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EXISTENTIALIST THEMES IN  
WEST AFRICAN NOVELS

by

Nwachukwu-Agbada

One attribute of man which sets the distance between him and animals is his possession of consciousness. To date evolutionists have not done much to explain the origin of this characteristic in man other than that this rare distinction of man automatically developed with the development of the human brain. Writing in The Plain Truth magazine, John Schroeder, though from a religionist's standpoint, says:

*Evolutionists have proposed to explain the origin of the physical being called man. But evolution offers no viable explanation for the existence of consciousness. . . .*<sup>1</sup>

The objective of this paper is not to join issues in Schroeder's direction, but instead to view the mind and consciousness as part of the tool with which man searches for an answer to the raison d'etre of his existence or even those of others. It might be that he is not comfortable in his environment because he lives in a 'heated' setting; or that because he is so sensitive to realize the contradictions of life facing, not only himself but also his fellow human beings. The process that leads to this kind of reaction has always existed in the West. Richard Taylor admits that in such a place:

*The individual has found himself no longer in control of his fate, he has become a puppet whose actions and reactions are determined by external forces. As to the next world, the Western has largely given up his belief in a god-centred universe; scientific enquiry and experience of man's bestial nature have despoiled him of his faith and easy relationship with the supernatural.*<sup>2</sup>

Because man exists in a world in which he is perpetually in chains -- both nature-made and man-induced -- he sometimes desires to know through rationalistic preoccupations the reason why of the incongruities of his immediate environment. Existentialism therefore becomes for man a phenomenological homework meant to establish the logic behind human existence. Man cannot be blamed for this because he has choice and will. This is in contrast to the thesis of some behaviourists who are quick to proffer that humans are controlled by their environment and that as a result people's behaviours are governed by

law. However, the existentialists think differently: the self is the determiner of man's culture. Dugald Arbuckle puts it in a neater way:

*The free man lives within the laws of his culture, but he is not bound by them. They do not control him, rather his self transcends them.*<sup>3</sup>

The implication of this assertion is far from saying that people are free from conditions in their environment; instead it makes the point that human beings are free to act upon or take a stand in these conditions. More often than not, the concern for human existence makes man refuse to subordinate personal self-awareness to abstract concepts or dehumanizing social structures. Existentialism, therefore, leads man to rebel against established ideas and institutions that not only inhibit personal freedom, but also fosters situations that give rise to a shattered world for fellow human beings. Such concerns for human existence have resulted in a number of people turning atheists and attacking the idea of religion which social critics like Karl Marx have described as "the opium of the people." Ironically, such is their involvement in surrealist dimensions that they destroy themselves -- suicide-prone, demented, dead or sometimes rejected and cast away by the very society of people they have always thought for.

The question that one is likely to ask is the relevance of existential philosophical thought in African fictive utterances, considering the fact that the existential movement is of Western origin. Kierkegaard, Tillich, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Marcel to mention a few are Europeans. Perhaps the question could not have arisen if there had not been the tyranny of the Establishment, the bitter experiences of colonialism or the imperialist dispositions of the new African elite class who have chased out the white overlords and turned 'round to wear their garbs. However, effort is not being made to underrate other factors that could have nurtured existential preoccupations in the African novel. For sure the gradual movement towards industrialization, unrestrained capitalism competition, wars, poverty, economic upheavals and oppressions of various dimensions could have equally been important in making the theme of existentialism a viable venture in African prose. At any rate, the role which the three mentioned sources of dehumanizing experience for the African have played in blowing life into the motif of existential engagements in African fiction is of immense magnitude.

