



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

NKENGASONG AND O'CASEY: AN EXISTENTIALIST ANALYSIS OF *THE CALL OF BLOOD* AND *JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK*

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Article info

Article Received:11/05/2023

Article Accepted:18/07/2023

Published online:22/07/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.3.25](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.3.25)

Abstract

The search for meaning is an inherent human attribute that often leads to anxiety and anguish as manifested in John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *The Call of Blood* and Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. This paper attempted to explore the pursuit for meaning as an existential quest that ends in futility. The existential insistence on conscious existence and the sole responsibility of the individual to find essence in an absurd world provokes inescapable pain and suffering. Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus provide insights into concepts like nothingness, alienation and absurdity which enhanced the argument on the nature of existence. All three philosophers depict the human condition as bleak and unattainable akin to the toils of proverbial Sisyphus. The vain struggles of the characters painted by Nkengasong and O'Casey represent this existential ineptness leading to critical consensus that their plays fall within the scope of theatre of the absurd. In this existential quagmire called life, there are no heroes or villains as all effort results in anguish.

Keywords: Existentialism, meaning, alienation, nothingness, absurd

Introduction

The quest for meaning is a human preoccupation that often results in futility as portrayed by John Nkemngong Nkengasong in *The Call of Blood* and Sean O'Casey in *Juno and the Paycock*. The conundrum of existence and essence motivates the actions of characters who attempt to find purpose for their lives through pursuits that ultimately lead to despair. Their failures seem to be the reward for the search for essence in an effort to define themselves. Existentialists from Heidegger (1962, 42) through Sartre (2001, 292) are of the opinion that existence precedes essence thereby showing a disdain for the systematic qualification of

an individual's worth. Philipp Blum avers that "asking about something's essence is asking about which ones, among the many properties it has, make it the thing is, determine its identity or nature. The essential properties of a thing are those that matter, especially when it comes to the thing's existence, identity, nature or being" (9). The rejection of essentialism is inferred since one's conscious existence validates the purpose of life – the process of self-making or self-defining is continuous. Yet, the pursuit of meaning is ingrained in the individual since doing nothing is not an option. Jean Paul Sartre in "Existentialism is a Humanism" tackles the question of existence by stating that:

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards. 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 make himself. (3)

The above excerpt points to the fact that existence precedes essence and human beings shape their lives and find meaning as they come into their consciousness. There is no predestination only personal effort. The fact that one starts life from the position of nothingness before seeking self definition is daunting but it is a task which the individual must take in order to find meaning.

Albert Camus insists that there is the need to continue the search for meaning which is the affirmation of the absurd as characteristic of characters in *The Call of Blood* and *Juno and the Paycock*. Both plays explore absurd human situations that derive from difficult choices that have destroyed their lives. These characters still continue to toil and hope for something better despite evidence that nothing will change about their existential condition. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* avers that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (3). Having the courage to continue living even when life is devoid of meaning is applauded by existentialists like Sartre since the individual must assume responsibility for all their actions.

Existential concepts like nothingness, alienation and the absurd are relevant for the exploration of the search for meaning from the viewpoints of Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus. Nothingness to Kierkegaard emerges from human anxiety and he proposes Christian absolutism that is the complete surrender of the self to God though Nietzsche denies this premise on the grounds that God is dead. Kierkegaard insists that human beings cannot find meaning in material accomplishments because human needs are insatiable. Nkengasong's character Efenze falls within the category of

insatiable human beings, his attempt to seek more wealth and rise as ranking member of the local political party leads to derangement. Sujit and Anjum credit Descartes, Hegel and Kierkegaard as inspiration for the existential concept of alienation especially Sartre's focus on the conscious being and nothingness. This shows the intersectional manner of existential concepts since they inform on one another. The absurdity of human existence as envisaged by Camus gives perspective to the behavior of characters in *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Call of Blood*. The existential affirmation of "I am my own existence" invokes the idea of the absurd to Kierkegaard since the reason for his existence in the here and now is not divulge. Against the backdrop of this conceptual framework, this endeavor attempts to argue that the search for meaning is unattainable mainly because of the insatiable nature of human needs and the precarious aspect of the human condition. Since humanity has no defined purpose, self definition can be likened to an excursion in the dark wherein bad things happen to both heroes and villains alike.

Critics like Mhloney, Mbuh, Teke, Labang, Ngie and Nganshi have commented on Nkengasong's writings using diverse lenses. Nganshi attempts a comparative study of religious politics in James Joyce's Ireland and Nkengasong's Cameroon to show that both societies are embroiled with conflicts mainly because of the church's meddling in public affairs. Though this current endeavor does not focus on the concept of religious politics, the attempt to compare the existential quest for meaning in Nkengasong and O'Casey supports Nagashi's precedence that Cameroon and Ireland share numerous similarities since both societies have problems of home rule; the Irish problem and the Anglophone problem.

