



VULNERABILITY OF MANKIND: AN EXISTENTIALIST (PHILOSOPHICAL) INTERPRETATION OF CHARLES MUNGOSHI'S SELECTED LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to make an existentialist literary interpretation of Charles Mungoshi's selected works. Stories were selected on the basis of their concerns and subjected to content analysis. The analysis established that characters in the works exude general and all-pervasive pessimistic feelings which leave them anxious and despairing, in conformity with existentialism, where human beings are said to be free to make choices in an indifferent world and the decisions they make are not without stress, anxiety and anguish. The characters in most of Mungoshi's works reject the imprisonment imposed by society through social values and rules. They attempt to assert their own independent philosophies and approaches to life but are left vulnerable to the absurd world. The paper also unearths the gloomy side of life in Mungoshi's works which mirrors the general socio-economic malaise that the people, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, suffer in a neo-colonial world dominated by Euro-Asia.

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Keywords: Permanent income hypothesis, Absolute income hypothesis, Consumption smoothing

About Charles Lovemore Mungoshi

Mungoshi is a renowned Zimbabwean writer, born in 1947. He writes novels, short stories and poetry in both English and Shona (his vernacular). His works are a protest against imperialism, post-colonial oppression and the resultant general social malaise. The awards he has won include the Noma Award in 1992 and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (African Region) twice in the years 1988 and 1998. Two of his novels, one in Shona and the other in English both published in 1975, won the International PEN Awards. He holds an honorary degree from the University of Zimbabwe (Gikandi, 1987).

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ISSN(e): 2224-4441/ISSN(p): 2226-5139

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1. INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is as much a literary phenomenon as it is a philosophical one, whose emergence is associated with many philosophers who include Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855), Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Cuddon (1997) holds that, in its modern expression, existentialism had its beginnings in the writings of 19th Century Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard. The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger was important in its formulation and the French novelist and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre did most to give it form and popularity. Wimsatt (1974) posits that the fundamental truth of existentialism is in Descartes' formula, "I think; therefore I exist."

This approach is concerned with finding self and meaning of life through free will, choice and personal responsibility. It further advocates that people are perpetually trying to find out who and what they are throughout life, as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs and outlook (www.allaboutphilosophy.org/exist...). The paper contends that, Mungoshi's major characters in the works cited herein are confronted with an inherent inquiry into the being that they themselves are. Consequently, the tension between themselves as individuals and the outer world is apparent. The general spirit of optimism in these characters and indeed in individuals in reality is destroyed by such disenchantments and calamities as disease, war, economic meltdown, cultural dynamism and religious uncertainty. Characters find themselves at crossroads but because of their 'perceived freedom', they ought to make choices and consequently accept responsibility for such choices, be they good or bad. Mungoshi seems to suggest that decisions are not without stress and other consequences, nature itself is hostile and indifferent to vulnerable mankind and that a person is best when struggling against his/her individual nature and society – fighting for life. These notions seem to conform to the underlying concepts of existentialism. The paper further contends that, because man is, in the existentialist perspective, endowed with the freedom to make choices (including not making any), we constantly suffer a sense of dread, anxiety and absurdity. Indeed, we cannot help but agree that life is a journey infested with uncertainties which must be tackled in order for us to fully achieve self-definition, a fundamental principle of existentialism.

It should be observed that there is a wide variety of philosophical, religious and political ideologies that make up existentialism, so there is no universal agreement on an arbitrary set of ideals and beliefs. Existentialist ideas came out of a time in society when there was a deep sense of despair, following the Great Depression and World War 11. There was a spirit of optimism in society that was destroyed by World War 1 and its mid-century calamities. This despair has been articulated by existentialist philosophers up to this day (21st Century) as a popular way of thinking and reasoning (with the freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and lifestyle) (www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existent...). Today, there are so many calamities confronting mankind such as natural disasters in Japan (earthquakes and tsunamis), Australia (veld fires), the political unrests in the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Bahrain etc) and Africa (Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the world economic meltdown and others. Such calamities make the existentialist approach relevant in interpreting literary works, in this case, by Charles Mungoshi, one of Zimbabwe's most renowned writers. Characters seem to be in despair

and continual search for the meaning of life and how they can disentangle themselves from the shackles of a society dominated by the elderly.

Existentialist philosophers basically agree that human life is in no way complete and satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power, and control one has over their life (www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existent...). As such, this study seeks to answer the following central thematic questions:

- (a) To what extent does existentialism help the reader understand better the characters in Mungoshi's literary works in English?
- (b) How far is the language of the texts a fundamental manifestation of the feelings of loneliness, anguish, anxiety and despair in characters?
- (c) How conscious are the characters of how their individual choices can impact, not only on themselves but, on society at large?
- (d) How reflective are Mungoshi's works of the contemporary life in Zimbabwe, Africa and the world at large?

