

JOHN PEPPER CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S SONG OF A GOAT: AN ABSURDIST EXPLORATION

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Abstract

*Since man first woke up on this earth, he has been intrigued by the question of his very existence. How did he come to be, why is he here, what is he supposed to do here and ultimately where does he go from here? These existential questions troubled him then as he still does now and the bigger question is what progress has man made since he first began to contemplate these questions? Consequently, he has this natural tendency to continually find meaning to life and inherent value to his existence. And this internal conflict tends towards the absurd as it arises from fundamental disharmony between the human tendency to seek meaning and the idea that no true meaning really exists. Operating from the philosophical and metaphysical streams of consciousness, the absurd dramatists artistically communicate non-realistic unconventional scenarios aimed at reiterating the existentialist and often intractably complex world of the humankind. The aesthetics of absurdism inhibits the causal and logical flow of actions; the plays evolve in a staccato and episodic plot structure, the characters lack individuality, the language tends to be eclectic and elevated as opposed to everyday language, while the story of the plays are often tall tales that beggar belief. This paper shall examine in context the philosophical concept of absurdism using the African tragic play **Song of a Goat** by John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo as a case study. The absurdist theory to literature shall be our theoretical paradigm and our conclusion shall be premised on the fact that man's overall stay on this planet is merely an existential one where he has little or no real role to play at happenstances to his existence; but play, he must.*

Keywords: John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo, *Song Of A Goat*, Absurdist, Existentialism

Introduction

In the bible book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve sinned against God, the woman was sentenced to a life of intense pain in child bearing while the man was exposed to the existentialism of human life by his sentence to life of hardship; for out of his sweat would he find bread. From that antiquated history, man has found himself scratching the earth as it were to eke out a living and thus, he toils till the day he dies ([www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/genesisGenesis 3: 16 – 18](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/genesisGenesis%203%3A%2016-18)). And living as a social being in a social environment, man lives in a seemingly moribund society that is filled with dos

and don'ts and where he must live by social norms, values and etiquette based on the traditions and expectations of his immediate society.

Unconsciously therefore, man becomes a slave to his existence as he always strives to meet up to the expectations of the society while battling with his personal limitations and demons. Customs, traditions and laws of the land and people where he lives becomes a kind of open prison of the mind that keeps in a kind of psychological bondage. He is bounded by the laws to which he must conform and be punished if he runs afoul of them. Thus, man becomes both a victim and prisoner of societal rules that never allows the person within him to blossom because somehow, he has little or no powers over his existence. Bounded by these invisible societal imitations which are often nebulous in their operations and to which he must adhere to or be asked to proffer explanations if he breaks them, man is seemingly caught up in a situation where he loses out on all fronts – to the society and to the gods – and could not therefore take full control of his existence. He is both a child of fate and chance who tilts wherever the pendulum of life swings him to and even though he tries to fight against this tide, his efforts are often futile.

In philosophical realms, absurdity is often linked with the face off and/or conflict between two ideals man and his existence. The human condition is known to be absurd through man's eternal struggle with the meaning and purpose of his life on the one hand, and an unforgiving, unfriendly and chaotic world on the other hand. Consequently, different people create meanings in life through various means in a bid to make sense out of their hard existence; but these attempts often end in futility with human condition being further exacerbated towards the absurd.

What Is Absurdism?

Absurdism refers to the never-ending conflict in the human tendency to find meaning and inherent value in life. While it has always been in history and philosophy, it took flight in the 20th century with the works of the philosopher Albert Camus. Absurdism attempts to tackle the issues that arise from the deep, ever present and fundamental disjointedness between the human tendency to seek meaning to his life and existence as well as the idea that no true meaning really exists because his very existence is an exercise in futility. It has existentialism at the core of its theory therefore. Thus, absurdism can be viewed as the philosophy that holds that there is no true meaning to life and all human attempts to find one are, essentially absurd and acutely flawed and ultimately existential. In other words, the contradictory nature associated with the universe and the human mind gives form and life to the absurd (www.owlcation.com/humanities/The-Philosophy-of-Absurdism).

