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Prof. Isa Muhammad Maishanu

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Interrogating Existentialism in Simone de Beauvoir's *Le sang des autres*

Ramonu A. Sanusi and Nengi Ndidiamaka Teknikio

Abstract

This paper attempts to present an existential analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le sang des autres*. The study explores *Le sang des autres*' unique portrayal of outstanding features of French Existentialism namely, freedom and choice. It exposes characters' exercise of existential freedom in their political choices as well as in their sexual relationships. Using Existentialism as a theoretical framework, the study presents Simone de Beauvoir's literary characters as they make choices freely and thereafter assume full responsibility for their actions. Through the use of examples found within the text, the study further demonstrates that choice is consequential and could result in the suffering of the "Others." From the analysis, it is obvious that Simone de Beauvoir, projects authentic existence, as can be seen in Jean Blomart the protagonist and H el ene, one of his lovers. Authentic existence emphasizes that individuals must readily own up and accept full responsibility for their actions, whether such consequences are positive or negative.

Introduction

Existentialism is traditionally associated with the post-war era in Paris (Baert, 2011). It is a philosophical movement or tendency that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. Existentialist writers emphasize individual existence, freedom, and choice. Dreyfus (2008) identifies "moral individualism, subjectivity, choice, commitment, dread and anxiety" as the major themes in existential literature. Three twentieth century French writers and philosophers, namely, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, the author of the text under study, are known as the major proponents of Existentialism.

Although there were many philosophical movements in the twentieth century, Existentialism is by far the most influential of them all (Omoregbe 2012). The term 'Existentialism' is derived from the word existence. In general terms, humans speak of the existence of plants and animals and other creatures that we can easily see or touch. Existentialist philosophers on the other hand, do

not use the word existence when referring to such creatures, but rather restrict existence to humans. To existentialist philosophers, “only humans exist, all other kinds of being are, but do not exist (Omogbe 2012).

According to Walsh (2000), existentialism starts from the premise that there is no such thing as human nature and that our duty and responsibility is to create who we are. Its starting point is that humans are born with no fixed essence, that is, existence precedes essence. Thus, the sole preoccupation of Existentialism is human existence. To existentialists, humans are free to define themselves as they choose since they are radically free.

In existential criticism, different characteristics of human existence are examined, described and analysed by existentialist philosophers and critics in an attempt to understand fully what is meant for human beings to be in existence. Wallace (2009) has it that existentialist philosophy posits that humans are beings that create and define themselves in interactions with others. Creating and defining oneself becomes possible when humans make conscious choices, reach decisions, set goals and work towards attaining their goals and thereafter assume full responsibility for their choices.

Walsh (2000) further adds that “the focus of Existentialism is freedom and the individual, as Existentialism attempts to reinforce the liberal individual as a conscious choosing being.” Many critics agree that Existentialism promotes the view that humans should chart their own course in life, control their affairs and then assume full responsibility for the consequences of their actions and choices. For existentialists, when an individual chooses what to do, it is a choice, when he refuses to choose, that in itself is also a choice, because that individual has chosen not to choose. Thus, there appears to be no middle ground in Existentialism regarding choice. This paper focuses on freedom, choice and responsibility in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les sang des autres*. The selected text is content analysed, highlighting instances where characters are faced with choices that they must make on their personal freedom regarding the different situations that they encounter.

Freedom of the Individual in Existentialism

The theme of individual freedom and the responsibility resulting from such freedom permeates the different schools of thought in existential theory. This is because human freedom is considered an intrinsic nature of man. As Omogbe (2012) notes, “existentialists maintain that one does not acquire freedom since it is identical with human existence and is inseparable from it”.

This is what H el ene, a character in the novel means by her favorite saying: “c’est   moi de d cider” (It is up to me to decide). Human freedom, however, is a heavy responsibility because although man is free to choose, he is also responsible for the consequences of his choice. In other words, man’s destiny is in his own hands. His future is not predestined; rather it is the projects he resolves to carry out that determine his actions, because all his actions are geared towards fulfilling his life’s projects.