No wonder then that Okara's hero in his novel hit by the high-handedness of tradition, is induced to look for "it". The quest has been necessitated not for the fun of it, but because the weight of the Establishment is obscenely heavy on the con-



sciousness of individuals such as Okolo.<sup>4</sup> Chief Izongo's regime is a totalitarian one where opposition is quickly routed. Sycophants such as Abadi (M.A. PhD.) project Izongo's rulership as "a democracy." Abadi tells the Elders:

*His (Okolo's) mouth is foul. You and I are comrades in arms and we must see this through to its logical conclusion . . . We are in a democracy and everyone has the right to express any opinion. (p. 45)*

If Abadi is honest in his assertion, why then is it that Okolo is so much hated and chased about by Izongo's henchmen? Of the hypocrisy of Abadi's statement Oladele Taiwo says:

*But the only reason Okolo is hounded from place to place is that he expresses an opinion unacceptable to the community. Tuere is ostracised because she too expresses an opinion from which it is inferred that she is a witch.<sup>5</sup>*

The agony of Okolo no doubt must have been heightened by the gullibility of the rural folks who unwittingly side with Chief Izongo in his nefarious activities. They have even composed a song in honour of this hawk:

*Who can Izongo's words face?  
Nobody!  
Who can Izongo's place take?  
Nobody!  
Who gets money reach him?  
Nobody!  
Nobody! (p. 118)*

If the ordinary folks are this daft, then the behaviour of the Elders can be easily understood since as the acknowledged leaders of the people they are the greatest beneficiaries of the status-quo.

*Why should Okolo look for it, they wondered. Things have changed, the world has turned and they are now the Elders. No one in the past has asked for it. Why should Okolo expect to find it now they are the Elders? No, he must stop his search. He must not stop their pleasure. (p. 24)*

Okolo, therefore, moves through a society that has sold its soul to materialism and corruption. Like Eliot's Waste Land, Amatu is a spiritually dead place in which the search for the Holy Grail as a way of redeeming the Waste Land is equivalent

to Okolo's search for "it." Okolo becomes the Cervantian hero, Don Quixote, who in his idealistic quest for sanity in a corrupt, materialistic world is himself regarded as insane. Eustace Palmer then adds:

*The world exposes his naivety, but his very innocence acts as a catalyst precipitating the hypocrisy, spiritual sterility, and materialism of the people he meets.*<sup>6</sup>

But will Okolo be as lucky as Quixote? Oladele Taiwo insists that Okolo has been able to make "spectacular gains." Says he:

*He (Okolo) enlists the active support of Tuere and Ukule and through the latter Okolo is given the assurance: 'Your spoken words will not die' . . . Ebiere, her husband and her brother throw aside traditional constraint and assert their youthful liberty. Even Abadi seems to accept Okolo at last.*<sup>7</sup>

It is tempting to be as optimistic as Taiwo is; however, events towards the end of the work seem not to lend credence to such an optimism.

*And in the canoe tied together back to back with their feet tied to the seats of the canoe were Okolo and Tuere. Down they floated from one bank of the river to the other like debris, carried by the current. (p. 127)*

Okolo and Tuere are lost in the same place while Ukule is a cripple who is evidently handicapped to spread the message. Izongo's messengers, who could have been the direct beneficiaries of Okolo's iconoclasm, are reluctant to associate themselves with his idealism, even in secrecy.

Sunday Anozie sees an analogy between what happens in Okara's The Voice and Shakespeare's Hamlet. Says he:

*Structure and incidence in Gabriel Okara's first novel, The Voice, in many respects echo Shakespeare's Hamlet.*<sup>8</sup>

He sees Chief Izongo as King Claudius and Prince Hamlet as Okolo. Abadi finds a counterpart in Polonius. While the latter is knowledgeable through experience, the former has a string of degrees obtained from England, Germany and America. However, the similarity in form does not obliterate the fact that the problem being discussed is entirely an African affair. There is no doubt that in The Voice, a portrait of an African



intellectual as a young man who is doubly alienated is being painted. Okolo is alienated from himself and from his society. Okolo is alienated from himself since he does not possess that "sweetness of one's inside" which is necessary and which "everybody has or ought to have" in the world "apart from bearing children." Okolo is equally alienated from his society because "everybody has locked up his inside." Because Okolo is accused of "touching" Ebiere during his journey to Sologa, he decides, on his return journey to avoid a repeat of the incident by keeping to himself far off from other passengers in the canoe. This in effect represents his own distancing from society, a separation that is self-willed.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the depth of his education has been able to transform him from a docile or pro-Establishment person to an active conscience of society. Though Abadi is equally read, it is doubtful if he has been able to develop an equal amount of consciousness as Okolo has been able to do. Okolo tells him: "You have your M.A. Ph.D., but you have not got it." (p. 44) It is not always that a highly read individual truly perceives his role in a decadent society such as Amatu. Those who do perceive their proper place, however, do pay for it as Okolo ultimately does. Such people are bound to be "alone, embattled, cut adrift from the world and society."<sup>9</sup> This is the situation that makes Okolo to be:

