

**The Search for Meaning and Struggle for Futility**  
**in Ola Rotimi's *hopes of the living dead***

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**Abstract**

Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is a profound exploration of the human condition, where characters struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds in their pursuit of meaning and dignity. This paper examines the existential and absurdist themes that pervade the play, focusing on the characters' search for meaning amidst suffering and their confrontation with the futility of their circumstances. Through a close analysis of the play's characters and events, the study demonstrates how Rotimi's work reflects the tension between hope and despair, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of absurdity. Ultimately, the paper argues that Rotimi juxtaposes the existential and absurdist struggles of his characters to comment on broader social and political issues in the post-colonial Nigeria. Again, through the choice of words, the blending of languages, and the poetic and dramatic elements, the paper reports Rotimi's creation of a rich and multi-layered narrative that explores the complexities of the colonial power, resistance, and identity. Language becomes a battleground in the play, where the struggle for control, recognition, and dignity is fought as much with words as with actions.

**Keywords:** Absurdism, Existentialism, Futility, Despair, and Ola Rotimi.

## **Introduction**

African literature, including African plays like Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead*, serves several critical roles within the society ranging from cultural preservation and identity, political and social issues, empowerment and advocacy, to historical documentation among several others. Through these African traditions, beliefs, and social structures are reflected as they provide the space for artistic expression, showcasing the creativity and talent of writers, actors and directors. The Nigerian plays often have didactic elements; teaching lessons about morality, ethics, social responsibility and showcasing the importance of resilience, solidarity and the pursuit of justice which are the glaring issues of Rotimi's play under study. Through the lens of existentialism and absurdism, which are philosophical frameworks that explore the human condition, particularly the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent or chaotic world, the paper unveils the intricate search for meaning and the struggles against futility in the play.

Set in the colonial era, the play depicts a group of leprosy patients who, despite their marginalized status, struggle for recognition, dignity, and survival. This struggle, however, is often met with futility, reflecting the absurdist idea that life can be inherently meaningless. Yet, within this context, the characters persist, embodying the existential quest for purpose amidst despair, in African literature, these philosophical ideas find unique expressions as writers grapple with the legacies of colonialism, social injustice, and the quest for identity. Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is a compelling example of this fusion of existential and absurdist themes within an African context.

## **Existentialism and Absurdism**

Existentialism and absurdism are two philosophical movements that profoundly influenced 20th-century literature and thought. The terms have been defined by several scholars

and sources. The Britannica for instance records that, Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasizes individual freedom, choice, and responsibility. It posits that humans are not born with a predefined purpose or essence; instead, they must create their own meaning and identity through their actions. This philosophy stresses that existence precedes essence, meaning that we first exist and then define ourselves. Existentialism, primarily associated with thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, emphasizes the individual's quest for meaning in a world that does not inherently provide it. Sartre, on Existentialism says, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does". Sartre's major work elaborates on existential freedom and the burden of responsibility. His existentialism emphasizes that humans must create their own essence through choices and actions in a world without predetermined meaning, leading to what he describes as "existential angst".

At first, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. (54).

According to Sartre's quote above, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre 28). This idea underscores the existential belief that humans are not born with a predetermined purpose but must create their own meaning through choices and actions.

In contrast, Absurdism believes that the universe is irrational and meaningless. It states that trying to find meaning leads people into a conflict with the world. This conflict can be between rational man and irrational universe also between intention and outcome or between subjective assessment and objective worth but the precise definition of the term is disputed. Absurdism, articulated by Albert Camus claims that existence as a whole is absurd.

At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face. It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or factory, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm-this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begin'-this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the end of the acts of mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. (12)

This quote expands on Camus' ideas from *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he explores on the theme of absurdity as a notion that life lacks inherent meaning, and the confrontation with its realization linking existentialism and absurdism to broader political and social struggles (13). Thomas Nagel, is of the opinion that, "The absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning" (Nagel 718). Nagel's exploration of the concept of absurdity in a philosophical context, argues that absurdity stems from the discrepancy between humans' expectations for meaning and the indifference of the universe. His work expands the discussion of absurdism beyond literature, contributing to philosophical discourse on the topic. While Martin Esslin, strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices" ( 6). Esslin coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd" to describe plays by writers like Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco,

who portrayed the absurdity of the human condition through illogical narratives and characters. Their works link absurdism directly to modern drama, illustrating how existential and absurdist themes manifest in the theatre. An instance in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is where Beckett features two characters, Vladimir and Estragon who wait endlessly for an imaginary person called Godot, who never shows up in the story. Through this idea of waiting, what is indeed a futile waiting, Beckett explores the themes of futility and absurdity of the human existence.