It is the researchers' hope that the existentialist approach to the interpretation of Mungoshi's literary works in English would help illuminate the works. As classroom practitioners, the researchers believe there is need to examine the soliloquies and interior monologues as well as characters' dreams in order to understand how far these are representative or reflective of the ever-changing reality in Africa and the world over. It is in these soliloquies and interior monologues that characters' true desires, yearnings, ambitions, fears and frustrations are reflected, hence the need to dissect the unconscious and examine the mental processes, eventually leading to their feelings of life as tantamount to taking a journey into nothingness.

Existentialism takes into consideration the following underlying concepts, among others:

- (a) human free will;
- (b) human nature is chosen through life choices;
- (c) a person is best when struggling against their individual nature, fighting for life;
- (d) decisions are not without stress and other consequences;
- (e) there are things that are not rational;
- (f) society is unnatural and its traditional religious and secular rules are arbitrary;
- (g) personal responsibility and discipline are crucial; and
- (h) worldly desire is futile (www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existent...).

Existentialism is broadly defined in a variety of concepts and there can be no one answer as to what it is, yet it does not support the following:

- (a) wealth, pleasure, or honour make the good life;
- (b) social values and structure control the individual (a view of life rejected by characters like Garabha, Lucifer, Betty and others in Mungoshi's works as shall be discussed later in this paper);
- (c) accept what is and that is enough in life;
- (d) science can and will make everything better in life;
- (e) people are basically good but are ruined by society and external forces;
- (f) "I want my way, now!" or "It is not my fault!" mentality (e.g. Lucifer's summary of his philosophy to life: "I was born here against my will..." conforms to the dictates of

existentialism that Lucifer is endowed with the ability to choose from several alternatives and that his 'refusal' to make such a choice creates a sense of despair for which he should accept responsibility).

Basically, the theory assumes that existence precedes essence, that the significant fact is that things and people in general, exist but that these things have no meaning for us except as we can create meaning through acting upon them. This is opposed to the traditional view that 'essence precedes existence' - a rejection of determinism. The philosophy contends that "we are thrown into existence first without a predetermined nature and only later do we construct our nature or essence through our actions" (www.anselm.edu/.../sartreol.htm).

When we look at these observations, it is clear that we have no predetermined essence (nature) that determines our actions, values or intentions and we are radically free to act independently of determination by outside forces. We also carve our own human nature through these free choices and consequently are responsible for such. Furthermore, we create our own individual values through these choices.

Harman and Holman (2000) argue that, the existentialist's point of departure is human beings' immediate awareness of their own situation. Part of this is:

. . . a sense of meaninglessness in the outer world; this meaninglessness produces discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face of limitations and desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act in a meaningless, 'absurd' world lead to anguish, greater loneliness and despair.

Holman and Harman further observe that human beings are totally free to make choices but are also wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. The freedom and responsibility are sources of their most intense anxiety. Such a philosophical attitude can result in nihilism and hopelessness, as, indeed, espoused by existentialists like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Camus.

Of significance in the above observations are such terms as 'anguish', 'anxiety', 'meaningless world' 'loneliness' and 'despair'. In this study, the researchers feel that man (for mankind) is nothing but that which s/he makes of him/herself. In line with this perspective of the human being, Veit-Wild (1992) argues that *Waiting for the Rain* explores the loneliness of an individual, Lucifer Mandengu, particularly. Veit-Wild further asserts that on the philosophical level, the preoccupations of Mungoshi's literary works compare life to walking on a tight rope, on the brink of nothingness and annihilation. This observation acknowledges the concept of existentialism which alludes to the human being as ever fighting for life because decisions made are not without stress and other consequences (www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existent...). Mungoshi's literary works are written from the perspective of young boys who feel lost, lonely and threatened by the unsolvable contradictions which dominate their lives: between country and city; between witchcraft and education; between father and mother; mother and stepmother; between the feelings of security when with the grandfather (e.g. Garabha), pity for the father and fear of the mother and so on (Veit-Wild, 1992). The idea of hopelessness and despair can best be summarised in the central image of the book *Waiting for the Rain*, contained in one of Lucifer's dreams which leaves no room for doubt, "The road just stops at the brink of nowhere, on the edge of darkness" (p.153).

