistic reading of Irobi's drama: one that captures both the material contradictions of the Nigeria's postcolonial society and the existential crises that animate its subjects. In essence, the dialectical–existential framework illuminates how survival imperatives and material interests intertwine to produce the ethical, political, and psychological tensions within *Cemetery Road*. By grounding Marx's dialectical materialism in existential ontology, the paper underscores the fact that social conflicts are inseparable from the human condition of anxiety, choice, and struggle. It is through this synthesis that Irobi's play achieves its profound philosophical resonance—depicting the material world not as mere economic structure, but as the theatre of existential becoming.

3. DISPLACEMENT, ANGUISH AND REVOLT IN *CEMETERY ROAD*

Cemetery Road is Irobi's intertextual engagement with the traumatising experience of the indigenous Bakolori peasant farmers who were forcefully uprooted from their ancestral homes at a village near Abuja, the nation's seat of power. The play is not a mere rehash of that agonising historical event; it is a revolutionary reconstruction by the playwright that captures the pervasive hopelessness, frustration and existential anguish which typify Nigeria's postcolonial condition — especially as embodied in repressive military regimes and their attendant misgovernace, high-handedness, institutionalised corruption and state-sanctioned brutality. In essence, Irobi's *Cemetery Road* is clearly informed by earlier texts such as Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1999), which likewise dramatises army brutality against the Ilaje (Maroko) squatters.

In *Cemetery Road*, characters — Mazeli the firebrand academic; Somadina, his betrothed; Lawani, the President's chief security officer; Prof. Madubunjoala, the academic leech; and the Kudingi peasant farmers — all experience various degrees of existential anguish manifesting as frustration, alienation and estrangement. These existential conditions shape their choices and counteractions and thereby trigger the play's central conflicts. Irobi deliberately centres the narrative on the hapless peasant farmers as a representative class that bears the brunt of the ruling elite's hegemony and its foreign collaborators. As Mazeli observes, the play is "rather about the struggle. The struggle of the peasants of this country who are daily humiliated by the snobbery of the ruling class…" (43). Individuals are prone to anguish when confronted with existential circumstances beyond their control. The realisation that one cannot wholly define or predict one's existence is itself a source of despair and anxiety. Typically, people confronted with such dilemmas face two options: they either resign themselves to conformity —

Sartre's "bad faith" — accepting that nothing can be done, or they choose resistance and revolt. This binary aptly describes the existential realities of the Kudingi farmers and explains their choices.

The farmers' predicaments are twofold. First, they suffer physical dislocation from the land that supplies their livelihood. Second, they endure emotional displacement and memory disruption, severing their spiritual ties to land, ancestors and totems. There is a direct link between physical/economic dislocation and alienation: the land is the Kudingi farmers' economic lifeline, and its forcible seizure plunges them toward poverty and deprivation. During an interview with two BBC correspondents, the farmers articulate the land's centrality:

Lead Singer: (kneeling) Stranger, we are peasants. We live by the mercies of the land and the muscles of our toil. In the planting season, when if it pleases Allah to send us rain, we bury our tomorrow into the red earth and pretend they are seed.

Second Peasant: And in due season, we weed our farms.

Third Peasant: With our mattocks and our hoes.

First Peasant: And harmattan, when the barns are bare, in harvest time…

Chorus: We root beneath the entrails of the earth for the tubers of our toil.

Lead Singer: In Bakalori, in what was once our fertile marshland, we sowed and reaped…

Second Peasant: Our grain of rice.

Third Peasant: Millets and soya beans

First Peasant: Onions, yams…

Lead Singer: Watermelons…

Second Peasant: Carrots, potatoes…

First Peasant: And red tomatoes

Third Peasant: (erratically) Red! (demonstrating) like blood spurting from a shivered vein. Red! (calmly) like blood on a plate of rice! (25).

Through enumerations such as "red tomatoes," "millets and soya beans," and "grain of rice," the text conveys both the farmers' economic activities and their existential dread at losing this bounty. Beyond economic loss, the dislocation severs memory and ritual: the farmers are cut off from their gods, ancestral graves and earth shrines. They voice this rupture:

First Blindman: …We were evacuated to this acre of stone called Kudingi
Second Blindman: …A new village; without food, without homes, without rods, without schools, without hospitals…

First Blindman: Without our totems and our earth shrines
Third Blindman: …without the graves of our ancestors and our places of worship;
Lead Singer: (weeping) A ring of stones marks the crib where our god was born. Now, nothing worships that crib of stones and bones except wind (31).

Rather than accept hopelessness, the farmers are galvanized into action. Like the outcast lepers in Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* who challenge their marginalisation, the Kudingi peasants, roused by Mazeli, confront the elite forces and their western collaborators whose projects — notably the dam and Nicon Ne Niga Hotel — serve elite interests and dispossess the people. The dispossession is thus a paradigmatic "robbing Peter to pay Paul." The farmers recount their violent resistance, in which many are maimed and killed:

Lead Singer: (incensed). We rose in arms. For stranger, we are a race of warrior. Our ancestors were warriors. Warriors who conquered the kingdoms of the desert and the Sahel Savannah and swore to dip the Koran into the throat of the Atlantic Ocean. We are a race of warriors. A fighting people. We rose in arms.

(The set explodes into a violent but carefully choreographed war dance sustained by a war song….)

Lead Singer: We rose in arms (displaying them). But we only had bows and arrows
First Peasant: Dane gun and blunderbusses…

Third Peasant: (demonstrating) And a few sharp spears which we planted between the ribs of three of the white men.

