

A Gendered Perspective on Free Will in Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó*

Roseline Yacim, PhD

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja

Aduragbemi Ogundiran

Department of Film Arts, University of Jos / National Film Institute, Nigeria

Abstract

This article interrogates the philosophical and gendered dimensions of free will as represented in Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó*. Using qualitative content analysis, we examine how the choices of the film's principal characters are shaped by patriarchal structures, social conditioning, and introspective agency. The analysis is situated within libertarian and compatibilist accounts of agency, as well as broader debates on determinism and moral responsibility, with specific attention to how gender norms inflect the possibilities available to Saro and Arolake. While Saro's narrative foregrounds deliberation and the conscious authorship of action, Arolake's trajectory exposes gendered constraints that narrow the frame of "choice," thereby complicating standard attributions of responsibility. We argue that agency must be theorized within a sociocultural matrix in which norms, expectations, and institutions pre-structure options and sanction outcomes. The article contributes to African screen studies and moral philosophy by showing how a contemporary Nigerian film stages tensions between freedom and constraint, and by proposing that interpretations of free will and moral responsibility in gendered contexts require attention to structural coercion as well as individual intention. We conclude by outlining implications for cultural criticism and suggesting legal-institutional reforms that mitigate gender bias and expand the horizon of choice.

Keywords: Free Will; Gender; Moral Responsibility; African Cinema

Introduction

Debates about whether human actions stem from free will or are shaped by social conditioning, culture, tradition, and environment remain central to philosophy and

the social sciences, and they are especially salient when adjudicating moral responsibility. These debates acquire distinctive contours in contexts where gendered expectations delineate permissible conduct and valorised outcomes, since norms about marriage, reproduction, and lineage often operate as background constraints on deliberation. In many African societies, customary institutions and kinship obligations assign different weights to similar actions depending on the actor's gender, thereby turning the same decision into differently sanctioned behaviour. Such asymmetries complicate any simple appeal to individual autonomy, because assessments of blameworthiness must contend with the social architecture that frames choice. Against this backdrop, Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó* provides a rich narrative for examining how choice, constraint, and consequence intersect in a patriarchal setting while still granting characters psychologically credible motives.

As a period fantasy set in precolonial Yorùbáland, *Aníkúlápó* stages agency within an environment where ritual technologies, courtly power, and communal surveillance shape the stakes of action. The film's diegesis—centered on Saro, an itinerant artisan, and Arolake, a young royal wife—invites viewers to track how private desires collide with public norms and how status, fertility, and lineage mediate legitimacy. The supernatural device of the àkàlá gourd, which confers the power to revive the dead, dramatizes the translation of intimate choices into political authority and social capital, revealing how technology—ritual or otherwise—reconfigures who gets to decide and who must comply. At the same time, the film's attention to the textures of confinement, humiliation, and aspiration renders characters' choices intelligible without absolving them of responsibility. In this way, the narrative oscillates between interior deliberation and exterior compulsion, producing a fertile site for testing philosophical claims about freedom and accountability.

Conceptually, this article situates the analysis at the intersection of libertarian and compatibilist accounts of agency, while integrating insights from gender theory and African feminist scholarship. Libertarian views underscore the phenomenology of choosing—the felt capacity to do otherwise and to own one's actions—an intuition that the film evokes through Saro's vacillations and reflective endorsements. Compatibilist accounts, by contrast, recast freedom as reasons-responsiveness within a causal nexus, a framing that helps explain how patriarchal institutions can channel yet not extinguish agency. Gender theory further clarifies how expectations around sexuality, fertility, and obedience structure the menu of options that are socially available and the sanctions that follow from selecting them. The combined framework allows us to analyse actions as authored by agents and at the same time shaped by asymmetries that systematically burden women's choices with higher risks and narrower payoffs.