Another scholar by name Kierkegaard also made his contribution to existentialism by exploring the concept of despair as a result of failing to realize one's true self and purpose. His work lays the groundwork for existentialist themes, particularly the struggle for identity and meaning. Kierkegaard's discussion on absurdism does not directly make emphasis on the term absurdism but revolves around themes that resonate on absurdism. He delves into the tension between faith and reason, the irrationality of existence. His concept of the "Leap of faith" suggests subjective and passionate commitment to a belief or action despite the lack of rational certainty or objective evidence. For Kierkegaard, faith is not a matter of logical deduction or empirical proof but a rather a deeply personal and existential commitment. The "leap of faith" is an act of individual choice and commitment in the face of uncertainty and doubt. It requires a willingness to embrace the paradox, to accept that some truths may be beyond rational comprehension, and to take a leap into the unknown realm of faith. The concept is related to his emphasis on the importance of subjective truth and the individual's relationship with God.

Merleau-Ponty's work is considered central to existential phenomenology as it emphasizes the embodied experience of existence, suggesting that meaning arises through our lived experiences. His ideas contribute to existentialism by focusing on perception and the human body as the primary sites of experience and meaning-making. William Barrett's studies

on existential philosophy views "Existentialism as the attempt to face the full consequences of a world without meaning, and thus to make of it a truly human world" ( 22). Barrett here provides an accessible overview of existentialism, tracing its development from philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to modern existentialists like Sartre and Camus. His work synthesizes key existential themes like existence preceding essence, absurdity, alienation, anxiety and dread, death and nothingness and shows how they address the human conditions in a world perceived as irrational and absurd. Simone de Beauvoir in his essay, "The Ethics of Ambiguity" says, "To will oneself free is also to will others free" ( 73). De Beauvoir's work addresses the ethical dimensions of existentialism. She argues that individuals must acknowledge their own freedom and that of others, creating meaning through collective action. Her ideas expands existentialism's focus on individual freedom to include social responsibility and ethics.

In addition, Walter Kaufmann, and others, added that, "What all existentialists have in common is the fundamental doctrine that existence precedes essence" (11). Kaufmann's anthology brings together key existentialist thinkers, illustrating the diversity of thought within existentialism. His work highlights existentialism's central concern with human freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning, providing readers with a broad understanding of the movement. The paper's engagement with various definitions of Absurdism and Existentialism by different scholars is to provide a ground to situating the themes of Rotimi's work under study in that regards.

### **Synopsis of Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead***

*Hopes of the Living Dead* is a powerful drama by the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi that chronicles the struggles of a group of leprosy patients in the colonial Nigeria. Set in the early 20th century, the play depicts the harsh realities of life for those afflicted with leprosy, a disease

that not only ravages the body but also leads to social ostracism and dehumanization. The play's central character, Paul, a leprosy patient himself, becomes the leader of a group of lepers who are confined to a leprosarium in Port Harcourt. Paul draws inspiration from the historical legacies of King Jaja of Opobo who is a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression to support his stands for justice and resilience for his fellow lepers. The lepers live in squalid conditions, neglected by the colonial authorities and shunned by the rest of society. Paul's voice reads from the text:

We may be lepers, cast out and forgotten by the world, but we are still human beings. We will not be treated like animals. We will stand up, speak out, and fight for our dignity. They may try to crush us, to silence us, but they cannot destroy our will to live as free men and women. We will show them that we are stronger than the disease they use to define us. Our strength is in our unity, our courage, and our unbreakable spirit. (23)

This passage highlights Paul's determination to resist dehumanization and oppression, emphasizing the strength and unity of his community in their struggle for dignity and justice. Despite their suffering, Paul and his fellow lepers refuse to accept their fate passively. They unite and begin to demand better treatment, dignity, and recognition of their humanity. The lepers' fight for justice is met with resistance from the colonial government, which views them as expendable and undeserving of basic rights. The struggle intensifies as the lepers are pushed to the brink, both physically and emotionally. Yet, through their perseverance and solidarity, they continue to resist oppression, determined to reclaim their dignity and assert their worth as human beings.

As the lepers' protest gains momentum, they attract the attention of sympathetic individuals from outside the leprosarium, including the Christian Missionary who is a character

in the play and a representative of a few Nigerian leaders who also see the cause of the lepers as part of the broader struggle for independence and social justice. However, their efforts are constantly thwarted by the colonial powers, leading to moments of despair and hopelessness.