Theatre of the Absurd explored through a dramatic lens the central idea that life was inherently meaningless and humans were fundamentally flawed and incapable of controlling their fates in a harsh and unforgiving universe. Even though Theatre of the Absurd was never quite a formal movement, there are many playwrights that scholars and critics refer to as absurdist due to the shared characteristics of their writings and the ideas

explored therein. Prominent absurdist playwrights include French writers Jean Genet and Eugene Ionesco, French-Russian writer Arthur Adamov, British writers Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, and Irish writer Samuel Beckett. Nigerian writers like Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark and some of Wole Soyinka's works belong to this school too. (www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english-literature/literary-devices/theatre-of-the-absurd/). It is the stand of this paper therefore that absurdism is a philosophical framework as well as a literary and artistic style characterised by the enquiry into the meaning of life. Theatre of the Absurd was a theatrical style and tradition that attempted to portray the Absurd in life.

The Philosopher Albert Camus – Father of Absurdism

Among the many people who have tried to unravel the mysteries of absurdism, the contributions of author and philosopher [Albert Camus](#) have been immense. In the essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (1942), Albert Camus talks about the Greek mythical figure Sisyphus who is condemned by the gods to roll a boulder up a hill, which falls down as soon as he reaches the top. So, Sisyphus starts again, only to keep doing it over and over. The 'Myth of Sisyphus' is one of the foundational texts of Absurdism as a philosophy. Camus paved the way for future theorists associated with the discipline and influenced the minds of many. In his postulations, Camus argues that humans search for meaning in life by seeking the comfort of a god, higher power, or strong belief system, solely as a way of comforting themselves. He believes that in order to follow the philosophy of absurdism, you must choose one of three options: Essentially giving into the meaningless by ceasing to exist; pretend there is a God or higher power and pretend to follow a religion; and lastly, accept that there is no true meaning to life which then translates into complete freedom. From the absurdist point of view, life is a habitual repetition of mundane tasks you do every day; indeed, if you stop to think about it, there is no inherent meaning or purpose to anything we do.

According to Albert Camus therefore if man eludes the absurd, they can never confront it, and are then repressing their own ability to feel satisfied with their lifestyles. His viewpoints emphasize escapism as the fundamental flaw in existentialism and religion, while specific human activities vary in absurdity and therefore life itself becomes a relative concept. Indeed, the objective relativity of absurdism is what allows its literary proponents to adopt non-traditional styles and patterns to tell their stories of what they considered as the hopeless and benign human condition.

Why Absurdism Matters?

The practice of absurdism gives one freedom and an opportunity to find their own meaning and purpose in life. Indeed, individuals or groups of people may create a meaning that is entirely related to themselves and that does not rely on any objective, universal truth. Ultimately, this affords the individual some measure of control of happenstances around him; but whether this control leads to personal fulfilment or not is highly debatable. And whether forces of nature, fate and the human existence themselves

to have a form of super control over the puny control of man is in itself another issue for discussion. As things stand and whatever be the case, with absurdism the individual can believe anything he likes, no matter how silly, weird, against the ground norm, irreligious or absurd.

In all of these however, it must be noted that for anything to completely pass as absurdism, people must accept that their own personal meanings may very well have no actual significance in their fates, in the lives of others, and in the universe as a whole. They must also accept that their own human consciousness is too limited to understand the potential existence of a God or a higher power. It is this acceptance that makes absurdism absurd and not just another philosophy of existentialism; for as Camus cannily puts it, man should fight against meaninglessness by living his life to the full on his terms and with the full knowledge that these so-called meanings upheld by the society have no meanings in themselves whatsoever. For Camus, this is freedom.

Absurdism and Literature

From the classical Greek epoch to the medieval English period and down to the present modern age including African traditional drama, theatre and dramaturgy has gone through several innovations and changes with the theatre of the absurd being something of a post-modernist school. The theatre of the absurd, which is an arm of the avant-garde theoretical school, is one of the most modern movements. Indeed, while the classic theatre, the medieval drama, neo-classicism, romanticism, realism and naturalism, among others, emphasize the presentation of familiar events in a causal and logical manner that falls in with the experience of the spectator or reader, the absurdist theatre stands in apposition to this – with its major departure being unreasonableness from where the name absurdist emerge; or better rendered as reasonable unreasonableness.

