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Tragic Optimism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Beyond the Horizon*

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Abstract

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* are similar in many ways. They both focus on characters whose everyday peaceful lives are overturned by tragic events: in *Half of a Yellow Sun,* these include brutal war and its antecedent starvation, sickness, loss of properties, beloved family members and friends, squalor, and even death; on the other hand, in *Beyond the Horizon,* we witness forced marriage, domestic brutalization, rape, and sex-slavery. The texts capture what it could mean for existence to hang or dangle from edge to edge, from the height of peace and seeming happiness to one of unhappiness and near-extermination. However, as the symbolic meanings of "beyond the horizon" and "half of a yellow sun" signify, the texts are about survival, endurance, perseverance, hope, courage, and defiance. Echoing the Nigerian civil war, *Half of a Yellow Sun* portrays characters who are involved in a struggle for self-determination in the face of ethnocide, and who, being beaten hands down, accept what they cannot change, and in the spirit of tragic optimism venture to make the best out of life. Like Adichie's Olanna, Odenigbo, Ugwu, Kainene, Madu, etc. all of whom encounter losses, defeats, and failures, Darko's protagonist Mara is an epitome of what it means to remain optimistic under harsh conditions, and to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive. This paper

adopts existential psychotherapy in exploring tragic optimism along two axes, the personal and the communal, in the primary texts.

Keywords: Tragedy, optimism, death, freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, existential givens, psychotherapy

Introduction

As human beings existing within a vast cosmos which rotation and direction we have little or no control over, we are often confronted with situations that seem to overwhelm all odds and to decimate every chance of a revival, what Viktor Frankl calls an "existential vacuum" (48). An existential vacuum saps the sufferers' joy of living, making them "lack the awareness of a meaning worth living for. They are haunted by the experiences of their inner emptiness, a void within themselves"(48). Incidents bearing such cataclysmic import have more often been given the generic term *tragedy*, a concept which is as old as literature, dating as far back as the Greeks who used it to describe incidents of serious magnitude which unfailingly arouse pity and fear (Aristotle 15). A tragic occurrence is such that "even without seeing the things take place, he who hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity at the incidents," maintains Aristotle (17). Richard B. Sewall, therefore, described tragedy as dealing with human suffering, and "the sense of ancient evil, . . . 'the blight man was born for,' . . . the permanence and the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life" (6). According to Oscar Mendel, the individual who encounters a tragedy, "necessarily and inevitably, meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering"(20).

But in the face of this occurrence of cataclysmic import, what prevalent human spirit is it that could, and often does, carry the individual through the limit of their suffering? The answer, following the existential psychotherapy of Frankl, is captured by the term: tragic optimism. Tragic optimism delineates the human capacity to remain "optimistic in spite of the 'tragic triad' . . . which consists of those aspects of human existence which may be circumscribed by: (1) pain; (2) guilt; and (3) death" (Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* 61). A tragic optimism is, thus, the retention of potential meaning in life, the saying yes to life in spite of its tragic aspects. Following Frankl, an individual has the "human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive," making life potentially meaningful under any conditions (61). Tragic optimism then is founded on the idea that conditions like ravaging war situations, incarceration and torture in concentration camps, painful health challenges, rape, sexual enslavement, loss of loved ones and treasured possessions etc are not final, but could be turned around so that the sufferer begins to see life positively. Shawn Rubin, echoing James F. T. Bugental (1978), Irvin D. Yalom (1980), Kirk Schneider and Rollo May (1995), defines the term as "the philosophy that human beings are endowed with the capacity to courageously confront and transform the depths of suffering into hope, creating meaning and initiate responsible action" (1).

Certainly, Frankl's notion of tragic optimism is existential and likewise psychological, as it is concerned with how the individual finds meaning in life. In his essay, "Towards a Dual-Systems Model of What Makes Life worth Living," Paul T. P. Wong examined what truly makes life desirable. He not only ascribes to Frankl the view that "the will to meaning is the key to living a worthy and fulfilling life regardless of personal preferences and circumstances" (3), but also builds on Frankl's central positions, whereby he postulates that the human quest for meaning can be achieved through a bridge between two intellectual traditions that pursue this goal, these traditions being "the existential perspective" and "positive psychology." Understandably, the adjective "positive" entails a likeable characteristics, the absence

of which seems to make the former less enviable than the latter, for the existential perspective "tends to focus on learning to live with the dark side of the human condition, such as suffering, meaninglessness, loneliness, and death, and creating meaning through one's courageous choices and creative actions [while], in contrast, positive psychology emphasizes positive experiences and emotions [such as love] as the pillars of a worthwhile life" (3).

Following Wong, a psycho-existential approach to meaning raises three questions: what do people want in life, what do people want to avoid, and how do people make sense of life? People generally want "the good life," Wong remarked. He observed, however, that we unfortunately "do not live in an ideal world with perfect justice, equal opportunities, and unlimited resources for all individuals to get what they want in life" (5). Hence people often encounter the pain, suffering, and death which they *naturally* shun. Even as people "want to be free from deprivation, discrimination, oppression, and forms of ill-treatment, [and] also shun rejection, opposition, defeat, failure, and all the obstacles that prevent us from realizing our dreams, [as well as] difficult people who upset us and make our lives miserable"(Wong 5), these very things are often the inevitable accompaniments of daily life in the cosmos we live in. To ask the question attributed to Gordon W. Allport who wrote the preface to Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, "how could [the man who lives under these circumstances]—every possession lost, every value destroyed, suffering from hunger, cold and brutality, hourly expecting extermination—how could he find life worth preserving?"

Frankl, who is known to have dealt with the discouraging perception that "modern life is trash," recommends for those in an existential vacuum: creativity, love, and the freedom of moral choice (Barbara A. Heavilin and Charles W. Heavilin 1). Psychologically speaking, love is a significant phenomenon which presence is said to fortify a hard-pressed soul, since "by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize [his] potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true" (Frankl 51). The two Heavilins, adopting this

psychological perspective, suggest that "creativity, love and the freedom of moral choice are only evidence that man is a reflection of God (who could be sought out when in an existential vacuum), "of a higher way—or what Frankl calls—another dimension, [which entails] the capacity to rise above conditions" (1). They are, nevertheless, at a loss as to: "how and where . . . help [is] to be sought and found if God Himself seems absent, thus compounding the perceived emptiness and lack of meaning?" (Ibid).

The psychologists' view that "meaning is derived from the compassion and care for relationship with others in harmony within ourselves" (Maurits G.T. Kwee 1) runs contrary to existential philosophy. Existentialism negates the "care for relationship with others," since it favours and promotes authenticity, and de-emphasizes a closeness with others (Gideon Uzoma Umezurike 2). Existentialism holds that by having a strong bond with people we trust, we stand to lose our originality to the "they-self"; Martin Heidegger puts it this way, "Dasein's giving 'its-self' over to the they [or being in affinity with other men] inevitably reveals 'something like a flight of the Dasein from its authentic potentiality of self-Being'" (Cited in G. U. Umezurike 17). Thus, from the existential perspective, tragic optimism is something an individual possesses independent of others, without "the care for relationship with others" which psychology, as well as as Frankl's psychotherapy, recommends as a means to meaning.

Yet, Wong insists that an existential psychotherapeutic approach is the best means to meaning. The individual's achieving of tragic optimism is, as he affirmed in his "*International Network on Personal Meaning,"*

> Based on five virtues: 1) Affirmation [which] enables one to believe in the meaning and value of life, regardless of the circumstances; 2) Acceptance [which] enables one to confront what cannot be changed—both past traumas and future losses; 3) Self-transcendence [which] enables one to feel worthy of suffering for a higher purpose; 4) Faith [which] gives one a flickering light in an otherwise very gloomy situation; 5)

> Courage [which] enables one to endure the pain and strive for a better future. (Qtd in Rubin 203)

The novels, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Beyond the Horizon* by Amma Darko, feature man's search for meaning, portraying the human capacity to create meaning and find joy even when existence hangs "on the brink of oblivion" (E. Becker, cited in Rubin). The struggle to be free from the shackles of all that keeps the soul suppressed is seen in the lives of the characters who are bent on creating and finding joy within the existential vacuums which surround their lives. Both Adichie and Darko project this image on two levels: the collective and the personal. The independence struggle in *Half of a Yellow Sun,* and the sense of female bonding shown by Darko's female characters delineate the collective quests of people who, like Maya Angelou's persona, insist that though

> You may shoot me with your words,
> You may cut me with your eyes,
> You may kill me with your hatefulness,
> ...Still, like air, I'll rise ("Still I Rise," lines 21-4).

