



## Study of existentialism in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*

Benapamo Elijah, Chinedu Ogoke

Department of English and Communications, Studies, Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria

### Abstract

The resources available to us are not limited. We strongly wish to excel, but it is more difficult when we find ourselves in an adamant world. It makes life for some people unexciting. That is in addition to a life that is ruled by uncertainties and in which we ponder over its meaninglessness. These conditions are presented to us in literature and in real life. In both spheres, it resonates in the life of Medza in *Mission to Kala* by Mongo Beti. Medza makes a circular journey; from attainment to throwing away everything and is taken back to a state of emptiness by his unexpected action. Fate places him in a position of advantage, where he is like a chosen one. He hardly lifts any of his acquisitions for his comfort. What is diagnosed is existentialism. Readers are left in bafflement, nonetheless. The events raise posers. It becomes clear that man's life is one of endless tortures. Therefore, this essay attempts analyses and interpretations of the novel under study in the realm of existentialism. The objective of the study is to portray that literature is life and can be used to solve societal problems, as well as launch one to a better understanding of self, life and society. The undertaking is informed by misrule in various societies as well as frictions in human relations, the bulk of the materials is sourced from books, newspaper and journal articles. Text-based analysis is adopted in the project.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, death, literature, anguish, nothingness, free will

### Introduction

Literature is an imaginative work of poetry, drama or prose distinguished by aesthetic excellence in its execution. The 19th century critic, Walter Pater referred to "the matter of imaginative or artistic literature" as a "transcript," not of mere fact but of fact in its infinitely varied forms. The art of literature is not reducible to the words on the page; they are there solely for the craft of writing. As an art, literature is described as the organizing of words to give pleasure. Yet, through words, a writer of literature elevates and transforms experiences beyond "mere" pleasure. Literature also functions more broadly in society as a means of both criticizing and affirming cultural values (Rexrot). Imaginative writers express these cultural values in a broad way, depicting the meaninglessness of life through the medium of literature. This vagueness, senselessness and absurdity of existence is made visible by writers, bringing to bare the concept of existentialism. Existentialism itself is a form of philosophical enquiry that tries to explain the problem of human existence and centres on the lived experiences of thinking, feeling and acting individuals. Existentialism is an aspect of modernism, which is a movement in the 20th century that intentionally splits or disconnects itself from the earlier conservative traditions. The temporal frame of modernism is the Second World War, which brought about destruction of human lives, infrastructures and a sense of disappointment and meaninglessness of life. As a form of modernism, existentialism reveals the ridiculous nature of human existence. It portrays a sense of absurdity and the emptiness of life that came with the Second World War.

To the existentialist writers, the starting point of every individual is the existentialist 'ennui,' a kind of fatigue and weakness. To them, life is pervaded by a sense of dread, anxiety and fear in the face of an apparently irrational world. According to Soren Kierkegaard, the existentialist philosophy is linked to the view of the absurdity of the human condition. He illustrates the state of an individual in

a strange world; asserting that man has no reality if he unthinkingly follows social laws or conventions suffering anguish and despair in his loneliness. Man may nevertheless become what he wishes by the exercise of freewill. The existentialists' views converge in the assumptions that reason is insufficient in understanding the mysteries of the universe. They define doctrines and attitudes, though disagree over certain points. These experts believe that anguish is a universal phenomenon, and that morality has validity only when there is positive participation (Stuli).

For Mary Warnock, existentialism enjoyed great popularity in the 1940s and 1950s and has probably had a greater impact upon literature than any other kind of philosophy. The common interest that unites existentialist writers is their interest in human freedom. Readers of existentialist philosophy are being asked not merely to contemplate the nature of freedom but to experience freedom, and to practice same (Warnock). The concept of existentialism as discussed above is what forms the focus of the two South African and Cameroonian authors in this study; Mongo Beti in his *Mission to Kala*. In essence, this text serves as a basic source for this research. Therefore, this study examines the existentialists' viewpoints as contained in the texts mentioned above. In his text, *Mission to Kala*, Mongo Beti gives an account of the transitional stage of an individual from adolescence to adulthood in the colonial Cameroonian society. The individual grows from a stage where he lacks the ability to make decisions for himself to a stage where he is free to make decisions for himself. This, the narrator depicts in the life of the protagonist, Medza.