The article pursues three aims that together refine debates on moral responsibility in gendered contexts. First, it demonstrates how an African screen text can function as a philosophical case study by embedding the experience of willing within historically specific institutions, thereby moving beyond abstract puzzles toward lived moral ecologies. Second, it argues that responsibility assessments must incorporate both deliberation and constraint, asking not only whether an agent could have done otherwise in principle but also whether the social order made alternative courses meaningfully available without disproportionate harm. Third, it proposes that interpretations of transgression and blame in patriarchal settings require attention to the unequal distribution of vulnerability, recognition, and redress, so that identical acts by men and women are not evaluated as if they occurred on a level field. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative content analysis of key scenes, dialogic exchanges, and narrative turning points, triangulating these observations

with theoretical constructs drawn from moral philosophy and gender studies. The remainder of the paper reviews relevant literature, details the analytic method, develops the film analysis across Saro's and Arolake's arcs, and concludes with implications for scholarship and policy.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

Philosophical debates about free will often crystallize around the relationship between an agent's authorship of action and the causal structures that shape what is thinkable, permissible, and sanctionable. In this article, that philosophical core is deliberately situated within gendered social orders to foreground how norms, institutions, and expectations restrict the field of available options while still leaving room for deliberation and accountability. Rather than treating metaphysics and social theory as competing lenses, the framework adopted here treats them as complementary: the metaphysical question of whether agents could have done otherwise is examined alongside the sociological question of how "otherwise" is made costly, implausible, or invisible. This dual perspective is essential for interpreting the choices of *Aníkúlápó's* protagonists because the film stages decision points within a dense matrix of tradition, status, and kinship. It is also consonant with contemporary African feminist inquiry, which urges readings that balance attention to individual agency with critique of the structures that contour life chances (Sudarkasa, 1986; Anyidoho, 2020).

Libertarian accounts of free will maintain that agents, at the moment of choice, possess genuine alternative possibilities and thus originate their actions in a way not reducible to antecedent causes. The appeal of libertarianism lies in its alignment with the phenomenology of deliberation—agents feel torn, rehearse reasons, and endorse a course of action in a manner that seems self-authored (Kane, 2005; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2004). Within the film's narrative, Saro's oscillations—hesitation, resolve, and later reversal—map onto this intuition of authorship and the live sense of "I could do otherwise." Critics of libertarianism, however, question whether such phenomenology is sufficient evidence for metaphysical freedom, given the influence of unconscious processes, affective cues, and situational prompts (Baumeister, Clark, & Lau, 2022). These critiques do not eliminate responsibility, but they press interpreters to distinguish the felt experience of choosing from the wider forces that scaffold that experience.

Compatibilist approaches, by contrast, argue that freedom can coexist with causal determination so long as actions are produced by the agent's reasons-responsive capacities. On this view, responsibility requires appropriate control and awareness, not metaphysical independence from causation, and it is satisfied when agents act from stable evaluative mechanisms that would modulate behaviour under counterfactual scenarios (McKenna & Warmke, 2013; Gillett & Liu, 2016). Compatibilism is analytically powerful in patriarchal settings because it allows us to say both that Saro chooses—guided by aspirations, scripts of masculinity, and incentives—and that Arolake chooses—within a narrower corridor shaped by surveillance, marital hierarchy, and reproductive evaluation. The framework thereby supports nuanced appraisals in which accountability is graded by the quality of deliberation, the foreseeability of harm, and the degree of structural constraint. Read this way, *Aníkúlápó* becomes a study in reasons-responsiveness under unequal social pressures, rather than a simple moral parable about willpower or vice.

A further strand of literature clarifies the difference between control over willing and control over outcomes. Empirical work in psychology and decision science shows that people often overestimate their control while underweighting institutional and

environmental moderators of consequence (Nahmias et al., 2004; Baumeister et al., 2022). In the filmic world, customs, rumour networks, and ritual technologies mediate what follows from any given choice, and those mediations are themselves gendered. Men's breaches are more readily laundered through status and achievement, whereas women's breaches invite intensified scrutiny and bodily risk. The theoretical payoff for interpretation is a two-tier analysis: we assess the source of action at the level of deliberation and endorsement, and we assess the justice of consequences at the level of social distribution and sanction. Only by holding these tiers together can we explain why similar acts by different genders yield asymmetric moral readings and punishments.

