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# Beyond the Absurd: Human Aspirations and Transcendence in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence*

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**Abstract:** The tension between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's perceived indifference, engendered by existentialism and the aftermath of World II, has significantly shaped contemporary literary writings. The basic essence of existence and the underlying structural order and significance of life on Earth have since been under intense scrutiny. Literary writers challenge the orderly, meaningful, and well-structured world that modernity represents. In an attempt to portray the world and life in their purest forms of meaninglessness, absurdism emerged. This paper undertakes a hermeneutical analysis of the human aspirations and transcendence that go beyond the absurd in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence*. The study is anchored on Postmodernist literary theory as advanced by Derrida, Lyotard, Jameson, and Delaney (2005), and Marxism as proposed by Marx and Engels (1848). It employs an analytical research design within the qualitative research approach. Data are collected from the two texts via textual coding, allowing a blend of thematic, discourse, and narrative textual analyses. Significantly, the study reveals how the African worldview offers pathways of transcending the absurd and seemingly meaninglessness of life. The findings include: hope as a mechanism of transcendence; absurdity defied through the journey metaphor; and the existential reconciliation of meaning and transcendence in the afterlife. This paper concludes that the absurd exists in the triumph of the transcendence.

**Keywords:** Absurdity, aspirations, defying the absurd, Postmodernism, Marxism, and transcendence.

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## 1. Introduction

Human beings stand apart from all other creatures due to their wisdom and knowledge, placing them at the peak of existence. Despite this, the world remains a vast and complex sphere, often eluding human comprehension. A constant search for meaning and answers to life realities characterises humanity, even within the African context. This human insatiability is manifested in various aspects of life, including financial, social, spiritual, traditional, and emotional realms. Psychological phenomena such as 'hedonic adaptation' contribute to this endless pursuit, wherein individuals quickly aim to return to a baseline level of happiness, prompting continued desires and struggles for improvement and betterment. This perpetual quest for fulfilment fosters both individual and societal advancement but also poses challenges to the long-term happiness and holistic well-being of humans. The search for meaning and the efforts towards absolute comfort in life, spur men into an endless and continuous strive in life's pathway. Humanity strives to discover and rediscover itself for the better.

This human drive for self-discovery and growth is underpinned by the continual pursuit of meaning in life. This search has culminated in the establishment of institutions such as family, religion, education, economy, politics, law, reason, media, science, and technology. These institutions have historically helped humanity address fundamental questions to structure the society better. For instance, religion, as Jensen (2021) notes, provides frameworks for understanding the spiritual and temporal realms of existence, while economics and politics shape the resource production, distribution and governance (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Sen, 1999) of a people. Reason and science on the other hand, enhance human progress (Pinker, 2018; Ridley, 2020), yet these institutions do not entirely satisfy human insatiability. They have not made the world a perfect abode.

Irrespective of the improved life and world brought about by these institutions, they also often fail humanity under various adverse conditions such as political instability, economic downturns, endless struggles, and existential crises. As a result of this, Nietzsche (1882) famously proclaimed that 'God is dead,' expressing disillusionment with religious and moral structures, while Hardy (2008) and Achebe (1958) explored the limitations of human control over fate through their works. Wars, such as World Wars I and II and other conflicts in Africa, exemplify the catastrophic failures of the political and economic systems. The destruction wrought by war, as Parker (2001) and Dongala (2002) illustrate, reveals the absurdity of human existence, reinforcing Camus' (1942) notion that the human quest for meaning collides with an indifferent universe that does not care. The failures of governance, particularly in postcolonial Africa, are evident in the rampant corruption and authoritarianism almost all over Africa. Mamdani (1996) critiques 'decentralized despotism,' where power is used for oppression rather than empowerment. In addition, Chabal and Daloz (1999) point to the 'politics of the belly,' wherein political elites prioritize personal enrichment over democratic governance. For this reason, Achebe (1966) and Thiong'o (1977) also paint the picture of politically corrupted states (African) in their literary works. Consequently, insecurity and economic deplorability persist, perpetuating societal disillusionment that forms a basic component of the absurdity of human life.

Furthermore, the grip of natural disasters on humanity at different places and times, highlights human vulnerability, challenging the religious belief in a benevolent God/god(s). Catastrophic events such as the 2010 Haitian earthquake (Schuller, 2016), African droughts (Thiong'o, 2006), and tsunamis (Lay, Hiro, & Charles, 2005) reveal the unpredictability of nature in its harshness towards people. Similarly, recent floods and landslides in Kenya have led to widespread devastation in people's lives especially for those not met with death. These disasters, alongside chronic illnesses and mortality rates, reinforce the absurdity of human existence where one wonders the essence of human existence. Not even the modern healthcare system has salvaged humanity from the tormenting illnesses and impending death that befall humankind, hence, Gawande (2014) critiques modern medicine's failure to address the realities of aging and death, underscoring the unavoidable existential struggles of humanity; the absurdity of humanity.

In all these chaotic and difficult realities of life, some people preoccupy themselves with the pursuit of power at all costs, such that the relentless pursuit of power further exemplifies human absurdity. In such pursuit of power, many are trampled upon while others perceived as obstructions are eliminated from the way. Such a power quest drives not only ambitions but also destructions that increase human absurd experiences. Nietzsche (1886) posits that power drives human ambition, a view supported by Lukes (2005), who examines its impact on institutions and the relationships that exist among people. The thirst for power has fuelled political instability, colonisation, and economic subjugation, as seen in Soyinka's King Baabu (2001) and across almost all spheres of Africa and beyond; a reality that makes life unbearable. The persistence of power struggles, from slavery to modern economic dependencies, perpetuates the cycles of exploitation and inequality, which subjugate many to perpetual hardship in life and a few to unending affluence in life.