### Evolving Existentialism

Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are considered as the first philosophers that are fundamental to the existential movement. Though, neither of them used the term existentialism, they were more interested in people's concealment of the meaninglessness of life and how people try to escape from boredom. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

wrote that human nature and identity vary depending on what values and beliefs they hold. These two philosophers were not part of the 20th Century existentialist movement, but their works serve as the buildings or the foundations to many existentialist writers after them (Coelho). Karl Jaspers was one of the first German existentialists. Jaspers recognized the importance of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and attempted to follow their footsteps. Heidegger was influenced by Jaspers and Edmund Husserl. Although, existentialists see Heidegger as an important philosopher in the movement, he denied being an existentialist. Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the well-known existentialists and is one of the few to have accepted being called an existentialist. Sartre developed his own version of existentialist philosophy under the influence of Husserl and Heidegger. *Being and Nothing* is his most important work about existentialism. In the 1960s, he attempted to match existentialism and Marxism in his work, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. He rejected the existentialist label. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus uses the analogy of the Greek myth to demonstrate the futility of existence. Simone De Beauvoir was a longtime companion of Sartre. She wrote about feminist and existential ethics in her works, including *the Second Sex and Ethics of Ambiguity*. Maurice Merleau Ponty, an often-overlooked existentialist, was a longtime companion of Sartre. Michael Foucault would also be considered an existentialist through his use of history to reveal the constant alterations of created meaning, thus providing its failure to produce a cohesive form of reality (Coelho).

#### **Dostoevsky, Kafka and the Literary Existentialists**

Many unrecognized literary writers have also had a major influence on existentialism. Franz Kafka, in his *Metamorphosis*, created characters who struggle with hopelessness and absurdity. Fyodor Dostoevsky, a Russian literary writer, wrote such novels as, *Crime and Punishment* and, *The Brothers Karamazov*. These novels have covered issues relating to existential philosophy, at the same time denying the validity of the claims of existentialism. In the 1950s and 1960s, existentialism experienced a renewal in popular artforms. In addition, art house and films began quoting and alluding to existentialist thoughts and thinkers. Existentialism considers an individual's personal experience. Thus, it is considered as a philosophy of being. The question is, does man's existence have an essence? In this regard, existentialism is attributed to the modern French existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre's famous diction 'existence comes before essence.' This implies that there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which it makes of itself. Sartre adds that "Man first is only afterwards is he this or that. Man must create for himself his essence" (Roubczek 121). This gives some authority to the German existentialist, Martin Heidegger's statement of man being thrown into existence, which existentialists consider as prior to any other thoughts or ideas that humans have definitions of themselves that they create. Sartre states that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre 3). Therefore, the human being has no essence that comes before his existence.

#### **Choice as the Ultimate Evaluator**

Man's freedom exists in two opposite forms, namely choice of freedom and freedom of choice. This means that if man is free, he must be free to choose, but he can either make a right choice, which really sets him free, or a wrong choice which enslaves him. Therefore, human beings' role in the

world is not predetermined, and every person is compelled to make a choice. The exercise of choice is therefore the core of human existence. There is no escaping freedom, because to exist is to be freely engaged in the world (Sartre 2-3). What Sartre is saying here is that human beings come into existence not out of their own will, but because they cannot choose not to exist. Sartre elaborates further in existentialism and human emotions, saying that Precisely, because here we are dealing with a choice, this choice as it is made indicates in general other choices as possible. The possibility of living is lived in the feeling of unjustifiability, and it is this which is expressed by the fact of the absurdity of choice and consequently, being. (25)

#### **Anguish (Anxiety)**

Sartre observes that in choosing and committing himself, man gets committed not only to himself but to humanity. So, he says, "in fashioning myself, I fashion man" (28). This leads to a state of anxiety or anguish that descends upon man as he realizes that through his choice, he is acting as a decision maker who decides for the whole of mankind. The realization of this responsibility gives rise to pain or anguish which is an aspect of human existence. Sartre sees the bedrock of anguish in the state of a being that is not responsible for its origin or the origin of the world. Due to the dreadful freedom to choose one form of action over another, man is responsible for what he makes of his existence. The feeling of responsibility brings about anguish. Sartre further remarks thus: "consciousness in one stroke opens up a world of possibilities, yet at the very moment poses their annihilation. This says Sartre is our anguished lot" (46).

