

# Absurdity and Absurd Conceptions as a New Identity in Francophone African Literature

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

The arrival of European in the African continent induced a process of social change that reshaped the social and intellectual capacity of the black man. Before this time, Africans were heterogeneous, more inclined to the values of African kinship, happy communal and agrarian life of spiritualism and totem. (Agbasiere, 2000, 22). An important aspect of this communal life is dependency and mutual exchange to promote the well-being of all members of the community. However, from the time of slavery and colonization, there is no doubt that the alien incursion and irruption in the history of the African people constituted a major event in the evolution of African practices, beliefs, habits and all that shape his philosophy of life. Hence, the concept of individualism and independence which was alien to African culture has crept into the black man's consciousness and got him derailed from his traditional ways. This and other various human conditions affecting and impacting life such as wars, famine, among others constitute the major preoccupations of modern African literature. The question of the existence of the African man in his present reality and personality has remained a major and fascinating issue that many prominent writers of the continent have to contend with. Ahmadou Kourouma, Chinua Achebe, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Calixthe Beyala and many more have each in their particular way pinpointed the existentialist disposition of the new African man.

This paper draws attention to the paradigm shift of the African who is torn, on one hand between his traditional belief of communal life, peer-group psychological well-being and his new philosophy of life of independence and individualism and on the other hand the problem of adaptation and/ or inadaptation to his new existential condition. To achieve our set objective, the concept of existentialism and its main features will be adopted. This approach will highlight the notion of the individual as the source of all values and as being obliged to choose for himself what to do, what standard to adopt or reject.

**Keywords:** European Colonization, Social Change, African Communal Life, Individualism, Existentialism, Cultural Alienation, Adaptation, Modern African Identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Existentialism as a philosophical movement can be traced back to some notable philosophers such as Blaise pascal, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus to mention but a few. However all these great philosophers are indebted to a Danish religious writer Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) whose writings influenced latter existentialists' writers (Clark, 2002:140). Nowadays, many writers in the continent identified with the existentialist literary movement that situates man in an absurd world and at the same time as it seeks to liberate man from all constraints- social, cultural, religious and political. Existentialism is more often used as a general name for a number of thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that have made the concrete individual central to

their thoughts (Tasmania).

In order to address the subject matter of this paper, there is the need to first of all understand the terms essence and existence as they constitute major conceptual poles on which existentialism stands, as Sartre (1968) noted:

C'est la doctrine philosophique, selon laquelle l'existence de l'homme Précède l'essence, lui laissant la liberté et la responsabilité de se choisir. La première démarche de l'existentialisme est de mettre tout homme en possession de ce qu'il est et de faire reposer sur lui la responsabilité totale de son existence'

## Translation

It is the philosophical doctrine, which asserts that the existence of man precedes his essence, trusting on him



the liberty and responsibility to choose for himself. 'The first course of existentialism is to put everyone in charge of what he is and throw on him the full responsibility of his existence'

Existentialism has been about a philosophical representative of man hinged on his essence and existence. Resulting from this pivotal role played by these two concepts, it is expedient to briefly explain them. According to Anderson (2014) 'essence is the most important quality or feature of something that makes what it is' hence the essence of a thing is what that thing is. In the words of Burke, cited by Munoz (1999) man is an animal rational: this is his essence. In his word, essence can be seen from two angles: the nominal essence and the real essence. The nominal essence is the idea of the property, the possession of which justifies the application of a given name while real essence refers to all natural things which have a real but unknown constitution for their insensible part, from which flow those sensible qualities which helps us to distinguish them one from another.

Existence however according to Anderson (2014) is the state or fact of being real or living. Existence is an immediate notion, a property that every individual has and affirms his existence. However, in the words of Couprie (2002) existence is not a predicate, that is existence is not a property or a characteristic of individual at all but rather human existence is divine, which means that human existence comes from God. Existentialists, especially, Sartre move away from this religious conception of divine existence, thus, existentialism is seen as a revolt against tradition. It holds that humans have no pre-given purpose or essence laid down for them by God or by nature. It is up to each one of us to decide who and what we are through our own actions and this is the point of Sartre's (1968) definition of existentialism that human existence precedes essence, which means that we first simply exist, by finding ourselves in a world not by our choice, but then it is up to each of us to define our identity or essential characteristics. Existentialism which is the result of the fall of rationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Van Pelt, 1998) may be considered fruitful as a historical movement which makes the concrete individual central to his thought. In France, existentialism is wide spread and its major proponent is Jean Paul Sartre who used it as a philosophy in his works in the 1940s. The theory of rationalism believes that human's behaviours, opinions, habits etc should be based on reason rather than emotions or religious beliefs while existentialism claims that the individual cannot be understood within a rational system and that the universe which the individual lives in is absurd. According to Munoz (1999), existentialism therefore, gives a detailed description of the self as an 'existing individual' understood as an agent in a specific social and historical world. Its chief aim is to understand how the individual can achieve the richest and most fulfilling life in the modern world.

