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**A Reading of Waiting, Time and Social Change in
S. N. A. Agoro's *Something To Die For***

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Abstract

The study of waiting and time, hope and none fulfilment of hope, came into literary limelight in literature particularly in the dramas of Samuel Beckett, the absurdist playwright and others like Albert Camus, Martin Esslin and Eugene Ionesco. The subject is most prominent in Samuel Beckett's seminal dramas - *Waiting for Godot* (1956) and *End Game* (1957). In these dramas waiting is presented as a static experience that generates the rise and fall of hope. It breeds frustration, alienation, faithlessness and depersonalization. The act of waiting as a critical feature of the human condition is the most significant and intense thematic engagement in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The study notes that aside the circle of the absurd art in drama, the

subject of waiting and time has not been given adequate dramatic representation by dramatists outside the absurd background. It is against this backdrop that we attempt to explore the depiction and treatment of waiting, time and social change in the dramatic universe of existentialism created by some playwrights who have not been given scholarly attention. The study shall therefore undertake a dialectical consideration of the concept of waiting and time in Agoro's *Something to die For* an existential drama and raise new judgment in the appreciation of waiting and time from the perception of Christian reflection in literary limelight and scholarship.

Key words: dialectics, waiting and time, social change, absurdism, existentialism

Introduction

Existentialism and Absurdism are related philosophical movements, but in the field of drama there is a lot of difference in the making of the plays which carry their identity. Both plays depict human suffering and human struggle for survival sometimes without liberation. But in the absurd drama tradition, the plot of the play is cyclical or plotless, the characters are not psychologically developed, the location of the dramatic universe is limited as it infringes the freedom of its characters, the play's means is small and intense as the characters suffer broken hope, faithlessness, alienation and depersonalization while the language of the absurd characters, in the words of Bamidele, is fizzling, agonizingly despairing in the midst of silences, repetitions and readymade phrases (2001, p. 100) This is the dramatic plane from which plays like *Waiting for Godot*(1956) by Samuel Beckett, and *The Zoo Story*(1963) by Edward Albee were written. In the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus introduces his philosophy of the absurd.

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour... You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. (1996, p.1)

From the above quote the point becomes clear that man in futility, search for meaning, unity and clarity in the face of an unintelligible world devoid of God and eternal truths or values. Camus rationally compares the absurdity of man's life with the situation of Sisyphus, a figure of Greek mythology who was condemned to repeat forever the same meaningless task of pushing a rock up a mountain, only to see it roll down again

(accessed online 24/7/07/16) Absurd and existential plays share a deep sense of human isolation and beyond repair temperament of the human condition.

In the existentialist drama the problem of choice, fate, and futility of struggles, anguish and despair together with alienation, cynicism including absurdism and acceptance of responsibility are reflected. The dramas that can be pointed in this tradition are J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (2005) and Derek Walcott's *The Sea at Dauphin* (1954). The existentialist play is not without plot, it may have a locale that violates the freedom of its characters and its linguistic character could be conventional. Existentialism as a philosophy that cuts across some disciplines of rational inquires like Philosophy, literature, social sciences and even education also has its strong roots in Christian scholarship. Thus, it is pertinent to bring to limelight the position of Nicola Abbagnano in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, who expresses the theological dimension of existentialism as a philosophy which does not leave man with nothing to do. Existential literature portrays this struggle by describing the anguish and pain that

Man suffers as he struggles with alienation. Christian existentialism relies on Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity. Kierkegaard argued that the universe is fundamentally paradoxical, and that its greatest paradox is the transcendent union of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ. He also posited having a personal relationship with God that supersedes all prescribed moralities, social structures and communal norms. (Steven 2012: 1)

The Danish philosopher and theologian considered the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) holds that an individual must make independent choices, to bring about his existence. “No imposed structures can alter the responsibility of each individual to seek to please God in whatever personal and paradoxical way God chooses to be pleased. Each person suffers from the anguish of indecision until he makes a "leap of faith", and commits to a particular choice. Man is faced first with the responsibility of knowing of his own free will, and then with the fact that a choice, even a wrong one, must be made in order to live authentically.”(Quoted in Binebai's dramatic theory lecture note 2013:1) Søren Kierkegaard's understanding of existentialism has a Christian background since he associates man's struggle with his existence with the question of faith.