#### **Nothingness**

There is an understanding that comes with anxiety, called nothingness. While contemplating it, Heidegger affirms that man's entire existence is believed to be paused between the two poles of nothingness: That before birth and that after death. Heidegger rightly points out that "personal existence is launched between nothingness and nothingness, and it is nothingness that is real, every other thing is absurd" (Raosaheb 124-125). So, in place of God, there is nothing. As Heidegger observes, at the very core of existence, nothingness is dissolving the being into nothingness. Strangely enough, nothingness can never refer to non-existence, but always to something that exists. So, as Nietzsche predicts and Heidegger confirms, nothingness grows until it swallows everything (Raosaheb 125).

#### **The Absurd**

The acceptance of nothingness leads to the concept of the absurd. This becomes the re-occurring idea in Sartre's view of existentialism. Absurd is primarily a state of alienation from the world. To become aware of the absurdity of life. Kierkegaard says,

The awareness of the absurdity of existence enables one to transcend all superficial thoughts and discover the inner reality. But once the transcendental is dismissed altogether, the absurd becomes the final objective, and there is no further attempt to make it meaningful.

The philosophy that encompasses the absurd is referred to as absurdity. Absurdity is a philosophy that is based on the belief that life is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict of the universe. The idea of absurdity is a common theme in many existentialist works, particularly for Albert Camus. Camus explains absurdity this way in his work "The Myth of

Sisyphus.” The absurd is born out of this confrontation between the human and unreasonable silence of the world. It is very easy to highlight the absurdity of the human quest for purpose (24). Sartre, in his analysis, opines that

It is common to assume that everything has a purpose, a higher reason for existence. However, if one thing has a higher purpose, what is the reason of that purpose? Each new height must then be validated by a higher one. This evokes the common theological question: If human kind was created by God, who or what created God? And if God answers to a higher power, to what power does that answer? (25)

### **Existentialism and Literature**

Existentialism and literature have a symbiotic relationship. Indeed, literature is life and life is literature. This is because works of literature are pure expressions of our experiences in life. Therefore, literature is the imitation of life and a mirror of the happenings around the society. These occurrences are refined and presented in artistic form by literary artists. These artists as well portray the realities of life, ranging from the successes and failures of life, which characterize the human being. There is this endless strife for materialism and survival. This struggle continues till one gets to his/her ultimate end, which is death. The foregoing relates to existentialism. When these writers write in this form, what they do is not divorced from the concept of existentialism. Existentialists communicate their ideas through plays, novels and short stories. In this line of thought, Peter Richman observes, “Why did existentialism resort to literary expression? Art has a tendency to act as a lens of thought which passes through it. In that sense, an existential author absorbs the idea and expresses himself through written works.”

Some professional philosophers used literature to communicate their ideas of existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre who was a professional philosopher offered insights into the subject of existentialism through his write ups. He is widely known for his novels, plays and short stories. Therefore, Sartre’s literary works are embodied and widely known. With his works, he strengthened the existentialist movement. Soren Kierkegaard is also very prominent in the existential movement. He is usually considered as the father of existentialism. Kierkegaard also made use of fictional devices. For example, his first major philosophical work, “either/or” shows the different views of three characters he created. These writers’ views are expressed in forms of letters, diaries, aphorisms and essays. Friedrich Nietzsche who is also a godfather of existentialism used literature as a means to communicate his ideas. In his production, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he used poetic fiction to describe his characters.

Martin Heidegger also believed in the importance of literature so he used poetry to portray his idea, though not very successful. Another known scholar is Franz Kafka. His writing enriched literature from the existentialist standpoint in the 20th century. It is rooted in the experiences of Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He emerged out of the bitter experiences of the First World War, unnerved by the death and destruction of the period. It affected him deeply and played a role in the various works he produced. Unable to conclude any novel, but he gave the world his novella *The Metamorphosis* (Kafka 71).