The collective goals in the texts are given impetus by the spirit of tragic optimism, this same mental attitude being the preservative factor enabling the individual characters to *accept* defeat and move on with a meaningful life in view, even if their quests fail. Nevertheless, while the works of Adichie and Darko continue to gain attention in literary studies, it has been the case that studies on *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Beyond the Horizon* have been shrouded within a seemingly bound spectrum, the critics often focusing on the feminist and war issues and more or less disregarding their search for solution and meaning.

I. Critical Review of the Primary Texts

II.

A survey of the critical output on *Beyond the Horizon* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals that Ghanaian writer Amma Darko and Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are, like most African writers, devoted to the idea of *litérature engagée* (literature of commitment or

engagement). However, while Darko is said to engage with the various forms of suppression and enslavement that becloud women in a patriarchal world, Adichie is known to have used her feminist viewpoint to fertilize her commitment to the portrayal of the Nigerian civil war.

Hence *Half of a Yellow Sun* is reckoned a historical narrative, a fictional representation of life in Nigeria during the early and the late sixties. The aim of the narrative, in the words of Chijioke Uwasomba, is to narrate "the civil war, pointing out its damning effects on all classes of people living within the enclave of Biafra" (33). Contrary to the assertions of many critics though, particularly that of Ayo Kehinde (137) who views *Half of a Yellow Sun* as "a recreation of history for a didactic purpose" and that of John C. Hawley who sees "the war as a backdrop for interpersonal ethical questions" (15), Meredith Armstrong Coffey provides a counterargument, saying that these readings wrongly "emphasize the personal over the political in the novel" (2). According to Coffey, there is surely more to the novel than meets the eye, for "the novel's complex representation of the war functions as much more than a setting for a series of family dramas at the foreground" (v).

Coffey interprets the novel from a symbolic and allegorical perspective. She proposes and traces "a political allegory which is legible within [the] characters' personal relationships and historical circumstances." For her, the twins Olanna and Kainene are symbolic representations of the two sides to the 1967-to-1970 Nigeria-Biafra war. "In the way that Kainene grows emotionally distant from Olanna, eventually stops speaking to her, and suddenly disappears, so Eastern Nigeria increasingly clashed with Northern Nigeria during the early 1960s, seceded as the Republic of Biafra in 1967, and eventually "disappeared" at the end of the war in 1970, as it was absorbed back into Nigeria" (Ibid). While she decodes this allegorical play within the text, Coffey underscores that to suggest a one-to-one correspondence between events of the novel and events of the war, or even a one-to-one correspondence between the literal warring sides and their symbolic equivalents (that is, Olanna and Kainene) is definitely to

oversimplify the novel; hence her "intention is to outline how their (i.e., the twins') sometimes tense relationship to one another speaks to the conflicted relationship between Nigeria and Biafra" (15), a strained relationship that ultimately results in the civil war which, as Z. Justin and B. Cauveri reminds us, "cost the Igbo people a great deal in terms of lives, money and infrastructure; it has been estimated that up to three million people might have been killed due to the conflict, mostly of hunger and disease (8)."

Justin and Cauveri trace the root cause of the civil war, as portrayed in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun,* to the "religious beliefs [that] stand in the way of human love and relationship." Even as they agree that *Half of a Yellow Sun* "raises political questions as well as many challenging gender, race, and class related issues" (9), the duo, who as well see the novel as using the civil war as a backdrop for dramatizing personal conflicts, are apt to suggest that the cause of the major conflict in the text, the conflict between Nigeria and Biafria, is their religious differences; they note that both sides are able to cohabit and transact peacefully on every other ground apart from that relating to their spiritual beliefs. Hence they see their religions affecting or determining the nature of their interpersonal relationships. For instance,

> The friendship that existed between Abdulmalik, a Hausa Muslim, and the Mbaezi, a Christian family is very strong and they live as cordial neighbors before the civil war. . . . However, everything changes drastically and tragedy befalls the Mbaezi's family. The strong friendship did not last long when there was unrest due to the civil war. The brutality and bestiality displayed by Abdulmalik towards Uncle Mbeazi's family shows how the religious difference strips the human values of love and friendship once and forever. (10)

Similarly, Justin and Cauveri attribute the rift that arises and dishevels the hitherto smooth friendship between Olanna and Mohammed to the difference in their religious affiliations. Even as Mohammed has real love for Olanna, says Justin and Cauveri, "Olanna reminds him

always about her ethnicity and religious identity whenever she gets a chance" (9-10). After the massacre of her relations, "though he helps Olanna escape from the violent mob, she does not trust him as he belongs to the other religion. She rejects his love saying she was a Biafran first" (10).

While religious beliefs evidently stand in the way of human love and relationship in the Nigerian novel, in Darko's narrative, the love of lucre and egoism are noted to be hindrances to the cultivation and expression of human love, and therefore the cause of the many conflicts in the text. Beyond the Horizon, like Darko's *The Housemaid* (1998) and *Faceless* (2003), "present[s] and contest[s] the culture of patriarchy," argues Mawuli Adjei (47). The novel, in short, "takes us through the life of Mara, a sweet, naïve village girl who goes through exploitation at the hands of her husband. Her ordeal transforms her from a hard-working wife to a consummate prostitute bent on trading her body to men in order to cater for the needs of her children and mother back home." (Philomena Yeboah 96). Upon her attaining the enlightenment of things around her, this "disgruntled wife (and mother) decides [however] to punish the husband whose exploitation of her motherhood renders her a prostitute. Here, we observe an instance of the exploiter being exploited" (Charles Marfo, Philomena Abeka Yeboah, and Lucy Bonku 37).

According to this three critics, "Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon . . .* primarily . . . challenge[s] prevailing views of motherhood held by African societies. In [the novel], mothers are portrayed in their real complex natures as nurturers with potential to exploit even their own [exploiters]. Since, especially in contemporary times, there are many instances of the exploitation of mothers, Darko is sharp to condemn, in her novel, the traditional view of women as being equivalent to female animals, this traditional view presupposing, as the aforementioned trio – citing the words of Irigaray – put it, "that the mother nurses the child for free, before and after giving birth and that she remains the nurse of men in society" (C. Marfo, P. A. Yeboah, and L. Bonku 36). This challenge to traditional views of women is evidently the object of feminist ideology, which not only captures the place of

women in society but also seeks "to negotiate their identity through various platforms, and literature is one of them" (Gloria AjamiMakokha 111).

Makokha reads Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* from this standpoint, examining how the novel articulates the place of women characters in the Nigerian society. According to her, Adichie reveals that in the postcolonial setting of her novel, "the voices of African women have rarely been listened to, contrary to the noises of men which have 'drowned us out in every sphere of life, including the arts" (111). In her essay, "Portrayal of the African Woman in *Half of a Yellow Sun,"* Makokha presents the view that even after Nigeria gained her independence, and prior to the civil war, women, as seen through the literary lens of Adichie, have little or no place of recognition in the political and business spheres, except the positions they could buy with their sexual appeal, by granting favours to men who used them as sex pawns and baits. Makokha writes,

> Most of the rulers and politicians in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are male. This also applies to the successful businessmen. Olanna's father is a rich politician and businessman who hosts high-level dignitaries in his home. The businessmen who want to give him tenders expect sexual favours from his beautiful daughter, Olanna. He does not discourage this, but rather attempts to convince his daughter to prostitute herself. (113-4)

Since, as the essayist denotes, the beautiful Nigerian woman is an 'object' for sale and an agent of sex for commercial purposes (114), Kainene understands "the benefit of being the ugly daughter [which is] that nobody uses you as sex bait"' (Adichie 33). Citing the words of Walby, D. Kandiyoti distinguishes between two types of patriarchal domination, private and public patriarchy. The former involves the "relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life other than the household and the appropriation of their services by individual patriarchs within the confines of the home," while the latter "is based on employment and the state; [for] women [are] no longer excluded from the public arena but subordinated within it. [And] more

collective forms of appropriation of their services supersede the individual mode of private patriarchy" (377).