On her part, Ngie takes a historical approach to reading the plays of Nkengasong since "the study of literature through our history, enhances our understanding of our modern world" (61). Through an interrogation of historical events that share similarity to the crisis faced by characters, Ngie concludes that Nkengasong is an activist who uses theater as a medium to expose the oppressive and tyrannical leadership that Cameroon has suffered

since independence. This conclusion aligns with readings of political works like *Black Caps and Red Feathers* and *Across the Mongolo* which have led critics like to dub the author a radical activist.

Teke describes Nkengasong as a prolific Cameroonian writer and intellectual, who “expresses a variety of views and convictions on history, nation, culture and how they intersect with creative writing for transformative purposes” (1). Teke scrutinizes the role of the writer from the postcolonial perspectives and concludes that Nkengasong takes his role as socio-cultural transformer seriously as his themes question the status quo in order to promote progress. Similarly, Labang has examined several of Nkengasong’s writings and has established how his commitment to the questioning of the status-quo is a defining feature. Particularly relevant is Labang’s examination of dystopia in Nkengasong’s first play, *Black Caps and Red Feather*, because it deals with the existential choices of the main character, Creature, and the dystopian universe in which he finds himself because of the cruelty of political leadership.

Mhlongo and Mbuh in reviews of *The Call of Blood* both comment on the centrality of the theme of madness within the theatrical works of Nkengasong. Mbuh posits that madness is the perfect expression of the absurd and the succinct exploration of the theme elevates Nkengasong to the rank of existentialist playwrights like Sartre and Camus. Mhlongo interjects that *The Call of Blood* dramatizes evil and vaulting ambition in the quest for power in postcolonial societies. Through madness, the playwright subjects “his characters to the judgment of the garbage heap” which portrays him as “an abstruse visionary but also as a probing garbage heap philosopher” (<http://www.africanbookcollectives.com>).

Juno and the Paycock has also attracted critical attention from critics who examine different aspects of the play. Jaleel Abd Jaleel and Claudia Parra take feminist perspectives in reading *Juno and the Paycock* and insist that women suffer immensely within the world of the play because of their oppressed status. Jaleel dwells on the anguish of

women and link the conundrum to the Irish conflict that contributes to this plight. Judging the relevance of O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* against other Irish authors like Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw the critic avows that “O’Casey was committed to the roots of Irish society and attempts to depict the issues that the natives face” (167). The Irish conflict and its ramifications, the impoverished nature of ordinary Dubliners and the disenfranchisement of women are some of the issues articulated in the play. Parra questions patriarchal constructions that are oppressive to women’s emancipation even though the women are the breadwinners of the society.

Unlike Jaleel’s feminist reading, Malkawi takes a postmodern approach examining why men reject conventional traditional roles in *Juno and the Paycock*. The critic adopts the postmodern perception of gender as a repetition of patterns of behavior that contributes to the neurotic attitudes of male characters. By ascribing the adjective of darling to male characters who dodge the responsibility traditionally associated to them as breadwinners, the critic seeks to expose the myth of masculine superiority. In opposition to the pathetic male characters women are depicted as the silent pillars of the community.

Salahuddin, Zaidi and Salah examine the play from the Darwinian perspective of survival of the fittest. They discuss the physical, mental and emotional fitness of the characters and conclude that “the role of fitness is very important in people’s lives to overcome anxieties and pressures of life” (34). The survivalist characteristics of the individuals as shown in their analysis is complementary to the existentialist dimension explored in this paper because the instinct to survive is both an expression of freedom and part of the dynamic process of self-making. On their part, S. Sheeba’s analysis examines Sean O’Casey’s experience of rebellion and war and how they are conveyed in the play. From a realistic point of view, Sheeba concludes that “O’Casey decided to reveal the real conditions of the Irish people during the Easter Week Uprising” (79). Bernice Schrank examines the play from the perspective of dialectics commenting on “the fundamental conditions of life and death” in the

context of poverty and war. Schrank analyzes the various pairs of characters in the play and notes that the essential elements in the universe of the play are structured dialectically.

Yearning for Sleep or Dead and the Nothingness of life

Kierkegaard in *Repetition* focuses on the nothingness of human existence when he posits that "I stick my finger into existence, it smells of nothing. Where am I? What is this thing called the world? Who is it that has lured me into the thing and now leaves me here? Whom am I? How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted" (200). All these existential questions lead Kierkegaard to the premise that his existence was meaningless leading to anxiety and despair. Both Nkengasong and O'Casey depict characters whose quest for meaning has led them to the conclusion of the nothingness of their existence.