The Play

Something to Die For is a drama published by Caltop Publications (Nigeria) limited in 2001. The drama which was performed at the Niger Delta University stage on the 3rd of March 2004 to an unprecedented population of theatre goers enjoyed the benefit of production economy. Its simple-one location setting, the down-to-earth lighting and the general theatre technology it presents are manifestations which

underscore the production possibility and stage friendliness of the play. The play's language is direct, simplistic and realistic while the style of the dialogue is apt. The playwright's choice of linguistic minimalism in preference to the doctrinaire fashion celebrated by the likes of Wole Soyinka makes the play accessible to all classes of readers. The play deals with confusion and frustration of Tokieme the principal character upon which Agoro's existentialist drama revolves. The play is a good evidence of a creative work that strips reality to its naked bones. A psycho-analytical reading of the play indicates that Tokieme the most important character has an inner conflict. A conflict between him and his desires.

Tokieme is the only child of the Enimotors. He is a lawyer who is pressurized by broken love and feeling of unfulfilled life, a life scaled by worthlessness and virtually pathological alienation arising from an unrealized innermost longing for satisfaction. This drives him to take heroine which sends him straight to the mental hospital. During rehabilitation he comes in contact with a nurse, Asueme Ibikien at the hospital who is practically loving and full of care for him. Tokieme caught in the euphoria of her benignity, proposes to marry Asueme as his wife. She promptly responds favourably. Despite coming to a realization that Asueme, his proposed wife is from a family living with the leprosy stigma in his Epie community, he is determined to marry her. In spite of Sopupu, his friend's persuasion, warning from his fiancée and the likely opposition from his parents, Tokieme builds an inviolable love fort to beat down the taboo. He eventually receives the blessing of his parents, marries Asueme and takes her to Abuja.

Dialectics of Waiting and Time

We shall therefore, dialectically explore the subject of waiting and time from the background of the existential drama of the study. Tokieme's life of struggle and disappointment is drawn from existentialism, which sees man as lonely, alienated and caught up in a meaningless and absurd world. Kalusi holds strongly that man is faced with a dreadful freedom in choosing his world view (1996: 86). This theory takes us to the question of existence preceding essence. Man therefore exists first before he finds direction for himself. *The Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary* defines Existentialism as "the theory that human beings are free and responsible for their own actions in a world without meaning." (2005:400). The implication is that man is at liberty to choose what he wants. No existence is meaningful without the phenomenon of struggle and waiting. This is because waiting is a fundamental feature of the human condition and human life generally. In all stages of human life the waiting experience prevails. All through our lives we wait for something. Time, a point, an instance that carries our hope, that annuls or fulfils our dreams, struggles and expectations in life, is spent waiting for a thing of great interest. In this phenomenon of waiting, however we wait, where we wait, and our ability to withstand the pains imposed on us by waiting, extends

waiting to characterisation. There is therefore a dialectical link between the person waiting, the time he spends in waiting and what he is waiting for. The connectivity between waiting and time on one hand and time and change on the other revolves around Tokieme and his experiences in the play. Tokieme's struggle to find a well-defined life in the drama despite the chains of frustration he is plunged into attests to the treatment of waiting and time. He is faced with the problem of marital frustration. His marital interest remains static and unfulfilled despite the efforts made to overcome it. He is exposed to torrents of sorrow interspersed by cascade of fleeting joy. *Something to Die For* has in-built mechanisms of waiting, hope and the constant trepidation of the non-realization of that hope. And this is an existentialist trait plotted in the Character of Tokieme.