Despite the overwhelming odds, the play ends on a note of resilience. While the lepers may not achieve all their goals, they achieve a significant victory, as they are granted better living conditions, medical care, and the right to have visitors. Paul and the other lepers celebrate their hard-won victory, though they know the struggle for dignity and justice is far from over. Their struggle symbolizes a broader fight for freedom, dignity, and recognition. Their story therefore, is a testament of the strength of the human spirit in the face of dehumanizing forces which existential themes hinged on.

Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is a poignant exploration of the themes of survival, resistance, and the search for meaning in a world that often denies it. Through the experiences of the lepers, the play addresses issues of social justice, human rights, and the enduring legacy of colonialism in Africa among others. The play therefore, ends on a hopeful note, with the lepers realizing that even in the face of great adversity, they can bring about change if they remain united and steadfast.

### **Existentialism in *Hopes of the Living Dead***

Rotimi's characters embody the existential struggle to create meaning in a world that offers little inherent value. This is especially evident in the portrayal of Paul, who refuses to be defined by his illness or societal marginalization. His leadership and determination to fight for the rights of his fellow lepers reflect the existential belief that individuals must define their own essence through action. This existentialist viewpoint is often summarized in Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence," meaning that humans must create their own purpose through

their choices and actions, rather than relying on any preordained destiny (Sartre 28). This is evident in the play as the main character, Paul, a charismatic leader, emerges as a voice of hope and resistance and encourages the lepers to demand better living conditions and their basic rights. Paul believes that, despite their illness, they deserve to be treated with dignity. In the spirit of existentialism and resilience, the play records Paul's words: "I tell you, even if they lock us up in a room without windows, we shall still breathe. No one will silence us. Not even death" (15).

These lines reflect Paul's unyielding spirit and determination to fight for the dignity and rights of the lepers, no matter the circumstances. His resilience is evident in his refusal to be silenced or defeated by the oppressive conditions imposed on them. Another quote from the play that demonstrates Paul's resilience reads: "They can break our bones, but they cannot break our spirit. We shall stand, we shall fight, and we shall win" (22)

### **Absurdism in *Hopes of the Living Dead***

Absurdism, as articulated by Albert Camus, posits that life is inherently meaningless, and the human condition is defined by the tension between the search for meaning and the universe's indifference to this quest. In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, this tension is reflected in the characters' ongoing struggle against a system that devalues them and their lives. Despite their efforts, the lepers face a world that continually denies them dignity, embodying Camus's idea of the "absurd" (Camus 30). The absurdist perspective in the play is further captured in the characters' realization that their fight for recognition may ultimately be futile, yet they continue to resist. This echoes Camus's notion that the recognition of life's absurdity should lead not to despair but to rebellion, as he famously states, "The struggle itself... is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 123).

This is the situation in the play on the colonial authority's realization that the lepers' protest could lead to a wider rebellion, decided to suppress it by sending Mr. Granville, a colonial officer, to negotiate with the lepers. Mr. Granville to the lepers says: "I have always acted in your best interest. Everything I do, even when it seems harsh, is for your own good" (49). This describes Mr. Granville's deceptive nature, as he tries to mask his true intentions with the pretense of acting for the benefit of the people, despite the harm his actions causes on them. But Paul sees through his deceit and joins forces with the other lepers to raise tension refusing to back down. This explains how the life of a leper is in total absurdity; meaningless to the colonial authorities. They see no use or meaning in Paul's effort and the rest of the lepers' in striving to achieve any form of meaning through the better treatments that they advocate for.

The colonial authority's perspective of the lepers in Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is a pure reflection on the ideas of Absurdism. This is even read in the conversations they make among themselves of the lepers. An instance is when Mr Granville says, "Order must be maintained at all costs. These people need to understand that their place is not to question, but to follow" (79). The Colonial Officer, also a character in the play says: "They are lepers, outcasts by nature. We must keep them in line, or chaos will spread like their disease" (92). While the District Officer's response on the conversation says, "We bring them civilization, and this is the gratitude we receive? They must be taught to respect authority, or they will never learn"(92).

The above quotations from the text reflect the colonial mindset of control and the desire to suppress any form of resistance or dissent among the colonized people. It also shows the dehumanizing attitude of the colonial authorities, who view the lepers not as individuals deserving of dignity, but as a threat that needs to be contained. This underscores the paternalistic

and condescending attitude of the colonial powers, who believe their oppressive rule is justified under the guise of 'civilizing' the colonized population.