In *The Call of Blood*, the yearning for sleep is seen from the beginning. The bedroom as described in the stage directions is elaborate and beautiful, a place wherein one can relax and sleep in peace yet Efenze is unable to sleep because ghosts haunt his dreams. He is scared of everything even the hoot of an owl which is considered a bird of ill omen. He groans and tosses about indicating his restlessness and mutters in his slumber:

Efenze: There's evil in the cry of that bird. It roots something out of my mind. What did she tell me again...? That I've broken the oath and left her in the cold? She's been waiting for too long? That her husband will... will... o God, let me sleep for a while. (3-4)

From the above quotation, it is evident that Efenze is preoccupied with some dreadful thought. The speech of the protagonist and the hooting of the owl gives a premonition that something sinister is about to happen. He goes ahead to talk about a certain lady, he remembers what she told him which is the fact that he has broken an oath they took together and has left her out in the cold. The fact that Efenze seems scared of the said lady goes to show that he owes her something. The use of ellipses further

indicates that something bad transpired between the two of them.

Sleep is a pleasure given to every human being freely. Unfortunately, the protagonist's sleep is haunted by nightmares showcasing the absurdity of life. He is a wealthy individual and if the money he has worked and schemed for can buy him sleep he will be a happy man. This is not the case as evident in the following quote:

Efenze: Hei! Has he come already? (*pause*)
Let him come plain if it's the hour... let him come like seven vipers with seven fangs... like seven witches and haunt and murder me... and Manka with them... I loved Manka for His Excellency the Fool's money and not for Her Majesty the Harlot's love... damn it. Let Sancheu's blood colour the River Mungo to the bottom at the sea..., mess up the slaughter house so that dogs can lap and smack and sing their masters hunting songs. Let Sancheu... Sancheu... (4)

The dread in the protagonist's utterances foreshadows something sinister. It is evident that he cannot avoid his fate so he challenges the avenger to come directly if it's the appointed time. He knows what is coming to him is fearful and challenges it to come with seven vipers or seven witches to haunt him out and murder him. The use of similes shows that the protagonist does not know what his end will be like but is certain it is going to be horrifying. Seven seems to hold some significance to him as he requests for 'seven vipers with seven fangs', 'seven witches' brings in a supernatural quality. There is some sort of confession when Efenze says that he only loved Manka for her husband's money. There is the use of satire when he refers to the individual as 'His Excellency the Fool' and the wife 'Her Majesty the Harlot'. The fact that the husband is cuckold makes him a fool while the wife succumbing to seduction is perceived as a harlot. Efenze is clearly a schemer who takes advantage of people to get ahead. Blood is symbolic as it is constantly referencing implying that he is complicit in Sancheu's murder. Freud avers that it is dreams that one's innermost desires are exposed. Efenze therefore speaks his mind his dream when he

confesses that he coveted another man's wealth so much so that he seduced his wife to get it.

Equally, Efenze represents the individual who encounters anguish and despair since he must take responsibility for killing his friend. The motivation is the friend's wealth because he feels that it will give his life meaning. Incidentally, the cruel action of murdering his friend has cursed him like the proverbial Cain in the bible; his existence has degenerated to nothingness. His inability to sleep is symptomatic of his guilt and represents existential anguish. To Sartre, this anguish arises from the fact that the character has made a choice and he cannot "escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (4).

In *Juno and the Paycock*, Johnny like Efenze cannot sleep mainly because of the post traumatic stress syndrome and physical infirmities he suffers as a soldier. In Act 1, the stage direction describes him as thin and pale and has the look of someone who has experienced hardship. Also, "the left sleeve of his coat is empty, and he works with a slight halt" (71). The problems increase because of the uncomfortable accommodations Johnny shares with his parents and sister in a noisy tenancy building in Dublin. He can only hope for some reprieve in the morning when his family is out of the house in the morning which is not the case in Act 1 when he laments:

Johnny: I was lyin' down; I thought you were gone. Oul' Simon Mackay is thrampin' about like a horse over me head, an' I can't sleep with him – they're like thunder-claps in me brain! The curse o' – God forgive me for goin' to curse.

Mrs Boyle: There, now; go back an' lie down again, an' I'll bring you in a nice cup o' tay.

Johnny: Tay, tay, tay! You're always thinkin' o' tay. If a man was dyin', you'd thry to make him swally a cup o' tay! (He goes back.). (71)

The above excerpt shows Johnny's yearning for respite which is impossible because there is no quiet in the cramped living spaces to accomplish the feat. The upstairs neighbor is tramping like a horse, a metaphor for the loud stomping that keeps the

character awake. His frustration is evident when he curses but immediately prays to God for forgiveness. Mrs. Boyle, Johnny's mother is very sympathetic of Johnny's condition and tries to appease him with the promise of a cup of tea which only aggravates him as he complains that a cup of tea is her solution to everything.