*forever swimming in a dark existential void where  
'grim faces like the dark mysterious afire with flies'  
haunt him like figures in a nightmare.<sup>10</sup>*

Lewis Nkosi is loud in saying that "his very education instead of fitting him for service in his community isolates him, provokes hostility and suspicion."<sup>11</sup> However, Okolo's questioning the tyranny of Izongo is equally a service to his community even though he is misunderstood by those he is supposed to be fighting for. It is the possession of a nurtured sensitivity that makes him go for "it." But what is "it?" Eustace Palmer gives the answer:

*It is that indefinable something which gives integrity, honesty, spiritual values, faith in God and man, and a sense of purpose. Some call it God, or the Holy Spirit, others the grace of God. It comprehends everything which is opposed to the present tendency to a sterile materialism.<sup>12</sup>*

Camara Laye's The Radiance of the King is a step away from his earlier work, The African Child. Laye might not have set out with the intention of writing an existentialist novel, but all the same, he did move in that direction with Clarence

being subjected to a forced knowledge of the black man and his God. Hitherto, it had been the black man being schooled, as it were, in the culture of the white man. Here, however, Clarence who is a white man, rational enough to appreciate what is happening around him, is being compelled to learn what he did not know about Africa and her God. Compelled because he is quickly ushered in and we are told that his money somehow got finished through gambling and so had to be thrown out of his hotel. It is in this state of wretchedness that he is made to learn what he never knew before. Somehow Clarence manages to keep his head above water, convinced that the colour of his skin will save him. When the beggar tells him, "Young man do you think the King receives just anybody?"<sup>13</sup> he replies: "I am not 'just anybody', I am a white man." He soon realizes that whatever he will get is not because he is a white man, but because he is a human being. Like most other people he has no "rights," but "favours." The beggar tells him:

*I only spoke of 'favours' . . . You are quite wrong to think I said anything about 'rights' of any kind. As far as I'm concerned I have never claimed any kind of 'rights'. I have always restricted myself to soliciting favours. I'll say no more than that I expect these favours to be granted. (p. 53)*

Things move so fast for him that he is bewildered, isolated and estranged. As he stands on the Esplanade, surrounded by a thick crowd of Africans, he is almost completely without possessions except for the clothes he wears, his razor and his shaving soap. Not long after he loses all these possessions, which are more or less the relics of his Western origin. Alone in a setting that is essentially black, he is poisoned, so to say, by the odour of black people. There is a:

*herd-like odour that seemed to dull the senses into a kind of trance, emanated from these men packed tightly together under the African sky. (p. 21)*

According to Charles Larson, the odour is so over-powering that he feels he will fall asleep.<sup>14</sup> It is through the motif of sleep-walking that Clarence stumbles through a culture alien to his own. It is under this condition of a somnabulist that much of what he later learns is unfolded before him, reflecting Freudian contentions about dreams.

Commenting on the humbling experience which Clarence is subjected to, Adele King has this to say:

*He is laughed at as helpless and sold into slavery. His one recognized accomplishment is his sexual prowess, an obvious ironic reversal of western attitudes*



towards black men.<sup>15</sup>

The impact of this Kafkaesque experience is that the white man "learns to accept a black God-King whereas colonialism brought to the African the white God of Christianity."<sup>16</sup>

Time, which is an important motif in the novel is of existential character. The African way of regarding time is different from the West's. In Laye's work, time is given to us as something very much different from Western conceptions. In existentialism, the future is more important than the past and the present. However, this future in the African sense is not definitive. There is only "the appointed time" which only "the King knows" just as Christ alone knows when He will come again. Space, like time, is equally limitless in African perception. Little wonder that Clarence's ultimate image of the king is the