Makokha suggests that Adichie's Olanna and Kainene both utilize the benefits of their education, and put up strong resistance to these various forms of patriarchy. "Olanna and Kainene were well schooled," she writes, yet their father, with their mother's approval, wants Olanna to marry from a rich family, in order to see that their wealth is secured. Olanna nevertheless rejects their requests; even as they keep finding her more prospective rich suitors; "…she refused to marry Igwe Okagbue's son, and later, Chief Okaro's son" (Adichie 33). Makokha notes that she even refuses to give in to her father's wish to have her spread her legs for "that elephant" (that is, Chief Okonji) in exchange for a contract (114).

> As much as she was well educated and enlightened, her father still wanted to impose a man on her, by displaying her to the public for the men to see and have her in exchange for money and tenders, hence Public Patriarchy. Olanna's constant rejection of these men and [fidelity] to Odenigbo, a university lecturer with little wealth, brings out the fight for the right of women to choose their marriage partners. She stayed firm to her decision and married Odenigbo, eventually, a sign of forthcoming victory for the woman in patriarchal Nigeria who chooses to find a marriage partner for herself, despite opposition from her parents. (114)

Aside the position of women as sex pawns and baits used by politicians, businessmen and parents to win contracts, Makokha tells of another role assigned to women in the patriarchal African setting of this postcolonial novel. In her own words, "The woman in the postcolonial Nigerian society was expected to be a mother once she started living with a man, whether legally or traditionally married. A child was what identified a real woman from a 'spoilt' one, and lack of children was perceived as a sin" (Makokha 114). Hence Odenigbo's mother berates Olanna for being unable to conceive; Mama not only calls her an abnormal woman but also a witch who has been sent to

eliminate their family line (Ibid). Following Walby's line of thought, what Mama promotes, by bringing Amala to get pregnant for Odenigbo, is private patriarchy which sees the patriarch as being entitled to have any woman for a wife, the wife herself having the utmost duty to produce children for the man, a task in which she should never be found wanting, lest she be termed a failure.

There is no doubt that Darko well captures the aforementioned two forms of patriarchy, for as Louise Zak's "Writing Her Way, Creating a New Life" points out, Darko's oeuvre, including *Beyond the Horizon*, relates "the psychological and economic impact of colonialism on women, the injustices of patriarchal society, the conflict between the traditional values of the village and the pressures of urban life" (12). Adjei assays the anthology, *Broadening the Horizon: Critical Perspectives to Amma Darko,* noting that all the critics who contributed to the work are in line with Louise Zak, as they not only see Darko's works from mainly economic and socio-cultural perspectives but also "concentrate on women as victims of patriarchal violence. [And] although a couple of them draw attention to women as complicit in their own predicaments, very little is written about the condescending manner in which Darko treats her male characters, whether the narrative is third-person or first-person" (48). While Adjei does not deny the fact that Mara, in *Beyond the Horizon*, as well as Darko's other female characters, is a subjugated woman, he accuses Darko of misrepresenting the males, through the subjective 'I' of the female narrator. This extract from Adjei's essay, "Male-Bashing and Narrative Subjectivity in Amma Darko's First Three Novels," is worth citing here:

> As Okiwelu (1998:107) points out, "the intrinsic linguistic value of the pronoun *I* is more than that of a subject of a sentence, which is a grammatical function" since its role is "semantically that of *subjectivity*." The first-person pronoun 'I' can be used in nuances of exaggeration, understatement, perception, prejudice, sentimentalism or lyricism. The 'I' is a fictional voice, or the *alter ego*, through which writers attempt to (re)present themselves. Through this fictional voice, writers are able to

> dramatize the different viewpoints and present their own diagnoses of society. Thus, within the framework of the first-person narrative, everything is seen *subjectively* through the eyes of the 'I': the objects, concepts, conceits, perceptions and beliefs which pass through the lenses of that eye are filtered through the idiosyncrasies of the 'I', hazing, dimming, daubing, illuminating or totally annihilating them. (49)

Thus told from a first-person narrative perspective, the story of the female protagonist, Mara*,* is accordingly "a story told on behalf of women, narrated from such a subjective perspective that there are no good men in the story. The only good men . . . are anonymous, non-physical entities, used only as illustrative references" (49-50). Adjei further understands that under the subjective window of the feminist 'I', *Beyond the Horizon* collapses into an allegorical tale of conflicts between vice and virtue, Akobi (who is the principal male figure in the narrative) personifying vice and Mara, a personification of "virtue wrapped in the garb of innocence, naivety and vulnerability—and therefore an object of our sympathy. And she courts our pity and support through the overly sentimental and lyrical narration of her experiences, first with Akobi in Accra, and then with Akobi and his accomplices in Germany where she is forced into prostitution" (50).

> She presents herself as a young, innocent, illiterate, trusting, unassuming woman trapped in a violent and exploitative relationship. On the other hand, she presents Akobi as callous, brutish, sadistic and exploitative. The greater part of the story is devoted to Akobi's capacity for violence on the one hand and Mara's extraordinary capacity for endurance on the other hand. (50)

However, whether or not Darko misrepresents or under-represents the men is not the issue we seek to pursue in this discourse, for such project will inevitably involve looking for a correspondence between the text and what is outside the text, a relationship which might be inexistent. Of particular interest to us is the presentment of the

characters within the text, and not a comparison of them to real life personalities. And verious critics readily lend their views in this regard.

Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur, for example, comes close to a merger of ideas from structuralist and psychoanalyical perspectives. She suggests that the actions of Akobi could be seen in the light of Jacques Derrida's fusion of "logocentrism" and "phallocentrism" into a new word "phallogocentrism," which denotes "the authority and centrality of the male essence in the affairs of women, and the thoughts and actions that are brought about as a result of the over-concentration on the phallus" (296). Thus Amissah-Arthur studies "Darko's male characters in relation to the authoritative and the psychosexual attitude with reference to language and violence of the male characters and how this affects their women" (Ibid). The essayist surmised that "Mara's husband Akobi represents this masculinity distinctly in his attitude towards her. He beats her whenever he pleases without any tangible reason. This may be done to show his authority in his home and let the wife realize that he should in no way be opposed" (297). Since the male is always right and is known to have the right to use violence when he feels he is being misinterpreted or disobeyed, especially by the wife, the succession of unjustified violence is said to "exhibits the ability of Darko to bring to effect the male dominance and logocentricity in the novel" (297). But how do the women react and how can they still react in the face of this prevailing circumstance?

The theme of resistance takes first place in Peter Uchechukwu Umezurike's account of Darko's novel. According to him, Darko's "narratives confront patriarchal oppression and demonstrate quite evidently through [the] female characters a resounding feminist position in how women must reconstitute their subjectivity from subaltern positions; positions of disadvantage and subjection." Recalling Ato Quayson's statement that in Africa "women's existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedoms without severe sacrifices or compromises" (585), P. U. Umezurike implicitly agree that Darko's women are placed in that extreme position from

which they cannot free themselves without the use of force. In his analysis, he underscores the fact that "internal struggle within a character could induce self-knowledge; this knowledge could in turn incite the character to contest her subjection. However, even when the character refuses to go along with the social practices governed by the ritual of ideology, the outcome usually turns adverse and in some cases life-destroying" (160). However, his conclusion that "a subject simply cannot escape ideology" is somewhat controversial, for it, perhaps, could be read to imply that resistance to ideology is meaningless and, therefore, the struggle for freedom itself futile, since freedom comes at a costly price. While many critics of *Half of a Yellow Sun* seemingly agree with this view, since they see the war in the text as a closed case, Coffey does not take it so.