In light of these realities, one is compelled to question the purpose of human existence. The perpetual pursuit of meaning, fulfilment, and power often leads to disillusionment of the world and in the world. While humanity continues to build institutions, seek knowledge and meaning, and strive for improvement in life, the inherent absurdity of existence remains an inescapable truth; leaving humanity in continuous social/class struggles (Marxism); a metanarrative that requires complete deconstruction (Postmodernism). Nevertheless, this sad inescapable truth of human absurdity does not imply a total defeat of humanity; it does not make the world an

absolute sphere of meaninglessness; it does not dissuade humanity from striving on; it does not discredit all human efforts and struggles even amidst their absurd situations of life. Man, soldiers on, man remains constantly on the move; a movement that translates into small wins. As the texts illustrate, humanity has transcended and continues to transcend these absurdities with the ultimate bit of it in the afterlife reality of the African cosmology, thereby, defying the absurd.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs two distinct but interrelated theoretical frameworks: Postmodernism and Marxism. Postmodernism, which emerged in reaction to the rigid structures of Modernism, challenges metanarratives, fixed identities, and universal truths. It emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and the deconstruction of conventional hierarchies in politics, culture, and knowledge production (Preda, 2001). Prominent theorists like Foucault (2001), Lyotard (1979), and Derrida have shaped its discourse, particularly through the rejection of absolute meaning, the instability of language, and the critique of grand narratives. Nietzsche's works (1966, 1967) further laid the foundation for postmodern thought by questioning truth and embracing ambiguity.

Key aspects of Postmodernism include scepticism toward science, rejection of positivism, the centrality of subjectivity, and the blurring of traditional distinctions (Delaney, 2005; Copan, 2007) of opposites like white and black, male and female, good and bad and so on. It critiques how knowledge is shaped by cultural and historical contexts, highlights the influence of media in constructing hyperreality, and celebrates the hybridity brought by globalisation. Literary forms associated with Postmodernism, such as intertextuality, metafiction, and fragmented narratives, are evident in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman and Ruganda's Echoes of Silence, both of which subvert dominant Western narratives of history, culture, and morality. Derrida's deconstructionist ideas, including 'différance' and 'logocentrism', are particularly relevant in analysing these texts' representations of colonial and postcolonial realities that contribute to building and fuelling the absurd experiences of the African people.

Some other scholars expound the perspectives of Postmodernism as propounded by the aforementioned theorists by exposing other diverse perspectives characterised by the following core features:

i. Distrust in Science: Postmodernists question the benefits of scientific progress, arguing that it contributes to industrialisation's negative effects, such as environmental degradation, poverty, and unemployment, particularly after the destruction of the World Wars.
ii. Rejection of Positivism and Verificationism: The idea of universal truths or objective research is challenged, with Postmodernism rejecting overarching theories that claim to explain everything (Preda, 2001; Delaney, 2005).
iii. Subjectivity and Individuality: Knowledge is shaped by personal experiences rather than objective reasoning. Nietzsche's influence shifted the focus from state and politics to individual concerns (Brann, 1992).
iv. Truth as Relative: Postmodernists view truth as a construct rather than a universal constant, emphasising that different perspectives lead to different realities (Copan, 2007).
v. Blurring of Traditional Distinctions: Binary oppositions like male vs. female or East vs. West are questioned, promoting fluidity in concepts related to gender, race, class, and ethnicity (Copan, 2007).
vi. Globalisation and Cultural Fusion: Increased global interactions lead to a merging of cultures in various fields, urging scholars to study these changes without imposing moral judgements (Copan, 2007).
vii. Media and Information Overload: Media shapes human perception and creates 'hyperreality', where representations of reality become more significant than reality itself (Copan, 2007).
viii. Innovative Literary Forms: Postmodern literature embraces irony, fragmentation, intertextuality, and metafiction, breaking traditional storytelling norms (Copan, 2007).

Complementing Postmodernism as used in this paper is Marxism, which remains crucial in addressing material conditions, class struggle, and economic determinism—areas that Postmodernism does not strongly emphasise.

Rooted in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848), Marxism critiques capitalism, exposing its contradictions, exploitation, and alienation as illustrated in the two texts. Concepts such as historical materialism, surplus value, and revolution frame the class conflicts in both plays. The Communist Manifesto and Das Kapital lay the foundation for understanding these struggles, which are further illustrated through themes of oppression, labour, and social upheaval. Marxist ideas of the proletarian revolution and the eventual emergence of a classless society serve as analytical tools to examine the dynamics of power and resistance in the texts. The insatiable human nature and the capitalist societies of pronounced inequality bring about unsettledness of human conditions, which lead to relentless human struggles and strives, marked with disappointments, failures, and absurdities.

These struggles bring about a clash and defeat of interests, leading to a high level of disappointment and frustration in life and the world. At times, such individual and societal struggles and clashes lead to the irrationality of the world and the people, with the destruction of lives (death) and properties (evident in the World Wars) as resultant effects. All about life is simply fragmented and chaotic as a result of individuals' and society's quest and struggle for betterment and meaning in the world. Hence, Marxism becomes highly needed to complement Postmodernism in the course of this study, especially because Postmodernism does not strongly capture these aspects of material conditions, class struggle, and economic determinism, which form strong parts of the studied texts, but Marxism does. By integrating Postmodernism and Marxism, this paper explores the absurdity of human existence, class struggles, and fragmented realities within *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Echoes of Silence*. Postmodernism interrogates the instability of meaning and cultural hybridity, while Marxism highlights the economic and social forces shaping individual and collective human experiences. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analysing the complexities of colonial and postcolonial tensions, existential absurdity, and societal collapse within the studied plays.