*impression that the king was walking off into space, as if the bracelets and the rings of gold, as if that gold, and all that love had suddenly become powerless to hold the king to the earth. (p. 46)*

Clarence's regeneration only comes in the third chapter in Part Two. According to Charles Larson:

*Clarence is beginning to comprehend that he has no rights at all -- nobody owes him anything. He is not bringing light to the dark continent; instead, he will be the one illuminated but only through his hard-won understanding of African culture.<sup>17</sup>*

One of the crucial things he learns is that the King has a god-like figure; that the King is much more than a human monarch. Because of this new knowledge, Clarence is saved the burdens of life which leads to his own purification. He now knows that the African is essentially reconciled to his environment and that life and death are unavoidable realities just as the King's coming is inevitable. Larson goes on to say:

*In essence, there is no ontological gap -- for life and death are fused together, and a man is a part of everything that surrounds him. It is only the Westerner who feels a sense of separation from his environment.<sup>18</sup>*

In the views of Ramsaran, Clarence's reconciliation with events around him is signified by his falling upon his knees as soon as he sees the king. According to the critic:

*He (Clarence) is at the end of his seeking, at the*



*end of all seekings, when he is held in the King's  
embrace and enveloped by the mantle of his love.  
So the quest of Clarence ends in this mystic union  
after the long struggle between the sensual and the  
spiritual.*<sup>19</sup>

Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* . . .<sup>20</sup> is an allegorical African novel in which the recklessness of the new African elite is given full treatment. In the mad preoccupations of the indigenous greedy inheritors of the colonial setting, society becomes a battlefield in which the mental and physical breakdown of characters is incubated. The Ghana that is presented to us, though a microcosm of Africa, is a land of corruption, graft and stagnation. It is the land of wicked practices and notions where empty intellectuals and shallow leaders are at the helm of affairs.

Man in this society, therefore, cannot escape the harshness of the moral wretchedness prevalent in the place. The society nurtures both the snobs and the victims. For instance, Alex is a principal secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture who "through sheer doggedness . . . had pushed his way to the top." (p. 21) Because of this achievement, he becomes self-assertive, self-confident and impatient with those who, unlike him, are college-trained. Bob is another fellow, an unsuccessful scientist who has turned a banker. He is fond of trying to appear young and is apparently a comedian of a sort who is overtly interested in sexual matters. Row is a police officer, a drunk who is faithful to the nationalists or for that matter anybody who happens to be in power. The dentist's past-time is sleeping with his female patients. The list is endless as one can go on and on enumerating the frivolity of some of the characters who set the stage for the existential preoccupation of Amamu, the alienated hero of the novel. On the receiving end of the dehumanizing experience of both the colonial and the post-colonial regimes are a number of characters who are either made to run mad or are in some way eccentric. Abotsi, for instance, comes back from the white man's war a shattered personality. All he can do is steal drinks at dances organized by the privileged classes of society. Part of the reason for his fate is that:

*. . . he did not perform the purification ceremony  
which was required. So the ghosts of the Japanese  
he killed followed him. And made him mad. He did  
not perform the ceremony because he did not have  
money.* (p. 70)

While Abotsi is suffering for his penury, foreigners and local imperialists are busy carting away Ghana's resources. The civil servants are sticking to the British General Orders

while their neatly dressed girlfriends are cozily perched on their laps, girls whose wish is that the evening should come so they might have a full rein to practise their other profession: prostitution. Yet Abotsi has no money to perform a sacrifice that could have forestalled his insanity. Tailor is Abotsi's friend. Initially he was a smuggler of 'akpeteshie', the local drink which is declared illicit by the indigenous rulers while preferring the its foreign equivalent -- Whisky, Brandy, Scotch-on-the-rocks and what have you. Tailor is caught in his illegal business and is jailed. He is abandoned by his family. He becomes alone, penniless and broken. The setting has been created for bitterness to have a field day. Little wonder then that when one day the catechist comes to talk about church dues, Tailor goes after him with a machet. Paku is a schoolboy -- though older than his classmates -- who absents himself from Palm Service in preference to attending to his animal traps. The language of the stomach is of course one that knows no Palm Service! The headmaster desires his buttocks as a punishment but he says no and is sacked. Months later he comes back dressed in army uniform. The headmaster is now convinced that the soldier that was once his pupil is a patriot. And quickly he makes a moving speech in which he praises Paku, the new-found nationalist. Other characters who suffer one form of deprivation or the other include Dzesan (the Burma veteran), Sule (also a veteran) and Rev. Paul Dumenyo who is regarded as a Holy man, but who puts one girl in a family way while desiring the hand of another in marriage. On the wedding day, however, Paul is confronted by the pregnant girl. Paul takes to the street as a penance for his sin and as a way of changing the sinister tendencies of the world.

