

The Philosophy of Being and the Practical Implication of Literature: Greg Mbajiorgu's the Prime Minister's Son and Nuruddin Farah's Secrets

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Abstract

The Philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, is regarded as the great pessimist of philosophy. It is in his philosophy that one can locate Greg Mbajiorgu's and Nuruddin Farah's *The Prime Minister's Son and Secrets* respectively. Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy was a reaction to both Kantian and Hegelian Philosophies. The objective of this essay was to see where Greg Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son* and Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets* complied with Schopenhauer's idea of the absurd, which the world is. The questions the essay tried to answer are: Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why did the characters such as Ezinma and her son have to endure so much suffering in *The Prime Minister's Son*? Why did Damac have to be gang-raped in *Secrets*? Why do we hold secrets? Why are there taboos, which humans will so willingly not adhere to in their privacy? The paper sought answers to these questions in the two texts under study using qualitative method. Quantitative data in the form of interview published in a book was also used to support both the deductive and inductive analysis of texts. The importance of this research paper cannot be overemphasized when one considers the suffering that most humankind experience in the process of living. It is expected to provide enlightenment to Governments of the world, especially in developing countries on the need to reducing the suffering that many in these countries face.

Keywords: Arthur Schopenhauer, Hegelian and Kantian Philosophies, Absurd, the World

1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* seeks the known truths which might be used to erect a general system of laws by a rigorous study of certain laws as duty established through a priori knowledge or reason, that is, knowledge independent of experience or empirical reality (pp. 4-6). Through this rigorous enquiry he was able to establish when an action was moral and when it was not. He goes further to argue that goodwill is the sole determinant of good and happiness; that there are moral imperatives limited by condition and therefore not categorical (pp.9-22). However, moral imperatives that are not limited by condition are always categorical, for one is expected to act only according to that maxim by which one can at the same time will that it should become a universal law (p.18). By implication, therefore, Kant is trying to guide man towards moral actions that will indeed become beacons of light to all humankind in their universality. In other word, Kant encourages man toward the ideal: this ideal in the Kantian sense is in the realm of Things-in-themselves, *Das-Ding-an-Sich*. This form of reality is apart from and independent of experience, for according to him, 'the mind imposes a certain form of order on objects, which we can experience. But it is beyond our capacities to know anything about things-in-themselves, that is things as they are apart from and independent of experience' (Quoted in Moore and Bruder, p.165).

For Hegel, however, this ideal is no where outside of experience: in fact experience is part of it: it is all the categories of being, that is, an all encompassing reality, the absolute, which is the mind or thought unfolding, whereby the unfolding mind unfolds through the reconciliation of its inherent contradictions and the reconciled possessing the germ of further unfolding in that order. What this means by implication is that the objective world, which exists in the mind of individuals, is an 'unfolding or expression of an infinite thought and the individual mind is the vehicle of infinite thought reflecting on itself' (p.92) in constant progression toward the ideal. And reality, the Absolute, for him:

Is not a group of independent particulars or states of affairs?
But rather, like a coherent thought system such as mathematics
It is an integrated whole in which each proposition (each state of Affairs) is logically connected to the rest. Thus an isolated state of Affair is not wholly real; likewise, a proposition about this or that Aspect or feature of reality is only partially true. The only thing that Is totally true (or totally real, because these amount to the same thing) Is the complete system (p.92).

Indeed, both Kantian and Hegelian philosophies see the world as possessed of meaning and purpose. However, Arthur Schopenhauer, believes that Hegel makes a mistake if he rejects the Kantian proposition of thing-in-itself, for indeed for Schopenhauer there is a reality apart from and independent of experience, the thing-in-itself; but

that thing-in-itself is 'a blind and purposeless impelling force that is manifested in humans as a *will to live*. It is this drive, this will that determines human behavior, not reason (p. 98). In other words, 'the human being is not fundamentally rational, but willful' (p. 98); for Schopenhauer, it is the conflict between individual wills that causes endless strife and suffering in the world. In other words, the world itself is suffering; people are impelled by a force beyond them in an endless quest for goals that are not attainable, or goals that, if attained, bring only momentary satisfaction. He opines that we succeed always through sex and "love" to bring more people to the world, which itself is suffering, pain and misery. And for this reason, he believes, human beings think of sex as shameful (p. 98).

