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## From Limbo to Continuity: Existential Analysis of Joseph Situma's *The Mysterious Killer*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper is an explication of the stoicism and the resilience of the diseased characters in Joseph Situma's *The Mysterious Killer* which is framed within Sartrean existential epistemology with a focus on his concept of authenticity. For Sartre, authentic existence is related to pursuance of transcendent goals, honesty and courage. Human beings, Sartre opines, impose values in their lives in moments of forlornness. This concept is germane to analyzing the existential necessity of the diseased characters in the selected text to transcend the limbo of their existence as HIV/AIDS patients.

### 1. Introduction

Chronic illness brings a certain weight on the existence of the infected who become apprehensive of their mortality as their world collapses in the face of chronicity, accentuating the individual's vulnerable existence. The many ways in which the HIV disease affects the body also influence the individual's perception of himself since the body is usually tied to one's subjective experiences of identity. This is especially so because the HIV contraction is an embodied experience which is mainly contracted through bodily fluids during sexual intercourse. Isolation, embodiedness and anxiety are therefore existential givens that confront and are confronted by those living with HIV and AIDS.

Rollo May (1972, p. 28) defines anxiety as 'the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality' and that it is 'the experience of the threat of the immanent non-being... the subjective state of the individual becoming aware that his existence can become destroyed, that he can lose himself and his world, that he can become nothing' (ibid). Differentiating fear from anxiety, May (1972) holds that whereas fear merely threatens one's existence, anxiety strikes at the core 'of the psychological structure on which the perception of one's self as distinct from the world of objects occur' (May, 1972, p. 62). This insightful definition of anxiety highlights the way in which HIV/AIDS threatens the existence of the infected persons, since, as Bengental (1987) cautions, 'anxiety cannot be denied or rationalized away, it can only be confronted steadfastly as possible, and then incorporated in the ones being' (cited in May, 1972, p. 67).

According to Camus, people whose lives are detached and disconnected are prone to suffer from tensions and conflict, isolation and emptiness and the fear of death, a perspective endorsed by Paul Tillich who held that:

We are only in the world through a community of men. And we discover our souls only through the mirror of those who look at us. There is no depth of life without the depth of the communal life.' (cited in Naylor et al, 1994, p. 56).

Immersed in Foucaultian dividing techniques where the AIDS diseased are divided from themselves and from others, their diseased bodies, as Nicole Markotic observes 'assert their individuality through ultimate demise' (Markotic, 2003:176).

## 2. Methodology

This is a library-based content analysis of the selected literary text framed within Sartrean existential epistemology. Sartrean concepts of authenticity will be utilized to analyze data. The novel under study will be analyzed within this conceptual framework to yield insights into the resilience of the diseased subjects battling the inevitable physical and social death.

## 3. Results and Discussion

In Joseph Situma's *The Mysterious Killer*, Cecilia Odo individuation begins when her escapades in Busaki as a commercial sex worker are jolted by the reality of her compromised immune system. She operates in a setting where superstitious knowledge constructs AIDS as witchcraft and her immediate reaction is to seek the intervention of a traditional apothecary. Her conceptualization of AIDS as witchcraft enables her to view her condition as curable, boosting her optimism for recuperation. This feeds to local AIDS discourses and beliefs that AIDS is witchcraft, an ascription of AIDS with supernatural causes which harmonizes with the denial of infection, or 'the conviction that one's affliction is anything but that particular dreaded disease' (Kwesi, 2004, p. 185).

Her faith in the effectiveness of the curative herbs from the Wauzi traditional practitioner taps into the popular understandings and reaction to the pandemic as caused by a spell cast by the evil eye. This seems to be a psychological denial of effects of lethal sex which was a line of her duty as a substitution trumpet. This denial of what is most feared provides Cecilia with a psychological cushion the result of which is some degree of equanimity and her opportunity to journey through her soul in the face of a failing health. Her option for traditionalist intervention, refusing 'ghettoization' in a hospital world can be read as a determination to live as 'a patient in life' and not 'in the ward', and by extension therefore resists the oppressive bio-politics. This process of subsuming AIDS with the supernatural serves to elicit public pity and sympathy and in effect shields the diseased from stigma and prejudice. These views are subsumed within uniquely Kenyan AIDSlore, where 'the illness that accompanied AIDS were thought to be caused by a 'microbe' or by malevolent magic or both', and the coterminous belief that 'AIDS related illnesses could be treated by doctors or voodoo priests or herbalists or prayer or any combination of these (Farmer & Kleinman 1990a, p. 83).