The scene is now set for Amamu's alienation and eventual madness. Right from childhood he had always had the capacity to be different. He, as a little boy would not be harsh to Abotsi, an embarrassing contrast to his other mates who ritualise in running after mad people. Little Amamu also would not throw stones at Rev. Dumenyo:

*. . . he alone did not cast a stone. He stood, trapped like an animal. He could hear the shout of his comrades, as they chased their enemy into the Presbyterian Mission Compound. (p. 96)*

Amamu has always witnessed the nauseating nature of the human environment in which he grows up. It is an environment of deceit, violence, neglect, subjugation, oppression and deprivation. The process of the conquest of human dignity does not stop in his childhood. It follows him into his early adulthood when he becomes a reporter with a socialist newspaper. Sent to cover an incident in a village where the traditional durbar has been cancelled, he discovers that the ancestral



stools have been seized by government officials and that the riot squad invited to the scene has killed three people while the village is destroyed by fire. The police loot houses and rape several women, perhaps a reward for their 'love' for their country. Amamu files in his report, but it is not published by his editor so as not to embarrass the Establishment. Why then is the newspaper a socialist one? Femi Ojo-Ade is quick to say the following:

*Propriety dictates silence. Mutual guilt dictates compromise. A man who lives in a glass house does not throw stones. Socialism must give way to nationalism.<sup>21</sup>*

What type of nationalism is it that suppresses the truth and aids the mental and physical torture of the populace? According to Ojo-Ade, nationalism now changed its meaning: it is now "you should 'chop make I chop some'." There are, however, two alternatives for the Ghanaian who finds himself in a privileged position:

*If you do not want it, then let others have it. The worst you can do is to complain of nationalistic corruption, graft and patriotic thievery. The best you can do, must do, to survive is to be an integral part of the wise majority.<sup>22</sup>*

But Amamu will not accept this position. When he goes about talking to his friends on his attitude to such matters, eyes stare at him. This man must be mad!

However, the point must be made that Amamu had been -- if he is not still -- a part of the system. He is a brilliant lawyer, respected and admired and maintains a lot of clients. To be a lawyer at any rate is to possess the gateway to success or so it is popularly believed. Little wonder then that when the policeman who scolds him for committing a traffic offense discovers that he is a lawyer finds himself bending down to beg for forgiveness. At a nightclub, for instance, he gets the best attention, and at the airport a customs official helps him to recover his wife's luggage, all because he is a lawyer. Our Amamu is distant, assertive and proud. Alice, his wife threatens divorce because he has another woman called Adisa. How then is he free from the mess that is the system? It is perhaps the realization of his own role in promoting the inequities of society that makes him a victim of his own conscience. Beaten and powerless, the more he knows that he can do little to change the social structure, the more he is uneasy, and the more he becomes a logical candidate for madness. Part of the reason for his fate is that:



*. . . the man has enjoyed his privileges half-heartedly from the first, and the brutality with which he sometimes treats the poor is caused by his sense of guilt and failure, his inability to do something concrete and symbolic to save the captives of African modernism.*<sup>23</sup>

Lost in his own guilt and highhandedness, he wishes to be blind to reality and begins to fall in love with inebriety. He knows that somehow things have just got to change; that he and others who are parasites living on the ignorant magnanimity of the poor must one day be annihilated. In his daily notes, he more or less becomes an observer of his own steady, but gradual demise. This inevitably leads to his cultivation of cynicism and pessimism, distancing and aloofness not only from the masses of his people, but also from his equally privileged colleagues. His friends jeer at him and mutter to one another: "the man is mad." (p. 25) Of his sad predicament, Gerald Moore has this to say:

*When finally confronted with the brutalization of the poor, however, Amamu's reaction is to renounce everything, including life itself. But the class which he represents is not about to renounce anything. If their grip on affairs is to be loosened, it must be by other means.*<sup>24</sup>

Found in this condition, Amamu cannot escape being a prototype of Achebe's Ezeulu, who becomes mad because he is unwilling to submit himself to the dynamo of groupal wisdom, and because he is more interested in emphasizing his personal role as a priest of Ulu. Equally Amamu cannot but be like Ngugi's hero called Mugo, a detention camp veteran, who in a bid to save his life betrays the national cause. Soon after, voices of guilt, of retribution, of helpless citizens who are subjected to untold suffering because of his self-aggrandisement pursue him, until the prop of his life collapses signifying the beginning of his own destruction.

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* has a lot in common with Awoonor's novel, not only in its bitter fictional use of imagery, but also in the similarity of setting. Ghana is the place in both cases. At a time when West African writers were still lounging in talking about the past and the place of colonialism in Africa's experience, Ghanaian writers, encouraged by the harshness of the post-independence rulership, had begun to move a step further in a bid to lay bare the present faceless archetypes responsible for the sorrowful plight of the populace. Nor does Armah forget the past completely. Robert Fraser is quick to point out that:

*Armah too has offered us vistas which lead back to the distant past, but his work began with a fearless look at the present, and opens finally on a prospect of a future.<sup>2 5</sup>*

Achebe has criticised Armah for his own harshness on a country that is his which the Ghanaian writer has chosen to pour venom upon as if he were a foreigner to the place.<sup>2 6</sup> However, how else can one explain Armah's position other than that Shakespearean belief that "as fire drives out fire, so pity pities?" Achebe has not defended the moral squalor and bankruptcy inherent in the society neither does he make a case for the pathetic figure of self-doubt, self-recrimination, and hopelessness of citizens enkindled by their new leaders. All that Achebe seems to be saying is that two wrongs cannot make a right. But Armah's disposition is that if the white man came with colonialism, he did not will on his exit that African leaders should be arrogant, selfish, greedy and corrupt, just as the retreating colonialist did not ask the local politician to be ignorant, unpatriotic, uncultured, artificial, tasteless and conscienceless.

Such is the sad situation of the environment that people like the Man, the hero of the novel must engage in their hopeless existential journey. Boneless and spineless, his namelessness becomes a symbol of his own self-delusion. Little wonder that his wife calls him a chichidodo, a bird that hates shit, but is fond of worms that feed on human excreta. When he refuses to take bribes and to take part in Koomson's boat business, we are almost tempted to be impressed, to say a Daniel has come to judgement. But his own contradictions chase him about so that we find him merely existing, not living. Why does saliva slip from his mouth as if he were a sore-mouthed idiot? Why does he have to breathe the smell of the rotten currency note into his lungs? Why is he so absent-minded that he could have been crushed by an on-coming vehicle? Why does he lack the guts to defend himself against insults? Why does he reject Koomson's deal and still feed from the proceeds accruing from it? We definitely cannot like this character because he is guilty; he is not one of the beautiful ones. Even on the book that the man finds Teacher, his friend reading is this symbol of the moral death chasing both of them about. The book is entitled, He Who Must Die. And die they must because they are passively impotent, weak, inconsistent and aimless. For instance, the man does not even know why he has refused to take bribes. We, more or less, find him a scarecrow of what he is supposed to be. Of this picture, Eustace Palmer says:

*He (the man) drifts aimlessly through a colourless life of poverty, unrelieved by any bright spot. Each day he makes a dreary journey from his loveless*



home through filth, slime, and insults, to his tedious job in decaying Railway Administration Block.<sup>27</sup>

Of Teacher, on the other hand, Abu Abarry says:

*Thus for him the existential question is no more what type of life, but rather what manner of death is he to embrace. He has become the condemned awaiting execution.*<sup>28</sup>

One is not being unaware of the spotless qualities which Armah has forced on his main character. In this direction, O.R. Dathorne points out that:

*The Man is good and his goodness is emphasized throughout. He is unlike Teacher who is an outsider, who reads, listens to the radio, and admits he is not free. Teacher has left the "Loved ones" and he realizes he is nothing without them. At least the Man has his family and is able to survive in an era of crass materialism.*<sup>29</sup>

The quarrel, at any rate, is not with the man's "goodness", but with the fruitlessness of this seeming perfection. According to St. Paul, faith without good acts is dead.