## 3. Procedure

The study adopts an analytical research design within a qualitative research approach, making it suitable for literary analysis. By focusing on descriptive and analytical research methods, the study enables a deep textual examination rather than statistical analysis. Drawing from Bernard and Ryan's (2010) perspective, qualitative research identifies and describes patterns, assesses differences, and tests hypotheses. Given that the study explores the concept of transcending human absurdity in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence*, an analytical approach is appropriate. The analysis heavily relies on the researcher's subjective interpretation, aligning with the study's emphasis on understanding human incomprehensibility in an indifferent world.

The study area is Africa, focusing on the absurd realities as reflected in specific literary and geographical contexts. While the study acknowledges that absurdity is a universal human concern, it deliberately contextualises this theme within African societies, as depicted in the selected texts. The thematic area is literary absurdism, chosen due to the chaotic nature of contemporary global experiences like political instability, social upheavals, pandemics, illnesses, death, and existential uncertainties that leave a lot of people questioning the meaning of life. Geographically, the study examines the Yoruba society during colonial Nigeria in *Death and the King's Horseman*, despite its publication in 1975. Similarly, *Echoes of Silence* is set in an imagined Kenyan post-independence society, reflecting political tensions, particularly between the Luo and Kikuyu communities, all as imagined in the texts. The study population consists of the five absurd plays by Soyinka (*The Road, Madmen and Specialists, A Play of Giants, King Baabu,* and *Death and the King's Horseman*) and the three absurd plays by Ruganda (*The Flood, The Burdens,* and *Echoes of Silence*), which best illustrate existential and absurdist themes and realities. These plays are selected because they strongly portray absurdist features, such as fragmented dialogues, non-linear narratives, chaotic existential elements and thematic concerns, making them ideal for this study.

To achieve its objectives, the study employs a purposive sampling technique, which allows for the deliberate selection of texts that best represent the absurdist literatures by the two authors. This non-probability method

ensures efficiency by focusing on the most relevant materials that suit the achievement of the set objectives. The primary data collection technique is textual coding, where key themes, phrases, and motifs are labelled and categorised for analysis. The texts are read multiple times to ensure a deep understanding, and additional insights are gathered through observation of YouTube video clips related to the plays. The reliability and validity of theoretical and methodological tools were tested in a pilot study of *King Baabu* (Soyinka, 2001) and *The Burdens* (Ruganda, 1972), which share absurdist elements with the main texts. The collected data is analysed thematically, discursively, and narratively to uncover patterns in language, character development, and socio-political critiques. The analysis therefore illustrates the concern of this paper, which is 'Beyond the Absurd: Human Aspirations and Transcendence in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence*.'

## 4. Analysis of Human Aspirations and Transcendence in *Death and the King's Horseman* (Text I) and *Echoes of Silence* (Text II)

As 'Homo sapiens sapiens,' human beings are perpetually in motion, constantly setting the world into movement. This is why it is often said that nothing in life is permanent except change itself. The insatiable nature of humanity does not wane; instead, it fuels an unrelenting drive, a fire that compels individuals to keep striving despite the apparent meaninglessness and irrationality of the world. As long as life endures, the journey continues. Nothing remains static; existence is marked by perpetual dynamism. The world is not where it was two hundred years ago, nor is Africa where it stood a century ago. Individuals, communities, and entire civilisations are in motion, shaping and reshaping reality.

However, this movement is accompanied by pain, failures, disappointments, irrationality, desperation, frustration, meaninglessness, loss, and death. These experiences provoke profound existential inquiries; the question of the absurd, some of which yield answers, while others remain unresolved. Among the critical questions to consider are: Are failure and meaninglessness the inevitable destination of humanity? Have there been glimpses of triumph, however small, amidst the absurd? Are there tangible instances of humanity's resilience and capacity to prevail? Have individuals and societies transcended, and do they continue to transcend the absurd burdens of human existence? Are there human aspirations that have and still demonstrate the capacity of defying the absurd? Furthermore, does everything end here in this world, or does the afterlife offer the possibility of hope and renewal?

In this vein, Pritchard (2010) asserts that while the absurdity of life may seem overwhelming, it simultaneously presents individuals with an opportunity to assert their agency by imbuing life with meaning. This perspective aligns with the notion that goals like moral responsibility, creativity, and social interaction are acts of defiance against the absurd. For instance, even when ultimate meaning remains elusive, ethical living and artistic expression become mechanisms through which individuals counteract the void of meaninglessness. By acknowledging the reality of absurdity yet refusing to succumb to its nihilism, humanity exhibits resilience and an enduring quest for significance. Furthermore, Pritchard highlights angst as a catalyst for transformation, suggesting that confronting the absurd can lead to a reassessment of one's values and a deepened sense of self. Through this process, individuals can focus on aspirations that affirm their humanity, such as forging authentic relationships, contributing to societal progress, or pursuing personal fulfilment.