Samuel Beckett is another prominent existentialist. He brings together the idea of literature and existentialism. He dramatizes characters that appear deficient and strange. In his play *Waiting for Godot*, he uses literary devices to show

that existence itself is troublesome, disappointing and shows itself in no other way than what the individual has made for himself. Therefore, Beckett mirrors, through his theatre, the craziness and meaninglessness of existence (Richman). There is therefore a close relationship between literature and existentialism. The existential writers use literature as a medium or means through which they communicate their points. Existentialist philosophers utilize various literary concepts like poems, novels, plays and essays to pass across their messages.

### **Previous Scholarly Criticisms of Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala***

Clearly, Beti’s *Mission to Kala* can be analysed as a Bildungsroman. A Bildungsroman is a novel that looks at the growth and development of the main character of a story, from childhood innocence to adulthood maturity. It is a novel of formation, education and coming-of-age of the protagonist. The Bildungsroman “can also be defined as a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming-of-age). At this point, character change is therefore extremely important” (Tamuno). Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala* is a growing-up novel because it narrates the transitional process of the protagonist, Medza from a naive, innocent schoolboy to an exposed adult. As a young boy in school, he is being sponsored by his father. Having failed his examinations in school, Medza fears his father’s wrath. It shows the innocent and formative stage of the young man. Despite his failure, he embarks on a trip to nearby community called Kala, to bring back one Niam’s wife. He leaves his primordial base, Vimili, to accomplish the task given to him. In Kala, Medza is exposed to many things and discovers many truths about himself. There is a transformation in his character. This is because at the beginning of the novel he is totally different from the person in the middle of the novel. He returns to his village and resolves never to fear his father anymore. He even challenges his father and fights him openly. Medza rewrites his failed exams, gets a job and never returns to his father’s house. All these events show that Medza has reached maturity where he can decide for himself. From the foregoing, we see that there are so many existing literatures, scholastic reviews, analyses and criticism on Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala*. However, none of these reviews has attempted to analyse these narratives in terms of existentialism. This work therefore examines Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala* as an existentialist narrative.

### **Existentialism in Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala***

This chapter of the research is concerned with a close analysis of Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala* as an existentialist novel. In the novel, there is struggle and despair among the major characters, particularly Medza. It agrees with Sartre and Heidegger’s theory of existentialism. They say that man has been thrown into a meaningless universe in which they have no purpose at all. Humans are put in an absurd situation by an unknown force and are living in mental pains and sufferings. Hence, the reason behind the sufferings of humans is not the terrible world but that humans are freely living in it. They are free to choose, but the irony is that no choice is given to them. Existentialists believe that not making a choice is a choice. In concise words, existentialism is a theory that believes that man is what he is. Its beliefs are centred on the idea of finding the meaning of life through different choices and situations. In the process of living and making of choices, there is a vague

imagination that keeps man in a state of anticipation that, at the end of every struggle, lies the hope of survival. This imagination sustains man. Life is therefore about making of choices and the entire process of waiting; but the ultimate waiting is the wait for the final end, which is death (Ahmed).

### **Elements of Existentialism in *Mission to Kala***

Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* evaluates the struggle of life and decision-making. The novel covers the story of mistaken identities, illogical decisions, failures and uncertainties. Its hero, Jean Medza is alienated and lives an absurd life, as one stage of failure in life drives him to more tedious tasks, with him passing through different stages of life into maturity and self-reliance. The novel opens as Medza is returning to his hometown, Vimili. School has just gone on vacation, and he has just left high school. He has failed the oral baccalaureate examination and is uncertain about his life. This is the beginning of his struggle, as he ponders how to face his father and the fate that lies ahead of him. He says, "I still had eight or ten miles to go before that dreadful interview with my father" (Beti 5). He is not quite sure about his future, and perhaps terrified. This situation is a clear depiction of existentialism as stated by Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, which is explained better by Ahmed, when he says that "humans had been thrown into a meaningless universe in which they had no purpose at all. They are put in absurd situations by forces and are living in mental pains and suffering." Certainly, the fear of uncertainty, anxiety, dread, awareness of the future are the major themes of existentialism. These are clearly depicted in the novel.