Tokieme is an estranged young man, the only child of his parents who is in desperate need of love but could not find it. He is therefore subjected to waiting for love with the experience of his hope rising and falling. The waiting puts him in a psychological whirlpool. Bonze drives him out of her house. Nimi refuses the gold wrist watch he gave to her on her 21st birthday and leaves him crashing emotionally. This frustration of his passion of love and feeling of internal satisfaction compounded by his fear of retribution, which in his imagination could have robbed him of his chances of having a lover because of his earlier aversion for girls intensifies and extends his fears for continuity of his family name. Tokieme is thus ruled constantly by fear of disappointment. This propels him to contemplate suicide by taking heroine to end his waiting game. After his rehabilitation his friend Sopupu advises him: "Tokieme, forget about these things. Your girl is on the way. One of these days" (Agoro 2000: p.16). Tokieme replies. "When, Sopupu? When?" Here Tokieme repeats the question of the existentialist in search of the omnipotence of God. Such questions include: does God exist? If He does, is He interested in man? If He is, is He powerful or powerless? If we associate these questions to Tokieme's experience in *Something to Die For* we come to conclusion that he must have been abandoned by God or he doubts the existence of God. Hence he embraces some form of pathological despondency and the attempt at suicide.

The representation of the existentialist character Tokieme is different from those absurd characters in Samuel Beckett's drama of waiting and time, *Waiting for Godot*. The play consists of dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for the appearance of the strange Godot, who persistently sends word that he will come but to no avail. They come across Lucky and Pozzo, they talk about their despair and their divine intervention in existence, they reflect on hanging themselves. In spite of this contemplation of suicide they wait. Vladimir and Estragon are a pair and clear copies of human beings who do not know why they were put on earth; they make the delicate assumption that there must be some point to their existence, and they look to

Godot for enlightenment. Because they hold out hope for meaning and bearing, they get hold of a kind of dignity that allows them to ascend above their pointless existence.

Something to Die For establishes the fact that it is only through waiting patiently in spite of frustration that one's deep desires can be realized. In *Something to Die For*, the playwright makes a parallel thesis statement on the subject of waiting and time. He opens a debate quite different from the established logic of waiting and time brought to literary scholarship by the likes of Samuel Beckett of the *Waiting for Godot* fame. In the classical concept of waiting, waiting brings about alienation, pessimism, hopelessness and faithlessness. In *Something to Die For* and *The Pain of Love*, the principal characters Tokieme and Lovelyn pass through excruciating experiences in trying to wait to fulfil their dreams. As characters of Christian breed that wait, they are strengthened by faith in God and the overwhelming anticipation that the end of the waiting will put smile on their faces.

Agoro is unequivocal in stating, from the Tokieme experience, that between the time of waiting and the time of hope and change, humanity should not allow negative thoughts to becloud its sense of judgement. This is because where the patience of man fails the patience of God endures and pays off. In Beckett's concept, waiting is laced with hope that rises and falls. In the process of waiting, frustration and regrets creep into the mind of the man who waits longer than expected. The waiting is endless and what is waited for is not seen at the end of the day. In *Waiting for Godot*, waiting does not see the light of day. This brings pain, alienation, hopelessness, faithlessness and depersonalization upon its characters. In *Something to Die For*, Tokieme's realization of what caused him to wait is not by any stress of interpretation an inspiring enactment of the waiting perception associated with the likes of Samuel Beckett. But it is considered very seriously in this investigation as a parallel thesis lunched from the Christian concept of waiting and time.

This concept sees waiting as having an end that attracts compensation. Thus in *Something to Die For*, the waiting passes with the coming of time. This brings joy upon Tokieme and his family. Thus, Agoro's artistic and philosophical commitment in this drama is found primarily, in the positive denouement he provides in the dialectical relationship between waiting and time which has a biblical allusion and influence. Ecclesiastics Chapter 3 verses 1-8 is loud about the question of time, which states that there is time for everything under the heaven. Tokieme waits despite disenchantment through the stormy seasons until he finally marries an affectionate wife. It can therefore be anecdotal that the playwright writes with a Christian mind and consciousness in consonance with the injunctions of the holy book of God.

Tokieme in his struggle to live a fulfilled and authentic life, takes decision that runs against his tradition, the future of his children and even his political carrier because he is desperate and determined to live a life of his dream. This brings to focus

Kierkegaard's association of existentialism with individuals caged in indecision getting freedom from 'leap of faith'. And this gives support to Nicola Abbagnano's theological element of existentialism which is powered with faith and hope. Kierkegaard's Christian existential postulation further reflects on the infringement of communal systems for private reasons. This is demonstrated by Tokieme in *Something to Die For* when he marries Asueme against the cultural position of his clan. Kierkegaard believes "that one must give the entirety of oneself to God." The fundamental thesis in Kierkegaard's existential writings is how the individual human being can come to terms with their own existence, for it is that existence which is the most important thing in every person's life. Unfortunately, we are as if adrift in an infinite sea of possible modes of living with no secure anchor that reason informs us will provide certainty and confidence (Austin 2012:1)