Similarly, Gorichanaz (2022) examines the mechanisms through which hope emerges, emphasising the role of information in shaping aspirations that transcend existential absurdity. He identifies four interrelated components that actively shape hope: belief, desire, imagination, and metacognition. Belief provides the fundamental conviction that a better future is attainable despite life's inherent uncertainties and absurdities; desire channels this belief into actionable aspirations, motivating individuals to pursue meaningful goals; imagination expands this process by enabling individuals to envision alternative realities and pathways to fulfilment, extending their perspective beyond the immediate present; and metacognition, the awareness and regulation of one's own cognitive processes, allows individuals to critically assess their beliefs and desires, ensuring that their aspirations remain adaptable and grounded in reality.

Drawing from these scholarly perspectives and in alignment with the thematic explorations in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence*, it becomes evident that over time, individuals and societies have transcended, and continue to transcend the absurd human experiences. Humanity at different times and places has defied absurdity. Moreover, from an African perspective, the notion of the afterlife presents a compelling possibility for hope and renewal, suggesting that existence does not merely end within the confines of this temporal world.

**4.1 Hope: A Mechanism of Transcendence**

Hopelessness is one of the most devastating conditions of human existence, when one merely exists without purpose or motivation to propel them forward. It strips life of meaning, rendering human endeavours futile and reducing individuals to mere shadows of their potential. In such a state, life becomes the fertile ground upon which absurdity flourishes. It is precisely in these moments that the opposite of hopelessness becomes most essential, where hope emerges as a vital force. Gorichanaz (2022) defines hope as a positive attitude oriented towards a possible (yet uncertain) desired outcome. Although hope is often regarded as a virtue, hopelessness remains pervasive, tied not only to present circumstances but also to anxieties about the future. As a result, hope itself is also multidimensional, extending beyond the present into the unknown terrain of the future.

Conformingly, hope is a multifaceted and intricate idea that is frequently described as a positive motivational state that results from the union of pathways thinking (the capacity to organise and carry out plans to accomplish desired results) and goal-oriented intensity. It allows people to imagine a better future even in the face of hardship or uncertainty because it is a cognitive and emotional process. By giving people a sense of direction and purpose, hope serves as a protective factor in the literature of life, building resilience and enhancing mental health. Hope affirms the possibility of substantial progress, providing a means of overcoming absurdity and despair in the face of existential challenges. Hope is a dynamic cognitive process that enables people to overcome obstacles in life, according to Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., Yoshinobu, L., Gibb, J., Langelle, C., and Harney, P. (1991). Its dynamic nature stands out in different ways of its manifestation in the two texts as part of the human aspiration that demonstrate the capacity to transcend absurdity.

Hope transcends the mere ephemerals. It steps into the great unknown with the aim of succeeding. It doesn't fleet away, it persists. Elesin on this note therefore says in *Text I*:

> *All you who stand before the spirit that dares*
> *The opening of the last door of passage,*
> *Dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish*
> *Transcends the blotting out of thought*
> *In one mere moment's tremor of the senses.*
> *Do me credit. And do me honour.*
> *I am girded for the route beyond*
> *Burdens of waste and longing.*
> *Then let me travel light. Let*
> *Seed that will not serve the stomach*
> *On the way remain behind. Let it take root*
> *In the earth of my choice, in this earth*
> *I leave behind*. (pp. 16-17)

He makes it so clear that his desire, his hope, his *'wish transcends the blotting out of thoughts.'* Whatever he asks for is not just for the flesh, not just for pleasure, not completely ephemeral, instead, it harbours a sense of hope; one that transcends the immediate. He notes that the seed will not be for the stomach. It is meant to take root and grow beyond him, even when he is gone from this earth. This seed refers to the yet-to-be (the unborn) he intends to beget with the new maiden. His first son Olunde is sent away to the white man's land, he believes that another will come through his conjugal union with this new girl who appeals to him. Iyaloja doubts his

intentions by saying, *'Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards'* (p. 18). To this Elesin responds, *'The waters of the bitter stream are honey to a man whose tongue has savoured all'* (p. 18). This is a reassurance of the fact that there is no cause for alarm, that there is hope and he will accomplish the set-out goal of transitioning to the life after. There might be many interpretations of the above excerpt, but toeing the line of thought in Postmodernism which posits that truth is relative and that subjectivity/ individuality should ride over objectivity, one can confidently sieve out the reality of hope from these statements, pointing to the fact that hope is a mechanism of transcending the ephemeral; that is, the immediate.

After having waited for quite a time without Njoroge returning in *Text II*, Wairi reassures Double O that *'He will come by and by'* (p. 60). Reaffirming the exact time Double N is to return, Double O speaks, *'He did say today at six o'clock, I'm sure of that'* (p. 60). To be sure of that implies some sense of hope that he is not mistaking. Wairi then attempts to say something she does not finish, *'If you are in a hurry …'* (p. 60). However, because of the reality of hope as a mechanism of transcendence, Double O immediately cuts her short by shouting, *'God forbid, no. He has my manuscript you see'* (p. 60). He knows that leaving is not the best option; that being in a hurry to go home without his mission being accomplished is not the end of his journey; and that his goal is never not to see Double N. Therefore, he waits on; transcending the immediate obstacle of Double N not showing up. Again, in the long monologue by Wairi where she recounts the images of her past about her husband, she says, *'What's itching you, old girl? The moment will soon be upon us that will put an end to our uncertainty and the long spell of waiting …'* (p. 41). Then she continues in the same monologue, *'An athlete at sixteen, a commissioned officer at twenty. Thereafter, the future will be smooth … sergeant. Lieutenant, major general, general and why not … president … combining military skills and intellectual acumen … a new breed on the continent … a pride of his mama and papa, but above all, to his people'* (p. 42). There is hope that the future will be better and that he climbs from one position to the higher ones, up to the position of the president. This is practically hope at work; one that transcends the immediate into a better future. This is the quest that governs individuals in a society that is made up of social and class strata according to Marxism. Such societies should be transformed into one where everyone is at the highest social/class level. This Marxist ideology is also hope-oriented, where all in the society and the world will one day climb to the top.