Apart from the inability to sleep, Johnny has nightmares about dead people which is symptomatic of his PDST but also foreshadows his potential guilt for betraying his comrade. O'Casey like most Irish activists writers inserts the Irish quest for home rule in his urban drama. Johnny got hurt while participating in the Easter Rebellion on Easter Monday 1916 orchestrated by the Irish Republican Brotherhood against the British. His life is completely altered both because of the physical deformity which makes him incapable of working long with the post traumatic stress syndrome. Sacrificing his life for Ireland is a heroic deed and gives meaning to his life, but it ends in nothingness because of the accusations of treason. The killing of Robbie Tancred casts a shadow on Johnny's life and one ponders on the motivation for betraying a comrade to the British who maimed him. His reaction to the conversation about ghosts indicates the plausibility of treason:

Johnny: Sit here, sit here, mother... between me an' the statue... merciful Jesus, have pity on me!

Mrs. Boyle: I'll sit beside you as long as you like, only tell me what was it came across you at all?

Johnny: (after taking some drink) I seen him ... I seen Robbie Tancred kneelin' down before the statue... an' the red light shinin' on him ... an' when I went in ... he turned an' looked at me ... an' I seen the wouns bleedin' in his breast ... Oh, why did he look at me like that? ... it wasn't my fault that he was done in ... mother o' God, keep him away from me! (107)

Johnny is clearly affected the passing of Robbie Tancred and is triggered when the conversation revolves around ghosts. His hysteria suggests that

there is something more to this especially the description of the bloody comrade. It is obvious that as a victim of the conflict getting triggered by news of the passing of another soldier would lead to such a reaction. The use of ellipsis is psychological tell while the rhetorical questions hints at a guilty conscience. Sartre insists that since "existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves" (3). By this reasoning, Johnny has defined himself as a hero of the Irish resistance through his personal sacrifice and also as a traitor to the cause through his betrayal of Tancred. Both hero and traitor are images that define since both actions are performed in his journey of self actualization. When Johnny is being tortured for betraying Tancred, he questions "haven't I done enough for Ireland?" and he is told "Boyle, no man can do enough for Ireland" (121). The response invalidates Johnny's sacrifice illustrating Sartre's idea that individuals secrete their own nothingness.

The irony of the human condition is evident in the lives of characters like Efenze and Johnny who seek rest yet are unable to attain it for differing reasons. To Kierkegaard, both characters suffer from the anxiety of the nothingness of life, thus, the inability to sleep. Efenze has a guilty conscience and believes that his illness is the result of his horrendous actions. Johnny feels that Robbie Tancred is haunting him because of his guilt. Both have blood on their consciences which alludes to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where the ghost of Banquo haunts Macbeth while Lady Macbeth in her derangement cannot seem to wash off the blood from her hands. She laments that all the perfumes of Arabia could not sweeten her little hand which is ironic since she had proclaimed that a little water would wash off the bloody evidence upon killing Duncan.

The situations in which characters like Efenze and Johnny find themselves places *The Call of Blood* and *Juno and the Paycock* in the category of theater of the absurd. Their lives are devoid of meaning even though their actions were intended to ensure the contrary. The illogical nature of their existence supports this absurdity, both are unable to sleep because they are plagued by nightmares.

Efenze has a comfortable bedroom and all the money in the world yet it cannot buy sleep while Johnny is a dejected hero who turns traitor for no obvious incentive. These characters are parallel to the character of Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, who experiences a drastic shift in fate, from being the master who abuses his slave Lucky to becoming the slave. In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard ponders on this illogicality of life by questioning "if one has to take life as it is, would it not be best to find out how things go? ... Guilt, what does it mean? Is it hexing?" (200). The nature of guilt is the existential question preoccupies the characters. Efenze actually believes that he is hexed and this affects him only because he knows he is guilty just like Johnny believes he is haunted by the ghost of Robbie Tancred.

Alienation as Women's Plight

Alienation is an existential condition that is prevalent in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and Nkengasong's *The Call of Blood* especially regarding the condition of female characters. The historical transition from nihilism to existentialism caused a collapse in the moral framework and resulted in modernist human experiences such as boredom, anxiety, and alienation – all of which became indicative of the meaninglessness of human existence. In the alienating vortex, self identity becomes a major quest for human beings though this always ends up in futility as they become alienated from their purpose. When Kierkegaard (1989, 43) states that human beings are "a relation that relates to itself" he points to the fact that as self-conscious beings we are capable of surpassing our identity by questioning it, interpreting it differently, and deciding how to handle it in the future. The yearning for love and happiness are predominant as motivation for the actions of the female characters in the plays understudy. Sartre's existential concept of alienation derives mainly from Hegel's social philosophy that explores the ways in which human consciousness is alienated from itself. Jaleel associates the alienation of women within the Irish society to the Irish conflict that leads to loss of life and division. Women are the mothers and spouses of the soldiers on both side of the conflict

and their demise brings pain no matter whether they were fighting for or against the Irish nation.