As Andronne (2012) posits, “Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine . . . emphasizing man as an individual, his freedom and responsibility, his possibility to make choices without any constraint, bringing forward the idea of subjectivity.” Both Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are adherents of atheist Existentialism which holds that man creates himself and carves out a future for himself since he is his own artisan. As a result, there is absolutely nothing that predetermines or preconditions the path of man in life.

Sartre considers human freedom as “the power to get involved or fully engaged in the present situation to build the future. It means that involvement or engagement is by definition an act, the power of human freedom is the power of engagement, active participation in the life of a community” (Andronne 2012). Man is thus not only responsible for his life, but for the life of others. The exercise of human freedom is central to the text under consideration because Simone de Beauvoir is an existentialist. Thus, embedded in her texts are issues that border on characters’ exercise of freedom in different areas of life. For example, in the novel, a young man is faced with the choice of either tolerating his capitalist father’s mistreatment of his workers and continue to be catered for by him, or condemn the ill treatment and be kicked out of the house. He chooses the latter, got a low paying job and moved out. On another occasion, he is required to free the Jews who were being oppressed and killed by sending fighters there. However, he refuses, knowing that using his freedom to decide would result in the death of some of the soldiers who would go on the rescue mission. It is important to note here that our interest in this study is limited to two areas, namely, freedom and choice in politics and in human relationships.

Politics and Choice in the Novel

Just as in every human society, choice can either bring people together or set them apart. The latter is true in the case of the protagonist, Jean Blomart and his father, a rich businessman. Jean’s political interests break the father-son relationship between them. At just eight years, Jean realises the big difference

between the rich and the poor. Along with his mother, Jean visits a bereaved family living in a slum. The filthiness in the surroundings makes Jean to feel sick. It was to the extent that on his return home, he could hardly eat his meal that evening. These incidents as well as other manifestations of poverty constantly remind Jean of unequal opportunities in his society. Thus, on becoming a teenager, he joins the communist party with the intention of bringing about a better society. Here, Jean is seen exercising his freedom to choose. He is aware of the anomalies in his society and decides to act so as to alleviate the suffering. But as the analysis will show, he meets with challenges while trying to achieve his goals.

Having joined the party, Jean would secretly go out at night for communist meetings without his father's knowledge. One night, the police raid the place, beat some up some and arrest many. Although Jean narrowly escapes, the police phone his father telling him of his son's involvement in communist activities. The father threatens to throw him out, so Jean learns a trade, saves up some money and moves out of the family house.

However, it did not take long before Jean realises that communism embraces violence as a means to achieving their goals. During such times, some members are maimed while others lose their lives. Jean is strongly opposed to this, and condemns them, saying: "Les communistes regardent les hommes comme des pions sur un echiquier; il s'agit de gagner la partie; les pions par eux-mêmes n'ont pas d'importance. p.77 (Communists consider people as pawns on a chessboard, it is about winning; the pawns in themselves have no importance). Thus, after the death of his colleague Jacques, which resulted from a violent encounter with an opposing group, Jean quits the communist party. He considers himself responsible for his death, having introduced Jacques to communism. Quitting communism after discovering its use of violence and accepting blame for Jacques' death are proofs of Jean's "authenticity" in existential criticism.

Even when a fellow communist party member dissuades Jean from quitting the party, reasoning with him that the loss of Jacques is no big deal, Jean remains resolute. Concerning Jacques' death the man says: « C'est un accident. Tu ne vas pas quitter le parti pour ça. Tu te dois au parti, mon petit. Nous le vengerons. Deux poings un cerveau : c'est si peu de chose, il reste tant de têtes et tant de poings »p. 52 (It is an accident. You are not going to leave the party for that. You owe the party, my brother. We will avenge. Two fists and a brain: it is such a small thing; there are many more heads and fists).

Jean strongly disagrees with him because he understands that his choice can affect others negatively. In Existentialism, when an individual accepts responsibility for his actions, acknowledges and owns up, he is considered to have an “authentic existence.” The actions of the protagonist, Jean Blomart, prove his authentic existence.