With hope on the ground, danger at some points in life is averted. Hope becomes an instrument that fortifies one to transcend moments and situations of danger. It fuels one's courage to soldier on amidst uncertainties and unfavourable conditions. The danger in such circumstances becomes a stepping stone towards the manifestation of hope. Suspecting that riot might erupt from the people, Pilkings tells Aide-de-Camp in *Text I*, *'It's unlikely but I don't want to take a chance. I made them believe I was going to lock the man up in my house, which was what I had planned to do in the first place. They are probably assailing it by now. I took a roundabout route here so I don't think there is any danger at all. At least not before dawn. Nobody is to leave the premises of course — the native employees I mean. They'll soon smell something is up and they can't keep their mouths shut'* (p. 42). By saying *'I don't think there is any danger at all,'* he reinstates hope; a hope he believes will suffice till morning comes. It is a hope that transcends the immediate perceived danger of riot, to the reassurance of peace that will last at least for some time. Marxism highlights the place of social inequality as the source and cause of conflict in society. Evidence of this is seen here where social difference makes it possible for Pilkings to abduct an important native chief; an act that is likely to cause riot or revolution from the people.

The state of hopelessness can only be counteracted by the state of hope. When hopelessness beats humanity down, it can only take hope to raise humanity. Thus, with hope, one is not or should not be trapped within the chains that hold them captive. Slaving in the domains of disappointment, loss and futility, one only needs to put on the armour of hope. Wairi in *Text II* voices this concept out to Double O, *'(Moves towards Double O) You smell of silence already, Double O. You mustn't be morose. Live life, while you still have a chance. No one will do it for you. Grace is not the end of the world. Nor is Tina. Wake up man'* (p. 95). To have a chance is to be hopeful. This is not just a piece of advice from Wairi to Double O, it is a wakeup call on humanity to transcend their current predicaments and still find meaning in life; meaning to keep living. The frustrations that trap people in a hole of pain and absurdity are not their final destinations. Their destination transcends those absurd realities of their lives. The self, the individual, is what matters the most over the others. Other people and other external factors

count (like Muthoni and Tina in Double O's life), but they are not the ultimate goal in life. There are still other things and reasons to live for; at least the self. Life does not end with the externalities. Thanks to Postmodernism that upholds individuality over collectivism.

Reason, logic, science, and certitude have always governed the world. A lot of realities around the world are predictable. Order seems to be a strong mark of the world. Human experiences are seen to flow in sequential progression. However, when the absurdity of life strikes, everything is put into question. In all of these nevertheless, hope thrives. A reflection of this is seen in *Text I* in the conversation between the Praise-Singer and Elesin who says, *'A dog does not outrun the hand/ That feeds it meat. A horse that throws its rider/ Slows down to a stop. Elesin Alafin Trusts no beasts with messages between/ A king and his companion'* (p. 31). The Praise-Singer then says, *'If you get lost my dog will track/ The hidden path to me'* (p. 31). Elesin trusts neither the dog nor the horse to be the bearer of the King's message. He is so certain of himself as the true bearer of the King's message just like humanity has always trusted reason, science, and technology which unfortunately have not guaranteed the absence of absurdity in the world. However, even in such circumstances, there are possibilities of hope and transcendence as the King speaks through the Praise-Singer to Elesin that even if he gets lost, the dog will track the hidden path. In *Text II*, Double O pleads, *'Just forget that American hobo, will you? And get back home, the both of you. Everything will be fine, Grace. I promise you. You'll see. I want the very best for the both of you. We'll start a new chapter. I'll work hard at my script and the acting. I promise you. Give me a chance … Grace, Grace …'* (p. 92). Hooking up with an American by Grace suggests the certitude with which humanity gets hooked up to science and technology, but eventually gets disappointed by many absurd events like war, sickness and death; just the way Double O gets disappointed by Muthoni. In spite of such a blow of absurdity, he still hopes that things will be fine, promises the family the best, and requests for a chance. Hope transcends current predicament. The interplay of these contents from *Text I* and *Text II*, which portray the same point, is an element of Postmodernism which is highly in support of intertextuality.

As a mechanism of transcendence, hope translates into a strategy, into a process, and into a journey. It entails the move humanity has to make towards a better space. This movement leads one from low to middle, another from middle to high, and others from high to the ultimate transcendence. Hope becomes the journey of life.

**4.2 Beyond Absurdity: Analysing the Journey Metaphor**

Motion is a constant in life; a constant that can never be quenched insofar as existence endures. The metaphor of a journey is simply the metaphor of movement. Humanity is never static. It is always on the move. During this movement, it hits the hard rocks of life; the absurdity of life in the world. These hard rocks of life move a tough one. These absurdities make the journey unbearable to almost the point of impossibility. Life experience becomes a hard nut to crack making human experience very complex. Nevertheless, it is at such instances that the journey becomes not just interesting but most needed because when the going gets tough, the tough gets going.