Women like Juno (Mrs. Boyle) and Meshi yearn for marital bliss which is unattainable despite their persistence. Mrs. Boyle works hard to support her husband and son Johnny who is maimed in the Irish struggle. The only source of support she has is from her daughter Mary, who is equally as hard working as the mother; though she is currently on strike when the play opens. Juno believes that if her husband can quit his friendship with Joxer and get a job, their financial situation will improve along with their quality of life as a family. She is rather regarded as an oppressor as her husband and his drinking buddy continues to undermine her wishes. The manner in which they speak of her is indicative of the futility of her dream:

Boyle: (to Joxer, who is still outside) Come on, come on in, Joxer; she's gone out long ago, man. If there's nothing else to be got, we'll furrage out a cup o' tay, anyway. It's the only bit I get in comfort when she's away. 'Tisn't Juno should be her pet name at all, but Deirdre of Sorras for she is always grousin'.

Joxer: It's a terrible thing to be tied to a woman that's always grousin'. I don't know how you stick with it- it ud put years on me. It's a good job she has to be so often away, for (with a shrug) when the cat's away, the mice can play! (73-74)

Boyle comes home to entertain his friend expecting his wife to be out working. The fact that he considers his wife an impediment to his freedom is ironic since all she wants is the financial stability of the family that requires both of them working. He feels oppressed by her nagging and thinks that her named should be Deirdre of Sorras for her bad attitude. Deirdre of Sorrows is considered the most prominent figure in Irish mythology known for her extreme beauty that brought a lot of tragedy. The playwright JM Synge's *Deirdre of Sorrows* helped in popularizing this myth leading to several critics referring to Deirdre as the Irish Helen of Troy. In a way, Juno's life is tragic as she toils for her family relentlessly yet only gets ingratitude from her husband. Joxer the no good friend sympathizes with

Boyle for putting up with a nagging woman, to him, the only silver lining is the fact that Juno is always at work. They therefore have the liberty to entertain themselves with the resources she works hard to procure for the family. Malkawi ironically dubs men like Boyle and Joxer as darlings who reject traditional expectations of society to be breadwinners and rather sponges on women.

Paradoxically, Juno's life is truly tragic though her husband only jests that her nickname should be Deirdre of Sorrows instead of Juno. In classical mythology, Juno is the most elevated goddess. *The Dictionary of Etymology* indicates that Juno is the Roman reference while Greek mythology calls her Hera, the wife of Zeus the supreme god. She is also the goddess of love and marriage suggesting a felicity that her namesake in O'Casey's play does not possess. Her husband is very pleased to announce that he is the one that gave her the nickname. He explains "Yis, doesn't it? You see, Juno was born an' Christened in June; I met her in June; we were married in June, an' Johnny was born in June, so wan day I says to her, 'You should ha' been called Juno,' an' the name stuck to her ever since" (93-94). June is supposed to be a lucky month for Mrs. Boyle but the hardships in her life shows the irony of fate.

Juno and Meshi suffer alienation as spouses of men who have not respected their part of the social contract. Juno is married to a lazy husband who is only interested in drinking and refuses to work even when job opportunities are presented to him. He insists that his legs hurt badly only when he is called to provide for his family. His disregard for his wife's feelings is evident in his continued friendship with Joxer and refusal to get a job. Sheba in Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* as a realistic play posits that "only Juno is earning, her daughter Mary is on strike, Johnny has lost his arm and so cannot work and her husband "Captain Boyle" is an idler who cannot or will not find a job" (77). This sums Juno's alienation as her existence becomes linked to the attempt to make a living for her entire family. The family unit is supposed to be a source of support and the marital contract indicates oneness of the two yet Boyle's behavior has caused a rupture. Juno is therefore alienated from herself as she

cannot rely on any member of her family to support her quest for financial stability. This problematic bifurcation of the family unit contributes to the tragedy that unfolds.

There is the feeling of disillusionment which comes from failed aspirations. Meshi the main characters wife feels disillusioned and unhappy because her husband is turning into a ranting lunatic. He cannot sleep at night since he is constantly plagued by nightmares in which he utters sinister things. She expresses her unhappiness thus:

Meshi: My husband, I have known you to be a man of substance, a man of dignity, a prosperous politician. You used to tell me how you could auction all your tribe to own me. Just when I'm beginning to feel the pride of the wife of a prominent husband you have turned sour. Tell me darling, where have you destroyed your life? ... There is something more than a dream. These last six months I have hardly seen the gentleman that I used to know... o my god! Efe, you showed me paradise and you want to take it away again so soon. (6-7)

From the above quotation, one deduces the wife's disappointment. She had thought the husband was a man of substance, one who had integrity. She remembers the seriousness with which he came to woo her. This has all gone sour because she has not slept for the past six months and she is coming into the opinion that the husband was not the gentleman she thought him to be. All he had succeeded in doing is showing her paradise and taking it away. This feeling of disappointment exhibited by the wife shows the absurdity of life. She has married a man whom she considered wealthy and a gentleman, unfortunately things turn out badly since she realizes that the husband is keeping a secret one that is destroying their marriage. It is ironical that she thought the husband to be a gentleman, since gentlemen keep their hands clean, do not seduce other people's wives or kill them for their wealth. Her position is precarious and shows that she was charmed by the idea of the man's wealth and did not take time to know him.