The man and Teacher are not alone in this existential voyage. The man's other friend, Rama Krishna is even a more shattered personality. In a bid to fight the decay surrounding him, he abstains from sex so as to rejuvenate his brain. But when he dies, his heart is found to be thoroughly inhabited by worms. Home Boy's predicament is a parallel to Krishna's experience. A World War II veteran, he finds himself:

*endlessly repeating harsh, unintelligible words of command he had never understood but had learned to obey in other people's countries, marching all the day, everywhere, and driving himself to his insane exhaustion with the repetition of all the military drill he had learned, always to the proud accompaniment of his own scout whistle with its still-shiny metal sound.*<sup>30</sup>

Kofi Billy too has a shattered world resulting from the obscene display of wickedness by both chance and his fellow man. His leg gets cut while he is loading some cargo into a ship when the steel rope snaps. It may have been unplanned, but why does the English man say he deserves to lose his legs?

*The Englishman said he deserved it: he had been playing at his work. Had he moved faster, he would*



*not have been there when the steel rope snapped.*  
(p. 66)

Must we not mention Maanan, the beautiful woman, who, now mad, has given up the search for meaning in life? We hear her admit defeat when she says:

*They have mixed it all together! Everything! They have mixed everything. And how can I find it when they have mixed it all again with so many other things? (p. 180)*

In her helplessness she resembles Okara's hero, Okolo who dies searching for the elusive "it." But Shatto Gakwandi makes a distinction between the two:

*. . . whereas Okolo's search is a positive process which shakes the foundations of society, Maanan's search is hopeless. There is no hope for her. She will die of despair, like many other characters in the novel.<sup>31</sup>*

Yes she will die of despair because there is no saviour in sight. Nkrumah has been overthrown yes, but to what benefit? Koomson who is a contrast to the man has fallen from his pagan opulence, but does the army promise a new lease of life? Does the man even know why people like Koomson must pass through the latrine hole in their fugitive effort from justice? Such is the man's ignorance, and therefore of his guilt that he equally passes through the shithole, for he does not seem to understand why in Oyo's eyes:

*. . . There was now real gratitude. Perhaps for the first time in their married life the man could believe that she was glad to have him the way he was. (p. 165)*

Such is his guilt that he escapes with Koomson even though the Khaki boys now in control could not have touched him. He cannot escape condemnation because he encourages Koomson to give bribes, a crime he had all along stood against. The inscription written boldly on the passing vehicle that is Ghana itself is evocative of his being an accomplice in the moral destruction of his own country. The painted words, The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born must continue to linger in his subconscious:

*As he got up to go back into the town he had left in the night, the man was unable to shake off the imprint of the painted words. In his mind he could see them flowing up, down and round again. (p. 183)*

Armah's quarrel with existence further finds expression

in *Fragments*, his second novel.<sup>32</sup> As in the first, the author "focuses before the reader's eyes characters defeated by this cruel world."<sup>33</sup> The hopelessness of Juana's surrounding is echoed in the displayed Akan expression: OBRA YE KO (which means 'Life is War'). She is an expatriate doctor who has fleeting moments with Baako, the chief character. She comes to Africa, like others of her ilk, in order to take refuge as it were. But she soon discovers that she is in a place where she finds herself trying:

*. . . to forget that now the sum of her life was only that she was here in another defeated and defeating place, to forget all the reminders of futility. (p. 17)*

The sense of tragedy is compounded further by the fact that she comes to Ghana in a bid to recover from the hopelessness of her tasteless life in the Caribbean. Listen:

*she searched in herself for something that might make sense, but there was nothing she could herself believe in, nothing that wouldn't just be the high flight of the individual alone, escaping the truth of life around him. That way she knew there was only annihilation. (p. 271)*

