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DESTINY, DETERMINATION AND DILEMMA: AN EXISTENTIALIST READING OF CHIGOZIE OBIOMA'S *AN ORCHESTRA OF MINORITIES*

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates destiny, determination and dilemma in Chigozie Obioma's An Orchestra of Minorities. The paper adopts a qualitative approach which involves a close reading and analysis of some extrapolations from the text, using Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism as theoretical anchor. Through this method, the paper explores some contemporary issues and themes and strongly posits that forces of fate controls what one is and what one is destined to be. The study also delves into the unforeseen circumstances of the protagonist's decision, and the encounters in his pursuit of love and success as he tries to navigate his way into proving to Ndali's family that he is worthy of her love and that he can be prosperous. Findings further reveal that Chigozie Obioma's An Orchestra of Minorities reflects Sartre's emphasis on individuality, the clash between fate and freedom, and the existential dilemmas faced by the protagonist amidst societal expectations. The paper concludes that the fusion of Chigozie Obioma's Narrative in An Orchestra of Minorities with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy enriches the understanding of the protagonist's battle with fate, choice and societal pressures.

Keywords: Fate, Existentialism, Societal pressure, Choice.

Introduction

Existentialism as a theory or philosophy has been used by different researchers to identify and analyse the meaning in ones live by becoming aware of freedom and choice as an individual and how they throw up anxiety about the unknown (Okpiliya and Akpan, 52). Developed in Europe in the 1800, the theory began as a philosophical movement that was used to oppose the traditional philosophy (Akpan and Okon, 6). The existentialist movement started as a reaction against the Rationalism which characterized the age of reason and the period of the industrial Revolution in Western Europe. According to Paul Roubiczek:

> Existentialism is a rejection of all purely abstract thinking, of a purely logical or scientific philosophy: in short, a rejection of the absoluteness of reason. Instead, it insists that philosophy should be connected with the historical situation in which he (man) finds himself, and that it should be, not interesting abstract speculation, but a way of life. It should be a philosophy capable of being lived (10).

This assertion explains the reason most existentialists propound their philosophical ideas through the medium of poetry, fiction and drama, rather than through analytical prose.

Jean-Paul Sartre discusses the importance of Existentialism in several key points. First, he sees existentialism as humanism, and emphasises that "Existence precedes Essence" (40).Kierkegaard explains this when heaver that:

> …the term "Existence" was reserved for the individual human being. To exist … implies being a certain kind of individual alternative, who chooses, who considers above all, commits himself (40).

This intricately means that humans exist first but they are only defined by their essence through their choices and actions; secondly, he asserts that humans are condemned to be free (Affiah, Amaku and Akpan, 72). This implies that every individual is accountable for the decisions made and they bear the consequences of such choices. Sartre highlights the concepts of Individual Autonomy and stresses the idea that humans are wholly autonomous when making decisions, usually or must create their values and morals and they have the freedom to control their affairs. Furthermore, Sartre accentuates that individuals define themselves through the choices they make and are solely responsible for these various choices (Akpan, 150).

According to existential philosophy, the theory often explores the themes of despair and absurdity, individual Autonomy, alienation, morality and ethics, and nothingness among others. Simone de Beauvoir discusses the tension between freedom and alienation and argues that on the whole, existentialism champions freedom, and also recognises the alienating aspects of existence, where individuals can feel disconnected from themselves and others (Utin, 40). The alienation can be created due to an individual's social standards in society. Existentialism recognizes man as having an inner core in which both the objective and subjective aspects of his being are rooted (Enang, Urujzian and Udoka, 7). Thus, existentialist analyses and seek to explore a certain depth of human experience or being that defies bifurcation into object/subject parts.

The theory is concerned with the problem of existence and is, therefore, the investigation of the meaning of being (Etuk and Urujzian, 10). That investigation is continually faced with diverse possibilities, from among which the existent (i.e., the human individual) must make a selection, to which he must then commit himself. Because those possibilities are constituted by the individual's relationships with things and with other humans, existence is always a being-in-the-world in a concrete and historically determinate situation that limits or conditions choice. Humans are therefore called in Martin Heidegger's phrase "there being" (Udofot, 349) because they are defined by the fact that they exist, or are in the world and inhabit it. Also, Mcquarrie lists some of the key tenets of existentialist thought which are:

> …attention on problems that seem to be directly related to concrete human existence rather than those that are abstract and speculative…such themes as freedom, decision, and responsibility are prominent in all the existentialist philosophers…It is the exercise of freedom and the ability to shape the future that distinguishes man from all the other beings that we know on earth. Another group of recurring existentialist themes includes such topics as finitude, guilt, alienation, despair and death (16).