Another female character who experiences alienation in *The Call of Blood* is Manka. She represents feminine frivolity. She is the individual who falls under the wiles of another man and becomes a partner in the murder of her husband. Efenze promises to marry her but at the end he also double-crosses her, steal her wealth and marry another woman. She enumerates the sacrifices she has undergone for him thus:

Manka: Efe loved me for my husband's money. The worst of it, he splashed mud on me one day and never said a word. My belly turned... my head turned... my mind turned. I asked myself: was this Efe who should be mine body and soul doing this to me; was this Efe whom I saved from going to prison after my husband's death, who was being charged for corruption and embezzlement of billions of francs, of state's funds? Not only that, his political rivals wanted his head at all cost. I saved him still. I had to work out a way to stop his name from being dragged in the mud. (28)

The realization that she was made a fool is shattering and this further shows the meaninglessness of life. Manka remembers an incidence in which Efenze splashed mud on her without apology. Manka's actions represent the breach of the marital contract as he betrays her husband with his friend under the notion that he loves her. She fails to understand the if Efenze can murder her husband who was his friend, he has no moral scruples to keep his word and marry her. Her antagonism is the cause of her alienation since her terrible decisions result her husband's dead while her partner in crime abandons her.

Manka's alienation aligns with Fromm's conceptualization of the idea as he posits that an individual's estrangement with themselves because of their actions. Her husband was a nice man who loved and catered for all her needs. Yet she allowed Efenze to seduce and humiliate her. She laments in the following:

Manka: Yes, my husband. A husband that was so kind-hearted, so humble and hardworking. ... manka! Manka! What did Manka want in this world of plenty? Efe came into my life

and took away all I had- my heart, my soul, my body, my husband, my wealth- Gods of my ancestors! What did Manka want in Sancheu's world of plenty? (32)

Regret is a byproduct of wasted opportunities and bad judgment. Manka recalls her loving kindhearted husband who did everything to make her happy. This recollection brings a lot of anguish as seen in the way she reprimands herself. She questioned what more she needed in the world that caused her to be an accessory to her husband's murder. She wonders what she lacked that made her to be part of such a horrendous act. There is the use of rhetorical questions and exclamation signs which further shows the agony of the character and the regret which comes at the end. These questions also affirm the absurdity of life. This type of absurdity gears towards nihilism as one thinks of Ecclesiastics which states that vanity of vanity, all is vanity. Manka had a husband who was loving and caring, yet she killed him for another, yet at the end she is left wretched and alone. If there was any meaning in life then she should have derived it with her husband. It is difficult for one to feel remorse for Manka considering the coldhearted manner in which she and Efenze disposes of her husband. She only becomes bitter when Efenze fails to live up to his own part of the bargain. This is similar to the regret Marlow's Dr Faustus shows at the end after making a pack with the devil for twenty-five years.

The search for love equally contributes to the alienation of characters as made manifest in the cases of Mary and Manka. Manka has a loving husband whom she fails to appreciate and schemes with Efenze his best friend to eliminate. She is manipulated into thinking that the demise of her husband will give her freedom to enjoy his wealth with his best friend as her new significant other. Incidentally, Efenze had no intention of leaving his wife for Manka, he only used her to get her husband's mother. The fact that both of them go mad and meet at the garbage bin is an ironic form of poetic justice. On her part, Mary rejects Jerry Devine, a hard working young man with a bright future for Charles Bentham without contemplating his motives. Charles Bentham is aware of the money Mr. Boyle will inherit upon the passing of his relative

Mr. Ellison of Santry and this motivates him to court Mary. His pretentious nature is evident in the stage directions "Mary enters with Charlie Bentham; he is a young man of twenty-five, tall, good-looking, with a very high opinion of himself generally. He is dressed in a brown coat, brown knee-breeches, grey stockings, a brown sweater, with a deep blue tie; he carries gloves and a walking-stick" (91). Juxtaposed against the backdrop of shabby poverty that characterizes the situation of the Boyle's one wonders what such a gentleman wants with them. Coincidentally, he is not only courting Mary but has brought good news that the family has come into money with the passing of their relative.