The question of waiting in the absurd and existential universes also has its character in Traditional African religious practice which is not very far from the position of Christianity. In a situation where humans rely on their local gods and deities for survival the waiting takes the dimension of ritual communion and it usually commences after a ritual supplication to the gods. Here again the waiting is characterized by optimism as the prayer sought is expected to manifest positively. Here, issues of faithlessness, alienation, depersonalization and hopelessness do not emerge as part of the waiting business. Thus the point is clear that both the Christian and African religious world views of waiting are adversative to the waiting thesis in the absurd tradition.

In *Something to Die For*, the point can be made that the waiting metaphor appropriated by the dramatist indicates that waiting as human experience is found in every functional field of human endeavour. Waiting and time are creations of God which humanity must cope with. As clearly dramatized in the universe of *Something to Die For*, waiting takes us to an appointed time. It also generates change. Between waiting, time and change there is an array of hope, fear, frustration and feeling of pessimism and optimism. Optimism sustains waiting while pessimism comes out as the centrifugal force.

Drawing lessons from Tokieme's incident in *Something to Die For*, waiting has the potential to destroy you if you are weak and impatient and it also has the power to make you if you have a strong upbeat spirit. This question of waiting also runs through the dramatic universe of another of Agoro's play, *The Pain of Love*. Where Lovelyn is frustrated by her boss Dr. Lasman, who refuses her promotion for five years. In all these years she waits hoping that God will not disappoint her. Lovelyn is compelled to grapple with the barbarity of Dr. Lasman, her boss for the sake of her love for God. She is full of hope that one day the waiting game will end and the promotion

waited for will come. There is no doubt that this tradition of waiting imported into drama by Agoro, is waiting influenced by Christian ethos.

It is fundamental to note that in the study of both texts, the dramatist postulates two schools of waiting with examples drawn from the experiences of Tokieme in *Something to Die For* and Lovelyn in *The Pain of Love*. These schools are drawn from the Christian concept of waiting which this paper will call the higher or the ideal waiting and the materialists waiting designated as the circular waiting. The higher waiting is characterized by optimism inspite of persecution from the forces of darkness while the circular waiting has fragile patience and optimism which snowballs into hopelessness, faithlessness and self-destruction. The play projects the author as one who has interest in the problem of existence.

The static situation explored by the play is predicated on the marital life of Tokieme and this propels the act of waiting. Tokieme's virtually hopeless wait demonstrates the existential position which underscores the fact that there is a chasm between human desires and the inane universe into which he has been dumped. The established position of both Camus and Sartre which highlights the inevitability for each person to find a set of values capable of ordering a disordered survival is being appropriated by the dramatist to energise Tokieme to struggle for his freedom from his painful marital ill luck.

Social Change

Drama is consistently a central means of addressing significant issues in any given society. This view is upheld by Robert Di Yanni. In his book *Literature; Reading fiction, poetry and Drama* he states: "Plays may be vehicles of persuasion Henrik Ibsen and Bernard Shaw frequently used the stage to dramatize ideas and issues" (2002:10). Bamidele holds that the social function of Art and the Artist is to help us make life bearable. Art should put order to the chaos of life through forms. This is more of a humanistic function that perches on the dialectical processes of art in politics (2001:33). This social function of art is further given voice by Chinua Achebe when he states:

When we speak of a writer's commitment we mean his attachment to particular social aims and the use of his writing to advance those social aims. This of course implies a belief that literature can and should be used as a fact for social change, and a writer has responsibility to do so (1978:177)

This function of art reflects by and large in Agoro's drama which this study investigates. Tokieme's desire to love and be loved by a woman of his choice is extremely unbearable that even his special training and education as a lawyer and his status as an adult could not present to him strong reasons to stop embarking on a suicide mission. His desire to tear off the garb of alienation, to break away from the painful

clutches of waiting to find soul soothing companionship is the canon which he lurches against the cultural inhibitions in Epie, his clan. His freedom from the blows dealt on him by frustrated love is a personal struggle to fulfil an innermost longing for satisfaction. Let us sound out this existentialist position of thought from the dialogic encounter between Sopupu and Tokieme when the open secret about Tokieme's proposed wife is revealed to him.