The metaphor of a journey offers a powerful lens through which to view the absurdity of life. Camus (1991) argues that the absurd is the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the silence of the universe, but the journey metaphor reinterprets this conflict by arguing that meaning is not only found at the destination but rather also created in the process of moving forward, turning the journey into a defiant act in which the traveller embraces uncertainty and finds meaning in the effort itself. Landau (2018) emphasises how metaphors such as life's journey assist people in creating coherent narratives, promoting existential well-being despite the inherent chaos of life. Each step of the journey symbolises a deliberate act of creativity and struggle against nihilism, making it a symbol of self-discovery. It helps people to deal with life's obstacles with fortitude and purpose by reinforcing continuity between their past, present, and future selves (Ownsworth & Nash, 2015). From this perspective, the voyage is a celebration of human creativity and agency rather than just a reaction to absurdity. In the end, using the metaphor of a journey to overcome absurdity affirms the beauty of life in spite of its unpredictable nature. It encourages a change in perspective from looking for clear-cut solutions, to appreciating the complexity of the process, the journey. Accepting life as a journey allows one to turn absurdity

into a platform for development, interpersonal relationships, the never-ending search for purpose, and a vehicle of transcendence.

From the very beginning of *Text I*, the metaphor of the journey stands out. Death is often seen as the final defeat of humanity. At the time of death, the world and all it holds appear to become useless, vanity upon vanity. Awareness of such, leaves man fear-stricken and frozen. The pain of death is severe to the dying and to the living. Irrespective of this fact, the African context sees human life as a journey that transcends this temporal world, seen in the character of the Praise-Singer who says, *'Far be it for me to belittle the dwellers of that place but, a man is either born to his art or he isn't. And I don't know for certain that you'll meet my father, so who is going to sing these deeds in accents that will pierce the deafness of the ancient ones. I have prepared my going -just tell me: Olohun-iyo, I need you on this journey and I shall be behind you'* (p. 6). Every horseman of the Yoruba people has praise-singers. So, this particular Praise-Singer whose father has passed on, is worried if Elesin will be able to find a Praise-Singer in the journey he is about to undertake to the other realm. Being so faithful in his duty as Elesin's Praise-Singer, he is willing to journey with him to the afterlife. Hence, he says, *'I have prepared my going -just tell me: Olohun-iyo, I need you on this journey and I shall be behind you.' When Elesin speaks in riddles as the Women are trying to obtain his forgiveness, the Praise-Singer continues, '... Speak now in plain words and let us pursue the ailment to the home of remedies'* (p. 12). He remains so focused on pursuing the journey towards their other home, the home beyond their current one, the home that transcends the present one. He reminds Elesin that they are on a journey. In Postmodernism, ambiguity is embraced, that is, when things do not have straightforward meaning or interpretation, instead multiples of interpretations. It is ambiguous that life is not ended with human physical death in this world. It is ambiguous that Africans find meaning even after death; an ambiguity that transcends absurdity.

The journey of life that can confront the absurdities of life is an act of persistence, that no matter how rough the path turns out to be, one keeps moving. Even when the destination seems far-fetched, the journey continues. Even when there are delays and obstacles on the way, one keeps going. This is a picture of what takes place at the beginning of *Text II*, *'(... Doorbell rings ... Bell rings again ... Continuous ringing of the bell ... The caller has been persistent all along)'* (p. 1). Double O makes a journey from his place to the house of Double N. His journey is not ended at the door of Double N's house. So, even when there is delay for the door to be opened for him, when there is delay in attending to him, when there is wastage of time in getting a response, he continues his journey by persistently ringing the doorbell till he gets a response from Wairi. The two characters in *Text II* are both actors such that at some point in their conversation they drift into incantation about sleep that leads to death:

*Wairi: I say, good people, sleep is death's willy scout.*
*OO: Death's willy scout.*
*Wairi: We shall all be stolen into the still chambers of sleep.*
*OO: Still chambers of sleep.*
*Wairi: We shall all sink into the fathomless pit of silence.*
*OO: Fathomless pit of silence.*
*Wairi: Spare us for a while longer, insatiable one.*
*OO: A while longer, insatiable one.*
*Wairi: I say, insatiable one, just a little while longer.*
*OO: Just a little while longer.*
*Wairi: Just a little while longer.*
*OO: Just a little while longer.* (p. 24)

The silence referred to in this piece is death; a reality that no one desires, one that everyone would do everything within their capacity to avert. This incantation shows the humanity that is on a journey; a journey that leads humanity close to its absurd end – death; and a humanity that does not want to die. Notice the repetition of some phrases especially, *'Just a little longer'* by both characters, signifying an act of persistence in the journey of life. The same act of persistence is manifested by Double O in *Text II* above. From both excerpts, there are

needs that stimulate the journey for which persistence becomes an attitude of existence, pushing further. Double O, in *Text II*, is in dire need of Double N for help in his manuscript to make a better livelihood; the kind of dependency that exists in a capitalist state which Marxism is against. Therefore, in *Tex II*, instead of the individualistic journey of life, one sees communality in the journey of life where all the characters move towards the same destination through their collective persistence.