The Theatre of the Absurd was among the literary movements that arose in reaction to the devastations of World War II and the attendant ennui and debilitation that faced the world. Men were discouraged and despaired over the fall of the human system and the sheer catastrophe of the war. Consequently, they began to question the very existence of man and God in the wake of all these calamities and destructions. However, it is important to note that the theatrical absurd was not a unified movement that took place at a consistent pace throughout these years and nor did group of writers gang up to call themselves absurdist writers. Rather, it was scholars and critics that observed these features in their writings and decided to categorize them as such in the epochal studies of literature. However, the most popular works of the theatre of the Absurd were performed in Paris during this time.

The name 'Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by British dramatist and critic Martin Esslin in a 1960 essay of the same name. In the article, Esslin discusses Adam Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett to evaluate the popularity their plays enjoy despite their

uncompromisingly unconventional nature. As it were, absurdism perceives the world as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning and sought to represent life as characterized by nothingness and our futile search for a universal truth or purpose. (Esslin 1991: 23). Indeed, this is akin to what the world's "wisest man" King Solomon meant when he posited in the holy bible that: vanity upon vanity all is vanity (Ecclesiastes 1:12). Fashioned after the existentialists' frame of mind, writers of the absurdist expression emphasize the desperate and helpless worthlessness of the human condition.

Curiously in theatrical history, certain Greek playwrights, especially Euripides and Sophocles, have portrayed a deep dramatic sense of despair and absurdity in their plays. Elizabethan playwrights like Shakespeare, Sartre and Camus equally presented absurdities in human condition in their works; but they follow traditional dramatic styles, patterns and conventions. With the absurdist school however, they glory in revealing the futility of the human project by deliberately ignoring tried and tested conventions while throwing up styles and patterns that defy all literary conventions, practices and logic. W B Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" from where Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* got its title succinctly captures this scenario filled with deep ennui:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falconer cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart
The centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*

Commenting on the cyclical nature of history and civilisation while considering the nexus between Achebe's thematic concerns in *Things Fall Apart* and Yeats' fall of the human civilizations in his apocalyptic poem "The Second Coming", Arthur Ravenscroft notes that in her article "Yeats and Achebe", A.G Stock:

Most persuasively argues the connection between the theme of *Things Fall Apart* and Yeats' vision of history as a succession of civilisations, each giving way to another through its own inability to embrace all human impulses satisfactorily within one enclosed order. She rightly emphasizes that Achebe is no mere disciple, but that he is using the Yeatsian idea as an instrument for analyzing and interpreting human experience in confrontation between different ways of life. (qtd. in Ravenscroft 8).

The absurdist school of thought who are not consigned to only the drama genre believe that the world is an incomprehensible wasteland of space, a mad house, where man is doomed to eternal ruin in the classic Sisyphean sense. They very often portray man as despondent, desperate, frustrated, helpless listless and lost; even as they hold strong to the (absurdist?) view that God and nature are dead, and that man is a mere accident of nature, fate and history who brought nothing into this world, achieves nothing in this world and leaves the world with nothing because the world itself is an empty void of nothingness. (Sartre

1978: 28) paints this rather bleak picture thus:

*.....there is no human nature, because
there is no God to have a conception of it.
Man simply is. ...Man is nothing else
but that which he makes of himself*

A disconcerted disorderliness portraying ennui as opposed to the causal orderliness of traditional writings of prose and drama is the hallmark of the absurdist writers whose works are aimed at 'representing' the absurdity, disillusionment, and loss of faith of man in the universe, the absurd dramatist aims at 'presenting' man's dilemma in the world through the open abandonment of discursive thought (Esslin, 24). Theirs focus is strictly anti-realism and anti-naturalism with their thematic concerns and subject matter detailing non-stories and presenting "a pattern of images designed to communicate the perplexity and anxiety that spring from the recognition that man is surrounded by an indecipherable cosmos (Gassner and Quinn, 1969: 843) that is not human friendly. The plot structures are episodic and zig zag in nature with all the absurd thoughts and actions of the characters producing nothing except from leading them into further despair and anguish. This line of thoughts in tandem with the absurdist idea that the life of man is all motion and no movement because no matter how hard one busies oneself and tries to break away from the existential shackles of man's existence, nothing worthwhile actually take place.