1.1 Subject Matter: Literature: *The Prime Minister's Son and Secrets*

It was indeed necessary to expatiate on these philosophies to be able to locate the play, *Prime Minister's Son* and the novel *Secrets* in them (Moore and Bruder, 1990). The two texts are stories of the world we live in: the one about a boy, the Prime Minister's Son, brought to the world through the irresponsible adventure of a wealthy man, the Prime Minister, who takes advantage of a helpless girl, Ezinma; the other also about a young man, Kalamani brought to the world through the violent act of rape, gang rape. The one a simple piece of drama about complex philosophical themes, the other a complex prose fiction about Somali and Somalians in search of meanings and values of life in a time of crisis and moral decadence. The simplicity of rendering of *The Prime Minister's Son* in terms of language belies the complex dramaturgy of Solo Performance Art, which it captures: the assumption of a multiple role by a solo dramatist requires skill: the ability to modulate the voice to suit the role assumed is one; the capacity to rouse the attention of the audience and hold the attention is another. The solo performer must also be able to represent the scenic images or at least project them in such a way as to make them believable. All this makes the putting of solo drama to paper in the form of *The Prime Minister's Son* by Greg Mbajorgu very laudable and worthy of celebrating.

The return of Sholoongo, who was Kalamani's childhood love, to Somali and especially to Kalamani to announce to him her intention of having him get her pregnant, takes Kalamani back to a past full of intrigues and misgivings. He recollects a past full of experiences with individuals, who do abominable things in secret but appear in public to be beyond reproach: of Fidow having it off with a cow and Timir in secret but leading normal lives in the public, of Nonno sleeping with his grandson's girlfriend, of blackmails by Arbaco and Gacme-xume. The tendencies in these individuals are seen as a kind of life they would ordinarily lead had there not been laws to keep them in check. These laws are mechanism of self-restraints, of guides, which we construct as constraints in our logic of being (Farah, 1998). It is then ironical that, although we construct all these laws, yet, indeed, we like to do those things in secret which we openly regard as taboo. For Farah, it is still these constructs that point to us the things we consider normal. How normal is it then for Kalamani to have Yaqut as father even when he did not father him biologically? How normal is it for Yaqut to really feel as father to Kalamani even when he was not his biological father? How normal is it that a child, who is a product of gang rape, is not depraved but good? Is the world then arbitrary? These are questions begging for answers.

In *The Prime Minister's Son*, the world is depicted as absurd. One sees only the will to live: The Prime Minister, on face value could be said to be a good and generous man, who tries to put smile on the faces of others. But just as he puts smile on the faces of Ezinma and her mother, by offering Ezinma job as his personal assistant, calamity strikes. Ezinma's blind mother gets hit by a car as she strays from home and could not find her way back. She dies and Ezinma grieves and attempts to take her life. The Prime Minister again tries to give her succor by bringing her to live with him and his family. One would think that he does that for the sake of being good, but once his wife travels to America, he gets Ezinma knocked out with rum and rapes her. Entrapped in the circle of Schopenhauerian pessimism and nihilism, one sees as the Prime Minister is tossed about by will, a force beyond him, in an irrational world; one sees as he gets temporary satisfaction in the act of violent sex in the form rape. Through this shameful act of his in his will to live, Ezinma gets pregnant and gives birth to a son, The Prime Minister's Son, who is immediately introduced to suffering which the world is. From Ezinma to Emenike, whose mother abandoned in a dustbin and who was rescued and taken to orphanage, to the Prime Minister's Son, one sees only suffering and pain: The question then is: what is our hope in a world filled with only pain and sorrow? Are our pains and sorrows experiences to help us live aright or are they just sheer pains and sorrows? The answers to these questions could be sort after in the world religions as well as in secular humanism. But whether the answers provide solutions to the situation one can never really say.

There is no denying the fact that values and morals are derivable from sacred scriptures of the world's religions. These values and morals are not able in themselves to stop the suffering and pain in the world. There is also no denying the fact that philosophy raises question on virtually everything about life and existence. Still there is no proof that by seeking the reason for things and asking questions about things the suffering and pain in the world will disappear. Not even science and technology have been able to do this. Instead, science and technology have increased the pain and suffering in the world on the one hand. On the other hand it has also contributed to the progress of the world. Is the world then absurd? Will people continue to be afflicted by

