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The Indomitable Human Spirit in T.J. Benson's *We Won't Fade into Darkness*

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Abstract
Human existence is replete with mysteries that literature, as part of its raison d'tre tries to unravel. This study is about human resilience and the urge for continuous striving in spite of challenges and circumstances that present in the course of life's journeys. The Nigerian writer, T.J. Benson's *We Won't Fade into Darkness* (2018) is a collection of short stories that serves as the primary text for this critical exploration while deploying the qualitative research methodology to examine the book's focus on life and meaning. The theory for this research is existentialism which investigates human existence and the absurdities, as well as uncertainties of life. Made popular in the 19th and 20th centuries by Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, existentialism explores the notion that no matter how people want to be obscure, they cannot escape from the essence of being human. The study discovers that the urge for survival is innate in human beings irrespective of class, race or gender and that human interactions with one another as well as relationships fuel the desire to live.

Keywords: existentialism, survival, human spirit, resilience, cupid.

Introduction

Life and attainment of goals are often predicated on the choices that people make. Chance also plays a vital role in human success or failure; a situation usually described as luck or grace when interpreted from the perspective of religion or spirituality. This paper examines what T.J. Benson makes of human existence and the desire for survival, even in the most dire and uncertain circumstances, in his collection of short stories entitled: *We Won't Fade into Darkness*. The stories analysed are: "Pretty Bird", "Light", "Nana", "The Killing Mountain", "Room 101", "Fly", "Life on Earth", "Passion Fruit", "Alarinka" and "I Can't Breathe." In these seemingly unrelated stories, the writer weaves experiences of people; exploring the vagaries of relationships especially between a man and a woman.

In the stories, the lesson of humankind's interdependability is laid bare. This dependence forms the motif that permeates the stories. T.J. Benson's stories; imaginative and speculative, tell of characters who are mainly abstract, depicting the grim state of what appears like present day Nigeria where things are uncertain. In the circumstance, hope of a better future becomes the factor that keeps the people alive and striving when faced with the reality of death and finality. The stories are of a people who remain unbroken in spite of adversities. Analysing the text, adopting the qualitative research methodology, the essence of human existence is examined critically and explained.

Theoretical Background - Existentialism

Existentialist theory, developed in the nineteenth century by Soren Kierkegaard (with Fyodor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre contributing to its spread in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) explores the "meaning, purpose and value of human existence" (Existentialism 2). Existentialist philosophers and theorists dwell on numerous subjects relating to life and meaning. Some of these thoughts centre around personal freedom, individual responsibilities, self-discovery, deliberate choices that people make and the role of fate in what happens to humans. Specifically, however, Jean-Paul Sartre avers that "what all existentialists have in common is the fundamental doctrine that existence precedes essence" (2). He states further that existentialism "attempts to draw all the consequences from a position consistent with atheism" (2). His standpoint is that individuals shape themselves and not a supreme being. This seeming rejection of God by Sartre differentiates him from other existential philosophers who posit that the concept does not need to involve the rejection of God but rather, it should be concerned with "mortal man's search for meaning in a meaningless universe" (3).

Twenty first century existentialists build on the work of the precursors and postulate that existential thoughts permeate society. One of such contemporary scholars is Lisa Vallejos who, writing in 2012, points out that "no matter how many ways we try to hide, there is no running from what it means to be human." This can be explained to mean that humans have a pre-determined course which must be fulfilled. Vallejos explains further the importance of existential psychotherapy in the interpretation of man's destiny. Vallejos' angle of existentialism, which emphasises the continuous struggle by human beings to understand, adapt to and make the best of their circumstances, is the anchor of this study as it best suits the experiences of the characters in the collection of short stories under focus. This perspective aligns with Benson's exploration of "individual existence, freedom and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent or absurd world" (Vallejos), just as existentialism as a philosophical and literary movement expounds.

Review of Related Scholarship

We Won't Fade into Darkness has been critically examined by a number of scholars. Ifeoluwa Nihinlola examines the short stories and posits that they are held together by "a kind of high-concept science fiction idea: a future dystopian Nigeria, filled with a poisonous gas called Nigerium, a by-product of continued exploration of oil in the country" (2). Nihinlola interprets this state of affairs as responsible for the acts of cannibalism that take place in some of the stories. Although the above expressed view appears pre-sumptuous, there is no doubt that something is amiss in the Nigerian society which forms the background of the stories. It is the image of a dying world where the characters cling to an abstract concept of hope for survival.