Central to this novel (and indeed most stories in the various collections) is the alienation of the (educated) son from his (rural) family – the loneliness alluded to (earlier on in this study) by existentialists. [Zhuwarara \(2001\)](#) thus says that in a sense, ‘Shadows on the Wall’ is a seminal story in as far as it underlines some of the central issues that Mungoshi goes on to explore in his other works: the vulnerability of mankind, the destruction of childhood innocence, the loss of that capacity to love and to relate to others and the slow, painful death of one’s soul are all key issues which resurface time and again in *Coming of the Dry Season*, *Some Kinds of Wounds*, *Waiting for the Rain* and *Walking Still*.

The above observations are in conformity with [Zalta’s \(1976\)](#) observation that the existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. It is the sense of despair and abandonment that is apparent even in the titles of Mungoshi’s works of art – the drought and the failure of the traveller to reach his/her destination – that has motivated the researchers to carry out an existentialist interpretation of these texts. This relates well to existentialist philosophers’ contention that human life is in no way complete and satisfying because of suffering and losses that occur when considering the lack of perfection, power and control one has over their lives. The old women, Japi and Mandisa, are perfect examples of such characters that suffer a sense of hopelessness and desperation in their old age and realise that life is indeed far from perfect.

The language of a text (the similes, metaphors, images and other devices) is central to such a study. [Gikandi \(1987\)](#) and [Ngugi \(1983\)](#) observe that language is more than an outer shell of meaning; it is the primary subject of the novel in the sense that, all the key issues that concern society, power, politics and class struggle, the status of women, culture and domination are reflected and promoted through language. [Zhuwarara’s \(2001\)](#) and [Veit-Wild’s \(1992\)](#) critical works allude to the issues of vulnerability of mankind, alienation, family disintegration and the political crisis in Zimbabwe, all of which are quite consistent with the dread and despair man suffers in search of meaning and the real ‘being’.

2. VULNERABILITY OF MANKIND

“Vulnerable” is used here in the sense which the [Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English \(1987\)](#) defines as, “. . . of a person or their feelings) easily harmed, hurt, or wounded; sensitive.” In [The Complete Word Finder \(1991\)](#), it is defined as “that which may be harmed or wounded; exposed, defenceless, weak, sensitive, unprotected, unguarded, unshielded, helpless, powerless or insecure.” In this study, these terms will be used interchangeably to refer to the concept of vulnerability.

Most of the characters in Mungoshi’s literary works seem to be powerless and this state creates fear and anxiety. [Zalta \(1976\)](#) observes that in existentialist philosophy, man is in anguish and this sense of despair and abandonment seems apparent even in the titles of Mungoshi’s novel and short stories. This, to us, toes the line of existentialists’ point of departure that:

. . . human beings are immediately aware of their own situation. A part of this is a sense of meaninglessness in the outer world; this meaninglessness produces discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face of limitations and desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act in a meaningless ‘absurd’ world lead to anguish, greater loneliness and despair [Harman and Holman \(2000\)](#).

Zhuwarara (2001) maintains that, like most other characters in *Coming of the Dry Season* and *Some Kinds of Wounds*, Garabha and the Old Man in the novel *Waiting for the Rain* remain vulnerable and more or less helpless to the change which is inevitable. It can be observed that feelings of vulnerability pervade most, if not all, of Mungoshi's literary works – Shona and English – and characters seem to live in perpetual fear of death and destruction. The titles themselves imply an archetypal drought and a sense of impoverishment, particularly when one looks at words/phrases like 'dry season', 'wounds', 'walking still' and 'waiting for rain' captured in the titles of these works. (Mungoshi, 1972) and Mungoshi (1975) both capture images of drought, hunger and thirst while Mungoshi (1980) evokes feelings of physical deformity and eternal spiritual suffering. From Mungoshi (1997), it can be discerned that characters embark on journeys that have no destinations perhaps “. . . in quest of dignified and fulfilling lives . . .” (Zhuwarara, 2001). The fact that they never seem to reach their destination or the much awaited rain which does not fall creates discomfort and even more anxiety and despair as in existentialism Wimsatt (1974). Just like Marechera (1978) by Marechera, titles like *Coming of the Dry Season* and *Waiting for the Rain* point at the sub-human conditions under which blacks were forced to live during the colonial era. It is the researchers' strong conviction that Mungoshi, consciously or unconsciously, has been caught up in the Sartrean style of writing which, as Wimsatt (1974) asserts:

. . . betrays metaphorically an obsession with images of confinement, enclosure and immurement. Sartre, whose central concern is man's [sic] freedom, seems almost obsessively drawn to a literature of imprisonment hence titles of his works – *Le Mur* (The wall), *Huis-Clos* (No Exit), *La-Chambre* (The Room), *Les Sequestres D'Altona* (The Prisoners of Altona).

Zhuwarara (2001) observes that all the generations of characters in *Waiting for the Rain* suffer from an overwhelming sense of being located in geographical, social, historical and cultural contexts in which they feel entrapped.