However, when Medza arrives in the town of Vimili, he meets Aunt Amou, who gives him news of a development that will allow him to avoid meeting his father. Amou tells him of a man named Niam, who is married to a woman from another clan. The story of Niam and his wife also indicates the struggles of life and the process of waiting and decision-making. Niam starts treating his wife badly; he forces her to exert herself too hard with chores while doing nothing himself. Also, Niam insults his wife because she has no child for him. Thrown into confusion and anxiety, Niam's wife queries herself and lifts her voice to God, asking Him unanswerable questions about her present state of barrenness. Certainly, life has become meaningless to her since the joy of every home is the fruit of the womb. She is waiting for a time when God will remember her, with a vague imagination that keeps her in a state of anticipation that, at the end, there will be hope.

Having waited for so long without any positive result, Niam's wife begins an adulterous affair since, she is barren and disliked by the community. Adultery is common and does not attract disapproval in those parts, as people do not consider it an anomaly. However, Niam's wife makes the unpardonable error of choosing as her lover a man from a clan that is not her husband's. The narrator explains this situation thus, "For a woman to grant her favours to a man from a neighbouring tribe is bad enough, if she goes with some rootless stranger, she is in all intents and purposes, deliberately giving the most deadly insult possible to her kin" (Beti 8). Finally, Niam's wife runs away and returns to the forest village in which she was born. "The unexpected thing was that she swore (it was said) never to return to her husband's house again" (Beti 8).

Convinced, and more than willing to avoid having to tell his father of his failure, Medza sets out on a bicycle to Kala. When he arrives, the villagers are engaged in a game against

a neighbouring village. This game, one resembling a version of dedgeball, showcases the prowess of a tall, muscular man named Zambo, Medza's cousin and son of Mama, the uncle with whom Medza is supposed to stay. After the game, Zambo recognizes Medza and they greet each other warmly. Zambo is prepared to see his cityfied cousin, the embodiment of sophistication and Medza is quite willing to accept this view of himself. This is the beginning of self-realization, which will lead to illogical decision-making as expounded by existentialists. However, as soon as they arrive Mama's house, an encounter imposes a different pattern on their relationship when Zambo introduces Medza to his mistress who lives with him openly in the house of his (Zambo) father. Medza is shocked that a young extremely presentable girl served us with a light supper; my cousin did not bother to introduce her. So when she had gone back to the kitchen, I asked Zambo if she was his sister or some relative. He burst out laughing then told me, with shrugging indifference, that she was his mistress. (Beti 29)

### **Free Will**

At this point, Medza knows that the sexual mores of his people are more permissive than those of the French colonizers, but he is not prepared for the actual experience of this looseness. He hides his surprise, but the central irony of the novel is established. Medza is now free to make his own decisions and choices. Just as the existentialists clearly state, man sees himself in a universe of free will. "Man is what he does" (Ahmed). The people of Kala are fascinated by Medza, seeing him as a sophisticated, French-educated person. So dazzled are they by his scholastic accomplishment that they cannot see his perpetual amazement at their subtlety, manners, and firm grasp of life. He struggles to project an air of unsurprised acceptance while attempting also to comprehend their ways. Medza's stay in Kala falls into a pattern that has very little to do with his mission. There is a transformation and change in his life. On the second day, he and his uncle, a skilled carpenter, visit the father of Niam's wife, in a fruitless attempt of negotiation. After a solitary attempt, Medza proceeds to party. During the day, he spends time with Zambo and Zambo's village friends, a jocular crew that appears to have no particular ambition, and no work. At night, the uncle, Mama, parades his nephew around the various houses in the village. Everyone is eager to host a dinner for the newcomer and, Mama, for personal reasons, is equally eager to oblige them. This dinner is attended not just by the hosts and Medza, but also by all the villagers who can squeeze themselves in. After the food is eaten, the dinner turns into extended interrogation sessions. Medza is placed in the center of the room and forced to answer rapid-fire questions about his future, the white man's knowledge, the country's future and anything that comes into anyone's mind (Beti 60-61).

Medza is put in a condition of discomfort by the situation. This condition extends to his admirers. His entire existence is put to test and questioned by his admirers. On his part, he struggles to maintain the status-quo bestowed on him by the villagers. He says:

They seemed to have no immediate inclination to let me go. I could hardly leave by myself; it would have been the worst possible thing I could have done. Afterwards, I waited to hear them say it was all over, I could go home, that is how it would have been done at home if we were entertaining a casual stranger. But things were different here. (Beti 62)

Medza's entire stay in Kala is full of challenges. These interrogative sessions leave him drained and weak, but they have their benefits. The morning after each visit, the host sends a gift to his visitor, generally in form of a goat or chicken. By the time Medza has been in Kala for a week or two, his uncle is obliged to build a corral and a pen for Medza's growing wealth of livestock. This is a potential buildup for pain that will result from the loss of accumulated wealth of great magnitude. Obviously, his loss will be immense. Without the accumulation of so much wealth, his loss would have been minimized, and the existentialist ennui, which is a kind of despair, fatigue and despondence of life would have been minimized.