When his eyes catch the beautiful maiden, Elesin desires to have her to himself and when asked by the Praise-Singer why his eyes are rolling in distraction like a bush-rat, Elesin answered:

> *How can that be? In all my life*
> *As Horseman of the King, the juiciest*
> *Fruit on every tree was mine. I saw,*
> *I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No.*
> *The honour of my place, the veneration I*
> *Received in the eye of man or woman*
> *Prospered my suit and*
> *Played havoc with my sleeping hours.*
> *And they tell me my eyes were a hawk*
> *In perpetual hunger. Split an iroko tree*
> *In two, hide a woman's beauty in its heartwood*
> *And seal it up again — Elesin, journeying by,*
> *Would make his camp beside that tree*
> *Of all the shades in the forest.* (pp. 14-15)

In his speech, he recognises that he is journeying by, implying that humanity journeys by. For this reason, he continues, *'… I shall leave That which makes my going the sheerest Dream of an afternoon. Should voyagers Not travel light? Let the considerate traveller Shed, of his excessive load, all That may benefit the living'* (p. 16). In his journey, he moves on to leave that which sheers humanity's dream to benefit the living in their own journey. Thus, his son Olunde, who is supposed to be counted among the living, makes his own physical journey, *'On that journey on the boat, I kept my mind on my duties as the one who must perform the rites over his body. I went through it all again and again in my mind as he himself had taught me. I didn't want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people'* (pp. 40-41). His father's journey to the realm beyond provides what spurs him into the action of his own journey back home. Thence, Olunde journeys back from England to perform his duty to his father and his community. He says, *'I didn't want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people.'* He is moved and driven in his life journey bearing in mind the welfare of his entire people, a concern that is so important in the sphere of Marxism which upholds communism.

Journey metaphor defies absurdity imminently and futuristically through the process of transition. This journey moves beyond the immediate absurdities of life through its small wins and relentless continuity. This journey transitions from below to above; it transitions from here to hereafter; from now to then; and from the flesh to the spirit. It is a journey that transitions to the ultimate transcendence.

**4.3 Meaning Beyond the Absurd in the Afterlife: Existential Reconciliation**

There are moments in life when life feels messed up. Tainted and merciless, the world torments its members and very difficult to understand, the world becomes. People sing as the hymns of their lives many questions that involve 'why', yet no meaningful answer comes their way. Meaning becomes elusive. Understanding disappears from the space. Irrationality of the world becomes the order of the day. Bitterness, loss, heavy hearts, tortured bodies, damaged properties, unattained goals, abject poverty, gainless struggles, failed governments and systems, wicked people, very dark world and so on, become the hallmarks of human existence. When these are so for people and societies, there are always cries of tears soliciting for meaning and redemption, and in so many instances, people are met with silence; a silence that does not help, a silence that actually kills. Their meaning

and redemption become echoes of silence. That silence is as dark as death itself; that silence is death itself before which people plead for *'Just a little while longer'* (like Wairi and Double O in *Text II*, p. 42). Some people in the faces of these absurd circumstances, seek comfort in death; they seek comfort in the darkness of suicide that they know nothing of. They simply want to escape these absurdities, even if the future remains unknown to them. They give in to the ultimate defeat of humanity – death, which equates everything to nothingness. Nihilism becomes their transcendent destination. Is death really the end?

On this note, some scholars frequently question and reject the traditional views of the afterlife, expressing doubts about its ability to resolve life's absurdities. Sartre (1989) for instance, portrays the afterlife as a place of constant confrontation with oneself and others, with no supernatural intervention or final redemption. This depiction emphasises the notion that meaning must be generated within the constraints of earthly life, as there are no assurances beyond death. On the contrary, especially within the African cosmology, belief in a life after death influences human resilience and purpose, reflecting the search for meaning beyond the absurd. The afterlife for instance is portrayed by Alighieri (2024) as a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. In this epic, the afterlife provides a resolution to the ridiculousness of earthly suffering through divine justice and immortal fulfilment, acting as both a moral framework and a source of ultimate purpose.

The interesting thing here is the fact that the argument is not about the existence of the afterlife, but about what obtains there for humanity. The two texts in use offer a perspective from the African cosmological point of view. In Africa, just like in every other part of the universe, death hits humanity so hard without any mercy. However, is that the defeat and end of man? Wairi speaks in *Text II*:

> *One day, a long time back, the spirit of death took away a mother of newly born babe. The child could not understand why. In despair she started singing and calling out between wails and tears, 'Mother, mother, mother, why did you have to go? You have left me all alone, who will look after me? Who will I talk to, laugh and play with? Mother, who will I graze with, now that you are gone? Who will milk the cows for me, now that I'm all alone? Mother, mother, Mother, please come back to me.'*
>
> *From the depths of the earth, a lonely loving voice answered back: 'My beloved child, my one and only Karunga, people do die, so am I, dead and gone forever. Take courage, my little one, open your eyes and ears. Open your eyes, my little one, and toughen your muscles. Talk to yourself, my beloved one, all will be well. Laugh with yourself, my child, for then none will laugh at you. Take the cattle to the grazing grounds, for then you'll not starve. Milk the cows at the crack of dawn, for then you will not thirst. Your mother is dead, dead, dead, for people to die. But they leave behind them those they love, some good, some bad. Your mother is dead, dead, dead. Your mother is gone a long way away.'* (pp. 24-25)

It is a cry of a newly born, one who has just started the journey of life only to be beaten by the evil hands of death that took away its mother. The baby cries, laments and calls out to the dead mother for solace and help. Although the mother is dead, she hears the cries of her baby from the far away beyond. She is no longer among the living on earth but among the living beyond. Death is not her end; death is not nihilism for her; death is not her final destination. Consequent upon that, she is still able to hear her child, connect with her through exchange of words, and still able to offer her some help via the explanations and advices she gave. She assures her child that, *'all will be well.'* Postmodernism posits that there is no universal or objective truth. Even when some people think life to begin and end in this world, Postmodernism allows others to contextualise what becomes true for them. Hence, life-after within the African context is as true to Africans as life on earth. In fact, the afterlife is the transcendence of the earthly life.