Gender theory and African feminist scholarship supply the vocabulary for naming such asymmetries and for tracing their effects on agency. Classic work on gendered division of roles in indigenous African societies documents both the embeddedness of women's labour in kinship economies and the institutionalization of male authority (Sudarkasa, 1986). Contemporary analyses extend this by showing how development discourses, legal regimes, and cultural narratives tie women's social value to fertility and domestic productivity, thereby narrowing the axes along which self-determination is recognized (Anyidoho, 2020; Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). Research on decision-making and leadership further indicates gendered differences in opportunity structures and evaluation standards, which can shape how confidence, risk, and care are performed and perceived (Eagly, 2009; Lizárraga, Baquedano, & Cardelle-Elawar, 2007; Minasyan & Tovmasyan, 2020). In contexts where early or forced marriage persists, reports from UNICEF and UNFPA underscore the cumulative constraints on consent, mobility, education, and health, with profound implications for what "choice" can realistically mean (UNICEF, 2001; UNFPA, 2012; Sen, 1997). Read against this literature, Arolake's decisions register as agency exercised under structural coercion rather than as free-floating transgression.

These insights motivate a refined concept of "agency under constraint," which marks actions as both chosen and pressured, and which resists the false binary between pure autonomy and pure victimhood. The concept foregrounds the epistemic and control conditions for responsibility – what the agent knew or could have reasonably foreseen, and what options were materially and normatively available – while insisting that social power redistributes these conditions unevenly. It also clarifies the analysis of consent, particularly where consent is extracted in settings of dependency or threat and thus cannot be equated with meaningful authorization. Within *Aníkúlápó*, the framework helps distinguish between Arolake's violations of marital norms, which are intelligible as pursuits of safety and self-authorship, and Saro's escalations, which increasingly reflect status-seeking within permissive male scripts. The point is not exoneration or condemnation in the abstract, but specification of how responsibility is inflected by context.

Finally, situating the film within African screen studies enriches the theoretical frame by placing its moral architecture alongside cognate texts. Nigerian cinema frequently interrogates authority, complicity, and gendered legitimacy, from the power-politics of *King of Boys* to the intimate violences of *Blood Sisters* and the performative masculinity of *Merry Men* (Adetiba, 2018; Biyi & Gyang, 2022; McBaror, 2018). These works, like *Aníkúlápó*, use melodrama and spectacle to make visible the bargains individuals strike within institutions and the uneven costs those bargains impose. Film, in this sense, functions as a moral laboratory in which competing theories of responsibility are stress-tested against lived social ecologies. Bringing philosophical accounts of free will into dialogue with this cinematic tradition enables readings that are theoretically rigorous and culturally grounded. It also prepares the analysis that

follows to treat scenes of choice not merely as plot engines but as enactments of agency within a stratified moral economy.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis to explore how free will and gender are encoded in *Aníkúlápó*. We focus on narrative structure, character arcs, dialogue, and emblematic scenes where decisions are made, contested, or sanctioned. Sampling is purposive: sequences were selected for their thematic salience to agency (e.g., decisions to elope, confrontations about reproduction, negotiations of authority). Coding combined deductive categories—free choice, coercion, sanction, deliberation, patriarchal enforcement—with inductive memoing to capture emergent motifs such as secrecy, betrayal, and ritual power. To enhance analytical rigour, we triangulated scene-level observations with theoretical constructs from moral philosophy and gender studies, attending to how speech acts and diegetic consequences position characters as free, constrained, or culpable. Ethical considerations involve faithful representation of the filmic text and careful contextualization of gendered harms so as not to naturalize oppressive norms.

Synopsis of *Aníkúlápó*

Set in precolonial Yorùbáland, *Aníkúlápó* weaves a tale around a mystical bird (àkàlá) whose gourd holds the power to revive the dead. Saro, a skilled aso-ofi weaver and former child slave, migrates to Oyo in search of a livelihood and falls into a liaison with Awarun, an affluent, assertive woman who both supports and cautions him. A chance encounter with Arolake—the Alaafin's youngest wife, married off as a teenager—ignites a forbidden romance. The lovers defy tradition and elope, ultimately leveraging the gourd's resurrective power to establish prestige in a new town. As Saro's status rises, desires for recognition, wealth, and further marriages escalate, straining his bond with Arolake. The film culminates in reversals that strip Saro of the very power that sustained his ascent, foregrounding questions of agency, betrayal, and the gendered costs of transgression. Across its arc, the narrative entwines personal decisions with social structures that punish certain bodies and reward others.