Bentham is a school teacher who wishes to transition into the law profession and it is glaring that he hopes Mr. Boyle will help fund his dream if he is to marry Mary. Unlike Bentham, Jerry Devine is hard working, with a brilliant future as the potential secretary of the union, a job that is worth three hundred and fifty pounds per annum. He believes that he can give Mary a good life if she will agree to marry him. Her rejection of Jerry is brutal and confusing to him:

Jerry: (appealingly) Mary, what has come over you with me for the last few weeks? You hardly speak to me, an' then only a word with a face o' bitherness on it. Have you forgotten, Mary, all the happy evenings that were as sweet as the scented hawthorn that sheltered the sides o' the road as we sauntered through the country?

Mary: That's all over now. When you get your new job, Jerry, you won't be long findin' a girl far better than I am for your sweetheart. (81)

Jerry's bewilderment at the sudden change in his beloved's attitude points to the fact that Charlie Bentham is the source of distraction. It is within a matter of weeks that Mary turns her back on Jerry forgetting the romantic moments they had spent strolling the countryside together and probably making plans for their future. Mary's sarcastic remark about Jerry finding a better girl to marry ironically backfires on her when Bentham abandons her and she turns to Jerry for rescue. In terms of

character, the two men are vastly different, Charlie is an opportunist who wishes to associate with people with means to facilitate his life, the Boyle's potential inheritance makes Mary appealing to him. On the contrary, Jerry is a hard working young man with good intentions. His attempts to get Mr. Boyle a job testifies to his good nature though Mary is too myopic to see his efforts.

At the beginning of the play, the stage directions describe Mary's predicament thusly; "two forces are working in her mind- one, through the circumstances of her life, pulling her back; the other through the influence of books she has read, pushing her forward. The opposing forces are apparent in her speech and her manners" (67-68). Mary's working class background pulls her down because despite her beauty, she might not attract suitors from the upper class, on the other hand, her interest in literature has made her to see that she can aspire for better. It is the ideal that literature presents that motivates her to reject Jerry, the realistic suitor for Charlie the ideal Prince Charming.

At the end, Mary is jilted by Charlie who impregnates her and flees to London when he realizes that the ambiguity which he caused in drafting Mr. Ellison's will excludes Mr. Boyle from the inheritance. Her pregnancy further complicates the family's dire situation as her father disowns her causing more estrangement on the Boyle's marriage since Juno prefers to leave her marital home to take care of her daughter. Mary's last hope is ditched when Jerry realizes that she is pregnant and refuses to claim responsibility for another man's progeny. Her alienation from Charlie is an extension to her existential condition as a member of the proletarian class who is alienated from the source of capital. Juno understands Mary's alienation and the struggles she will face as a single mother which is why she stands by her daughter when everyone else deserts her.

The Absurdity of Human Effort

According to Sartre, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, existentialism's first principle is "first, that man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself" (292-3). Thus, the futuristic projection into possibilities of a better life;

the continuous effort at imagining and re-imagining the self and the constant engagement with the unsettled process of self-making are fundamental in the question of existence albeit the fact that it often ends in futility. In *The Call of Blood* and *Juno and the Paycock*, the character's effort ends in absurdity because they do not attain the outcomes envisaged. Camus's *the Myth of Sisyphus* as a metaphor of the absurdities of life is prevalent. Sisyphus is depicted in Book VI of Homer's *The Iliad* as a hero who defeated death, as punishment he is made to push a stone uphill, an unattainable task. Camus acknowledges the futility of the endeavor and likens it to human existence since any attempt to a meaningful life is often met with failure and disappointment. The absurdity of human effort is seen in the lives of characters like Juno, Mary, Efenze and Manka.

Being bereft of purpose and still struggling on is Camus's definition of the absurd. Motherhood is the articulation of purpose in the lives of many women but Juno's efforts are marred with tragedy. Johnny depends on her for support because he cannot cope on his own due to his disability. Sacrificing her son for Ireland does not feel like a heroic deed because his care relies solely on her. As already posited by critics like Jaleel and Parra, the suffering of Irish women is intensified because of the loved ones they are forced to bury. Mrs. Tancred and Juno are yoked in their loss of children to the conflict. Both women live in the same tenancy building and unlike Juno who is strong and energetic, Mrs. Tancred depended on her son for shelter and the stage directions describe her as very old. This predicament is expressed in the following:

First Neighbour: It's a sad journey we're goin' on, but God's good, an' the Republicans won't be always down.

Mrs. Tancred: Ah, what good is that to me now? Whether they're up or down- it won't bring me darlin' boy from the grave.

Mrs Boyle: Come in an' have a hot cp o' tay, Mrs Tancred, before you go.

Mrs. Tancred: I can take nothin' now, Mrs. Boyle – I won't be long after him.