Adedotun Eyinade and colleagues highlight the hope motif to explain incidents which fuse the past, present and future. They opine that the experiences of men and women who suffer the

effects of unchecked exploration of Nigeria's oil result in air pollution taking its toll on the people's reproductive organs and driving many insane. This evaluation is germane and touches on the near state of despair that only the reliance on fellow human beings presents the only lifeline for the characters.

Another critic, Ope Adedeji, views *We Won't Fade into Darkness* as the author's experimentation with speculative fiction bordering on Afrocentric futurism. He compares T.J. Benson's collection of short stories with Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death?* and Lesley Arimah's *When a Man Falls from the Sky*. He writes that the technicalities employed by these writers place them in the realm of such a major and highly successful book as *Black Panther*. Adedeji's views about *We Won't Fade into Darkness* are succinct and truly express actions that are beyond reality. His summation is that the stories are on the pedestal of imagination of a most unimaginable dimension and propensity.

"Strange, extensive and original imagination" is how Chimezie Chika describes T.J. Benson's book under focus. He points to stories where the author expresses the grim reality of extreme struggles that people face, stressing that: "Gone are the days when people set up their own businesses to make personal gain and profit. The business of a dying world is survival" (3). A common thread of survival in a dying world, therefore, runs through all the reviews and critical evaluations captured by this paper. What fuels the desire for survival, which is the indomitable spirit inherent in humanity, is the contribution of this present research.

Mutual Dependence as Impetus for Survival

If anything is clear in T.J. Benson's *We Won't Fade into Darkness*, it is the notion that no man is an island. This is well illustrated in the stories when, at the point of despair by any of the characters, the emergence or realisation of the presence of another human being resuscitates the dying spirit of the character. The reader encounters this immediately the collection starts with the story titled: "Pretty Bird." In the story, two unnamed characters, simply identified by their male and female genders, come out as victims after a war. Their meeting in a rehabilitation centre proves to be providential as they encourage each other in their state of despair:

> The war ended. People were remembering how to fall in love. She met him at a makeshift healing centre not far from the wrecked village…. After a war in which all you loved was taken away; you unlearned how to love. You learned how to detach from fond memories, unless you were considering suicide. (1)

In the above excerpt, the male and female characters encourage each other after a war in a story told in a third person narration. Their co-habitation for one month leads them at first to feel something deep. Soon enough, the man realises the futility of the relationship. In spite of that realisation, the imminence of their separation as a result of the man's expulsion from the healing centre gnaws at his existence and he yearns still for her to intervene so that he could stay back.

Another story, 'Nana,' explores the concept of communication as an inevitable part of existence. It expresses a certain order in human relations "before the confusion at Babel millenniums ago" (13). The narrator points out human actions that result in self-destruction, alluding to the "war whose cause no one can remember" (13). The story captures the mood of despair but with hope that even when communication with one another fails, there is an alternative whereby "we retreated with the animals to the wilds and they have been teaching us all they know (13). "Nana" is significant for the re-awakening of inter-dependence of human beings even if that

re-awakening is ignited by animals. Again this aligns with the existentialist's thought of creating meaning from what is at most a fabulist concept. What is important is that there is hope of survival.

"The Killing Mountain" reeks of hope and survival even in adversity. An aspect of the story states that:

> … he was falling, truly terrified this time that he would die. He did not fall too far down. The next level of rock had a bed of cool sharp sand, so his body did not hurt too much. But, he did not stand up for a long time. The edges of the vast uninterrupted sky started darkening and he sprung up in panic. Night was coming, and he had not died. (20)

Having fallen down from a mountain, the man in the story is expected to die. He passes out but it is for a time. By sheer providence he misses the tip and he survives. The man's survival would appear to be a categorical statement by the author that even when all seem bleak, there would always be a glimmer of hope for humanity. Existentialist Lisa Vallejos terms that the "continuous struggle by man to understand, adapt to, and make the best of his circumstances" The narrator in "The Killing Mountain" states further that: "Besides, within the few hours he had spent here, he was beginning to gain a sense of ownership of the mountain" (21). Thus buttressing the point about the adaptability of people to circumstances.