Exploitation is also an aspect of existentialism because it is part of human existence. Medza's uncle Mama uses Medza as a tool for acquisition of wealth. Mama has been orchestrating Medza's visit for his own benefit. He accepts invitations only from the richer and the generous villagers. One day, he calls Medza into his workshop and gives him a long and circuitous lecture on the twin virtues of gratitude and respect for blood. Medza is slow to grasp the point, but when he does, he is more than willing to grant what Mama has hinted at. Medza offers his uncle half of all the gifts that he has received, and the visit continues. At the same time, Zambo is attempting to orchestrate a gift of his own for Medza. He is trying to find Medza a woman. Zambo is convinced that, if a county boy like him is sexually experienced, a city boy like his cousin must be unbelievably sophisticated. Little does he realize that Medza is not only a virgin but also terrified at the prospect of sex. Precisely, Medza is tantalized, but at the same time terrified that the woman he interacts with will be disappointed. He suspects (probably with some justification) that she will not keep her disappointment to herself. In short, if he failed, his façade of sophistication would crumble. It does not help that Zambo's first choice for him is a girl from the city who has spurned every other man in Kala, or that one morning, Medza awakens from an uneasy drunken slumber to find Zambo and this girl sitting on his bed. Zambo leaves, smiling, but Medza ignores the girl's obvious advances, and she leaves, baffled. Later, Madza explains to Zambo that he suspects the girl has a venereal disease. Zambo takes it lightly. But he does not give up the chase. He instead turns his attention to the daughter of the village chief. Late one night, he leads Medza through the dark to the house where the girl, Edima is waiting. Medza and the girl fondle each other in the dark, but she leaves before consummation of the romance. Nevertheless, Medza is love-struck. He enters another phase of life. To him, Edima is one of his greatest achievements, though he later abandons her due to his illogical reasoning and pursuit of freedom. From this point on, he devotes all his attention to spending time with his newfound love, Edima, who on her part is more than willing to be courted. Medza's life in the village settles into a customary pattern. He spends time with young people during the day and is treated to feasts by the older people of the village at night. The affair with Edima is consummated, ironically, during the wedding feast of the girl's father, who just married his seventh wife. During the gaudy festivities, as no one is paying attention to Edima or Madza, the two of them take advantage of the opportunity to sneak away to Mama's house. The affair is interrupted by the unwelcome arrival of Edima's mother. The woman bursts into Medza's room screaming, drags her daughter out of the house naked, hitting and scolding her violently. Medza is terrified. He assumes he must face dire consequences and cannot imagine

what will happen to his young lover. But, when Edima is dragged off, Zambo explodes in laughter. He explains: That old bag simply wanted to be able to tell the whole village that it was her daughter you'd honoured with your-hm-attention. Did you see how she was hitting the kid? Pulling her punches like mad, and trying to make each smack sound as loud as possible at the same time (Beti 140). At this dramatic point, when she has been forgotten, Niam's wife reappears. It turns out that she has been living with a man of ill repute in a house outside her village. Her open return with him creates a scandal. Though adultery is tolerated, shamelessness is not. Medza is convinced that he should leave Niam's wife to her own abandonment, but Mama and Zambo convince him otherwise. They say the woman may be an immoral slut, but she is, nevertheless, a wife; although she is important to Niam as a cook, field worker, and (potentially) mother of his children. Besides, colonial French law dictates that either she returns to the marriage or the wronged family benefits from the situation. According to the formalized French precepts about divorce, Niam's wife has a choice. She can leave her husband, but if she does, she must return her dowry. Thus, if Medza complains to the chief, he will win back either the woman or a sizable dowry. This is part of the struggles of life. Accordingly, Niam's wife's family goes to the chief and the matter is quickly decided. Niam's wife cannot afford to pay the dowry, so she will return to her husband. After settling the affair, the chief invites Medza, Mama and Zambo to his house for dinner. They decline, but the chief insists. As they eat, they are entertained by dancers, drummers and processions that grow steadily more elaborate, reminding Medza of the chief's wedding celebration. At this point, Edima is brought in, accompanied by handmaids and dresses as a bride. To his shock (although for certain he does not object), he had been tricked into a wedding. The chief marries the young couple. This is how the narrator describes the situation: "The chief had taken Edima by the hand and was coming over in my direction, trailing his daughter behind him, now he was joining our hands together. He followed up this gesture with a long speech (Beti 152). Medza has achieved his mission in Kala and has no choice but to leave. He remembers that his father will be furious with him now over the exam misadventure. But, Medza is now a transformed character, there is a new self-discovery and a mark of growth in him.