First Peasant: We also had sickles, sickles and scythes with which we harvest our millets and our rice (27).

This passage exposes the asymmetric military capacities between the government, which deploys heavy artillery, and the peasants, who fight with farming implements. It prompts a pressing question: why would a government, funded by taxpayers, purchase arms only to turn them against defenseless citizens? The disparity turns the peasant revolt into a tragic but inevitable consequence of structural violence. The experience of existential anguish extends beyond the Kudingi farmers to the nation's academic community. Lecturers suffer salary arrears while the military government pursues divide-and-rule tactics to fracture solidarity. Prof. Madubunjoala — "alias when I was at Oxford" — functions as a mole who betrays colleagues like Mazeli by reporting their community theatre work as subversive. Madubunjoala confronts Mazeli:

Madubunjoala: You are not teaching, Dr. Anyanwu. You are indoctrinating the students into revolutionary whims and caprices. You are turning teaching into subversive activity and that must stop.

Mazeli: It will stop when government starts paying us our correct salaries. And does it not worry you that three quarters of the lecturers have left this country in search of greener pastures in the richer countries of the West? Why should we be here eating palm kernels when soldiers shovel 50% of the GNP into the defence? Creating military colleges everywhere. And we are not fighting a war, are we? Professor Madubunjoala, the military monsters want to wipe out the intellectual class in this country. And they are using fossils like you. What is the future of a nation without an educational system? What is the future of these students? (77).

Madubunjoala's betrayal — culminating in Mazeli's arrest after a security invasion of the university — mirrors real occurrences under successive military regimes, from Babangida to the notorious Abacha era, when academics who opposed policy (including SAP) were threatened, exiled or killed. Mazeli represents those who remain unbowed; despite harassment, torture and even poisoning, he refuses to compromise his ideals. To his pregnant wife Somadina he says: "Anything can happen. If, however they succeed in knocking me off, use that money for the magazine and the child's education" (49). And he declares:

Father, as your wisdom knows, our ancestors said that a great man is he who wrestles with power and overpowers the overpowering power of power. The poison running through my veins, the wounds on my head and the blood on my face are not mine. They are scars inflicted on the skin of this nation and the flesh of the future by full-fed beasts who have no vision for our children and their tomorrow's womb (113).

Mazeli thus embodies Irobi's ideological vision: protagonists often assume a quasi-messianic mantle and insist that their interpretation of the nation's failures and remedies is unassailable. This predisposition fuels an idealism that can become excessive and tragic across Irobi's plays. Mazeli's willingness to use the scheduled theatre presentation before the President as an opportunity for assassination — despite Lawani's warning that it would be "suicide" — illustrates this contradictory faith in theatre's power over the gun:

Lawani: It will be suicide…

Mazeli: Remember to write my epitaph.

Lawani: …because the President is surrounded by at least fifty agents trained in Israel by MOSSAD. Armed with revolvers. You cannot get to him.

Mazeli: Art will show me the way. The theatre will (141–142).

Mazeli's belief that theatre can prevail over arms reveals a romanticism at odds with existential reality: theatre is a realm of dream and illusion, not of actual force. Somadina challenges his messianic posture when she observes that "He (Mazeli) tried to make possible a place where love will grow, a place where tenderness is possible. But unknown to him, he was fighting a disease past his cure…" (149). That

"disease past his cure" suggests an irredeemable social condition; if the nation's malaise is incurable, Mazeli's sacrifice may be tragically ineffectual rather than redemptive. Yet, by rallying the hapless farmers—victims of an unjust system—into collective action to assert their right to exist despite the disproportionate power relations, Mazili underscores the enduring power of human agency to resist when the conditions of survival are pushed to their limits.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined Esiaba Irobi's *Cemetery Road* through the interconnecting prisms of Marxist and existentialist thought, positioning the play as a dialectical–existential drama that captures the tensions between material deprivation and the search for meaning. Central to the narrative are the Bakolori (Kudingi) peasant farmers whose violent displacement from their ancestral land becomes both a literal and symbolic rupture—an uprooting that mirrors the alienation and dislocation endemic to postcolonial societies. Their anguish, therefore, is not only economic but ontological: a loss of identity, belonging, and purpose within structures of domination perpetuated by the collusion of Nigeria's ruling class and global capitalist interests.

Yet, Irobi refuses to allow his characters to remain trapped within the paralysis of despair. Through Mazeli, the play's protagonist, he reconfigures anguish as a generative force that awakens existential consciousness. Mazeli's revolt against the injustices of his society embodies a shift from passive endurance to active defiance—a movement from being victims of displacement to agents of resistance. This transformation marks Irobi's distinctive contribution to postcolonial drama: the dramatisation of rebellion not merely as a political act but as an existential affirmation of selfhood and agency. In reclaiming their right to act and to define their own reality, the peasants transcend their historical marginaliation and assert their humanity against the absurdity of their condition.

Ultimately, *Cemetery Road* articulates a vision of revolt that is both ethical and emancipatory. Irobi's dramatization of displacement and anguish culminates in a collective awakening that challenges the moral bankruptcy of postcolonial governance and the lingering shadows of imperial exploitation. The play insists that revolt is not an act of nihilism but a creative assertion of being—a reaffirmation of life, dignity, and hope amid systemic dispossession. In this way, Irobi's work resonates as a powerful testament to the enduring human impulse toward freedom and transformation, affirming that even in the cemetery of despair, the road to renewal remains open.

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