suffering in the world? Is it the fault of those who suffer pain that they undergo such? Strange enough, as Nonno, Kalaman's adopted grandfather, lay dying, he feels no pain: "he dies, his eyes still open, his heart racing in its competitiveness to outrun another heart, that of life" (Farah, p. 298). This statement is an affirmation that there is life after death. Recently, Dr Robert Lanza, said to be the 3rd most important scientist alive, has argued online in his book *Biocentrism* that life and consciousness are very important to the universe, that in fact consciousness creates the material universe, that we carry space and time around with us "like turtles with shells." In other words, without our physical body, we will continue to exist: in fact, our souls are constructed from the very fabric of the universe – and may have existed since the beginning of time. Our brains are just receivers and amplifiers for the proto-consciousness that is intrinsic to the fabric of space-time (Robert Lanza, "Compelling Evidence for the Afterlife", N.p., Web).

2. Quantitative Data in the Form of Interview

This is an interview that was granted Dr Ian Stevenson by Omni Magazine regarding his researches published in his book entitled *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*. This may provide answer to the arbitrariness, the suffering and pain that is typical of life on earth. It is an online material. It is necessary to make it available here as quantitative evidence of the point the essay tries to make:

Omni: Your newest book [in 1988], *Children Who Remember Previous Lives*, is a rare discussion of the evidence presented, it seems, after much questioning. How does this book differ from your previously published books, which were predominantly case histories?

Stevenson: It occurred to me that my case histories were not being widely read---to understate the matter--although *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* has now become a best seller as far as scientific books go, it has gone into seven languages and has probably sold fifty thousand copies, but that's over a twenty-year period. Judging from the mail, the readership was not among scientists but rather from the public at large. My paper "The Explanatory Value of the Idea of Reincarnation," published ten years ago, suggested that the study of these cases might illuminate problems in psychology and medicine.

I had become dissatisfied, you see, with the methods that had been developed in psychiatry for helping people. Orthodox theory conceives human personality as the product of a person's genetic material inherited from his ancestors through his parents, and the modifying influences of his prenatal and postnatal environment. But I found that some cases cannot be satisfactorily explained by genetics, environmental influences, or a combination of these. I am speaking of such things as early childhood phobias, about uncanny abilities that seem to develop spontaneously, of children convinced that they are the wrong sex, congenital deformities, differences between one-egg twins, and even such matters as irrational food preferences.

Omni: Is this work the only study of its kind in the United States?

Stevenson: Yes, and it's unique for the rest of the world. In India, however, scientists who have worked with me are now beginning to do independent research.

Omni: Do you wait for people to get in touch, or do you pursue cases?

Stevenson: It's sort of mixed now. I've got so much data I've been trying to withdraw from fieldwork myself. I want to write more so that not too many of my books will be posthumous.

Omni: When did you hit on the idea of dealing just with children?

Stevenson: It evolved in the late Sixties, probably after I went to India. Adults would write to me, and I eventually began to see that most of their cases were worthless. You can't really control the subconscious influences to which most adults are exposed. It's so much easier to be confident about the amount of information a small child might have learned, especially one living in an Asian village. I saw how fascinating and valuable these cases were. Obviously children are too young to have absorbed a great deal of information, especially about deceased people in some distant town. In the better cases, they couldn't have known about them. In many of our cases in northwest North America and Burma, people in the same family or village are involved. So there's a likelihood that some adult or older child has talked about a deceased person and the child has absorbed the information, as our questioning makes clear. This is not, however, an issue in most cases I cite in India, many of which involve long distances, twenty-five to fifty kilometers or more, with no contact between the villages. Often the child has quite precise details.

Omni: You've found children with intense interests in subjects having no relation to anything in their family background or up-bringing. And you've directly linked the phobias and addictions of children to traumas that transpired in the lives of people these children claim to have been. Are you talking about aspects of their personalities that heredity does not explain?

Stevenson: That's right. It's easy to see environmental influences, say, with such composers as Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, all of whose fathers were fine musicians. But what about George Frederic Handel? His family had no discernible interest in music; his father even sternly discouraged it. Or take the cases of Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer, and Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. Both had to fight for their chosen callings from childhood onward. One can find endless examples that are difficult to explain given our current theories.

But if one accepts the possibility of reincarnation, one can entertain the idea that these children are demonstrating strong likes, dislikes, skills, and even genius that are the logical results of previous experiences. I have found some children with skills that seem to be carried over from a previous life.

Omni: What about cases of childhood mental illness?