## FEATURES OF EXISTENTIALISM

It is necessary at this juncture to examine some of the major concepts that underpin much of existentialist thoughts. The first major issue that any existentialist orientation grips with is the issue of existence. According to Sartre (1968:61) 'existence precedes essence' which

means that man first simply exists, rises and defines himself. Existentialists hold that human have no pre-given purpose or essence laid down for them by God or by nature. It is rather up to each one of us to decide who and what we are through our actions. Hence, 'the essence of a thing is what that thing is; thus, man is a rational thing, this is his essence' (Sartre, 1968).

Another important concept of existentialism according to Tolan (2006:321) is 'responsibility of each person to create him or herself as a self-governing individual'. Each individual is what he or she chooses to be in life or what he or she makes of himself or herself; that each human cannot escape responsibility of his character or deeds by claiming that such actions are the pre-determined consequences of factors beyond his power to control or resist.

The next point in the study of features of existentialism is freedom of choice which is the primary distinction of human. To the existentialist, choice is the central fact of human nature, since man does not have forced natures that limit or determine his choices but rather it is his choice that brings whatever nature he has into existence. Munoz (1999) illustrates these features from three separate contentions.

First, existentialism believes that choice is ubiquitous, meaning that all actions imply choice. Even when I do not choose explicitly, my actions still bear witness to an implicit choice. Thus for Kierkegaard, a person's actions will always form part of a coherent way of life. For Sartre, it sometimes appears as if each separate action expresses an individual choice, thus, even if I decide not to choose, it is because I have decided not to choose.

Secondly, existentialists believe that in any individual's actions, his choices are governed by some criterias. This means that one is free to choose the criteria by which he discriminates true from false beliefs.

Thirdly, is that no causal explanation of any individual's actions can be given, the individual must accept the risk and responsibility of following his commitment wherever it leads because he is free to choose his own path.

Absurdity is also a major feature of existentialist's thought. Its major proponent in France is Albert Camus (1913-1960). According to him in his philosophical essay *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), absurdity is the feeling of the consciousness of the non-sense of everyday life, of inexorable running of time and of death that seems to render vain and unnecessary all actions. Similarly, Online (2002) has rightly observed that the force of Kierkegaard's philosophy rests in the notion that human life is paradoxical and absurd and to confront this absurdity is to become truly human. Hence, absurdity is all that is contrary to reason, events that occur and are beyond man's comprehension. In the words of Camus (1942) absurdity is seen as the strike of balance between human's exigencies that on one hand manifest life as intelligible and on the other hand the irrational nature of life which seems always strange.

## EXISTENTIALISM AND LITERATURE

Existentialist thought centers its philosophical speculations around man's existence and experience, focusing and emphasizing the freedom of choice and the



subsequent consequent responsibility of the human being as self or "être en soi". Thus Sartre asserts that man is condemned to be free and uphold the necessity of "engagement" that is commitment with one's life project. Because of these principles, many existentialist thinkers chose literature as a vehicle through which they could express the search for the authentic self, devoid of any external influence.

The influence of existentialism can be seen in the works of many writers such the French Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and in the literary works of many other francophone Africans writers like Sheikh Ahmidou Kane, Sony Labou Tansi, Calixthe Beyala whose works will serve as a corpus for this study. Sartre in his book *What is literature?* believes that philosophy cannot be separated from literature and art. He skillfully demonstrated how philosophical concepts and ideas can be dramatized in literature. In his work, he portrayed how the individual must decide between the enigma confronting him, that is what is right and what is wrong, what to accept and what to reject, what to be and what not to be and even whether to be or not to be.

Considering the work of the sengalese Cheikh Hamidou Kane who wrote *L'aventure ambiguë* (1960), translated as *Ambiguous Adventure* which was a major work by an African author set to express the feeling of anxiety, doubt, fear which are typical of existentialist features. These feelings are preponderant in everyone's life especially when confronted with responsibility of choosing one's fate. Foulquie (1968) argued the place of anxiety in leading us to confront the fact that we exist as finite being who must decide the content of our lives. Munoz (1999) explains further that the feeling of anxiety ascends from the realization that one's destiny is no more fixed but rather opened to some other infinite possibilities and limitless scope. In Kane's novel, Samba Diallo, the main character's sojourn in France for his further studies brings out the feelings of anguish and anxiety in him. Trapped in the gap between culture, religion and western education, he becomes distraught and gradually losing himself to anguish and bad faith. Back home and saddled with the responsibility of spiritual leadership of the Diallobe, Samba Diallo was faced with bad faith. He shelters himself from responsibility and denies the consciousness of liberty associated with responsibility. As Munoz (1999) asserts "in bad faith man loses the autonomy of his moral will and his freedom to decide". Samba Diallo's inability to accept the faith trusted on him is indicative of the notion that human life is paradoxical and absurd. It is in this denial he is wallowing before he eventually got killed by one of his kinsman, a death that seems a façade to suicide, in order for him to escape the challenge of responsibility and the life time anxiety that comes with it. In *L'aventure ambiguë*, one sees the major character of the novel, Samba Diallo as an existentialist. His actions are purely existentialist. Even though, he is incapable of leading his people, a situation that leads to feelings of solitude and impotence, he refuses to be influenced by his people's desire and circumstances around him.