Significantly, Coffey argues that rather than indicating a sense of finality, "Adichie's text refuses closure in ways that ultimately suggest an alternative both to the notion that the novel has an apolitical, purely tragic ending, and to dominant narratives about the Biafran secession's "inevitable" failure" (vi). Following this argument, she views Eastern Nigeria's secession and the Biafran phenomenon not as a thing of the past but in the light of Derrida's notion of the "spectre," something seemingly departed yet forcing everyone to remain "*waiting* for" its return (2). "Far from the prevalent scholarly and political rhetoric that relegates Biafra to a narrow three-year time frame," Coffey insists, "Adichie's novel conceives of a Biafran existence beyond the pages of some finalized history" (36), and if that existence stands to be achieved, it must be powered by tragic optimism, the object of study which we have set out to analyse in the two texts.

Thus, what we have done in this review is to show some of the different ways in which readers have understood Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon.* While Adichie's is widely seen from the stance of New Historicity, Darko's mostly has been studied as a feminist portrayal of the struggles of African women. Coffey's reading of the former and Adjei study of the latter are similar, on the ground that they both have an allegorical leaning. As earlier

mentioned though, our object of reading these texts is quite different, to look closely at the characters' personalities and decipher their embodiment of tragic optimism.

This research work is, therefore, significant for adopting a new focus, which is, "re-searching" for the factors which enable the characters to overcome their supposedly overwhelming problems. Moreover, the convergence of existential and psychological ideas gives more depth to the understanding of the texts which are fraught with characters who, aside learning to accept their sufferings, their existential vacuums, as the *inevitables* of human existence, also learn to creatively find something worth living for in the world, and hence overcome the depression or anxiety which suffering breeds. We seek to explore and give an explanation to how characters like Mara, Kaye, Vivian, Gitte, Olanna, Kainene, Odenigbo, Ugwu, etc find life worth preserving after witnessing in part or in whole various degrees of losses and failures. This task is undertaken from a psychotherapeutic dimension which borrows from the psycho-existential groundwork laid by Frankl, Irvin, Wong, Rubin, Tillich, etc.

III. The Existential Psychotherapeutic Framework

It is pertinent to state from the onset that existential psychotherapy is not a literary theory, but a philosophical method of therapy which is, nevertheless, a useful approach towards understanding literary characters. In his book, *Existential Psychotherapy,* Irvin D. Yalom, who is the most acclaimed proponents of this therapeutic school, states that existential psychotherapy is "a philosophical method of therapy that operates on the belief that inner conflicts within a person is due to that individual's confrontation with the givens of existence" (9). Thus Steve Berry-Smith makes a strong point when he avers that even though existential psychotherapy has evolved as a model for therapeutic practice, its foundation is firmly based on existentialism (1).

Existential philosophy comprises series of disparate, unsystematised thoughts which are based on the fervid individualism of Soren

Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and many others (Walter Kaufmann 11). In the heart of existentialism, according to Kaufmann, are the following: "the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic and remote from life" (12). It is for this reason that Hubert L. Dreyfus sees existentialism as a philosophy of rebellion against tradition (cited in G. U. Umezurike 2).

According to Udo Tietz, the ancestor of existentialism is Kierkegaard (162). However, "existentialism is known to be fathered by Sartre, not because he was the first to practise it, but because of his open defence of the outlook on life which it propagates" (G. U. Umezurike 13). The outlook that man has the freedom to choose how he is going to live his life is deeply entrenched in the thoughts of existentialists, notably, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Hence, the motto found in the words of Sartre, "existence precedes essence". Sartre not only observes that man is "a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it," but also avers that "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself" (290). As such, man is "what he wills, and as he conceives himself to be after already existing. [He] is nothing else, but that which he makes of himself" (291).

Existentialism is, therefore, concerned with some of the deepest issues which man wrestles with daily, such issues like: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. These four givens or concerns are, for Yalom, of utmost interest to psychotherapy, which is concerned with giving healing to depressed man. Yalom states,

> I have found that the four givens are particularly relevant to psychotherapy: the inevitability of death for each of us and for those we love; the freedom to make our lives as we will; our ultimate aloneness; and finally, the absence of any meaning or sense to our life. However grim these givens may seem, they contain the seeds of wisdom and redemption. (4)

Even though man's death is inevitable, his redemption lies in his being in possession of the power of choosing how to live. Both Yalom and Sartre see existential freedom as "the absence of existential structure which dictates the essence of man" (Berry-Smith 18). Being free then means being "thrown" into existence with no "human nature" as a defining essence or a definition of the reality into which one is thrown (18). Sartre puts it succinctly: "man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does" (295). However, while man is invested with the freedom of choosing how he wants to live, the possibility of choosing is known to have its attendant dread. The dread results from having to take up responsibilities for oneself, and, perhaps, for others; for when existentialists "say that man is responsible for himself, [they] do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (Sartre 291). Kierkegaard explains the dread that is associated with freedom in this way, "the self must be understood in terms of possibilities, dread, and decisions. When I behold my possibilities, I experience that dread which is "the dizziness of freedom," and my choice is made in fear and trembling" (Kaufmann 17). Since that trembling could lead one to resort to inaction, Yalom insists that "one is entirely responsible for one's life, not only for one's action, but for one's failure to act" (*EP,* 220). The awareness of one's responsibility entails that one "is aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings, and, if such is the case, one's own suffering" (218). According to Yalom, this awareness, the insight that man is responsible for himself, often leads man to seek "structures, authority, grand designs, magic, something that is bigger than one's self" (222).

Nevertheless, existential psychotherapy underscores that however big a structure one might get incorporated into, the feeling of isolation remains inextinguishable and always ready to let itself out. Yalom recognizes three types of isolation or aloneness—interpersonal isolation, intrapersonal isolation and, most significantly, existential isolation (*EP, 355).* While interpersonal isolation is the loneliness felt

when one is bodily and emotionally at a distance from other people, intrapersonal isolation is the form of adopted loneliness that is within (Berry-Smith 26-7). For Yalom, intrapersonal isolation is the result of one stifling their own feelings or desires and accepting "ought's" or "shoulds" as their own objectives; it comes about when one buries one's own potential" (354). As for the third kind of isolation on which is "Yalom's central focus," Berry-Smith infers that it involves an "unbridgeable gap between oneself and any other being, and even more fundamental—a separation between oneself and the world" (27). It is the image of this isolation that is invoked in the all too common phrase, "on your own." Berry-Smith comments that:

> Existential isolation is a vale of loneliness with many approaches, and Yalom believes [that] confrontation with the ultimate concerns of death and freedom inevitably leads the individual into the vale as can a catastrophic event, where everything once considered safe and predictable, permanent, precious and good can suddenly vanish. The phenomenon of existential isolation is experienced the most by those facing death; the time that one most realises that one was born alone and must exit from the world alone. (27)

Altogether, it is as Yalom will have us believe, "there is no solution to isolation, it is part of existence; we must face it and find a way to take it into ourselves" (Berry-Smith 28). Yet, as death becomes looming, throwing one into the bottom of existential aloneness, one contends with and understands the meaninglessness of existence.

Existential psychotherapy, therefore, has a huge interest in the issue of death and the meaninglessness of life. According to Heidegger, death is a certain 'yet-to-come'; it is inevitable, and also an occurrence which nearness reveals to Dasein what it means to be (Filiz Peach, N. pag). In view of this, Heidegger says that "disclosure of my mortality can therefore serve to individuate me. Anticipating my death destroys my egotistical attachment to unexamined [or inauthentic] ways of living" (Qtd. in G. U. Umezurike 19). Although man is "journeying-towards-death" (Teresa M Corso, N. pag), the understanding of the

meaninglessness of life becomes more coherent upon his nearing what Heidegger calls the condition of being 'no longer there' (Peach). Thus, suffering and the pains which result from conditions like illness, and all other situations that torture the mind and afflict the body, can make one get disillusioned with the world, such that one gets thrown into despair or anxiety.