Authenticity is an important aspect explored in Existentialism. Another character in *Le sang des autres* that has authentic existence is Héléne. Héléne exercises her freedom in the political sphere as well as in her sexual relationships. On one occasion, Jean blames himself for the injury that Héléne gets while on a clandestine resistance mission. He claims responsibility for her injury, for he is in charge of the resistance movement: “Mon seul amour...c’est par ma faute” (My only love . . . it is due to my fault). But Héléne disagrees with him, considering her going on that mission as a decision she made personally; no one coerced her to do it. Thus, she refuses to lay the blame on Jean. Héléne’s depth of conviction and acceptance of full responsibility for her actions is very remarkable. In her own words:

Où es la faute? C’est moi qui ai voulu y aller....Tu n’avais pas le droit de décider pour moi. N’aie surtout pas de remords...Il ne faut pas en avoir. J’ai fait ce que j’ai voulu. Tu étais tout juste une pierre. Des pierres, il en faut pour faire des routes, sans ça comment pourrait-on choisir un chemin? (307)

Where does your fault lie? It is me that wanted to go . . . You do not have the right to decide for me. Do not feel regrets . . . You do not have to. I did what I wanted to do. You are just like a stone. Stones are used to make roads, without that how can one make a road?

From the time she becomes injured till she dies, Helene blames no one but herself. She is fully convinced that an individual is responsible for all the actions he or she takes. Thus, Héléne accepts full responsibility for her actions like existentialists do.

On another occasion, people wanted Jean to make a choice that could result in the death of others, but he bluntly refuses. During the fascist invasion of France, some individuals wanted Jean to consent so that people can go to war. But he declines, arguing that it is wrong for him to make decisions that would bring about the death of others. Although people are free, Jean believes that they should be wary of making decisions that would negatively affect others.

Although he sympathizes with the Jews who are suffering under the Nazi regime, Jean deems it unfit to pay with the blood of his fellow Frenchmen. He says:

Derrière les Pyrénées, les travailleurs d'Espagne tombaient sous les balles fascistes, mais pouvais-je racheter leur sang au prix des vies françaises, au prix d'une seule vie qui ne fût pas la mienne? Les juifs crevaient comme des mouches dans les camps de concentration, mais avais-je le droit d'échanger leurs cadavres contre les corps innocents des paysans de France? Je pouvais payer avec mon corps, avec mon sang; mais les autres hommes n'étaient pas une monnaie à mon usage (155)

Behind the Pyrenees, Spanish workers are falling under fascist bullets, but do I have to redeem their blood at the cost of French lives, at the cost of a life that is not mine? The Jews are dying like flies in concentration camps, but do I have the rights to exchange their corpses with the bodies of innocent French citizens? I could have paid with my body, with my blood, but other men are not money for my use.

Jean reasons that he does not have the right to send people to go and die in war. He would rather give his own life in order to save others than sacrifice the life of his fellow Frenchmen

Choice and Freedom in Sexual Relationships

As an unmarried young man, Jean Blomart, the protagonist in *Le sang des autres*, chooses to have more than one sexual partner at a time. One is named Madeleine and the other Hélène. Jean and Madeleine do not strictly confine their romantic affection to each other. In other words, Jean is not exclusively for Madeleine neither is Madeleine exclusively for him. Simone de Beauvoir (95, 96) uses the protagonist Jean to describe that type of relationship.

C'était vrai, aucun engagement ne nous liait, pendant certaines périodes, nous nous rencontrions chaque jour et puis Madeleine disparaissait pour plusieurs semaines; elle me confiait avec candeur ses déboires sentimentaux. Si j'avais eu des aventures si je m'étais épris d'une femme, je le lui aurais dit sans embarras. (66)

It is true, no commitment binds us together, for some time, we were meeting each other everyday and then Madeleine would disappear for several weeks; she would then honestly confide

in me her emotional heartbreaks. If I have had affairs, if I had fallen in love with a woman, I will tell her about it without embarrassment.