Binkley further elaborates on the attributes of classical existentialism by describing the existentialist's approach to philosophical inquiry when he states that:

> Subjectivity and inwardness characterize existentialism to such a degree that systematic philosophy, with its objective contemplation of essences, is rendered suspect by it.…there is no possible rational guide to existence…our existence is irrational. There is an unbridgeable gap between the universal essence and the

> peculiar existence of each person. There can be no eternal or universal answers given to particular problems (147).

The main tenet of Heidegger's existentialism, for instance, is that "Truth exists solely in the subjective personal certainly of the believer" (Popkin, 293), while Sartre dwells on "the conception of man and his freedom to be what he wants to be", and the fact that "one exists first and later assigns essence to oneself" (Binkley 170).

It is a philosophy that looks at the fundamental nature of existence (Okpiliya and Akpan,30). It can be studied in various ways, such as understanding the way time plays a role in our existence, examining the origins of common words to find hidden meanings, using rational thinking to reveal the nature of the world, the soul, and God, exploring the core goals that shape our existence through existential psychoanalysis, or analyzing the possibilities that influence all aspects of existence (Okono, 88). It seeks to understand the nature and implications of human freedom (Urujzian, 183). It emphasizes that individuals have the power to make choices and shape their own lives. Major existentialist themes includes protest character, man's predicament, emphasis on suspective experience, man and the world, man and the others, freedom and responsibility, facticity of human existence, fear and Anguish, Death and commitment (Udoette and Udoinwang, 217). These various themes are the backdrop to existentialism theory. Macquarrie discusses the relationship between man and the world when he states that: "To be in the world is to be concerned with the world, to be engaged in ceaseless interaction with the things we find within the world" (84).

Authenticity is a central theme in existentialism. It encourages individuals to be true to themselves, acting in ways that align with their own values and beliefs rather than conforming to societal expectations or inauthentic roles. Existentialism grapples with the apparent lack of inherent meaning in the universe and the need for individuals to create their own values and purposes in life. It often confronts the "absurd" nature of existence. Existentialism frequently examines the sense of isolation and alienation that individuals may experience when they confront their freedom and the existential choices they must make.

In African literature, destiny, determination and dilemma are very strong areas of concern (Udoette and Akpan, 57). For example, thetheme of destiny is prevalent in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe, in this narrative explains how one's brutal actions can affect one's destiny through the character of Okonkwo. In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, destiny is explored through the life of Nnu Ego, a woman navigating the challenges of traditional roles versus individual aspiration. Her determination to become a mother, and also succeed in life clashes with the dilemma of societal expectations placed upon women in a patriarchal Nigerian society. Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter* explores the theme of determination through the protagonist, Aissatou. It can be seen through her letters, her determination to redefine her life after her husband's death.

In Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities,* the story intricately examines destiny, determination and dilemma. These themes intertwine throughout Chinonso, the protagonist's journey, highlighting the complexities of fate, human resolved and the challenging decisions faced in life after his encounter with Ndali and her family. Obioma's portrayal of these themes offers a poignant reflection on the human experience.

Destiny, Determination and Dilemma in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*

In this narrative, Chigozie Obioma explores prominently the theme of destiny, as it begins with Chinonso's encounter with Ndali. Chinonso who is a poultry farmer in Nigeria, on his way back to Umahia from Enugu, saves a young lady who seems devastated and wants to throw herself into the "Amatu River- a branch of the great Imo River."(17). As fate may have it, the duo meets again at the filling station after their initial meeting and this time, they fall in love. Their relationship faces numerous challenges such as social differences and family expectations in the sense that, since Chinonso is poor and uneducated, he is unfit and unworthy of Ndali.

The story follows a narration of "Chi", a spirit regarded as the guardian of Chinonso, the protagonist of the novel. The chi gives a detailed narration to the most high whom he calls "Chukwu", about the life of his host. The story unfolds with the chi narrating how Chinonso met a young woman on the bridge, who he eventually falls in love with while on his way back from Enugu to Umahia. Racing through rural roads, he stopped a short distance from the bridge and spotsa woman leaning over the rail contemplating on the next action to take. "Chinonso manages to dissuade her from jumping to her death by hurdling his most priced chickens into the Amatu River as an example of what would become of her if she eventually jumped in" (17-20).

Destiny as one of the major themes in the work is presented in the text when Chinonso and Ndali meet again after three months. Their initial meeting was at the bridge where she had attempted to commit suicide by trying to throw herself into the "Amatu River". "Ndali had driven into the same filling station Chinonso went to refill his gas, there she invited him to a date at Mr. Biggs and their love story begins. (53). With Ndali's presence in his life, Chinonso begins to understand all that his Uncle had also told him; the peace and care a woman brings. Chinonso wishes beyond everything that he will have Ndali as wife because she has lighted up a place in his life that he never thought would be lit.