Both existential philosophy and existential psychotherapy see death as "the ultimate source and object of anxiety about the future" (Corso). Citing Heidegger who is said to have beautifully put it that death is "the possibility of no further possibility," Corso in her “On the Basic Assumptions of Existential Psychotherapy” concludes that "of all limitations of existence, death is the ultimate and unavoidable limitation." Existential psychotherapy is not only predicated on the premise that "issues such as freedom of choice, responsibility, anxiety, guilt, meaninglessness, uncertainty, and, above all, death are inherent to existence," but also that some of these issues could cause afflictions and difficulties in one's life and can hinder a functional and fulfilling life when experienced with a great degree of distress (Corso). From therapeutic viewpoint, however, Yalom contends that humans can overcome the anxiety associated with death by their confronting "death in the same way they confront any fear" (Berry-Smith 8). Since death is inevitable, for one to live meaningfully while there is still life, "we should contemplate our ultimate end, familiarize ourselves with it, dissect and analyse it, reason with it, and discard terrifying childhood death distortions," Yalom suggests in his book *Staring at the Sun* (276). So, "even though the physicality of death destroys us, the idea of death saves us" (Heidegger, Qtd. in Berry-Smith 9). Explaining the meaning behind Heidegger's view, Yalom says that the recognition and acceptance of death can contribute a sense of poignancy to life and even provide a radical shift of life perspective: “such a realization can transport one from a mode of living characterized by diversions, tranquilization, anxieties to a more authentic mode" (*EP,* 40).

In the authentic mode, one embraces these questions: "what is the meaning of life? Why do we live? Why were we put here? What do we

live for? What do we live by? If we must die, if nothing endures, then what sense does anything make?" (Berry-Smith 34). These questions arise in that "the human being seems to require meaning. To live without meaning, goals, value, or ideals, seems to provoke considerable distress. In severe form, it may lead to the decision to end one's life" (Yalom *EP,* 422). In a world that is "full of shit" (Frankl), it is understandable that man often cleaves to religion as a source of meaning in life. But all existential philosophers and psychotherapists are not of unanimous agreement as to the relevance of religion as a fountain of meaning. While many psychotherapists, as well as some existential philosophers, see religion as an ultimate source of meaning, others suggest that meaning be derived from other things and not spirituality, what Berry-Smith terms “personal meaning in the absence of cosmic meaning” (36). For Yalom, one achieves personal meaning by means of the following: self-actualization, altruism, dedication to a cause (which could, of course, be a religious cause), creativity, and the hedonistic solution (*EP, 438).* The five media recommended by Yalom require the five attributes delineated by Wong (cited in the introduction): affirmation, acceptance, self transcendence, faith, and courage.

Generally, neither the religious/cosmic means nor the personal means to meaning does erase the existential vacuums which are inherent in man’s life. But they offer ways of enduring despite the presence of these hardships. Consequently, Corso comes to this conclusion: “to an existential therapist, working existentially means working with the painful awareness that some of the issues presented in therapy cannot be resolved, as they are an intrinsic part of existence and as such need to be faced and put into a fresh perspective that allows the client to re-evaluate and re-adjust their attitude towards life’s existential givens.” Therefore, the object of analysis in this discourse is the characters’ capacity to remain optimistic in spite of the ‘tragic triad’ which consists of those aspects of human existence that is circumscribed by pain, guilt, and death. It then follows that to understand focal characters like Ugwu, Mara, Olanna, Odenigbo, and Kaye, the following factors will be taken into consideration: their psycho-socio-cultural backgrounds and how their meaning systems

are structured by it; their reactions to meaning systems encountered outside their backgrounds, as well as their motivations for and means to new meanings.

IV. Personal Manifestations of Tragic Optimism: Comparing Ugwu and Mara

In examining the experience of personal tragic optimism in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Beyond the Horizon,* it is practical to begin with Ugwu and Mara. The two characters, more clearly than others, embody in their thought mode the feeling of tragic optimism, that spirit of defiance and courage in the face of changing circumstances. It is notable that both novels portray the two characters as they willingly leave their simple, bucolic lifestyle and move to a more intricate society. In *Beyond the Horizon,* we read the story of a woman steeped in the sordid station of marital enslavement. This woman is Mara, whose wifehood to Akobi is only notional, in that he rather sees and treats her as a slave than as a wife. Like Mara (forcibly yoked to Akobi in marriage) who leaves the village of Naka and its arcadian contentment to the savagery of a slum that claims to be an urbanized society, Ugwu, a mere village boy who has been denied the privilege of finishing his primary education, witnesses a quake in his life when he is taken to the bookish society of the Nsukka academe with all eagerness to work as Master's houseboy.

The transition from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar space demands that Ugwu and Mara must have the five virtues mentioned earlier by Wong. They need the virtues of affirmation, of the value of life and its betterment; acceptance, of their having left their previous life and undertaken a new one in which they are still novices; self-transcendence, which enables them to take up the pains of studying or living for a purpose higher than that of their village setting; and for Ugwu, faith in his ability to do well in school and to become a learned man despite the gloom of his being years above his class; while for Mara, faith in her ability to unlock everything, including her potentials, which conformism has locked up in her. Lastly, they both need courage, the courage not to be flustered as they encounter

mistakes, challenges, which seem beyond what they can bear, especially the challenge of being (in Mama Kiosk's term) "a greenhorn," that is, new in their environment. Thus we read that as Ugwu, the newcomer, arrives at Master's house, he "walked on tiptoe from room to room, because his feet felt dirty, and as he did so he grew *increasingly determined* to please Master, to stay in this house of meat and cool floors" (*HOAYS* 16).

Like Ugwu who is determined to make the best meaning out of his "houseboyship" to Master, Mara accepts her father's choice of husband for her with determined hope that things will eventually turn out good. Her life is a pointer to the concept of thrownness developed by Heidegger whose opinion is that man finds himself in the world by means of being thrown. Heidegger's view of thrownness "implies that Dasein is not in charge of its own entry into the world or the situation in which it finds itself; it does not decide where to start from or to start at all" but in all things it has its own being to be (G. U. Umezurike 14). The result of man's 'thrownness' is said to be that man is initially inauthentic. In the case of Mara, she is a woman who finds herself in a community where men are not only the head of the family but also the absolute controller of their women, dictating their every action and how they must behave, and giving them whatever treatment that seem fit. Moreover, Mara has the misfortune of having a father whose interest in her daughters' marriage is only in relation to its financial accruement, the gains which such "trade" could offer. Mara's father eagerly accepts Akobi's marriage proposal because of the position of respect which Akobi's family holds in Naka, as well as the fact that Akobi is well educated – at least, by the standard of the community – the first person to obtain a Form Four General Certificate. Mara's father practically sells Mara to Akobi, and, thereafter, drunkenly boasts that he could have given Mara "away even for one goat" (7). Mara whose level of awareness is still at the inauthentic stage agrees to marry Akobi, thinking that she has no option. Mara sees her life as normal and even accepts in good faith the choice of suitor made by her father. As Mara narrates, when told that her father has found a husband for her, all she does is to "grin *helplessly* because I clearly remembered the same good news as this that mother had given my

older sister two years before. Found, too, by father. And my sister was now a wreck" (4). Mara obviously accepts her father's choice with hope, the hope that things will eventually turn out good. But rather than turn out positive, Mara's marriage to Akobi is circumscribed by pain, guilt, and near-death circumstances.

Likewise, Ugwu takes up his new life with faith and the optimism that he will live it well. But when he gradually settles into the servant station and familiarizes himself with Master's house, he is disturbed by the news that Olanna, Master's girlfriend, will soon come to live with them, for he understands that Olanna's presence will inevitably strip him of his jurisdiction over Master's kitchen affairs, and make him a subordinate. In the same way that one despairs when a venture turns out badly after all, Ugwu sips the news with despair as he "did not want to share the job of caring for Master with anyone, did not want to disrupt the balance of his life with Master" (*HOAYS* 27). Yet, he later begins to appreciate the positive aspect of Olanna's coming. He makes meaning out of what many a servant will see as the beginning of their pangs of woes. The narrator relates Ugwu's stream of consciousness: "She would move to Nsukka. She would live in this house.... His life would change. He would learn to cook fried rice and he would have to use less oil and he would take orders from her. He felt sad, and yet his sadness was incomplete; he felt expectant too, an excitement he did not entirely understand" (*HOAYS* 26). When Olanna eventually moves into Master's apartment, Ugwu is able to look beyond the fact that her presence threatens his position as the cook and the second in command only to Master. His only resentment lies in the fact that Olanna's coming has changed Master to the extent that "he looked at Olanna too often, touched her too much, and when Ugwu opened the front door for him, his eyes expectantly darted past into the living room to see if Olanna was there" (*HOAYS* 64). Note that Ugwu's fear and resentment are not unfounded, for Olanna's presence has not only minimized the roles he has previously played in the house, it has moreover made Master order Ugwu out of the main house to the Boy's Quarter which is where all other servants live, if they are fortunate enough, separate from the main house. Master's prompt execution of Olanna's suggestion (the suggestion that Ugwu

should move to the Boy's Quarter) makes Ugwu worried, he fears that "it was as if Master would stick his head in a raging fire if Olanna asked him to. It was as if she had become the master" (*HOAYS* 64).