The Story of the Play

Song of a Goat, is a one-act play with four scenes called movements. It is J.P Clark's first written play which seems to draw from biblical, traditional and classical ethos. Very similar to classical Greek tragedy which allows a lot of philosophizing, the language is more of parable and riddle form while its characters are predictably flat and individualistic. Set in a small coastal village in the Niger Delta where the hero, Zifa, a wealthy fisherman suffers from impotence – a clearly existential occurrence because it was through no fault of his.

The first act or movement of the play introduces the traditional village masseur, who questions Zifa's wife, Ebiere, about her barren state. Informed that Zifa had no mistress, the masseur realizes Zifa's sexual deficiency and suggests that Ebiere have a child by Zifa's younger brother, Tonye, an act that the traditional society accepts but not acceptable to everyone; especially the people involved. Ebiere cannot accept this advice and her husband Zifa is even more vehemently opposed to it. In the main time, Zifa's aunt, Orukorere, prophesies tragic consequences if the masseur's advice is followed.

Eventually Tonye does seduce the frustrated Ebiere; Orukorere's warning goes as unheeded as did the classical Cassandra's. Zifa discovers the infidelity and, in a rage,

ritually slaughters a goat, forcing Tonyá to put the goat's head into a pot that is too small for it - symbolizing his illicit act with Ebiere. The furious Zifa thinks of killing Tonye, but Tonye, in shame, hangs himself. Soon after, a neighbor (messenger) tells of Zifa's somnambulistic suicidal walk into the sea in atonement for his own part in the tragedy; clearly a fallout from man's existentialist existence in this world. Indeed, if all was well with him, the unfolding scenario would probably not have taken place, but all was not well giving nature, fate and even the society the opportunity to conspire against him. It is also said that Ebiere miscarried. In an alternative closing of the play, the masseur returns to act as the choral leader (as would happen in classical tragedy); his final words provide an epitaph on the disaster.

Absurdism in *Song of a Goat* – the Story

In the play, J.P Clark took a traditional and rustic story of a coastal people and handled it in the true tradition of an absurdist work. He took an ordinary, almost every day, readily believed tale and elevated it to an existential piece where humankind was seemingly caught in a web of conspiracy not of his own making but in which he was an active and very willing participant and whose end he never fathomed. The encounter of Ebiere, Zifa's wife is the regular patient meets a traditional healer scene that is very common in our more rural settings but no one knew it was to set the ball rolling into a tale of tears, blood, exposed secrets, suicides, miscarriage and death. Often times in life, our actions result in the very opposite of what we intended and that was exactly what happened in the drama and what often takes place in the existential nature of the human life. It is as from birth; man is thrown into a stage to enact a script he barely understands because he was not the writer; but act he must because that was what he was born to do. It is like man is a mannequin and the puppet master somewhere above pulls the strings to get him acting and each time he deigns to act out his own thoughts and actions he misses the point and ends up tragically. The question now is why did Ebiere meet the masseur and the answer would be fate and existentialism with an unseen hand (not the playwright's) arranging the actions and deciding the speeches. Zifa's insistence on the goat head sacrifice and insisting on Tonye pushing the goat's heat into the small pot when he already knew the answer is another case in the existentialism surrounding the story. Indeed, why can't man let sleeping dogs lie? Probably that could ameliorate the existentialist sentence upon his life and being. Clark-Bekederemo's drama is built upon the tenets of classical drama. Aside from Zifa's curse of impotence, the play also describes the curse of violence and death on Zifa's family, A neighbor tells the audience that Orukorere's father knowingly killed clansmen, a terrible sin, and he was indifferent to the fate of his daughter, who has remained unmarried. The sacrifice of the goat, usually a cleansing, is, in this drama, a defiling of classical sacrifice. Zifa has insulted the gods with his ceremony, which he uses to parody the illicit relationship between Ebiere and Tonye.

The actions of the two brothers, Zifa and Tonye to the reality of their existentialist actions shows men and indeed all mankind at the crossroad of life. They stand at the crossroads of

psycho - historical time and must make a decision. They are at the epicentre of what the historical psychologist Zevedei Barbu calls a historical event and which he defines as “attributes which can be assigned to an event or group of events which have marked a change in the way of life of a community of people” (11). Barbu also asserts that he has:

observed that certain historical circumstances; certain cultural climates have, on the whole, disrupting effects on the rational structure of the mind, and, at the same time, stimulating effect on emotionality. In such cases, one can notice frequent symptoms of ambivalent (behavioural) feelings (58)

Both men could not come to terms with the reality of their present state in the play and therefore in the society and in this historical clash of mindsets, the personal and societal fulcrum of the brothers and their people respectively could no longer hold. Ironically, they both fall apart and commits suicide – the most common result of a frustrated existential life. Both Tonye and Zifa refuse to accept the reality and seeks solution to their problem while in this existential state of flux and this contributes to the catastrophe that ends the play.