Cecilia's maturity and transformation in illness compels her to abandon her naivety and affectations. Sharply conscious of what her condition portends, she re-thinks Nuom's persistent request for her hand in marriage and looks forward to securing a meaningful future in matrimony, which guarantees her the inner-connectedness essential for construction of meaning. This illness induced transformation boosts her spirit and subverts the doom scenario portended by the humiliating illness. This belated union affirms her continuity and connectedness, especially as it is hinted that she is expecting his child. The author is however ambivalent of the ethicality of this move by Cecilia because of the danger it poses to Nuom, who apparently gets infected and dies in the space of the novel. The ambivalence could be attributed to the absurdity of life in the era of AIDS where the literary writer contends with the glaring lack of a viable solution to the pandemic, only depicting diseased characters in desperate attempts to live more meaningfully in borrowed times.

It is noteworthy that from the outset Cecilia Odo is depicted as stoic woman who endures pain and suffering with equanimity, she calmly takes whatever comes her way, a strength of spirit that she falls back to in order to affirm life in the face of death. This stoicism is seen in the way she tolerates Mama Baby, her roommate for ten years in the turbulent Busaki city, who appears too boisterous for Cecilia's modesty, and who is totally blind to the immorality of their business as sex workers. Cecilia's ethical stance even as she practices substitution prostitution redeems her character. Hers is a compelling character that shines in illness as it did in the moral dungeon that has become Busaki city, a hotbed of HIV infection. Cloud 9 in Busaki in fact reads like the liberal embodiment of urban culture which accentuates HIV infection levels, an epitome of meaninglessness and nihilism that engulfs the larger society of the novel. Revelers in the joint indulge in debauchery and immorality which is presented as a meaningless quest. Revelers are haunted by their excessive sexual past because in AIDS era, there is no such thing as sex without angst anymore, the specter of death cannot be ignored even as people wallow in escapist debauchery. The text re-enacts the apocalyptic AIDS narrative as we see Cecilia hospitalized and witness her gradual emaciation and ultimately death from AIDS. Be this as it may, the novelist invests characters who assert a free will to act within the limitations engendered by their AIDS diagnosis, aware that their inner selves have been constructed by their own historicity.

*The Mysterious Killer* does not depict a solitary AIDS patient as she spirals down toward her death, surrounded by helpless doctors, a lover and a harrowing circle of friends. Instead it describes a richly textured web of interrelated relationships. Cecilia's inner development is intertwined with her deteriorating condition when, pathetically emaciated within a year after

she leaves the city and hoping against hope, she is emboldened by her altruism and is able to show affection to her niece Rachel. The writer offers her a transient moment in her process of dying, where, ameliorated by modern medicine, she tells her: 'I feel much better now, I think I may completely recover, when that happens, I will make sure that I do for you something nice' (p.144). This preoccupation with a future where illness is cured, and the fact that she can agonize over her safety in the hands of Yamo, even in her dying process, affirms life in the midst of death. We are confronted with Cecilia's life rather than an abstract image of disease. Her identity is not reduced to that of a lonely sufferer; she is a loving wife, mother and aunt. She is refused from functioning merely as a plot device and as a mere source of spectacle, which is the writer's way of reclaiming her agency and full human aspects of her character.

Yamo in *The Mysterious Killer* is portrayed as a larger than life man with money galore who engages in hedonistic pursuits to ease the agony of his diseased body. His debauchery and sexual escapades at Cloud Nine, the bonfire of vanities, has worn him high esteem among fellow revelers and sex workers, the beneficiaries of his big heart. He has thrown all caution to the wind and philanders with abandon, embracing an epicurean philosophy which celebrates pleasurable living even in the precarious times of AIDS, justifying that death is ultimately inevitable even outside the apocalypse portended by the AIDS pandemic. The epicurean reaction to his condition does not however guarantee him any meaning or fulfillment. On the contrary, it is an ephemeral and mechanistic sex exploit that leads to his void and half-dead existence. This epicurean construct however feeds to the popular discourses about AIDS where some indifferent HIV positives may opt for wanton spreading of the virus presumably in order not to die alone, rationalizing that they contracted the virus from someone to justify their callousness. He meets his comeuppance when Mama Baby poisons him to prevent his abandoned wife from inheriting his estate.