Stevenson: There again you will find cases of children acting as if they did not belong in their families. They treat parents and siblings with indifference, even hostility. This phenomenon is usually thought to have been caused by infantile trauma. Some theorists even try to explain it as the result of parents rejecting the child--before it has been born. Researchers look to the parents for the first cause. Comparatively little attention is given to the child, even though there is evidence that some children reject their parents before the parents have a chance to reject them. I suggest that such behavior could result from unhappy experiences in a previous life.

Omni: What about one's own child? Are there ways to introduce the subject?

Stevenson: I see no harm in asking a child if he remembers a previous life. I would be particularly interested if a child has a large birthmark or a congenital malformation. I've reported on a case of a child who claimed to have been his own paternal grandfather and had two pigmented moles in the same spots on his body that his grandfather did. It's said in such instances that genetics is responsible. But one wonders why the one grandchild in ten who had the moles claimed to remember his grandfather's life. Or take congenital malformations: Children born with deformed limbs--or even without fingers, toes, and hands--have claimed to remember being murdered and state that the murderer had removed these fingers, toes, or hands during the killing. In such situations the approach would be to ask the child to explain the birth defect. But I don't approve of pumping children if they don't want to talk.

Omni: Do the child's parents often "ruin" a case before you arrive?

Stevenson: All too often we reach the scene after the subject and his family have met the family about whom he's been talking. We sometimes have to pare away a great deal of extraneous information. I always prefer to record the child's account, but sometimes the boy or girl is too shy to talk, and I have to fall back on what parents say about his or her statements. My colleagues and I try to separate what the child said before meeting the other family from what he said later. Obviously the latter has much less value. I cannot emphasize too strongly that a child who is going to remember a previous life has only about three years in which he will talk about it. Before the age of two or three he lacks the ability. After five, too much else will be happening in his life, and he will begin to forget.

Omni: How frequently do children claim to have memories of a past life?

Stevenson: We don't yet know the incidence of cases. All we know are those that come to us. One survey of a township in northern India found one case for every five hundred persons. This would almost certainly understate the matter, as many cases never go beyond the immediate family. Even in cultures where reincarnation is accepted, parents sometimes think such memories are harmful. They are often upset by what the child remembers. Parents would not be particularly pleased to have a murdered child, not to mention a murderer, reincarnate in their family.

Omni: What would predispose someone to remember a previous life?

Stevenson: Violent death is a factor in our cases. In more than seven hundred cases in six different cultures, sixty-one percent remembered having died violently. But are these cases actually representative? Those involving accidents, murders, and suicides are bound to get more attention than others in which the child remembers a quiet life. Children also tend to remember the final years or a previous life. Almost seventy five percent of our children appear to recall the way they died, and if death was violent, they remember it in vivid detail.

Omni: You've stated that boys remember more often than girls.

Stevenson: Yes, but boys are presented to us more often than girls. A girl may not be marriageable if she is the notorious subject of a case, so she may be kept in the background. In a series of one thousand ninety-five cases from around the world, sixty-two percent were male. I can't explain this, unless men are more likely to die violent deaths.

Omni: Why do most Westerners ridicule the idea of reincarnation?

Stevenson: It's hard to find any single explanation. Some southern European Christians believed in reincarnation until the Council of Nice banned such beliefs in 553 A.D. In *The Republic*, Plato described souls about to be reborn as choosing their future lives. Schopenhauer took it seriously, and Voltaire's observation that it is no more surprising to be born twice than once is well known. Yet most scientists nowadays do not believe in survival after death. I suppose Darwinian ideas contributed to a sort of dethroning of the soul. Reincarnation may be particularly uncongenial because it's so much identified--mistakenly I think--with the Hindu and Buddhist ideas of being reborn as an animal.

Omni: What has it been like to swim against the tide?

Stevenson: Invigorating! (Laughs)

Omni: What criticism is most frequently leveled at your work?

Stevenson: That the cases occur most where people already believe in reincarnation. If a child seems to refer to a previous life, it's argued that his parents encourage him and may unwittingly feed the child information about a deceased person. I call this the socio-psychological interpretation of the cases. It is said that despite all my efforts, I have not eliminated the possibility that the subject of a case learned everything he knew through normal channels. Once a child comes to believe he or she was a particular person in a previous life, the argument goes, the other elements follow naturally. If you believe you had been stabbed to death in a previous life, you might have a phobia, for example, of knives. While this is a valid argument for a small number of cases, especially those occurring in the same family or village, it's inapplicable for long-distance cases where a child shows a detailed knowledge about a family his parents have never heard of, let alone met. But my critics say I must have overlooked something that the child must have learned about the deceased.