### **The Abandonment**

On his way back to Vimili, he thinks of his father's high handedness but resolves not to be scared of his father anymore, believing that his father cannot trash him anymore. He says,

I was gradually abandoning myself control more and more suddenly I know that my father would never beat me again; that if he pushes me to the limit, there was only one possible result- a to fight. It took me many years to make this simple discovery. (Beti 170-172)

Medza sets out to Vimili alone. This is the beginning of a life-turning irrational decision. After the acquisition of so many properties including a wife, he decides to leave everything behind in Kala. This shows that the essence of existence is just the struggle to survive for the moment. Life is ephemeral; therefore, there is absurdity in human existence. All the pursuits for fame and materialism are like mirage. They will all pass away. The entire life is just a passing phase full of struggles, with one waiting for the ultimate end, which is death. It shows the senselessness and

the meaninglessness of existence. These are the major themes of existentialism.

At home, Medza finds his father in a mood of indifference. His father utterly ignores him. Medza attempts to provoke a confrontation by whistling and being insolent, but his father is not perturbed. It is when Edima arrives that a confrontation erupts. His father attempts to beat him, and he fights back and runs away. This is the height of Medza's irrational decisions. There is the overriding sense of lack of direction and purposelessness in these acts. What is the essence of life, if at the peak of one's achievements one suddenly loses everything and goes back to the starting point? Medza acquires so much but loses everything and runs away to an entirely new environment to start life afresh. There is indeed a problem with human existence, a problem of lack of satisfaction and vague imagination. This problem came with the massive destruction caused by the Second World War. After the losses of so many lives and properties, humans are forced to ask, what is the essence of living?

Existentialism is therefore a form of philosophical enquiry that tries to explain the problems of human existence, and centres on the lived experiences of thinking, feeling and acting of individuals. After Medza's fight with his father, he watches his father for a moment, feeling genuine pity. Medza decides his fate and leaves. He walks along the dusty path out of town, followed by Zambo. Medza says, "My father gave up and went back to his house. I stood there and watched him go; and at that moment, I honestly felt sorry for him...ah, the hell with my luggage I said to the world at large, and walked away I was leaving, it was all over" (Bet 179).

A brief epilogue informs the reader that Medza never returned to his village. "I have never returned from that day to this," he says (Bet 179). The last pages of the narrative show that life is really a waiting process full of struggles and endless wanderings (Bet 186-181)

The quotation above summarizes the concept of existentialism in Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*, stating the tragedy of existence as man finds himself in a meaningless universe with a hazy imagination of survival.

### **Existential Nihilism**

Nihilism is a philosophical idea that is mostly associated with Friedrich Nietzsche. This idea was advanced principally in the 19th Century" (Muscato). The central point of Nihilism says that moral values are baseless. All our moral judgments and ethical standards are arbitrary and on top of that, there is no way for humans to honestly know how to communicate absolute truth. So, the nihilists believe that there is no moral truth. They assert that, "with respect to the universe, existential nihilism suggests that a single human or even the entire human species is significant, with no purpose and unlikely to change the totality of existence" (Storey).