Baako Onipa is not free from the gloom that is his birth place. Whereas his homecoming is uncelebrated, Brempong's is more or less a festival. According to Charles Nnolim:

*Brempong, his own people's hero, is ushered home in a limousine amidst dancing and noise while Baako suffers the ultimate humiliation of having mere taxi drivers refuse him their services because he seems a nobody -- all within earshot of the din of Brempong's tumultuous homecoming.<sup>34</sup>*

He does not own a car. His idealistic hope to revitalize Ghana through creative journalism at Ghanavision is a mirage because of the red-tapism inherent in the Civil Service. The principal secretary tells him:

*If you come back thinking you can make things work in any smooth, efficient way, you'll just get a complete waste of time. It is not worth bothering about. (p. 119)*

Baako's nauseous feeling of filth right from the hotel in which he initially stays is symptomatic of the fate that will later befall him. This nauseous feeling parallels that of Roquentin in Jean Paul Sartre's existential novel, *Nausea*. The echo of the Man's experience in Armah's first novel vibrates here too.



Baako's experiences of societal moral decadence are multiple and they unfold before him in quick succession, in a manner that ensure his eventual insanity. For instance, he finds it difficult to understand why there is now a craze among the girls working at the bank to wear wigs, neither does he appreciate why his mother, of all people, should insist on his bringing home a car. Efua, his mother, is equally a frustrated woman who has a son, and yet without a son. Naana, Baako's grand-mother is a tormented old hag who is disappointed with her grandson. Blind, old and awkwardly talkative, her world is of broken chinaware as she laments: "what remains of my days will be filled with more broken things." (p. 280) She can only find "rest in despair, not trying again to regain the larger meaning" that is life. What will save her is her blindness because in such a condition he perceives little of the madness of the world. Efua, on the other hand, will equally be saved by her somewhat deeper understanding of life. In her sorrow she seems to have been prepared for this trying moment, of her son's eventual destruction. As Ayo Mamudu puts it:

*Efua is a mother who reaches beyond and above this point of knowledge at which everything echoes and re-echoes sorrow. With the collapse of her dreams, she grows in character; what she calls her soul-cleaning is in fact growth into a philosophical wisdom very similar to that of Stoicism.*<sup>35</sup>

### CONCLUSION

West Africa, nay the African continent, cannot escape being a fertile ground for the exploration of the various motifs of existentialism. The sub-region, like other parts of Africa, is undergoing a change, the end of which is difficult to predict. The suggestion is not being made that existentialism will one day be a stale theme, at least not in the foreseeable future. If the developed countries have not been able to eradicate issues that give rise to existential thinking, African countries, helplessly copying after them, cannot escape situations that breed various ills which in turn encourage nausea and alienation of some of their citizens. Colonialism no doubt incubated dehumanization and deprivation, and left behind it a new form of perpetual subjugation called 'neocolonialism' as Emmanuel Obiechina<sup>36</sup> tries to argue in his review of Armah's first novel. Nevertheless, our indigenous elite have not helped matters by their shallowness, visionlessness, greed, deceit and mock leadership. Society will continue to swim in chaos because capitalism and other ills have come to stay. As a reaction, some individuals will, however, engage in actions that will estrange them from their fellows because they want to understand the reasons for the inefficiency of the system, for the preponderance of squalor, for crass materialism



neglect, persecution, inequality, greed and self-aggrandisement. As a result they are likely to lose their lives as in Okolo's case, especially if they challenge a robust system of tyranny; they will have to be reduced to a mere shadow of themselves if only they will be opportuned to learn the deeper meaning of African life and God as in the case of Clarence; they will turn mad like Amamu if after being a part of the harsh system they now want to revolt against it; they will be chichidodos (birds that hate faeces, but feed on worms that bask in shit) if with one hand they resist bribes and with another welcome the benefits of corrupt deals as the Man does; people like Baako and others will break down and will be chased about by little children in their madness if in their own absurdity, they desire a syllogistic and rationalistic human condition in which everything must be put in a neat, logical packaging, a condition in which there is an unbroken melody, instead of an unfinished symphony.

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