The excerpt above well illustrates what is considered acceptable to Madeleine and Jean, the two young characters. . From time to time, Jean goes out with other ladies and Madeleine with other men. On these occasions, Madeleine relates her sexual exploits to Jean and Jean would do the same to her in return. Obviously, it is safe to conclude that tolerance of multiple sexual partners is mutually acceptable to both parties. The fact that they do not reproach or accuse each other of infidelity, but rather openly tell each other about their sexual exploits lends credence to this claim.

Helene does not only exercise her freedom and choice in political issues but also in her relationships. Her favorite saying: “c’est à moi de décider”, [It is for me to decide] shows her determination. She meets Jean for the first time and falls in love with him. She proposes friendship to him, but Jean turns her offer down. Jean praises himself for his ability to reject H el ene’s offer in these terms: Je m’ tais bien d fendu, j’ tais tout fier de ma prudence incorruptible... je croyais faire de ma vie ce que je d cidais d’en faire je me sentais libre et sans reproche. (78,79) [I defended myself very well, I was proud of my incorruptible prudence . . . I believed I could do whatever I decide with my life, I felt free and without reproach].

However, Jean’s refusal lasts only for a short while because H el ene perseveres and Jean eventually succumbs and they become lovers. The newly formed relationship between Jean and H el ene is a mutually beneficial one, for it was not until his relationship with H el ene that Jean begins to enjoy sexual relations to the full. Frankly evaluating himself, Jean admits the wide gap that exists between how he feels when with Madeleine as opposed to how he feels when with H el ene. According to him, he feels like a criminal when with Madeleine because she appears to be horrified each time they make love. However, he does not experience any negative feelings when with H el ene, but rather feels very much at home. Acknowledging the difference between his two lovers, Jean says:

Avec Madeleine, nous faisons l’amour en silence et presque toujours dans la nuit: [...] quand je la caressais, je me sentais toujours criminel. Toi, [H el ene] tu n’ tais pas dans mes bras un corps abandonn , mais une femme tout enti re. Tu me souriais bien en face, pour que je sache que tu es l , [...] au milieu des

élans les plus passionnés, quelque chose dans ta voix, dans ton sourire disait "C'est parce que j'y consens." [...] tu me mettais en paix avec moi-même. Devant toi, j'étais sans remords. (137)

With Madeleine, we make love in silence and almost always at night: ... when I caress her, I always felt like a criminal. You, [Hélène] you were not an abandoned body in my hand, but a whole woman. You smiled to my face, so that I know that you are here, freely, that you were not lost in the tumult of your blood. You did not feel like the prey of a shameful fatality; in the midst of most passionate moments, something in your voice, in your smile would say "It is because I consent to it." ...you put me at peace with myself. Before you, I was without regrets.

In emphasizing the difference between Madeleine and Hélène, Jean uses some expressions that are strikingly vivid. These include, for example, [Tu ne sentais pas la proie d'une fatalité honteuse] "You did not feel like the prey of a shameful fatality]. Obviously this points to how Madeleine's attitudes affect him. Furthermore, Jean says "tu me mettais en paix avec moi-même" [you put me at peace with myself]. Again it is evident that while Jean feels at peace when with Hélène, that is far from his emotions when with Madeleine. Unlike Madeleine who feels dirty and guilty anytime she makes love with Jean, thereby leaving him sexually unsatisfied, Hélène is a more likeable person to Jean, for she well knows how to respond to Jean's emotional and sexual needs. Thus, Jean could say that with Hélène, he feels no regrets.

On a closer look, however, one can say that although Madeleine exercises freedom in her relationships, she does not enjoy making love, not with Jean, nor with other men. As a result, she often suffers emotional heartbreaks from the numerous relationships she goes into with different sexual partners. Overtime, Madeleine develops a very low self-esteem and does not value life. In the novel we read about Madeleine's poor outlook on life « Il était vrai que sa vie ne valait pas cher puisqu'elle la mettait elle-même à si bas prix; son corps ne valait pas cher, elle le livrait avec indifférence à qui l'en sollicitait » (83). [It is true that her life does not have much worth since she places herself very low; her body does not have a high value either, for she gives herself away to whoever asks for it].