### **The Search for Meaning**

In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, the search for meaning is a central theme, as characters strive to assert their humanity in the face of dehumanizing conditions. The lepers, led by Paul, seek not just physical healing but also a recognition of their worth and dignity. This quest mirrors the existentialist belief that meaning is not given but created through one's actions and choices. As Sartre posits, "existence precedes essence," suggesting that individuals must define themselves through their decisions and actions (Sartre 22). The lepers, marginalized and oppressed, attempt to reclaim their identity and agency by challenging the societal structures that confine them.

For example, Paul's leadership symbolizes the existential drive to find purpose in a world that denies it. His efforts to organize the lepers and demand better treatment from the colonial authorities reflect the existentialist notion of self-determination. His struggle, like that of King Jaja, however, is not without its challenges, as he often encounters resistance from both the colonial system and the absurdity of his circumstances. Despite the hopelessness of their situation, the characters' persistence in their struggle highlights the existential belief in the importance of human effort, even when the outcome is uncertain.

### **The Struggle Against Futility**

The absurdist philosophy, as articulated by Albert Camus, suggests that life is inherently devoid of meaning, and the human condition is characterized by a constant struggle against this realization (Camus 28). In *Hopes of the Living Dead*, this struggle is evident as the characters face the futility of their efforts to escape their plight. The colonial authorities' indifference to

their suffering, coupled with the harsh realities of their disease, creates a sense of despair that permeates the play.

However, it is in this struggle against futility that the characters' resilience is most apparent. Camus argues that the recognition of life's absurdity should not lead to despair but rather to a defiant affirmation of life itself (Camus 30). This sentiment is echoed in the actions of Rotimi's characters, which, despite the overwhelming odds, refuse to succumb to despair. Their resistance to their condition, both physical and social, can be seen as a form of revolt against the absurdity of their existence.

For instance, the lepers' decision to protest and fight for their rights, even when the possibility of success seems remote, embodies the absurdist heroism that Camus describes. Their actions suggest that while life may be meaningless, the struggle itself can be a source of meaning. In this way, Rotimi uses the absurdist elements of the play to highlight the strength of the human spirit in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

### **The Interplay of Hope and Despair**

Rotimi's play, *Hope of the Living Dead*, is marked by a constant tension between hope and despair, reflecting the existential and absurdist themes at its core. The characters oscillate between moments of optimism, where they believe in the possibility of change, and moments of deep despair, where the futility of their efforts becomes apparent. This dynamic is central to the play's exploration of the human condition as Paul says, "We are not dead yet, and as long as there is breath in us, we will not give up. Our voices will rise, even from the depths of despair"(19). This line captures Paul's indomitable will and his commitment to continuing the struggle, no matter how dire the circumstances may be.

The title itself, *Hopes of the Living Dead*, captures this paradoxical interplay. The term "living dead" suggests a state of existence that is marked by life and death, hope and despair. The characters, much like the living dead, are caught between these two states, constantly struggling to find meaning in a world that offers little in return.

### **Language In Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead***

Language plays a critical role in conveying the themes, character dynamics, and social commentary embedded in the play. Rotimi's use of language is deliberate and multifaceted, serving not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for exploring power relations, identity, and resistance. Here's a detailed discussion on the use of language in the play:

#### 1. Bilingualism and Code-Switching:

Rotimi skillfully employs bilingualism and code-switching between English and indigenous Nigerian languages, particularly the Pidgin English. This linguistic diversity reflects the cultural hybridity of the colonial context in which the play is set. The use of standard English by the colonial authorities contrasts sharply with the use of Pidgin and indigenous languages by the lepers and other oppressed characters, highlighting the social and power divide.

2, Colonial Authority's Language: The colonial officials and those in power often speak in formal, authoritative English, which reflects their education, power, and attempts to maintain control. Their language is precise, bureaucratic, and often condescending, underscoring their detachment from the people they govern. For example, Mr. Granville's speeches are filled with formalities and a tone of superiority, reinforcing his role as an enforcer of colonial rule. Granville's words reads from the text: "We must ensure that order is maintained. These people need to be reminded of their place, and that place is not to question, but to follow".