Analysis: Free Will, Gender, and Moral Responsibility in *Aníkúlápó*

Saro's trajectory is saturated with moments of introspection and reversal that exemplify conscious authorship. He initially resists Arolake's proposal to flee, before reassessing in light of desire, ambition, and remembered warnings. This oscillation models the libertarian intuition: the felt capacity to do otherwise coupled with reflective endorsement of a course of action. Crucially, Saro's choices are not made in a vacuum. Class aspiration, masculine scripts valorising accumulation and lineage, and the allure of ritual power shape what he takes to be reasons. A compatibilist reading thus reframes Saro's freedom as reasons-responsive within a cultural field that renders some reasons salient (status, progeny) and others negligible (equity, fidelity). When Saro later seeks additional wives to secure heirs and prestige, his agency remains intact, but it is normatively enfolded into a patriarchal economy in which male fulfilment is tethered to dominance and fertility. The film's moral grammar punishes this aggrandizement, yet it also exposes how institutions invite precisely the kind of overreach that Saro enacts.

Arolake's entry into royal marriage as an adolescent dramatizes structural coercion. Her subsequent choices—including adultery and elopement—must be read against a background of confinement, surveillance, and reproductive evaluation. The film lends

Arolake rich interiority: she narrates despair, anger, and the longing for self-determination. Within gender theory, such acts register as agency under constraint: actions that seek valued ends (companionship, freedom) while incurring severe social penalties. When infertility becomes a vector of humiliation and displacement, the patriarchal calculus of value becomes stark – wives are ranked by reproductive output, and “love” is measured against lineage. Arolake’s ultimate decision to neutralize the resurrective power that underwrites Saro’s authority is legible both as retributive justice and as a reclamation of authorship. Morally, appraisal is complex: her earlier transgression of marital norms does not negate the prior harms she endured, nor does structural injustice absolve her entirely of responsibility. The ethical upshot is not exoneration or condemnation but an insistence on context when evaluating blame.

The film repeatedly stages a separation between willing and consequence. Characters may choose, but they cannot command outcomes, which are mediated by law, custom, rumor, and ritual. This dramaturgical separation resonates with compatibilist thought: freedom concerns the source of action, whereas determinism governs the web of effects into which actions fall. In *Aníkúlápó*, consequences are meted out along gendered lines. Men’s transgressions are more easily laundered through status and achievement; women’s transgressions attract swift stigma and bodily risk. The nesting of individual choices within this asymmetric sanctioning regime invites a calibrated approach to responsibility: adjudication must weigh intention, deliberation, and the foreseeability of harm against the structural pressures that narrow the space of the permissible.

The àkàlá gourd is not simply a fantasy device; it functions as a social technology that reassigns legitimacy. Access to revival confers quasi-sovereign power on Saro, converting private desire into public authority. Yet this power is derivative: Arolake’s discovery and management of the gourd make her the hidden co-author of Saro’s ascent. The gendered concealment of her contribution reproduces a familiar pattern in which women’s labour underwrites men’s renown. By stripping the gourd of its essence, Arolake punctures the illusion that Saro’s eminence is self-made. The film thereby critiques patriarchal mythologies of solitary male agency and resituates achievement within collaborative – yet unequal – relations.

Discussion and Implications

The analysis indicates that *Aníkúlápó* is most productively read through a “situated agency” framework that integrates libertarian insights about reflective endorsement with compatibilist accounts of reasons-responsiveness under constraint. In the film, agents experience themselves as capable of doing otherwise, yet their option sets are patterned by patriarchal expectations around lineage, prestige, and sexual propriety, which function as background conditions rather than overt coercion. This configuration suggests that standard attributions of moral responsibility must be recalibrated to include a diagnostic layer: before asking what an agent chose, we ask what was realistically choosable within a given moral ecology. Gender operates not simply as content in the narrative but as a structuring principle that differentially prices acts, thereby altering the thresholds of praise and blame. The theoretical upshot is a dual-aspect view of agency in which freedom is affirmed at the level of authorship while responsibility is assessed relative to structurally mediated horizons of possibility.