Sopupu: Toky, these factors are overwhelming
 If you marry this girl you'd be estranging
 Yourself from the entire community
 This is a risky thing to do (p.30)

Tokieme: Why must it always be so with me?
 I was often rejected, so I engaged in drugs.
 Now I have been accepted by a lady
 And you are suggesting that marrying her
 Would mean my estrangement from the community (p.31)

The presentation of Tokieme as an existentialist character here is not in doubt. Tokieme questions his destiny. His strong will empowered by his human passion and fear of dashing the soaring hopes of his fiancée which will portray him in bad light, propels him to damn the consequences of his action. We are persuaded by the fact that the Epie taboo about the leprosy stigma is kept aside and changed beginning from the Enimotors. This is a very significant socio-cultural revolution arising from Tokieme's personal struggle to make his existence valuable and rewarding.

Tokieme's struggle for culture change not only condemns but destroys class discriminations. This existential struggle puts culture and father's will crumbling for the triumph of personal love and marital progress. The dilapidating romantic experience of Tokieme in scene two of the text regenerates and assumes full flowering at the resolution of the conflict. This is sequel to his finding a wife whom he marries against an established cultural institution. Faced with the problem of accepting the boot of estrangement and the grim question of not winning election in the community in addition to the fact that his children will be barred from marrying in the clan and holding traditional titles, Tokieme, pushed by his burning passion of love makes a billing for the annihilation of the barring culture.

The damning of the culture in *Something to Die For* by Tokieme is a deliberate ideological engagement and commitment by both author and character to effect social change. Saddled with a terrific feeling of worthlessness, coupled with an interior crave for fulfillment, he is prepared cap- a- pie to pull down whoever and whatever that stand on his way for the realization of his long anticipated fashionable dream. Obviously, it

is culture that comes suffering and crumbling from the annihilating fire of Tokieme's existential social revolution.

Something to Die For, a serious comedy, points strongly to the fact that the sacrifice of waiting is essential for change and the achievement of a desire. It awakens humanity to the Christian ethical values of life. Tokieme dares the cultural establishment of his clan, puts his life and those of his unborn children in the danger of isolationism, political marginalization and social segregation. Agoro's play is as well seen in this discourse as another angle of presumption on the subject of waiting and time. And this is viewed from the angle of literature and commitment. The dramatist is presented as one flying in the wings of the promethean myth because of his concern for his society. This is a demonstration of the fact that playwrights speak their mind through the characters they create. Thus there is no disputing the fact that Tokieme's revolt against the leprosy stigma in his clan is Agoro's revolutionary crusade against the continued celebration of dehumanizing values and traditions in our society such as the Osu system in Igbo land. *Something to Die For* is a fictional drama of the Christian variety on the condition of waiting, a human predicament that results in estrangement and hopelessness.

Conclusion

This study which investigates the subject of waiting and time in Agoro's drama *Something to Die For* joins the long established debate propounded by the absurdist dramatists and scholars like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albe. The paper articulates the position of the dramatist investigated on the question of waiting and holds firmly that waiting and time may breed hopelessness, frustration, faithlessness and alienation as presented in Beckett's drama but departs radically from the view that the waiting experience is endless and permits permanent hopelessness. The study notes characteristically that this is another angle to the understanding of waiting and time and it is purely a Christian thesis. This perception of waiting dramatized in *Something to Die For* brings about optimism, compensation and promotes faith in spite of persecution and frustration.

This study further showcases Agoro's drama as one that establishes the question of psycho-social reaction of literary imagination to sociological and religious issues. The Christian foundation of existentialism share the Marxist ideological firing lines, with which it shares the judgment of existence as the primal and permanent tie of man with God and with his society. This dialectical understanding of waiting hypothesized in the play *Something to Die For* and *The Pain of Love* underscores the fact that legitimate existence is not the self-projection of man in the world but, rather, the self-projection of man in the love of and obedience to God. But this self-projection is the saving event that enters through human faith, perseverance and decisive struggle into the future possibilities of man.

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