To begin with, for existentialists like Sartre, the absence of God has a much larger significance than the metaphysics of creation. Without God, there is no purpose, no value, and life is literally senseless, worthless, meaningless, empty and hopeless. It is, to use a favourite existentialist term, “absurd” (Ross, 2005). To be without value and meaning is also to be without standards of behaviour. The philosophical outlook can be illustrated by analysing several of Mungoshi's works, which is the purpose of this study.

In 'Shadows on the Wall', women are portrayed as victims of a patriarchal establishment:

Now he (the narrator's father) talks about his other women . . . This other woman has run away. It is now the fourth time she has run away . . . This will be the fourth time he has had to cycle after her Mungoshi (1972).

Violence against women is hinted at. When the narrator's mother asks the father to carry the former on his shoulders because the child has a sore foot, the father “grumbles” because “[H]e did not want to carry me and he did not like receiving instructions from the mother: she was there to listen to him always, he said” (p.2). Fathers make family decisions hence Old Mandisa, in *Waiting for the Rain*, says to Raina: “What does his father say? . . . Then you are only a woman. You have no mouth. Let it be as his father wishes” (p.16).

In 'Did you have to Go that Far' (*Walking Still*) Pamba's mother is a victim of severe (wife-) bashing:

For the whole week before Dura's birthday party, things had been going terribly wrong in the Dengu household. The slap-slapping and screaming went on every night. The Friday just before the party was the worst. Crockery crashed, doors banged, and Mrs. Dengu screamed until midnight . . . (p. 68).

Both the narrator's (Damba's) family and that of his friend, Pamba, are far from happy and the underlying source of violence is that most of these families are engulfed in poverty. The Dengu family in particular is full of strife as Mr. Dengu bashes his wife and child on a regular basis, "every night", as in the above quotation. About Mr. Dengu, [Zhuwarara \(2001\)](#) observes that he is a domestic tyrant eager to use his fists in order to make a point to his wife and child. In spite of the impoverishment, alcoholism exacerbates Mudzonga's and Dengu's financial plight as it drains their already depleted pockets. One is also reminded of Magufu in 'The Brother', who has turned alcoholic and consequently fails to pay his younger brother, Tendai's school fees; Gwizo in 'The Empty House' whose impotence could have resulted from excessive drinking and many other characters in Mungoshi's works. The cumulative effect of such a life of debauchery for Dengu and Mudzonga is that their wives are deprived of attention and love and so are the children. The latter unleash terror on weaker children on the streets probably to compensate for the psychological torture suffered at home.

The viciousness with which Damba and Pamba terrorise the children of their neighbourhood is a version of the power struggle that they unconsciously copy from their parents. Likewise, the child narrator in 'Shadows on the Wall' is vulnerable to the terror of his step mother. He suffers a fever, resulting from a destructive storm to which he is exposed by this negligent 'parent', a suffering akin to the plight of the unprotected furtherers on a dove's nestling. The character says of himself, "I don't know how many days I was in bed. There seemed to be nothing. No light, no sun or darkness to show it was night" ([Mungoshi, 1974](#)).

From the foregoing, it can be argued that the family has failed to provide the protection it purports to offer the individual child. Such is the absurdity of the world which existentialism emphasises – the nothingness and meaninglessness of life. Instead of providing refuge, the family institution is literally a torture house, a kind of immurement which relegates the individual to perpetual suffering and eternal search for an exit which is non-existent. Thus Sartre, in [Wimsatt \(1974\)](#) argues that man is involved in a collective tragedy, and torture becomes a daily reality. Almost daily, man is exposed to extreme situations and has to make choices between heroism and abjection. Sartre, in [Wimsatt \(1974\)](#) further argues, "The human condition is viewed as a form of collective imprisonment: man in chains, all condemned to die . . . each situation is a trap, there are walls everywhere . . ."

The reader is automatically reminded of the helplessness which Nhongo in 'The Hare' experiences when he suspects that his commercially-successful wife is involved in an adulterous relationship with Magaso. Through man's experience with the reality of being trapped and perpetually seeking an exit, man invents himself every day. This reminds the reader of Bigger in [Wright \(1993\)](#) whose personality is split and he perpetually seeks an exit from the American society that is socially, economically and politically controlled by whites, and he is black! Just like Moses in [Lessing \(1999\)](#), he is ensnared and suffers psychological immurement.

Dostoyevsky (1879), an existentialist, in [Ross \(2005\)](#) argues that to be without value is to be without standards of behaviour. He further says that, without God, everything is permitted and characters in *The Brother's Karamazov* (1880) remind the reader of the characters in 'The Crow'. [Harman and Holman \(2000\)](#) assert that:

Human beings are totally free to make choices but also wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. This freedom and responsibility is the source of their intense anxiety. Such a philosophical attitude can result in nihilism and hopelessness, as indeed it has with many of the literary existentialists.