First Neighbour: Still an' all, he died a noble death, an' we'll bury him like a king.

Mrs. Tancred: An' I'll gon on livin' like a pauper. Ah, what's the pains I suffered bringin' him into the world to carry him to his cradle, to the pains I'm sufferin' now, carryin' him out o' the world to bring him to his grave! (114-115)

The above interaction shows the absurdity of human effort. Old Mrs. Tancred has lost her only son to the struggle for home rule and the neighbor lauds this as an act of martyrdom which should cheer the grieving mother. It is ironic that Tancred is valued as a king for dying for the cause while his mother is left with no means and without shelter. With knowledge of this destitution she refuses the refreshment offered by Juno by declaring that her own death was eminent. There is the use of pathos when Mrs. Tancred laments that "me home is gone now; he was me only child" (115).

Motherhood as a travail of pain is evident when she describes the pains of labor and the pain of burying her own child. Juno echoes this sentiment at the end when Johnny is killed for betraying Tancred. In the attempt to deal with her son's dead she questions herself "maybe I didn't feel sorry enough for Mrs. Tancred when her poor son was found as Johnny's been found now- because he was a Die-hard! Ah, why didn't I remember that then he wasn't a Diehard or a Starter, but only a poor dead son!" (146). The heart rendering agony of these two mothers upon losing their sons brings to mind Kierkegaard's summation of the meaninglessness of human life "hear the cry of the mother at the hour of giving birth, see the struggle of the dying at the last moment of life, and say then whether that which begins and that which ends like this can be designed for pleasure" (qtd. in Lavine, "Existentialism: from Socrates to Sartre 1979"). Both Juno and Mrs. Tancred reference the pain of childbearing and the agony of burying children as a dreadful rite of passage for mothers.

The fact that Manka and Efenze both end up at the garbage heap indicate the absurdity of human effort. Their madness is poetic justice for the coldblooded murder of Manka's husband for wealth

and political gain. Unfortunately, Efenze takes everything for himself and renegades on his promise to marry Manka who in frustration seeks help from a voodoo priest to kill her husband's murderer. Ironically in her anger, she forgets that she is a co-conspirator, her madness alongside other poor decisions shows the absurdity of human effort. In madness Manka and Efenze detest each other yet one cannot do without the other and their garbage heap interaction brings to mind Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. Valdimir and Estragon depend on each other for company but also fights at times, they share their food as seen in the turnip incidence. Manka finds a piece of bread and feeds it to Efenze who eats it with relish and take marriage vows on the rubbish heap. The fact that madness unites them is the height of absurdity while their constant quibbling yet codependence support Sartre's premise in *No Exit* that hell is other people. Mbuh Tenu Mbuh, in the introduction, of the Langaa version of *Black Caps and Red Feathers* and *Ancestral Earth*, comments on the idea of madness that cuts across Nkengasong's plays. He says that:

Although madness is not directly the consequence of political manoeuvres, Efenze and Manka's eventual migration to the garbage heap fulfils the retributive strategy that the play maps out from sentiments that bracket Lady Macbeth's calculating brutality in *Macbeth* with Sartre's refraction of hell-in-life or otherwise in *No Exit*. (iii)

Mbuh sees the madness that affects Manka and Efenze as retributive justice. He also relates it to similar cases of madness in previous works of literature like the case of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and oppressive hellish situation in Sartre's *No Exit*. This is the same madness that plagues *Creature in Black Caps and Red Feathers*, yet his is not a form of retribution but results from the torture he undergoes in the hands of tyrannical leadership.

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper has, from the theoretical and philosophical perspective of existentialist thinkers, demonstrated the various levels at which the characters in the play exhibit the

futility of existence. Comparing the crisis of human existence in *The Call of Blood* and *Juno and the Paycock* showcased that the quest for meaning is universal though individuals approach it from different directions. After an investigation of the actions of characters from the standpoint of ambition, it is realized that nothingness is the outcome of human effort. The search for heroism, wealth, love and happiness ends in tragedy enhancing the notion of life as the myth of Sisyphus. No matter how individual characters try, their efforts end in absurdity. The plight of both heroes and villains is alike- pain and suffering. Intentions do not count as acts of sacrifice are punished just in a manner like acts of selfishness and greed.

By examining the character's yearning for sleep/dead, the alienation of the female characters as well as the absurdity of human endeavour, this paper has established that the characters in *The Call of Blood* and *Juno and the Paycock* epitomize the existentialist condition of humanity as theorized by philosophers like Sartre and Kierkegaard. The characters' actions are examined in terms of their choices because there is no pre-given essence that determines their existence. The existence of each of the characters is a result of the individual expressions of their freedom through choices and actions. Therefore, some of the (in)moral decisions and the fate that befall each of the characters at the end of the plays is part of that futile human struggle to continually imagine, re-imagine and remake the self.

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