Yamo is redeemed by the brief moment of transformation where, confronted with death, he cherishes noble thoughts of a rapprochement with the wife long abandoned in the village, and the desire to ensure safe conveyance of his estate to her through his attorney. Though belated, this noble thought is a bid for continuity in quest for meaning that transcends the present existential challenge. He was initially easily drawn to the superficial and inadequate source of meaning by his initial failure to come to terms with the nihilism of his diseased status. Rather than deal with the frightening specter of nihilism and all its pain and uncertainty, Yamo tries to escape through hedonism and consumerism, only realizing through the baptism of illness that there is no escape from the possibility of nothingness, and that 'a firm grasp of nihilism and all its implications is absolutely essential to the search for meaning (p. 41).

Yamo's hedonistic way of denial of AIDS as a coping strategy is an anti-quest that is not endorsed by the writer as a worthwhile response to illness. Though to some extent the horror of the pandemic is forgotten when Yamo wallows in hedonism, this is only transient and it denies him a chance to embrace nobility, a chance to do more with his life. He only wakes up to this reality when his past and the present come together in his bodily condition.

Yamo's worship of mammon and his destructive tendencies, exhibited by his consumerism and rapist tendencies ( he attempted to rape Rachael) was a mode of 'having' which negate the more meaningful mode of 'being'. Elaborating on the benefits of the care of the self, Foucault writes that:

...The risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely only when one has not taken care of the self and has become the slave of one's desires. But if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means to you to be a citizen of a city..., if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you, if you know, finally, that you should not be afraid of death- if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others ( Foucault, M, 1997, p. 31).

In the text, it emerges that Fr Michael's homilies and crusade against immorality in the fight against AIDS does not shield him from the disease. Though depicted as humane and dedicated to the eradication of immorality as a bulwark against the spread of AIDS, Fr Michel is, paradoxically, infected by the irresistible Kose, the attractive parishioner with whom he gets intimate in an evil and vindictive plan which is connived and executed through Yamo's machinations. The juxtaposition of the altruistic and moral priest with the callous and amoral Yamo, and the victory of the heinous scheming of the latter serves to underscore the triumph of evil over good in the philistine society of the novel.

Confronting the reality of his terminal condition and the social opprobrium it attracts, Fr Michael seeks solution in a suicidal journey to avoid slow death and oppression by marginalizing discourses. In choosing this easy exit, he lends some majesty and sublimity to his demise and also resists the medical gaze and bio-political colonization of his diseased body. He was buried as a reverent priest at St. Mathew's cemetery, his body saved from discrimination and stigmatization. Even his arch enemy Yamo, who had attended the funeral to confirm his demise, could not gossip about his body because it had not been condemned and 'otherised' by disease. Through his suicide, his body accrues a sense of nimbus, especially considering the fact that he was infected through Yamos's machination.

This easy escape from stigmatization is also sought by Rachel who scrapes through a contrived accident in a bid to terminate her life following a presumed positive diagnosis. The novel however, resists the apocalyptic AIDS narrative when further testing reveal that Rachael was not infected with the virus and that the initial diagnosis was a false positive result. The happy reunion with her family, the possibility of her marriage with Edison, and the fact that her position at Wayn Company was still secure, affirms continuity from the limbo engendered by the unmaking of her world by a false diagnosis. It is an optimistic closure that subverts the cultural apocalyptic plotting of AIDS. Rachel makes exit from the novel healthy, intact and restored and it can be inferred that she will continue disseminating cautionary AIDS facts that will go a long way in eradicating AIDSphobia.

#### 4. Conclusion

The novel is conflicted in respect to the apocalyptic AIDS narrative, which represents AIDS as a forced march forward to impending death. It resists the smooth linearity of the apocalyptic AIDS narrative. The narrative is broken into many chapters, each with subheadings and the narrative resists moving the story forward in a linear predictable fashion. Indeed, the happiness of the narrative has been one of the primary complaints by critics of the novel. HIV and the despondence it brings loom in the text, considering the web of infections in Yamo's nexus, but the inevitable linear apocalyptic trajectory is subverted by a counter plotting that initiates a surprise ending of the novel. An analysis of the novel's preoccupation with the phenomenon of social death using Sussan Sotang's ideas can offer insightful reading.

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