Out of spite and defying parental teachings and tradition that consider the crow as a sacred bird, the narrator and Chiko hunt down a black crow:

But what made us want to kill that crow in its nest by the river I still do not know . . . (p.9). We were getting tired but we were all of a sudden very serious about hitting it. We were quite soaked with sweat and this running had ceased to be fun. It had become something which had to be done: the killing of the crow. We would have been glad if somebody had come along and told us to stop all this madness and go home. But there were only the two of us, our obsession, our fears and the crow. It had to die (p.10).

Albert Camus, an existentialist, in [Ross \(2005\)](#) contends that, to live one's life, one must exercise the freedom to create life – just going along with conventional values and forgetting about the absurdity of the world is not authentic. Authenticity in existentialism is to exercise one's free will and to choose the activities and goals that will be meaningful for oneself. The values and decisions of others, Camus further argues, whether authentic or unreal, will be foreign and irritating. The narrator and Chiko act authentically by defying tradition, according to existentialism, but their self-reproach creates anguish and discomfort and leaves them with a disappointing realisation that they, too, are susceptible to fear of destruction – a feeling of despair. Consequently, they throw away their catapults into the river, confirming that they are failures and that life is nothing and it is meaningless. Still, they cannot run away from the responsibility of their destiny and the consequences of their choices. They seek to define life, away from the confines of their culture and background, which conforms to the tenets of existentialism.

To the researchers, metaphorically, a defenceless black crow is a weak, probably black person who is at the mercy of the white man under a colonial or neo-colonialist establishment. Mungoshi himself is no stranger to racial segregation as experienced from childhood [Veit-Wild \(1992\)](#). The boys are free to make their choices just like Lucifer is in *Waiting for the Rain*. They decide, out of free will, to kill the black crow but this responsibility becomes the source of their intense anxiety as in existential philosophy. This throws them into a state of hopelessness as they discover the 'absurdity' and the 'meaninglessness' of their actions.

Likewise, the thoroughly obscure Julius's pretended courage in 'The Hero' (*Coming of the Dry Season*) is perennial torture to him when he is expelled from school after making a bold and scathing speech in which he directly attacks the school authorities for their failures. The problem here is that Julius makes a blunt and tactless speech that is more calculated to grab attention from fellow students while offending the school authorities to the maximum, hence the expulsion. This scenario is inalienable from the victimisation (by state agents) that numerous citizens the world

over, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, are exposed to by stifling political establishments whenever they try to voice their concerns when their rights are infringed upon.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, Julius comes from a deprived family background in which love and recognition are rare. His situation thus creates discomfort, anguish, despair and feelings of abandonment as in most existentialist works cited herein, for example Sartre and Camus. The fact that Julius regrets having pretended to be courageous enough to challenge an established order so openly, demonstrates the extent of that lack of perfection and absurdity of the world he is living in. Julius is ridiculous in the sense that he tries to fight a very strong regime single-handedly and consequently, he is crushed. Nobody can undermine the importance of collective effort in an attempt to register a mass's discomfort with despotic regimes given the latest successful uprisings and mass demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Ivory Coast and Libya. Mungoshi seems to point at the importance of such a well-co-ordinated approach, if any fruits are to be enjoyed in revolutions. Historically, the grievances raised by the students could be genuine because they seem to evoke reminiscences of the food riots which gripped African secondary schools in the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) during the late 1960s and 1970s (Zvobgo, 1994). These schools were poorly subsidised by the colonial government whose own attitude towards African education was, at best, ambiguous and indifferent. There could be that authorial intrusion which reveals that Mungoshi could have experienced when he was in school during the period, when he attended Daramombe and St Augustine's High Schools (Veit-Wild, 1992). Indeed, such cannot be separated from the plight of the African, under the despotic establishments embedded in pseudo-independence which seeks to protect the interests of a privileged elite. Ngugi (1986) metaphorically refers to such independence as one that tastes like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man. While Julius's decision could be viewed as heroic, his incipient, though twisted, pride is like that of Nharo in 'The Mountain', pitilessly crushed by the circumstances; even his sense of manhood is, like that of Chiko and his friend-narrator in 'The Crow', ridiculed by the situation. Such decisions are not without stress and consequences, an underlying existentialist concept ([www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existent. . .](http://www.allaboutphilosophy.org/existent...)). He is a vulnerable young man who craves for love, recognition and a sense of belonging but none of these are forthcoming from the school, the family and from life in general. Thus he contemplates at the end of the story:

Everything lost colour. His speech had not been so wonderful after all, and he wasn't dangerous either; the look in Dora's eye had been of neither love nor admiration but of pity. Only the last words the Old Bat had spoken to him seemed true. He was 'a poor, spoilt, blind child who needed a loving mother's care.' Julius felt very sorry for himself . . . He felt very tired, and from this little rise of the road, he could see the whole country lying flat and desolate, and its lonely black immensity chilled him. He felt very small, very insignificant, and nobody cared what happened to him. The only important things to him now were that he was going home and the sun was setting and he was alone and it was sixty miles home . . . (Mungoshi, 1972).