Our qualitative content analysis—combining purposive sampling of key scenes, deductive coding (choice, coercion, sanction), and inductive memoing—shows how filmic texts can be treated as data for moral-philosophical argument. Scenes involving

deliberation, secrecy, and ritual technology yield distinct analytical payoffs that a purely plot-driven synopsis would miss, underscoring the value of coding for speech acts and diegetic consequences as separate layers. Future analysts of African cinema could refine this approach by operationalizing “reasons-salience” (which motives are foregrounded by the narrative) and “sanction-intensity” (how severely the filmic world penalizes particular transgressions) as traceable variables. Such operationalization would not convert interpretation into numerics, but it would make comparative claims across films more transparent and falsifiable. Methodologically, the study also highlights the importance of reflexivity: analysts must acknowledge how their own theoretical priors (about freedom, gender, and culpability) shape which scenes are coded as pivotal and which motives are read as credible.

The film’s representation of early marriage, reproductive policing, and asymmetric sanctioning points to concrete levers for widening meaningful choice in comparable real-world settings. Strengthening and enforcing statutory minimum ages for marriage, expanding access to education for girls and young women, and ensuring equitable inheritance and property rights are not merely social welfare interventions; they are preconditions for moral agency in the robust sense presupposed by responsibility practices. Legal frameworks should also target intimate-partner coercion—emotional, economic, and reproductive—by clarifying definitions and lowering barriers to reporting and redress, since these often-invisible pressures narrow option sets without leaving obvious forensic traces. Policy makers could further support community-led reforms that decouple social esteem from fertility and male polygyny, for example by incentivizing alternative status markers tied to care work, craftsmanship, and civic contribution. Taken together, these measures do not guarantee virtue or wisdom, but they enlarge the space in which deliberation can be both authentic and accountable, thereby aligning juridical practice with a compatibilist ethics attentive to structure.

For educators and cultural practitioners, *Aníkúlápó* offers a versatile teaching text for courses in African film, ethics, and gender studies because it stages familiar philosophical problems in a culturally resonant idiom. Instructors can design classroom modules that pair key scenes with short philosophical readings on free will and responsibility, asking students to map character choices onto competing theories while tracking how gender modulates the perceived legitimacy of those choices. Community screenings followed by facilitated dialogues could also serve as low-cost interventions to surface local norms about marriage, status, and consent, using the film’s narrative distance to enable candid reflection without personal exposure. Filmmakers and producers, for their part, might treat the film as a proof of concept for weaving ethical inquiry into commercially viable storytelling, thereby expanding the public sphere in which complex debates about agency and accountability can occur. Such pedagogical and cultural practices cultivate interpretive habits that make communities more sensitive to the structural textures within which choices are made, ultimately fostering a citizenry capable of nuanced moral evaluation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on a single film and by the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, which privileges depth over breadth. Future work might pursue comparative studies across recent Nigerian films that treat agency and gender, analyse audience reception to gauge how viewers negotiate the film’s moral cues, or employ production research to situate narrative choices within industrial and cultural constraints. Ethnographic approaches could also explore how viewers in different communities interpret the film’s representation of choice, obligation, and blame.

Conclusion

Aníkúlápó stages a compelling contest between the experience of willing and the structures that constrain it. Saro's arc foregrounds deliberation and the felt possibility of doing otherwise, while Arolake's story reveals how gendered institutions can constrict the very space in which choices are made and evaluated. The film ultimately invites a compatibilist sensibility: freedom as reasons-responsive authorship coexists with a world of consequences largely beyond personal control. Moral responsibility, in turn, demands attention to context—especially where gendered scripts expose some to harsher sanctions for similar acts. Interpreting agency through this dual lens both clarifies the film's ethical stakes and affirms the need for reforms that widen the horizon of choice for all genders.

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