3. Indigenous Language and Pidgin: The lepers often speak in Pidgin English or their native languages. Paul for instance says, "Dem tink say because we be lepers, we no go fit stand up. But we go show dem say we strong pass wetin dem think". "We no be animal! We go fight, we go speak, we go shout until dem hear us. Dis fight no be for today alone; na for our future." "Dem fit break our body, but dem no fit break our spirit. We go stand gidigba, fight, and we go win!" (18-28). This use of language is a form of resistance to colonial domination, as it maintains a connection to their cultural roots and creates a sense of solidarity among the oppressed. Pidgin, being a hybrid language, serves as a bridge between the colonizers and the colonized, but it is also a language of the people, imbued with humour, irony, and a sense of resilience.

Language is also used as a Tool of Resistance in the play and not only as a means of communication; it is a weapon of resistance. The characters, particularly Paul, use language to challenge the colonial authorities and assert their humanity and rights.

Paul's Speeches are filled with rhetorical devices such as repetition, parallelism, and appeals to the collective memory and pride of the people. He often draws on the imagery of strength and endurance, using metaphors like the "iroko tree" to symbolize resilience. His language inspires the lepers to resist their dehumanization and fight for their dignity. This reflects in the text when Paul says: "When the sun rise, darkness must run. No matter how long night dey, day go break." (32).

Rotimi also makes use of the subversive Humour and Irony as the oppressed characters use humor and irony in their language as a form of subtle resistance by mocking the absurdity of their situation and the pretensions of the colonial authorities. This is reflected in the play as the Lepers (in unison) say: "Make dem think say dem get power, but na we get mouth! We fit turn am upside down if we want!".

Symbolism is yet another powerful tool of language in use in the play as Rotimi infuses symbolic meanings into the language used by the characters. The repeated references to "light," "freedom," and "voice" symbolize the broader struggle for liberation and justice. The concept of "voice" in the play is particularly symbolic. For the lepers, having a "voice" represents their right to be heard, to assert their humanity, and to demand their rights. The play's emphasis on speaking out and being heard reflects the importance of language in the struggle for recognition and existence. "Our voice no go die. As long as we dey alive, we go talk. Even if dem no wan hear, we go continue to shout.". This is the position of the lepers in the play.

There are also the use of proverbs and sayings, chorus and songs, dramatic monologues and others. For instance in choruses and songs like: "Rise up, O spirit of the living! Let the light shine through our pain. We are more than what they see; our hope will not be in vain". An instance of dramatic monologue in the play reads: "I see the struggle in our eyes, the fire that burns within. We are not the walking dead they think we are. We are the living, and we will rise!". These help to enrich the language of the play by reinforcing the importance of the cultural identity of African and the Nigerian people in the face of their colonial oppression.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explores how Rotimi employs existential and absurdist themes to portray the search for meaning and the struggle against futility in *Hopes of the Living Dead*. By analyzing the characters' attempts to resist dehumanization and assert their dignity, the study reveals how Rotimi reflects the broader social and political concerns of the post-colonial Nigeria. The paper also examines how the characters' experiences with the existential and absurdist philosophies of Sartre and Camus among others, highlighting the universal human struggle for purpose in an often indifferent or hostile world. Through this lens, Rotimi's work is shown to be not just a

historical drama but a profound philosophical reflection on the resilience of the human spirit. By blending existentialism and absurdism with African social realities, Rotimi challenges the audience to consider how individuals can maintain hope and dignity even when faced with overwhelming adversity.

Through deliberate choice of words, the blending of languages, and the poetic and dramatic elements, Rotimi creates a rich, multi-layered narrative that explores the complexities of colonial power, resistance, and identity. Language becomes a battleground in the play, where the struggle for control, recognition, and dignity is fought as much with words as with actions. As the play illustrates that the search for meaning and the struggle against futility are not only philosophical dilemmas but also urgent social and political issues that continue to resonate in contemporary discourse on human rights and justice.

The paper then concludes that, Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead* is a powerful examination of the search for meaning and the struggle against futility in a world marked by suffering and injustice. Through the lens of existentialism and absurdism, the play presents a poignant commentary on the human condition, where characters fight for dignity and recognition despite the overwhelming odds against them. Rotimi's portrayal of these themes not only reflects the philosophical concerns of existentialism and absurdism but also resonates with the broader social and political issues of his time, particularly in post-colonial Nigeria. In the end, the play reminds us that while life may be absurd, the struggle to find meaning and assert one's humanity is both necessary and profound. It is important to also end here that, while Rotimi does not explicitly define existentialism and absurdism within the text under study, its narrative offers a rich, implicit understanding of both concepts.

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