Despite the denigration associated with living in the Boys' Quarters, Ugwu focuses on what he stands to gain from the move. He doesn't allow himself to be weighed down by the thought of his becoming "a normal houseboy" (*HOAYS* 22), instead he ruminates on the freedom and space he will enjoy while living in his own room away from the moaning and bickering of Master and Olanna. About the opportunities the Boys' Quarters offers, Ugwu thinks: "He could hide things he saved there; he could make it fully his" (*HOAYS* 64). Even when Ugwu's mother is brought to the house, "she looked impressed . . . when Ugwu told her that he would be living in the Boys Quarters. It was like being given his own house, separate, all to himself" (*HOAYS* 68). Indeed, Ugwu makes the room in the Boys' Quarters his own, he has the ceiling "patterned black and white. . . . held a candle up there for hours, flickering the flame all over the ceiling, stopping often to move the table he was standing on. There on his bed he curls up reading the *Renaissance,* and, at night, when Chinyere, Dr Okeke's house girl, will sneak across the hedge to his room, he relishes the hasty thrusts in the dark" (*HOAYS* 88).

In the same vein, Mara continues to nurture hope and optimism in the face of the brutalism she faces in her marriage. Her marriage to Akobi could be compared to Frankl's imprisonment in a concentration camp. Frankl, in the book *Man's Search for Meaning,* wrote about his concentration camp experience, narrating the relationship that existed between the Capos and the ordinary prisoners who, in addition to being at the risk of death in gas chambers and other methods of mass execution, are also under the tyranny of the Capos. "While these ordinary prisoners had little or nothing to eat, the Capos were never hungry; in fact, many of the Capos fared better in the camp than they had in their entire lives. Often they were harder on the prisoners than were the guards, and beat them more cruelly than the SS men did," narrated Frankl (*MSM* 7*).* Mara and Akobi represent the ordinary prisoners and the Capos respectively. In the same way

that the Capos brutally treat the prisoner, with disdain and force, Akobi acts upon his wife, unleashing on her series of physical and emotional abuses. He not only verbally abuses her, but even beats her when she is pregnant. Moreover, his sexual relationship with her is nothing short of that between a rapist and *its* poor victim, for though he has infrequent sex with her, he does not want her to get pregnant, and prefers to pour his semen on the floor during copulation (*BTH* 16).

Even though Mara is married, she is consumed by a sense of interpersonal isolation. She has a husband whose true self she does not really know and whose heart she cannot reach. As she says, "Akobi was a closed man, no one saw inside him. At least, I didn't. But I dearly wished there, that moment, that somehow he too could feel it, the movement inside my belly, for maybe it would have revived his human instincts" (*BTH* 21). Akobi's being a "closed man" means that he is inhuman, feels no love for his wife and even denies her existential freedom by treating her like an object in the place of a wife. But in all of this, Mara remains submissive to Akobi, finding meaning in "this secret burning hope that the situation [her total submissiveness] might mark a turning point in [their] marriage" (20).
Furthermore, Ugwu and Mara, in their different careers, both meet instances of existential vacuum which, on the long run, transform their whole being from the near-state of innocence to the matured state of awareness. Ugwu's transformation from a debilitated child-soldier to a writer is an innovative result of tragic healing. As a soldier, he has witnessed horrible things, the death of comrades; has partaken in the rape of women and the forceful taking of people's properties. His conscience has been tainted by his war experiences. There is also the physical injury he has sustained at the front, which at first makes him want to die:

> Ugwu wanted to die, at first. It was not because of the hot tingle in his head or the stickiness of blood on his back or the pain in his buttocks or the way he gasped for air, but because of his thirst. His throat was scorched.... He was on [the infantry men's] shoulders, bandaged with their shirts, the pain shooting all over his body as he walked. He gulped for

> air, gasped, and sucked but somehow he could not get enough. His thirst nauseated him. 'Water, please,' he croaked. They would not give him any; if he had the energy, he would invoke all the curses he knew on them. If he had a gun he would have shot them all and then shot himself. (*HOAYS* 267)

The near-death situation and the injury sustained plunges him into a debilitated crazed state and weakened his physicality. But Ugwu, who now craves death, later receives healing by means of positive thinking. His recovery from the injury testifies that the feeling of tragic optimism is innate in man. So he transforms from an incapacitated child-soldier to an emergent writer, pushed by the belief that he has the capacity to eventually make meaning out of the rude mass of his personal experience and the collective history of the war-torn country.

After the war, Ugwu and the others take up useful ventures as means to personal meanings. Odenigbo, Ugwu, Olanna and Baby return to Nsukka, clear out the dirt in Odenigbo's apartment and gradually resettle into their everyday life, willingly forgetting the injuries and injustices of the past, the loss of friends and relatives, and sustained by the ever-forward spirit of tragic optimism. At the visit of Miss Adebayo following their return to Nsukka,

> Ugwu disliked her. He disliked her Nigerianness. Yet a part of him was prepared to forgive it if that would bring back those evenings of long ago, when she argued with Master in a living room that smelt of brandy and beer. Now, nobody visited, except for Mr Richard. There was a new familiarity to his presence. It was as if he was more like family, the way he would sit reading in the living room while Olanna went about her business and Master was in the study" (*HOAYS* 285).

This moving-forward which marks the end of the war is in line with existential psychotherapy in that it portrays the human capacity to create meaning and find joy even when existence hangs "on the brink

of oblivion." Like Ugwu, Mara undergoes abject experiences which nevertheless transform her to a clairsentient being. While her diasporic experiences do not dampen Mara's optimism, her optimistic way of thinking grows to be more practical when she has stayed in Germany for quite a time. All through the period Mara has lived in their home country with Akobi, she has sheepishly lived for him, finding meaning in the misconception that every wife is there to please the husband by all means. However, this line of reasoning vanishes when he finds out the real reason why Akobi has asked her to come to Germany. Her German experience makes her discern her lack of existential freedom. Both Yalom and Sartre see existential freedom as the absence of existential structures which dictate the essence of man, so that man's responsibility is to be free, at liberty, and responsible for all he does. Mara realizes that she is, as existential psychotherapists believe, responsible for both her actions and her inactions. The migration to Germany is not only a physical migration, but also a form of intellectual migration. It is in Germany that Mara begins to reach out for self-discovery, so that she embraces existential freedom and questions the culture which creates a stereotype about women, as inferior and as having no unique qualities and yearning. When Osey's wife tries to convince her to live with Akobi and Gitte as Akobi's sister rather than as his wife, she becomes resistant, and demands that she be treated as Akobi's wife: "'Am I my mother?' I retorted, gradually becoming aware that I could assert my opinion and get away with it, and even ask relatively daring questions I definitely wouldn't have had the guts to ask some time ago" (*BTH* 80). Yet, Mara still battles with her inauthenticity and the inability to control her life in Germany. She is like a child who delights in her recently discovered abilities, and still finds it difficult to believe that she can actually wield those abilities to the fullest of her capacity. So Mara stifles her yearnings and goes with Akobi to live as his sister in the same house as Gitte his German wife.