Absurdism in *Song of a Goat* – the Language

Unconventional use of language is perhaps the greatest hallmark of an absurdist literary piece. The language is deployed and used in a rather stilted, roundabout, over-elevated and therefore absurdist manner. The aim is to distort the everyday contrapuntal use of language and conversation to convey the story of the literary work. Extended metaphors, innuendos, proverbs and even a metaphysical kind of conceit are used in the language as form of depiction of the existentialist nature of human life. The sense is to emphasize the fact that not even the language of man is free from existential and therefore absurdist colorations. In *Song of a Goat*, the major linguistic device used by the playwright are of metaphor and riddle as well as double speaking, proverbs and parables. The language is in elevated diction but not quite highfalutin in meaning. For instance, the conversation repartee between the traditional healer and seer, the Masseur and Zifa's wife Ebiere is coated with a very high dosage of extended metaphors, insinuations and innuendos. The two characters speaks of infertility and impotence in highly metaphorical terms: “An empty house, my daughter, is a thing of danger. If men will not live in it, bats or grass will, and that is enough signal for worse things to come.” We notice that he Masseur introduces the subject of Zifa's impotence with a riddle: “you have allowed the piece of fertile ground made over to you to run fallow with elephant grass.”

While ordinary everyday language usage tends to be informal and colloquial at the same time, the language of the play is poetic and elevated; trying to create some modicum of meaning in a meaningless world that the absurdist writers see of the human world. Some critics have argued that in taking this approach on language usage, the playwright, J. P. Clark was able to capture the wits and nuances of the Ijaw language where the drama is set but that he also inadvertently played into the hands of critics who categorized the work as a product from the absurdist theatre. Proverbs, parables and riddles featured very much in the play not for mere entertainment but as a vehicle of communication of ideas that are too sensitive for direct speech. The consistency of images these language usages provoke however runs against the tenets of the absurdist theatre which defines consistency as monotony and therefore boredom and listlessness which lead to existentialism. The images used in both the riddles and other aspects of the dialogue are drawn from the playwright's background – the Ijaw world. A very good example is the imagery of 'house' used for Ebieri's womb and love-making.

MASSEUR: An empty house my daughter is a thing/of danger... Your womb is open and warm as a room. It ought to accommodate many

EBIERE: It is not my fault. I keep my house/Open by night and day! But my lord will not come in ...why? Who bars him? ... My house has its door open I said ... Masseur

MASSEUR: Has he a house elsewhere?

All these thick innuendos and sexual connotations flying here are typical to the language use in an absurdist play where conversations and their meanings are never gotten from normal everyday use of language.

Conclusion: this paper has been able to iterate what absurdism and absurdist theatre is all about in terms of the existentialist nature of human life. And it has also been able to situate John Pepper Clark – Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat* as belonging to this school of literary study. The play while being classified as modern African drama however has a lot of traditionalistic tendencies about it. *Song of a Goat* is effectively a [parody](#) of the traditions and conventions of Western culture; which can further be interpreted to mean the battles a man faces as he tries to make something of his life in this acutely existential world. Its plots unconventionally called movements tends to be episodic, with no real sense of causal meaning and ultimately inconsequential just like the life of man on this earth. It is instructive that at the end of the drama all was lost – the two brothers committed suicide, the child in the womb was aborted and there was this suggestion that the life of Ebieri became unhinged thereafter.

The language was both elevated and obscure at the same time; filled with extended metaphors, innuendos and proverbs and parables with the dialogues made to look unnatural and eccentric to point out the inadequacy of language in communication. Indeed, the characters continue to struggle despite not having a purpose or meaning, trying to find sense in the senseless and to communicate the uncommunicable. Lastly, one

comes away from the play with a vague sense to life that is both unsettling and ultimately absurd.

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