Julius's life is indeed bleak, his hopes are dashed and he embarks on a journey into what Wimsatt. (1974) refers to as nothingness; recurrent images of darkness reveal this. The metaphors of 'loss of colour', and 'speed' are themselves 'consequences' of Julius's actions which result from an imperfect world which man must fight to define 'the self'. Indeed, existentialism is the search for true self and true personal meaning in life. Most importantly, it is the arbitrary act that

existentialism finds most objectionable – that is, when someone or society tries to *impose* or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed. Existentialists believe this destroys individualism and makes a person become whatever the people in power desire, thus they are dehumanised and reduced to being an object. It stresses that a person's judgement is the determining factor for what is to be believed rather than by arbitrary religious or secular world values (The Colombia Encyclopedia, 2012).

(Zhuwarara, 2001) contends that:

The elusive but pervasive shadows in the narrative ('Shadows on the Wall') symbolise not only the bright and promising life but also the presence of something nameless that is threatening the childhood innocence of the narrator; the shadows also carry intimations of death as if to suggest the gradual loss of the will to live on the part of the child as well as the lingering death of his innocent soul.

These same intimations of death and 'nothingness' are echoed in 'The Setting Sun and the Rolling World'. To Old Musoni, Nhamo (his son) is vulnerable and does not see his destiny as inextricably linked to that of the extended family. Instead, he is more concerned about his individual life and is desperate to be allowed to live the way he likes. This reminds one of Lucifer in *Waiting for the Rain*. In both situations, the elderly parents' perceptions and convictions are diametrically opposed to their sons' and they foresee doom and destruction of their wanderlust sons intend on leaving the protection that the family offers or at least is supposed to. Old Musoni's fears confirm this:

He saw nothing now but disaster and death for his son out there in the world. Lions had long since vanished but he knew of worse animals of prey, animals that wore redder claws than the lions, beasts that would not leave an unprotected homeless boy alone. He thought of the white metal bird and he felt remorse (Mungoshi, 1972).

Then Old Musoni says further on, "You will breakdown, without tears, my son . . . And what happens if the storm catches you far, far out on the treeless plain?" (p.30). Raina is equally worried about her son's (Lucifer's) helplessness in *Waiting for the Rain* when she says; "I do not think he will come to any good out there all alone . . . (p.6). Both situations are worsened by Nhamo's and Lucifer's refusal to carry with them concoctions and charms meant 'to protect' them in the 'jungle' (overseas) which leaves their positions even more precarious, according to their parents. This compulsion by their parents is a form of confinement and suffering as in Sartre and Camus already cited in this study. This is characteristic of existentialism whose perspective is tied to the project of "self-definition through freedom, choice, commitment and acceptance of consequences of such in a world where man is alienated and vulnerable (www.plato.stanford.edu/.../existentialism/).

Sartre (1970) thus argues that one is responsible for all the consequences of one's actions, whether it is possible to know about these consequences or not. Nhamo should be a responsible and conscientious person, which means that he should accept and acknowledge the consequences of his decision to leave the sanctuary of his family to seek socio-economic emancipation in a world which his father views as a 'jungle'. Indeed, those that fought the various revolutions the world over, from armed struggles against colonialism to the current uprisings in the so-called independent Africa expose themselves by choice, knowing full well how vulnerable they were and some, now, proudly enjoy the fruits of such actions. Nhamo should accept responsibility because he really intends to

leave home, after all, “all is permitted” in existentialist philosophy (Leintricchia, 1980). However, according to Zhuwarara (2001), the mocking tone of the story implies that Nhamo’s dreams and ideas of freedom may be far-fetched as his situation might remain as grim as it has always been, earmarked for further suffering as implied by his name (which means “poverty” in English). His desperation is also echoed in ‘The Lift’ (in *Coming of the Dry Season*) which portrays the racist ideology of that time, which made it clear that blacks were unwanted sojourners in the metropolitan society. The two boys’ dreams of escaping the stinking poverty and impoverishment at home are turned into nightmares as their lives are as insecure as the general black populace in ‘The Accident’ and Paul Masaga in ‘The Ten Shillings’ who realise, with disgust, that, “It (The Junior Certificate of Education (J.C)) had been just a piece of paper like any other. It had failed to get him a job while he had it” (Mungoshi, 1972).