Madeleine's low self-worth springs from the uneasiness she feels whenever she engages in sexual relations. Since there is no indication that she suffers any physical pain when she has sexual relations, more so, she engages in the

act willingly, not under compulsion or duress. These feelings of guilt can therefore be understood as disturbances/problems that are psychological in nature. Possibly, one can attribute this psychological problem to a kind of identity conflict, resulting from a change in Madeleine's view regarding sex.

While growing up, Madeleine's parents may have inculcated in her that only married people are entitled to sexual relations and that these must be restricted between a husband and wife. It is likely that among the set of moral codes handed down to Madeleine is one which rules out all sexual relations outside marriage. Thus, because Madeleine no longer lived up to a belief she internalized since childhood as being 'right', she feels guilty because she considers herself a "bad girl" for engaging in premarital sex.

It is true that our upbringing has much bearing on our view of sexuality as well as our personal identity. In her work titled *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson (26) posits that "the origin of our sexual being is in the nature of affirmation or disruption of our sense of self that occurs in childhood". According to a patriarchal ideology, there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender role as an "Angel of the house" she becomes very submissive and does all that is expected of her in a patriarchal system, she will be regarded as a "good girl"; if, on the other hand she fails to do so, and is able to express her freedom in sexual relationships, then she is a "bad girl". These two roles that are recognized in a patriarchal system are also known as "madonna" and "whore" or "angel" and "bitch" (Tyson, 88).

According to this patriarchal ideology "bad girls" violate patriarchal sexual norms. When they are sexually forward in appearance or behaviour, or when they have multiple sexual partners, girls are said to violate sexual norms. Both Madeleine and Helene belong to this group. "Good girls" on the other hand are modest, honest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and sexually pure. Thus, whenever Madeleine realizes that her actions define her as a bad girl, she becomes disturbed. This is one of the psychological implications for Madeleine for expressing her freedom in sexual matters.

However, not all in the novel who use their freedom in sexual relationships experience feelings of guilt. Hélène is a bold and courageous woman who freely decides and pursues her interests. Although initially difficult, she persists in courting Jean and eventually succeeds. By creating this character, Simone de Beauvoir shows that it is possible, for people to deviate from social norms or established conventions as they exercise their freedom. This is

considered moral as long as the individual does not cause harm to the “Other”. This possibly is what H el ene’s incessantly courting Jean until he eventually succumbs could mean. This is in consonance with Calixthe Beyala’s presentation of female characters that are capable of doing what was formerly considered a male reserve in sexual relationships in her novel titled *Femme nue femme noire*. Therein we read “seul le male doit d ecle ncher l’acte d’amour” (20) (Only the male should initiate the act of lovemaking). But immediately after stating this widely held view that only men should initiate sexual relationships Beyala debunks it by creating female characters who go against set societal gender roles in the area of sexuality by courting men, and thereafter initiate the sexual act when together with their lovers.

Conclusion

In this study, we have demonstrated that Existentialism promotes the idea that humans, men and women alike, can express themselves freely in different areas of life. While exercising freedom which is open to all individuals, , however, it does require that individuals be mindful of the consequences of their actions on “others” By others, we mean other individuals with whom they coexist. Thus, it becomes necessary that an individual be able to stand up responsibly and face the consequences of their actions. Also, the study highlighted two areas where characters in the selected text make their choices, namely, in their choices concerning political interests/issues and their sexual relationships. Accordingly, characters do not adhere to societal conventions; rather, they live freely, deciding for themselves what to do and what to avoid. By so doing, they prove beyond doubt that they have authentic existence.

As a true existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir in *Le sang des autres*, depicts characters who use their freedom in ways that show that they are mindful of the consequences their choices would have on the lives of others. Thus, they deliberately refuse to make choices that would affect others negatively, as found in the case of Jean, who, when persuaded, refuses to send his countrymen to war. Also, we observed how H el ene who sustains mortal injuries while on a clandestine mission readily accept responsibility for her actions. Rather than blame Jean who organizes the mission, H el ene blames herself, even as she lay on her death bed, and until she dies, she takes all the blame, thereby acquitting her lover Jean of all guilt. Certainly, one can say without mincing words, that Simone de Beauvoir’s characters do indeed have authentic existence!

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