This stifling of her yearning results in an intrapersonal isolation which is the kind of loneliness that is associated with one stifling their own feelings or desires and accepting "ought's" or "should" as their own wishes; it comes about when one buries one's own potentials, says

Yalom (*EP* 354). Thus while she lives as his sister, she is intensely disturbed and depressed by Akobi's lovemaking with Gitte (*BTH* 112). Listening to the moans and groans emanating from Akobi's room during his lovemaking with Gitte makes Mara see how alone she is in Germany. So she wishes to have her mind occupied with something else.

Frankl notes that in the concentration camps, prisoners under hard physical strain, labour, and suffering from hunger, often practise escapism, playing the wish-fulfillment game of preoccupying their minds with crystal clear pictures of home, of their families, and the delicacies awaiting their homecoming, as well as the parties and get-togethers they will attend. It is this mental game that Mara takes solace in to be able to bear her situation. In *Half of a Yellow Sun,* Ugwu and Odenigbo both play this mental game as situations around them worsen. Odenigbo takes to drinking, constantly becoming drunk with the local brew. For Ugwu, the only way to find relief from his injuries and loss is by writing down the war experiences. In a similar way, in *Beyond the Horizon,* while Akobi and Gitte make love in the bedroom, Mara preoccupies her mind by listening to music on the headset in order to make herself immune to the sounds from the bedroom. And when they leave for work, she not only does the housework (just like a maid will) but also fantasizes about finding a good job.

Unfortunately, the job Akobi later blackmails her into doing is one of dehumanization and sex-slavery (*BTH* 115). This blackmail makes Mara conscious of her real worth to Akobi, the man who is supposed to be her husband. As she realizes that she is a “no-thing” to Akobi, Mara sees clearly the reason why Akobi has married her: “He married me because he had a role for me in his dream. It was a dream, it seemed, he was bent on seeing through even if it meant making a sacrificial lamb of me. And so far he had got his way (115). Mara now begins to question herself and her fate in life. Seeing the sex-video of her makes her have the awareness of her being in a near-death situation, the death of her self-worth and dignity, as well as the ultimate end of her existence, so that she feels a deep sense of

existential isolation. She asks deep questions like: "I had made the long journey from home to here. What for?... Was this all that I was to derive from the many hens and cocks and goats whose blood has been spilled for my sake?" (*BTH* 115). She obviously discerns no atom of meaning in the life around her. All has become meaningless.

However, Mara never allows these existential givens of her life to consume her. By familiarizing herself with her situation, she learns to overcome the angst, afflictions and difficulties that follow her existential givens. Rather than shy away from it, she contemplates her ultimate end, dissects and analyses it, reasons with it and discards the terrifying and distorted images Akobi has used to hold her in prison. Akobi has threatened to show the video to the world if she doesn't do all he has said, but Mara now sees the video as immaterial to her being. In tragic optimism, she seeks to make the best meaning out of life, by being free from Akobi and working to enrich herself, and to help her family back home. Thus she familiarizes herself with her job, and also appreciates the good side of her decrepit near-death situation.

Consequently, Mara begins with recognition and acceptance of the death of her dignity and her job as a prostitute. Explaining what Heidegger meant when he said that the idea of death saves us, though its physicality destroys us, Yalom expresses that the recognition and acceptance of death can contribute a sense of poignancy to life and even provide a radical shift of life perspective. Such recognition can transport one from a mode of living characterized by diversions, tranquillization, anxieties to a more authentic mode (*EP* 40). The awareness of her existential situation helps Mara to grow from the ignorant village girl to a clairsentient, determined whore. Kaye sees this change in Mara, and tells her: "Mara is no more.... She is standing before me, but she isn't the same any more. You are no more you, Mara. You've changed;" to this, Mara replies, "I'm still me. I have just understood the world a lot better" (*BTH* 127). Mara has understood the world and is determined to make the best out of the shambles of her life. Her determination exemplifies the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative

aspects into something positive or constructive, "making life potentially meaningful under any condition, even those which are most miserable (Frankl, *MSM* 61). But like Ugwu whose manifestation of tragic optimism occurs within the larger frame of his people's collective suffering and optimism, Mara's transformation must be aided by the collective optimism of the women in her life, such as Mama-Kiosk, Kaye, Vivian, etc.

V. The Collective Manifestation of Tragic Optimism

As earlier stated, the experience of tragic optimism in both narratives not only occurs on a personal level but also on a collective scale. Aside from the life story of Mara, Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* portrays the collective experiences of women as they navigate through the hurdles of life, with most of them striving to regain their existential freedom from their male counterparts. These women include Kaye, Vivian, Gitte, Mara, etc. These women all share one common experience in Germany: they have, at some point in their lives, been under the stress of masculine bondage and deprivation. But by their manifestation of tragic optimism, and through helping one another in one or other way, they are able to keep their lives afloat, and to overcome their obstacles. Similar to the collective *war* for existential freedom which Darko's women characters are involved in, in *Half of a Yellow Sun* we see a war which could be likened to the opening of a Pandora's box that enables and even furthers the upsurge in violence, a stream of evil which played to the negative overturning of people's lives, careers, goals and prospects. Collective tragic optimism in Adichie's text is inherent in the communal goals and survival strategies which the characters and the Igbo people in general adopt for their subsistence.

Starting with the massacre in Kano, Lagos, and other parts of the fictive Nigerian country, the war in *Half of a Yellow Sun* unleashes a condition of cataclysmic import. It opens up to the characters – Ugwu, Odenigbo (Master), Olanna, Madu, and many unnamed others – the 'tragic triad' of pain, guilt, and death (Frankl, *MSM* 61), a situation which results in many deaths and a dense refugee crises. The

massacre of Olanna's relatives, including her pregnant cousin, Arinze, and other Igbos in the North has a shocking effect on her, making her psychologically and physically sick for a long time. Besides Olanna, there are other examples of Igbos who are hugely affected by their immense loss, such that they are thrown into a traumatic state of paralysis. The woman in the train, with a calabash containing the cut off head of her little girl, epitomizes the macabre sense of loss, pain, guilt and death which follows the massacre. She hugs the calabash, subduing the pain in her heart, and the guilt felt for her inability to protect the child and preserve the hair which has taken her a lot of time to plait (*HOAYS* 106-7). The bitterness of the Igbos in the wake of this massacre is better expressed by Zik in his words cited by a character, Professor Ezeka: "Eastern Nigeria seethes, seethes, and will continue to seethe until the federal government addresses the massacre" (*HOAYS* 114). But does Eastern Nigeria attain meaning only by seething?

Tragic optimism supposes that man does not resort to despair, seething anger, and mourning alone. "Caught in a hopeless situation as its helpless victim, facing a fate that cannot be changed, man still may turn his predicament into an achievement at the human level. He thus may bear witness to the human potential at its best, which is to turn tragedy into triumph," writes Frankl in the book, *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (203). Banking on this "human potential at its best," the Igbos embark on the project of forming a new country called Biafra. This collective project gives them tragic healing, hope and expectation, which Odenigbo calls a new beginning, a rebirth (*HOAYS* 116). Thus in the flag of the new country, "the half of a yellow sun," from which the book takes its name, is given great emphasis to show that the people have their hopeful eyes focused forward and not backward. During the war, Olanna teaches her class the symbolic meaning of the flag: "red symbolized the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future" (196). The place of "the half of a yellow sun" in the flag emphasizes the aspiration of the Igbos, which is to

forget the past and look into the future for meaning. This is in line with the concept of projection found in existentialism.

Similarly, the title of Darko's novel is a referent to the optimism embodied by the female characters who are caught in a mesh by the men to whom they have at one time given their trust. The expression, "beyond the horizon," indicates the women's quest and ever-readiness to escape from the dungeon of futility in which they are caught as slaves to men who do not appreciate them. Mara, Kaye, Vivian and Gitte all undertake the quest to reach beyond the horizon of their servitude. Vivian relates to Mara her enslavement by her husband Osey: "I was … in love with Osey then. And I did what Osey ordered me to do. I was his property then" (*BTH* 129). As Osey's property, Vivian has willingly come to Germany to become a prostitute so as to make quick money that will enable her husband Osey get established. Although Osey has married a second wife, a German, Vivian has given no complaint, seeing it as a circumstantial necessity. She has worked hard in her prostitution job, under the illusion that Osey, her husband and pimp, will save enough money therefrom to enable them live the mythical good life when they travel back home in the future. However, Vivian only comes to realize later that she is of nothing but financial value to Osey. Shocked that Osey does not love her, Vivian has set out to be free. In celebration of her newfound freedom, she excitedly reveals to Mara: "I have disappeared, Mara;" "I've gone.' "From Osey, Mara. Far, far gone! Direction America. Land of yankees and steaks, here I come. Take me whole, Lady Liberty. I love the sons of your womb!" (128). As a free woman, Vivian contributes to the collective aspiration of the women by the revelation concerning Akobi and Comfort. Moreover, by narrating her successful escape from Osey, Vivian, as does Kaye, gives Mara more inspiration to reach for total freedom from Akobi.