Due to the challenges the relationship between the main character and Ndali, Chinonso becomes determined to do anything humanly possible to make sure he has her. In the text, the narratorasserts that "these ideas came to him with so much power that joy welled within him. They meant that there was genuine hope- that there was a path to him getting married to Ndali" (156). In the above assertion, he decides to return to school as that was the major bone of contention of her father and brother and he also made a declaration "I will do anything to marry her" (110). The rejection by Ndali's family pushes him into becoming determined to further his education.

As Chi delves further into the narration of the story, he recounts how Ndali's family is not in support of their union. Chief Obialor her father and Chuka, her brother are majorly the ones who are against him on the ground that he is not educated. Thus, Chinonso's determination to return to school begins after his meeting with Ndali's family and the humiliation meted out to him by Chuka. At the birthday party, Chuka accosts him and refer to him as a Church and goes on to tell him to steer clear from Ndali and also warns him against telling Ndali about it. When the guests arrive at the party, and as the events kick-starts after the family's introduction, Chuka sends some thugs to bring Chinonso out to the backyard where the staffs work. At the backyard, one of the men pointed at a blue khaki shirt and a pair of trousers,

"the one he had seen the gateman wear, then he was paraded to the gate to start directing the surfeit of the cars that poured in and out of the compound". (148-149).

After that incident, he begins considering leaving Ndali but could not. During one of their conversations about her family, she states the reason her family are not in support of their relationship. Ndali reveals to him that "It is not that you are poor. No. It is because you don't have a big degree." (156). Here she discloses the reason her parents are not in support of their union. After this revelation, and when she retreats to his old room to study, Chinonso sits and begins pondering on everything she has told him and he wonders why he hadn't considered the possibility of returning to school. Ndali inspires him to return to school and suddenly he believes that, that would be the end of all the embarrassment he would receive from her family. "These ideas came to him with so much power that joy welled up within him. They meant that there was genuine hope- that there was a path to him getting married to Ndali." (156). Chinonso's encounter with Jamike spurs up another surge of determination to quickly get a degree in three years and then returns to marry Ndali.

The negative consequences faced by Chinonso because of his decision and determination to return to school lead him into meeting an old school friend, Jamike Nwaorji. Jamike informs him about Cyprus and how the education system is. Chinonso is intrigued and sells off his properties just to pursue and further his education, as he believes that once he is done with school, he will get a good job and eventually be given the blessings to marry Ndali. On reaching Cyprus, Chinonso realises that he had been played on and the consequences of his actions began to unfold slowly yet rapidly.

The protagonist's dilemma begins in part two of the book after he has finalized his documents and also received his passport in Abuja for onward movement to Cyprus. During all his preparations, Ndali is not in support of him selling off his properties, but he wouldn't listen and is still determined about pursuing his dreams. Chinonso's decision had led to his dilemma. He arrives Abuja and board the plane to Istanbul, where he will board the next flight to Cyprus in four hours. While at the airport in Istanbul, Chinonso meets two men who happens to be Nigerians just like he is and here, they began telling him about the realities in Cyprus which is totally different from what Jamike had told him. One of the men named Linus being his first time of travelling to Cyprus reveals to Chinonso : "I never go, too. In fact, my brother, I wish someone had warned me before I left Nigeria" (122). One of the dilemma Chinonso encounters in Cyprus his realisation that Cyprus was not what Jamike had told him about when he met two men from Nigeria namely T.T and Linus told Chinonso that he wished he never event to Cypus.

When he got to the phone booth, he "brought out the foolscap sheet on which he'd scribbled Jamie's number on it and following the directions on the side of the phone, dialed it." What he got in response "was a recurrent burst of static and a voice that sometimes came on to announce that the number was invalid" (124). After several tries, he resorts to the idea that something was wrong. Chinonso finally realises and admits that he is duped. His decision to be seen as somebody, his determination to pursue and acquire a degree to prove a point to the family of his girlfriend led to some destructive decisions that resulted in his accused of raping a Turkish lady and was sentenced to prison.

Conclusion

An Orchestra of Minorities not only tells a compelling story but also provides a philosophical journey through the lens of existentialism. It underscores the profound themes of destiny, determination, and dilemma as essential components of the human experience. Through the masterful use of language and narrative style, Chigozie Obioma's work prompts readers to reflect on the complexities of existence and the choices that define their lives. The work serves as a poignant reminder of the existentialist philosophy that individuals are the architects of their own destinies. Ultimately, the work aligns with existentialism in its exploration of the human condition and the enduring power of choice in shaping one's life.

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