Omni: Why do all the cases seem to be in Asia? Couldn't critics find any in the West?

Stevenson: Oh, absolutely. I am convinced that if child psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as pediatricians, family doctors, and parents, would listen to children and observe them with reincarnation in mind, they would make valuable discoveries. Children often seem to express memories of previous lives in their play and sometimes in their drawings.

Omni: Scientists usually dismiss reincarnation as some sort of wishful thinking. Yet William James noted that our desire to believe in survival after death does not automatically negate its possibility. We do want to believe in it, don't we?

Stevenson: No, in fact we don't. That's a misunderstanding concerning Hindus and Buddhists. They believe in it, but they don't particularly want to. Hindus see life in terms of a constant cycle of births in which we are doomed to struggle and suffer until we have reached perfection and can escape. Fear of death is almost universal; and some two thousand years ago Patanjali, an Indian sage, said it was due to our fear of having to undergo a postmortem review of our lives, to be judged and presumably be found wanting.

Omni: Your new book discusses some misconceptions about the idea of reincarnation. What is the most common?

Stevenson: The idea that reincarnation must include what Hindus call Karma, especially retributive Karma.

Omni: Retributive Karma being the idea that whatever bad you do in this life is paid for in the next by having the same amount of evil done to you?

Stevenson: Something like that. It can be more specific, so that if you put out someone's eyes, you will be blinded. There is no evidence for the idea of retributive Karma. The notion of a succession of lives with improvement in each, on the other hand, is precisely the view of the Druze, a Muslim sect of Lebanon, a people I've worked with a lot. They believe God sends us into different sorts of lives, perhaps as a fisherman, then a banker, then maybe a pirate. But in each life we should do the best we can, if a banker, one should be thoroughly honest—and rich! Whether pirate or peasant, it's all summed up at the day-of-judgment. But one life has nothing to do with the next. Your conduct could be vicious in one life, and in the next, you might be reborn into elegant circumstances.

Omni: In your new book you speak reprovingly of people easily persuaded by your evidence. Is your position that reincarnation can never really be demonstrated?

Stevenson: I don't think I rebuke anybody for being convinced by the evidence. All I say is that maybe they shouldn't believe on the basis of what's in that particular book, because the detailed case reports are in my other books. Essentially I say that the idea of reincarnation permits but doesn't compel belief. All the cases I've investigated so far have shortcomings. Even taken together, they do not offer anything like proof. But as the body of evidence accumulates, it's more likely that more and more people will see its relevance. I'm not much of a missionary. Most of that was drained out of me on my first trip to India. I did have a certain zeal when I first went there. When I talked to Ramakrishna Swami in Chandigarh, he asked me what I was doing, and I replied with a certain enthusiasm. After a long silence he finally said, "We know that reincarnation is true, but it doesn't make any difference because here in India we have just as many rogues and villains as you have in the West" (SecretMeryle, Secret, "Omni Magazine Interview with Dr Ian Stevenson". 1988. Web. N.p).

2.1 Conclusion and Recommendation

Arthur Schopenhauer was deeply interested in reincarnation probably because he was trying to find a justification for the suffering and pain in the world. Both *The Prime Minister's Son* and *Secrets*, as texts, or literature, simply try to show us the world as it is. They raise deep issues that bother us or cause us to be afraid. They use literary devices to subtly guide us on how to live in the world, how to change our situations. For example, at the end of the solo drama, *The Prime Minister's Son* apostrophizes: "Oh God, why? Why? Why? Why should we live in this world in this way: Human beings, living like slaves, with their fate in the hands of fellow men?..." (Mbajjorgu, p. 58) We know that God will not come down to earth to solve our problems for us: as human beings, especially in Nigeria, a developing world, we must collectively remind our leaders that there is need for Government to provide enabling grounds for its citizens to fulfill their lives, to be able to find work to take care of themselves; there is need for the government to, through policy formulations and parliamentary

backing, initiate social welfare reforms to cushion the effect of the suffering and pain that the world is. Indeed the change that *The Prime Minister's Son* and *Secrets* want to initiate must be made concrete and practical by human beings.

It is expected that future researches in this area will provide concrete guide on measures governments in developing countries could take to cushion the effect of the suffering of their people with their meager resources.

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