Furthermore, in *Half of a Yellow Sun,* the Igbo people exhibit tragic optimism when the war ends in the failure of their collective project, the Biafra which they have previously seen as their only hope. They learn to be even more practical, to accept things as they see them, and to adopt survival mechanisms during and after the war. For

instance, Nnesinachi, Ugwu's friend in the village, courageously becomes the mistress, if not a wife, of a Hausa soldier, a vandal, something they have frowned upon prior to the war. Since she cannot stop the war, nor could survive it on her own, she cleaves to the one option open to her as a means of survival, namely, loving and living with the Hausa soldier. As noted at the onset, Frankl recommends that those in an existential vacuum should be creative, should love, and have the freedom of moral choice. Love, he says, fortifies a hard-pressed soul and enables the beloved person to actualize his potentials. Consequently, Nnesinachi accepts the love offered by the Hausa vandal. She tells Ugwu how her relationship with the man has started, and how she has benefited from it: "They were living in our town and he was good to me, a very kind man. If I had been here at the time, what happened to Anulika would not have happened at all. But I have travelled to Enugu with him to buy some things" (HOAYS 283). Nnesinachi finds meaning during the war in the solace and love of the Hausa soldier, a relationship which her culture frowns upon. But by her freedom of moral choice, she chooses to live as an unmarried mother of the child of an enemy rather than die over the animosity favoured by tradition. She could be compared to Vivian, in Darko's text, who – by her freedom of moral choice – chooses to remain a prostitute after leaving Osey. Vivian's tragic optimism is evident in her words: "I got my papers, I got hashish and I got a profession that I can practise in every corner of the world. Can you give me a better formula for happiness?" (*BTH* 130). Vivian accepts her lot, and uses it as an asset to gain happiness.

Similarly, when the announcement is made that Biafra has conceded defeat to Nigeria, the Biafrans manifested tragic optimism by accepting the situation as it is. "A woman from the refugee camp dashed into the yard, shouting, waving a green branch. Such a brilliant wet-looking green" (*HOAYS* 277). The war ends, but not with the vanquishing of the human spirit of hope and optimism. The announcement over the radio captures that the truce which marks the end of the war is one triggered by hope, resolve, and expectancy, all in the spirit of rebirth/regeneration: "Throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defence where

peaceful negotiations fail. We are no exception. We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the massacre. We have fought in defence of that cause" (*HOAYS 277*). This statement portrays the Igbos' courage and acceptance of all that has happened.

In *Beyond the Horizon,* Darko's other women typify these qualities: courage and acceptance. Although, they all have been emotionally or psychologically wounded by men, these women are willing to let go of their loss, and to help one another achieve freedom for all. Gitte partakes in the feeling of tragic optimism by seeing the positive aspect of her failed marriage to Akobi. Although the anxiety of having to return to her family after divorcing Akobi makes her grow thin, she "has decided it was luck in misfortune since God only knows how many diets she's tried and failed" (*BTH* 139). Just like Mara who – feeling pity for her "own self and for Gitte, too" (*BTH* 126) – indirectly helps Gitte out of her troubles, as Kaye hears the true story of Mara, she too takes pity on her, resolving in her heart to help Mara out of her situation. Kaye's feeling for Mara is one of sympathy (fellow feeling) – what she gives the term, "sisterhood solidarity" (*BTH* 135) – for she too "had gone through a similar ordeal years ago, except that in her case the man who did it to her was her boyfriend and not her husband" (*BTH* 116). By her words and her actions, Kaye shows that she has accepted the fact that her job is nothing but prostitution, as is the job of the other women (*BTH* 118). Rather than overburden them as their Madam, she shows empathy towards them, treating them as comrades rather than as bondswomen. She not only speaks on their behalf to her husband Pompey, who has married her to help him build and maintain his sex-club business, but also follows them herself to the gynecologist for check-up. While she values her husband, she is averse to the idea of Mara's profit going into Akobi's account. Hence she courageously displays female bonding by using the visit to Dr Schroeder to facilitate Mara's escape from Pompey and Akobi.

Also, even though Mara fails to achieve infinite freedom from men, in that she escaped from the hand of Pompey into the hand of a more astute pimp, Oves, she accepts the development in good stead. Like

Kaye who has earlier said to her: “And I am happy with my situation, Mara. Well . . . not happy as such. That is a lie. But I have come to terms with it. I will lead this life of mine as long as age and health permit” (*BTH* 118), Mara courageously embraces her job. She says, "at Oves’ brothel, I have plunged into my profession down to the marrow in my bones. There is no turning back for me now. I am so much a whore now that I can no longer remember or imagine what being a non-whore is" (139). She knows the dangers associated with her line of job, and is aware that she might end up dead any day. Yet, she is moved by her new motivation of making “as much money as possible for my mother and sons back home" (139).

Summarily, *Beyond the Horizon* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* both speak of optimism in the face of the tragic dyad of life. Encapsulating the personal and collective experiences of people whose lives hang at the extremity between life and death, the novels portray the notion that man has the innate capacity to turn suffering around as a ground for the creation of worthwhile meaning. Thus even at the failure of their quests for total freedom, Adichie’s and Darko’s characters do not resort to despair but move on to create meaning out of their various lots.

VI. Conclusion

This research work is based on the human capacity to creatively turn life's negative aspects into something positive and constructive. Literary characters, specifically the characters found in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Beyond the Horizon,* much like persons in real life, are faced with four existential givens which could overwhelm the human spirit. In the face of degenerative social circumstances like war, ethnic conflicts, genocide, poverty, pestilence, marital violence, sex-slavery, and abuse, the characters are met with an ontological state of meaninglessness. Every meaning once held dear has gradually disappeared, making existence hang on the brink of oblivion. Yet these characters show optimism by putting their hurtful experiences in the past and sieving for themselves "meanings” out of the huge rumble that life presents.

Existential psychotherapy leaves no room for dwelling inertly on one's experiences, however sordid and sorrowful they are. Rather, it advocates that one confronts the givens of existence, familiarizes oneself with them and use these same experiences as a ground for positive action. Its therapeutic methods, whichever one the therapist thinks suits the particular patient, all recognize that for healing to occur, and for a patient to be reconfigured so that he/she becomes able to see life as meaningful, the client must become fully aware of their feelings and actions in the present, confront their anxiety, and develop a genuine relationship with themselves, and also with the world around them (Lisa Roundy, web). Thus existential psychotherapy proves to be a helpful hermeneutical tool, as it not only studies the social background of the characters but also raises deep questions that are central to the characters themselves. In Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon,* existential psychotherapy enables us to comprehend more deeply the ways characters achieve meaning and resituate themselves according to changing circumstances. Adichie's teenage character Ugwu, though having partaken in the degenerative rites of warfare, namely, rape, extortion, killings, and the mind-changing effects of being in near-death situations, encounters a grave sense of existential isolation at which point meaning becomes eclipsed in the radar of life's absurdities. But by means of tragic optimism, Ugwu is able to turn around his loss, his situation into a more rewarding one, thus he becomes a writer, achieving meaning even when existence scarily hangs on the brink of extinction. In the way Ugwu and Mara are able to turn their situation around, and to approach life in a way that benefits them, we see the human capacity to successfully overcome the angst associated with the encountering of one's existential vacuum. Hence while one has no control over what hard circumstances that might come his way, one is burdened with the task of choosing how he will respond. In this, a tragic optimistic response is the best resort.

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