Further on, the story shows a remorseful Paul, tortured by the sudden realisation that he has been deprived by the colonial order to participate in the rituals of self-affirmation that give order and meaning to life. Just like the two boys in ‘The Lift’, and Lucifer in *Waiting for the Rain*, who spent years in Salisbury without being gainfully employed in spite of their education, Paul Magaso is made to realise that the colonial system in which he yearns to play a meaningful role is harsh, cold and indifferent to his plight. He is confronted by absurdities of the colonial city and the pity is that he responds by feeling apologetic for being educated and for being human. Such is the absurd world of existentialism, the nothingness of life. Likewise, ‘S.O.S from the Past’ portrays the vulnerability of young job-seekers, ill-equipped for the socio-political challenges of metropolitan life. This dilemma turns into a quagmire, especially because they are blacks in a colonial establishment:

It (that his mates had better J.C. grades) had depressed him at the start but he had learnt to accept it, as he had learnt to accept many more situations in life. It was a mistake to even have thought so. It (education) is a western thing and we throw away brother and sister for it but when it fails, we are lost (Mungoshi, 1972).

In existentialist philosophy, man is perpetually on a journey in search of true self and true personal meaning in life. Here, it is the arbitrary act of life that existentialism finds most objectionable – that is, when someone or society tries to impose or demand that their beliefs, values, or rules be faithfully accepted and obeyed.

To extend the image of entrapment, Moab Gwati says, in Mungoshi (1972):

. . . the strong smell of onions dripping and rotting sofa sack-cloth brought before him a prison cell and his mother. She was there now, trapped by her conscience, holding on tight till he was there to leave whatever it was she wanted to leave him: her little cell, probably.

The feelings of immurement, incarceration, and incapacity bedevil even the employed because the neo-colonial hegemony relegates blacks mostly to low-paying jobs of a menial nature. Consequently, the blacks cannot provide for the members of the extended family who, by tradition, are their social responsibility. This creates further anguish and anxiety as in existentialism and the characters are forced to come to terms with the nothingness and emptiness of life.

As Zhuwarara (2001) observes, the city becomes a degrading environment in which circumstances compel the individual to participate in the process of self-denigration and self-dehumanisation. The only person who can provide for the ailing and lonely figure of the mother is

the son, Moab, but unfortunately, the money that he gets is pitifully inadequate to cater for his own upkeep in town and to meet what he is gradually beginning to regard as exacting and unwelcome, though not expected, demands of his mother. Moab's mother becomes a shadow, always ominously hovering over his life and this unsettles him. In existential philosophy, he should not worry about what society or his mother says but makes choices and tries to define himself, that is enough. But it should be understood that from an African perspective, parents become the responsibility of their children, particularly male, in old age. This is Moab's dilemma which haunts him even in his sleep! This is worsened by the economic hardships terrorising him and fellow black sojourners, "He had his money on Friday afternoon, and, as always happened when he had it; it seemed to fly in all directions" Mungoshi (1972).

'The Accident' (in *Coming of the Dry Season*) extends the image of the vulnerability, poverty and destitution of blacks who have come to see themselves as perennial victims of whites who, according to their experience, have always shown callousness towards blacks. The racial tension and volatility that rise to the surface at the scene of the accident are only part of a deep-seated problem that obtains in the city and the whole country in a colonial setting. City life is what Mungoshi seems to concentrate on in most of the short stories in Mungoshi (1980) and Mungoshi (1997). Thus Zhuwarara (2001) further argues that as is often portrayed in many Shona novels and short stories, the city remains a diabolic stronghold, that is, a place and a space full of temptations and where those values, painfully nurtured by the African society, come apart, leaving the individual vulnerable. Consequently, most of Mungoshi's stories in *Some Kinds of Wounds* and *Walking Still* have plots that fit into his usual cautionary tales (Veit-Wild, 1992).

The city is portrayed as the devil's paradise and it mercilessly destroys the fabric that holds society together, especially in the realm of morality and ethics. In *Waiting for the Rain*, John warns that, "The city isn't exactly the kind of place I would recommend for our sisters these modern days . . ." and the reader is automatically reminded of Magufu in 'The Brother' who is married and has a pregnant wife living with his parents in his rural home but he is bent on promiscuity. He drugs Sheila, a fifteen-year-old girl and subsequently deflowers her:

There is a long silence, then later on, as if she was being smothered, Sheila protested, 'Please Magufu . . . No. Please. No . . . Does your wife know that you treat people and when they don't know who they are and what they are doing anymore, you drag them home to bed and tell them to strip to the skin? (Mungoshi, 1980) .