In an apparently futuristic story, "Fly," a fourteen-year-old boy is goaded into driving a vehicle at that young age. This is in spite of being the "only survivor of his father and brother's accident" (63). The lad's mother is vehement:

> "Look at the road!" She screams, a thousand years later in a mud house lit with ultraviolet light that powers up a mind travel helmet on his head, "Or you will crash in some dying person's limbo, or in between bodies and become a phantom or crash into the wrong body". He can see his brothers before him who had gone up to the heavens with their father to become stars…. "Very good! Now; go! Go! Go!" (63)

In the above extract, the two-word motivation verb, "go," is deployed to capture the unrelenting spirit of humans. The repetitive pattern of "go! go! go!" in the story creates the motif of mobility rather than stagnation; awakening rather than inertia that results in death. The story adumbrates further the existentialist scenario whereby "the client struggles to (or against) transformation while the therapist creates a safe place for them to do so" (Vallejos). Significantly, the mother in the story performs a therapeutic duty to her son in order for him to remain hopeful of life and survival.

The resilient human spirit is expressed amply in "Life on Earth" where the personae in the story hallucinate as a result of their sniffing of the dangerous chemical, Nigerium, released into the air. The woman asks the man, "how did we die?" and the following conversation ensues:

> He scoffed: "How do you know we are dead? Stop talking like that!"
> She got impatient. "Well, how do you know we are alive ehn? Tell me."
> "Well, I am a scientist. We are talking right?" He turned sideways and pinched her arm.
> "Oow!"
> "See?" He was triumphant now. "Pain can only be felt by living things." (64)

The story underscores the hope by humans that in a near death situation they can feel something, even if it is pain, thus assuring them that all is not lost. Ifeoluwa Nihinlola would say of many of the stories in the collection that they "are tied together by a kind of high-concept science fiction idea: a future dystopian Nigeria…" (2). Although Nihinlola would regard the story in the way it is narrated as fabulist, the reality of the stories reading like a Nigerian story is not lost on the reader. History is replete with stories and reports of the catastrophic effects of oil exploration and gas flaring in Nigeria, especially in the South/South geo-political zone of the country. The title itself, "Life on Earth," is metaphoric as it helps the reader to visualise life in Nigeria as a microcosm of a larger hemisphere of atmospheric distortions.

Lastly in this segment of the paper, "Alarinka" recounts the wasteland experience of the characters who encourage one another on the need not to allow their immediate conditions define their destiny. As this excerpt goes:

> In a wasteland of charred roads, destroyed billboards and abandoned skyscrapers, a cloaked figure roamed. There was no telling whether it was night or day….
>
> She decided to take a break at a Mai-Shai stand…. I have been telling him that he must find his own recipe if he must become a Mai-Shai someday. It is the natural rite of passage; you must find your own herbs…. (97, 102, 103)

The quoted passage emphasises individualism as a survivalist strategy and the need for every person to make meaning out of life in any given situation. The statement "It is a natural rite of passage" symbolises the role of everyone to ensure his or her own survival, and this aligns with the existentialist concept of continuous striving. The story also deploys the "go, go" motivational verb that the reader encounters in "Fly" to underscore the notion of life as a journey.

Cupid as a Fuel for Human Survival

Renown British playwright, William Shakespeare, writes in *Twelfth Knight: Or What You Will* that: "If music be the food of love, play on" (289). The playwright uses the metaphorical analogy of music, food and love to underscore the human desire for satisfaction. Love, which is the abstract term out of the three, can be visualised from the point of music and food as elements of satisfaction.

In the conditions of war and calamities that the characters experience in *We Won't Fade into Darkness*, love, especially erotic or romantic love, acts as fillip to awaken otherwise dead emotions. In "Passion Fruit" for example, the emotional turmoil between a white boy, Edward, and Ekaete, the black girl, is made worse by the fact of racial discrimination. Love is, however, what keeps Edward invigorated daily, and able to tolerate his father's high-handed treatment of the black domestic staff:

> Ekaete was slightly shorter than Edwards and always wore a yellow Alice band round her head from which erupted a mass of tangled hair. She dodged his eyes as she served him chicken broth and bread before returning to the kitchen, humming in forbidden pidgin English, unaware of his eyes watching her. (77)

There is a silent bond growing between the two teenagers of different race and social backgrounds. This bond of love titillates Edward for the story goes on further to state that "for the first time since he could remember, he actually looked forward to going home" (87). His feeling of love for Ekaete, even if in a hide and seek manner, helps Edward to tolerate the coldness of his

father and the lack of warmth in the household. This is in congruence with the existentialist concept of exercising "free will, as well as authenticity, courage and virtue", even in the midst of "existential crisis, dread and anxiety" (Existentialism I). Cupid (the mythical god of love) is also in the air in "Pretty Bird," when at the end of the mentioned war, the man and woman, who find themselves inevitably in the same space, yield to human flesh in a display of eroticism:

> She showed him the rest of her flesh that night, after they both said a quick prayer to God just in case he was still there.
>
> The next morning she woke up to find him with a metal scrap in his hand, poised to strike a bird perched at the mouth of the well outside. He was not even wearing his clothes. She embraced his taut body from behind, truly happy and felt his muscles tense, then relax. (5)

The innuendoes of love expressed through sex is not lost on the reader. The man and woman find solace in their body symmetry and put behind the feeling of despair that they felt on arrival at the healing centre. The paradoxical feeling of happiness, even in the atmosphere of gloom and uncertainties, could only have been engendered by cupid. The couple see a reason to live because of the bond of love which begins to grow between them. Other lines in the story describe their mutual sexual desires. Ope Adedeji, writing on the impact of the circumstances on the psyche of the characters and the connectedness to present day Nigeria, states that "the more bizarre an era, the more adventurous its people would be in seeking pleasures to hide in" (3). For the man and woman in "Pretty Bird," love and sex serve as their vehicle of refuge and alternate reality.

Another story, "The Killing Mountain," that the writer narrates using vague characters who are referred to only in their gender, speaks to the "he" "coming to terms with how much he needed this woman" (24). The man and woman have both come to the killing mountain to die. The woman jumps from the height but for reason of providence does not die. In her state of unconsciousness, the man encounters her and "he fell in love with the dead woman on "The Killing Mountain" (21). The woman screams when he attempts to touch her. A friendship develops between them in their lonely and forlorn state. The ring on the woman's finger fires his curiosity and he learns that a failed love relationship is her reason for the attempted suicide. The two shake off their earlier death wish and agree to stay alive for each other.

"I can't breathe," another story in the series, paints the uneasy feeling in the wake of the "environmental pollution," couched as Nigerium, to explain the toxicity of the Nigerian state, particularly in the former capital city – Lagos. Human relationships are affected by the environment – physical and spiritual. In the end, however, love helps the characters to cope with the storms of life. The female persona states:

> I want my first sex to be without a gas mask…. Mama has not gotten pregnant, so I think they had me for me and that they are really in love. They hold hands when I am not watching and this has made me stay with them longer and not run off like my mates to find partners to have children with. As long as I stay in this house, we are whole, somehow. (123)

The unhealthy environment ordinarily makes the persona to take a dystopian stance about love and sex but viewing the love and companionship between her parents, even in a near hopeless situation, encourages her to stay on. Love in the home enlivens her and gives her a sense of

wholeness that she appropriates to the entire family. The essence of this feeling is the existentialist concept of "mortal man's search for meaning in a meaningless universe" (Existentialism 2). Thus, taking out what is good and wholesome in life, rather than seeing life as bleak becomes man's pre-occupation. Lastly, in "Room 101," a man's undying love for his fiancée manifests when she dies in a mysterious circumstance. The lady had been intimate with another man prior to her demise. Yet the man, as the story recounts, "wore his three-piece wedding suit to the room where her body was kept; still in the becoming bikini he had never seen her wear" (58). The man's behaviour elucidates, again, the principle of existentialism of embracing the good and wholesome in life while dwelling less on the negative. The man's action can be interpreted as his love and sympathy for his late fiancée as "he tried to imagine the pain she must have gone through before dying" (61). His heart continues to melt at the sight of her body in spite of her betrayal. He does that in his search for healing. Thus love and all such positive emotions and energy help humans to fulfil the innate yearning for survival.

Conclusion

We Won't Fade into Darkness narrates stories of characters who experience wars, environmental hazards and relationship hurts all leading to dislocations and despair. Though their stories begin with despondency, as the narratives progress, the characters, who are identified in most of the stories only on the basis of their gender, shake off the forlorn spirit. This happens because of the innate human fighting spirit for survival.

The author demonstrates the striving and hope of a better future by his use of words like 'go,' 'fly' and 'light' which connote continuous movement rather than stagnation. The repetitive pattern of some of these words create an artistic effect and aids the clarity of expression. The collection of short stories engenders hope and emits positive energy. This is done in ways that the readers, who view the stories like a typical Nigerian story with the use of the word "Nigerium" to depict poisonous gas, perceive hope of a better future, where what is about to die could live again.

Finally, the writer's use of gender pronouns rather than actual names of characters in most of the stories is believed by this researcher to be deliberate. It is to underscore the fact that the stories are connected to everyone in one way or another.

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