In the same vein, the voice of the dead King in *Text I* rings out from the land of the dead through the words of the Praise-Singer in his dialogue with Elesin:

> *PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come, I said, swear*
> *You'll tell my favourite horse. I shall*
> *Ride on through the gates alone.*

*ELESIN:* *Elesin's message will be read*
*Only when his loyal heart no longer beats.*
*PRAISE-SINGER:* *If you cannot come Elesin, tell my dog.*
*I cannot stay the keeper too long*
*At the gate.*
*ELESIN:* *A dog does not outrun the hand*
*That feeds it meat. A horse that throws its rider*
*Slows down to a stop. Elesin Alafin*
*Trusts no beasts with messages between*
*A king and his companion.*
*PRAISE-SINGER:* *If you get lost my dog will track*
*The hidden path to me.* (p. 31)

The dead King speaks through the Praise-Singer to Elesin to send his dog or horse to him if he cannot come over to the other realm, the realm of the spirit, the world that transcends the tangible earth. This spiritual realm is a very dark abode, but those who transition into it transcend the darkness of this/that world and live on. No wonder the dead King through the Praise-Singer speaks, *'The darkness of this new abode is deep – Will your human eyes suffice?'* (p. 32). It takes only the spiritual eyes to survive the world beyond, but because transcendency is its character, Elesin says, *'In a night which falls before our eyes However deep, we do not miss our way'* (p. 32). The absurdity of life is the darkness of the world; the *'not-missing-our-way'* is the transcendence of the world to the far beyond. One can infer that the human eyes can refer to the science and technology of the world which leads it on. However, there is a degree of distrust in science in the light of Postmodernism; hence, the dead King questions if the science and technology, that is, the human eyes, can suffice.

The imagery of heaven is not just the imagery of a spiritual realm, but also that of an abode that transcends the earthly abode in beauty, happiness and satisfaction. Africans from the context of *Text I* believe in the existence of such a realm where the gods dwell, from where they relate to the living, protecting them and providing for them and at times punishing them when they offend the heavens. Therefore, it's highly important for humanity (Africans in particular) to live in awareness of the existence of these two realms and sincerely maintain the needed balance. This is the mission of Elesin and, in fact, his entire people. That being the case, Iyaloja inquires and appeals, *'It does not bear thinking. If we offend you now we have mortified the gods. We offend heaven itself. Father of us all, tell us where we went astray. (She kneels, the other women follow.)'* – p. 12. In Africa, when someone of importance in the community or one known as a good person by society dies, the person transitions into the hierarchy of the spirits and intermingles with the gods. Such persons are numbered among the people's ancestors. Thus, Elesin addressing his new maiden states, *'You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors,'* (p. 46). Sequel to this, the people are so careful not to offend someone as important as the King's Horseman, someone whose role among the people is to bring about the unavoidable balance between the earthly world and the spiritual world through his ritual death. Both Elesin and the entire community have to ensure that nothing obstructs this significant assignment. It is a thing of the entire community, giving credence to the sense of communism propagated by Marxism.

There is a strong link between death and birth. The earthly death is greatly linked to the afterlife birth. Symbolically, this is seen *Text I* from Joseph's response, *'Madam, this is what I am trying to say: I am not sure. It sounds like the death of a great chief and then, it sounds like the wedding of a great chief. It really mix me up'* (p. 23). Traditionally, death in the African worldview is not the end of life; it is a continuation of it through birth into the afterlife, a wedding into the transcendent abode. This meaning and interpretation might not really be the same for everyone, implying that meaning is highly contextual as Postmodernism would have it. For this reason, Amusa *'(bewildered, looks at the women and the entrance to the hut)' then asks, 'Iyaloja, is it wedding you call dis kin' ting?'* (p. 27). At birth, one is born into the earthly world through a woman, but at death, one is born into the afterlife world through the mother earth. Hence, the Praise-Singer chants, *'No arrow flies back to the string, the child does not return through the same passage that gave it birth'* (p. 33). He says 'return' to

suggest that that is where one comes from in the first place, a journey from the world beyond into the earthly world and then back to the world beyond. Finally, on that note, Iyaloja consoles the new bride, *'Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn'* (p. 53), because life is neither ended by the absurdities of the earthly world nor by the death of Elesin. Transcendence thrives over absurdity; therefore, do not bury yourself in the current absurd situation. Instead, live on for the yet-to-be of the far beyond.

## 5. Conclusion

Human existence is marked by an unrelenting struggle against the absurdities of life, uncertainty, suffering, mortality, and the failures of institutions meant to provide meaning and structure. However, as Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ruganda's *Echoes of Silence* illustrate, humanity persistently seeks ways to transcend these absurdities. This paper has explored how African worldviews, postmodernist perspectives, and Marxist critiques intersect to reveal the mechanisms through which individuals and societies defy existential despair.

Hope emerges as a powerful force of transcendence, enabling individuals to envision a reality beyond immediate suffering. The metaphor of the journey underscores the persistence of human aspirations, demonstrating that progress is found not only in the destination but in the continuous motion of life itself. Finally, the concept of the afterlife within African cosmology offers a reconciliatory framework where meaning extends beyond earthly absurdities, providing a spiritual and cultural resolution to existential concerns. Rather than surrendering to nihilism, humanity finds ways to resist and redefine meaning within and beyond this world. The studied texts reflect this resilience, portraying a world where the absurd may exist but does not prevail. In defying the absurd, human aspirations and transcendence emerge as testaments to an enduring spirit, one that refuses to be bound by despair but instead forges ahead, embracing both the known and the unknown with courage and conviction.

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