And not only is Magufu prepared to do this in the same room in which Tendai, his younger brother of school-going age, is sleeping but also using violence to force Sheila into an intimate sexual relationship devoid of love or, for that matter, consent and commitment. This story and 'Some Kinds of Wounds' (from the same collection) with Kute, the main character, are archetypal of the many stories where Mungoshi uses the "city jungle" to reveal the degree to which the blacks, especially the young, sink into the life of decadence, promiscuity and debauchery. One cannot help but reflect on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS today, mainly as a result of promiscuity. Zhuwarara (2001).

The moral squalor in which Magufu and his drinking companions have sunk is vividly captured in the observations made by Tendai, with its low-key and matter-of-fact style, rivals Marechera's lurid depictions of sordidness in (Marechera, 1978) and Armah's putrid smell and scenes in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.

What the researchers find interesting about Mungoshi is not the stereotypical portrayal of women in a patriarchal establishment but the rebellious woman bent on asserting her independence over her men folk. In 'Who Will Stop the Dark', Zakeo's father, who is traditionally the ultimate authority in the family, is thoroughly emasculated by his wife, symbolically underlined by his broken back and his basket-weaving which, significantly, is work that is traditionally done by women. The dominance of men by their women folk is apparent. Zakeo feels deep sympathy bordering on pity and shame each time he looks at his crippled father who:

. . . drags his useless lower limbs out of the hut . . . and always the boy felt the stab of the pain when he looked at the front of his father's wet urine-stiffened trouser . . . The boy knew his mother had something to do with this condition of his father (Mungoshi, 1980).

Father, son and grandfather are imprisoned by the woman of the house who defies the traditional stereotypical woman who is docile and subservient to men. To emphasise the intensity of his suffering, the omniscient narrator says, "The old man shook his head and prepared for another battle with those things that his own parents never told him exist" (p. 31). This situation is worsened when this woman lashes Zakeo's father whenever he tries to protect his son from her volatile and violent temperament: "His father tried to intervene but he quickly returned to his basket weaving when the strop cracked into his (father's) back twice in quick merciless succession" (Mungoshi, 1980).

One does not miss the deep sense of hurt that Zakeo suffers, worsened by his mother who is supposed to nurture him but, instead, turns out to be grossly insensitive while his father and the old man remain equally helpless and vulnerable to the woman's violent temper. Once again, as in existentialism, our limitations as human beings create discomfort and anxiety (Zalta, 1976). Sartre, in *Leintricchia* (1980) maintains that:

Nothing more is required to arouse the nauseating disgust that characterises the consciousness of reality . . . the real is never beautiful. Beauty is a value applicable only to the imaginary and which means the negation of the world in its essential structure.

Just as physical objects function as signs and symbols of the mental state of a person (especially in *Waiting for the Rain*), and of a whole society, bodily distortions reveal psychological stress and strain. Members of the Mandengu family are virtually and visually 'eaten-up' by the general disease that has taken them (Veit-Wild, 1992). Tongoona (the father) suffers from burning and swollen feet; his wife Raina has a twitching eye, twisted mouth and sporadic but terrible headache attacks and Old Mandisa's eyes are ever burning ". . . as if they have fire in them" (p. 12). The physical deformities of their bodies could mirror the deformity of their minds: ". . . insecure creatures that fight each other in a thirty-year-old war of marriage, torn between superstitions and adaptation to the western world and its Christian ethics (Veit-Wild, 1992). Indeed, life is no bed of roses and existentialists seek to affirm and emphasise this. Society is indeed plagued by innumerable ills, mainly a result of the incessant poverty that the human being is exposed to in his relentless search for the meaning of his/her life.

3. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, one can reasonably conclude, with conviction, that the general theme that pervades Mungoshi's literary works is that of vulnerability of mankind caught up in a situation where they have very little control over their lives. This study has attempted to analyse Mungoshi's works from an existentialist perspective, in an attempt to find out how relevant they are to the current trends in world politics and the general socio-economic challenges that bedevil man in an indifferent world where s/he is supposed and compelled to find meaning for his/her life as an individual. The works generally portray the gloomy side of life, the life which existentialists view as instilling in each one of us, a sense of discomfort, anguish and anxiety. Indeed, both the city and the countryside expose the powerlessness and susceptibility of people, particularly in the Third World, who are part of a society whose own identity, value and beliefs are slowly being undermined and warped by globalisation in which western culture is dominant. The dilemma is that nobody can afford to lag behind, hence the world is certainly 'absurd', a favourite existentialist concept.

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