The principles of existentialism are also noticed in the books of the Congolese writer, Sony LabouTansi. Among his works are *L'ante peuple*, *L'état honteux*, *La vie et demie*, but just to mention a few. He focuses most of his

existentialist orientation on absurdity, futility of life and the indifference of the universe. Sony Labou Tansi is apparently influenced by the works and ideas of Samuel Beckett which give impetus to failure and death and of ridiculous absurdity of existence (Tasmina). In *L'état honteux*, (The shameful state), National Lopez, the Head of State crudely asserts himself; he is a military officer who is used to the idea and display of power and unquestioned obedience. He is too preoccupied with the maintenance of his position and status and sometimes confusing his personal survival with that of the state that he smells nothing but sedition when some of his subjects disapproved of his modus operandi.

Martial is one such opposition figures and he paid the ultimate price for his audacity to challenge the "emperor", he was debased and killed. However, Martial refused to die, he keeps coming back alive, even after he was chopped into pieces, cooked and given as food to members of his family. Lopez, the dictator could not get rid of Martial who keeps coming back to haunt and torment him. Behind the dueling campaign of perpetuating himself in power and the total saturation of cruelty, are grim realities of despair, anxiety and death. Thus, we witness the absurdity of power and life behind the actions of General Lopez. This absurdity also symbolizes the opposition to arbitrary governments in Africa which will always come back to haunt whatever means are used to silence it. Life is absurd in Zama-town as it is in many African cities. People are being killed not because the All mighty wants it that way but because one of them so desires.

Another major work in which the characteristics of existentialism is shown is the novels of Calixthe Beyala, a well-known franco-camerounian writer. Her novels include *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée* (1987), *Tu t'appelle Tanga* (1988), *Seul le diable le savait* (1990), *Le Christ selon l'Afrique* (2014) among others. Her literary work has focused on the theme of human kind in general and women and children in particular vis a vis loneliness, limitations, problem of communication between women and men etc. Beyala is a radical feminist and a partisan of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist inclination that denies the existence of a pre-ordained "human nature" and emphasizes the freedom and responsibility of each person to create him or herself as a self-governing individual. (Waugh, 2007:321). The influence of freedom and responsibility are important attributes displayed by some characters in the works of Calixthe Beyala, namely, in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée*, which was translated as *The Sun Hath Looked upon Me*.

Ateba, the protagonist lives with her aunt, who is a prostitute like her late mother. Devoid of mother care and real communication between her and her aunt, she was conditioned to live a life of solitude, remoteness and alienation. Such increasing sense of revulsion and alienation did not however obliterate Ateba's consciousness of absurdity of life. Already, in high school, she has begun to show a more lucid and original view of circumstances when engaging in discussions with her peers. This passage is suggestive of her philosophical behavior among her peers: Au lycée, Ateba avait toujours eu la réputation d'être une championne en raisonnement absurde (in High School, Ateba had always maintained the



reputation of being a champion in absurd reasoning) p.26. This early consciousness of existence beyond human knowledge and comprehension put her far above her peers. Like a typical existentialist, Ateba is preoccupied with the problem of communication and relationship with others in a society that denies women their humanity. Rather than live in bad faith by choosing resignation, Ateba chose self-assertion through literary creation. Her letters show not only the impossibility of communication between women and the society but also her desire for self-discovery to reconstruct herself. Her letters written, kept in bottles and thrown into the nearest river to unknown destinations showed her determination to assert herself and disrupt the univocal approach to rationality, a consequence of the annihilating treatment and place allotted to womenfolk. The point of her communication is to underscore her freedom and responsibility to redefine herself by breaking away from her confining environment and the irrational deprivation she suffered. Thus, she finds connection and interdependence with individuals and communities around the world as in this passage:

Aujourd'hui, deux ans après avoir quitté le lycée, elle ne communique plus à personne ses trouvailles. Elle se contente de se les réciter ou de les écrire sur des bouts de papier qu'elle s'empresse de transformer en bateau et de les lancer sur le ruisseau du QG, voie sûre, selon elle, pour conduire ses idées dans le monde (p.26)

### Translation

Today, more than two years since she has left High School, she does not communicate her findings to anyone. She is contented to read them to herself or to write them on pieces of paper that she hurriedly turns into paper-boats and throw in the stream of Q.G., sure means, according to her to channel her ideas to the world. (p.26)

Most of Beyala's heroines are endowed with powerful wills, stubborn tenacity and independent spirit to surmount the absurdity of a society that suppresses plurality and difference. Having noticed the contradiction and injustice inherent in male dominated society, Beyala decides to create characters who recreate their socialization that conforms to chosen essence and not given essence as Sartre (1948) would say

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