This means that every individual is born into this world alone, without knowing why. This brings about the inherent meaninglessness of life. In line with the concept of nihilism, in *Mission to Kala*, we are exposed to the arbitrariness of the individual's moral and ethical standards. This means that man's behaviour is based on his or her discretion or judgment, not based on any objective or laid down standard. Medza, at the beginning of the narrative, is known as a good boy with moral uprightness. This is shown where he fears that his father is very angry with him because he has just failed his examination. He ponders how to face his father and the fate that lies ahead of him. He says, "I still had eight

or ten miles to go before that dreadful interview with my father" (5). He arrives Vimili and undertakes the task that is given to him and goes to Kala to bring back Niams wife.

Upon getting there, he encounters a way of life different from the one he knows at home. Medza begins to have new orientations about his life and the world. He reasons that his father would never allow him to have a girlfriend at his age, not to talk of her living with him in his father's house. But he realizes that, in Kala, his cousin, Zambo not only has a girlfriend, but lives with her in his father's house. His morality is affected at this point. He begins to imitate Zambo's way of life, that is totally different from the upbringing he had at home. Before this journey, we are told that he is a virgin. In Kala, he acquires not only a girlfriend, but also a wife. This clearly shows that Medza's ethical life as a youth is arbitrary, determined by the environment in which he finds himself. At this point, Medza begins to live life at his own discretion and judgment. His morality begins to change.

Having achieved his mission in Kala, he must leave. On his way back, he remembers that his father will be very angry with him because he failed his examination at school. At this point, Medza is a transformed character with his own mindset. He resolves not to fear his father anymore. Medza says: "I was gradually abandoning myself control more and more. Suddenly I know that my father would never beat me again; that if he pushes to the limit, there was only one possible result- a fight it took me many years to make this simple discovery" (Beti 170-172).

This shows that his values were baseless and abstract, not inbuilt. The once very obedient child can look at his father eyeball to eyeball and exchange words with him. Not only that, he fights with his father and now has his own decision to make, not based on any laid down objectives. He abandons everything and goes in search of freedom. This portrays existential nihilism. Again, we see moral decadence in the character of Niam's wife. She leaves her husband in Vimili and runs to her lover in Kala. She is careless about what people might say. Even when she is aware that Medza is in Kala to take her back home, she still lingers a bit with her lover before she finally returns to Kala. She does not feel remorseful for her action. Another aspect of existential nihilism talks about the meaninglessness of life. This also can be found in *Mission to Kala*. Life indeed is meaningless because an individual continues to struggle on daily basis for the rest of his life. Medza acquires so much in Kala but finally leaves everything to start a new life. He abandons his wife, properties and family. His struggle continues. This shows the nothingness and absurdity of life.

### **Conclusion**

This research has attempted to examine the concept of existentialism, using the text, Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. The research has analyzed and given existentialist reading to the text, showing the ontological, ethnical and philosophical aspects of human existence. Thus, this chapter summarizes the work so far, draws the conclusion of the study, and proposes recommendations for further studies. The research explores how Mongo Beti's characterizations, and settings in *Mission to Kala* discuss and reveal existentialist thoughts and principles like absurdity, nothingness, choice, death, existential humanism and nihilism.

The first part deals with a general introduction and background of the study, statement of the problem, scope and limitation of the study, research questions, methodology and theoretical framework of the essay. The second segment dwells extensively on the review of related literature, a

critical examination of the concept of existentialism, evaluation of the relationship between existentialism and literature as well as the philosophical movement of existentialism. The work later focuses on a detailed analysis and discussion of one of the selected texts, Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. The novel is analysed, using existentialist features to explore the plot structure. This part also examines the concept of nihilism as an extension of existentialism. Findings reveal that writers have continued to use their literary works to address societal problems.

This research has undoubtedly contributed to the literature of existentialism and by extension knowledge, as little has been written from the existentialist perspective, using these literary works. I recommend therefore that further research be carried out to examine the problems of irrational decision-making and a state of hopelessness faced by man, and the effect on society. Since existentialism is broad with several perspectives and principles, which have not been exhaustively treated in this research, further studies should be carried out on this aspect. Researchers should go further to explore and detail the existential and different ontological aspects of being. Though, this has been examined to some extent in this work, further research should be carried out to deepen the understanding of human existence, through the portrayal of the experiences of characters in the works of art. This will help to widen the knowledge of individuals towards life. Finally, I will say that more attention should be given to literary works, as no work is written in vacuum, but done to teach and improve life in society and expand societal knowledge on the issues of life.

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