

The facets of existentialism and the concept of absurd theatre in Albert Camus' *the outsider*

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Abstract

Albert Camus, was a great novelist essayist and playwright of France. Camus' philosophy of existence seems to govern the action of his novel entirely. The Existentialism is viewed as a revolt against traditions and conventions against all that hampers the liberty of human being. It emphasizes upon man's alienation, suffering, helplessness, freedom and absurdity of human existence. The existentialists consider human life as absurd. In literature, the theory of existentialism lays emphasis on man's responsibility for forming his own nature along with his personal decisions, personal freedom and personal goals. The philosophy of existentialism is clearly evident in Camus' character-sketch of Meursault.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus elucidates the concept of the absurd. The meaninglessness of the existence of Human beings, the crisis and cruelty of Human Beings, the dissimulation of human society etc. are the themes of the theatre of the absurd. Absurd specifies man's failure or the failure of traditional values. Camus shows the dilemma of Meursault's life. The facets of existentialism and the idea of absurdity are vividly manifested in Camus' novel *The Outsider* at numerous stages.

Keywords: existentialism, absurd theatre, human existence and predicament, unbearable reality, meaningless and miserable life

Introduction

Albert Camus, was a great novelist essayist and playwright of France. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. It has been measured that after the occupation of France by the Germans in 1941, Camus became one of the intellectual leaders of the Resistance Movement. Camus' *The Outsider (L'Étranger)* and *The Plague 1947 (La Peste)* are considered his finest novels. Camus' philosophy of existence seems to govern the action of his novel entirely. The Existentialism is viewed as a revolt against traditions and conventions against all that hampers the liberty of human being. It emphasizes upon man's alienation, suffering, helplessness, freedom and absurdity of human existence. It has been considered one of the movements for human rights and human liberty. In literature, the theory of existentialism lays emphasis on man's responsibility for forming his own nature along with his personal decisions, personal freedom and personal goals. It was Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, who initially gave voice against the evils generated through materialism, scientific and industrial culture. The existentialists believe that man is more important than all rules, regulations, laws and values. They are of the view that desire for happiness is a myth and man cannot escape from suffering. The mere social, economic and scientific development can neither make man happy nor improve his predicament. Consequently, they think that all efforts to upgrade man's condition seems confusing and futile. Neither system nor any philosophy can reduce the man's sufferings. The death is inevitable; hence man should not bother the disorder arise in the course of life.

The existentialists consider human life as absurd. They believe that the individual is the product of the choices he makes. The existentialist viewpoint is not a formation of any single philosopher. This philosophy has been defined by many philosophers. Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers,

Abbagamo, Berdyaev and Albert Camus etc. are considered its major exponent.

The philosophy of existentialism is clearly evident in Camus' character-sketch of Meursault. The story of the novel is narrated by Meursault, the protagonist of the novel. The novel narrates the death of his mother and Meursault himself. Meursault, works as a clerk who seems dispassionate towards worldliness. He enjoys life in love-making, wandering on the seashore and watching movie with his beloved Marie. Even without any personal enmity he shoots an Arab on the beach. Though, Arab had earlier terrorized him and his friend Raymond. Meursault is arrested and sent to jail for his crime, but he doesn't seem to defend his case. He confesses his crime and demands the legal justice for himself. He rejects the standard of established societal frame. Though, he seems to become conscious during his loneliness in the cell: "as if this great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of signs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the benign indifference of the world" (117). Camus seems to manifest the philosophy of existentialism in the beginning of this novel when Meursault receives the news of his mother's death, says: 'Mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from the home: "Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely'. That doesn't mean anything. It may have happened yesterday" (9)

Camus had summarized his novel in 'Afterword' with a significant remark: "in our society any man who does not cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death.' I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he does not play the game. In this sense he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual... he refuses to lie.... So one wouldn't be far wrong in seeing *The Outsider* as a story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the death" (*The Outsider* 118-119). He neither seems to mourn

the death of his mother nor shows any affection or regrets for his dead mother. On the contrary, he smokes cigarettes and enjoys the taste of coffee. On the day of funeral he goes to a restaurant with his beloved Marie. When he is asked by magistrate 'why did he kill the Arab with five shots', he remains silent. Similarly when the Priest asks him 'if he believed in God', Meursault shouts 'No'. The Priest advises him to pray God, only God can save him, but he says that he doesn't need any type of help. He refuses to be absolved of the sin he committed. The prosecution concludes that 'Meursault showed his criminal heart – at the time of his mother's burial' (93)

Though, Meursault seems heartless but not a hypocrite. He thinks of his existence from the outside of worldliness. He neither pretends nor repents over his action. He seems to reject both God and the religion and proves himself an atheist. Hence, he is considered an outsider.

Absurd Theatre

"Absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective" (Martin Esslin 4). The term theater of the Absurd is derived from Albert Camus essay: *The myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus elucidates the concept of the absurd. The absurd comes with the realization that the world is not rational: "At this point of his effort man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (28). The meaninglessness of the existence of Human beings, the crisis and cruelty of Human Beings, the dissimulation of human society etc. are the themes of the theatre of the absurd. Absurd specifies man's failure or the failure of traditional values.

John Russell Taylor explains the term in *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre* (1966) [4]: "Absurd, Theatre...term applied to a group of dramatists in the 1950s who did not regard themselves as a school but who all seemed to share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in the universe... This diagnoses humanity's plight as purposelessness in an existence out of harmony with its surroundings (absurd literally means out of harmony). Awareness of this lack of purpose in all we do...produces a state of metaphysical anguish which is the central theme of the writers in the Theatre of the Absurd..." (Taylor).

Hence, absurd shows the complete denunciation of ancient values where there is no plot, no characterization, no logical sequence of events and no happy end. The Theatre of the Absurd, characterizes that man's existence is a dilemma and purposeless wherein there is no scope for a hero, no glory or no glamour. As an alternative there is an anti-hero who is absolutely alienated from society. He has no interest in the world where he is forced to live in.

The wretched predicament of two great world wars define that sanctity of life has been missing utterly. Man seems to be disillusioned. The traditional values are of no use to him which were considered a matter of glory previously. William I. Oliver writes: "The absurdist playwright believes that our existence is absurd because we are born without asking to be born and we die without seeking death. We live between birth and death, trapped within our body. Absurdist believes that our existence in this world is absurd or meaningless, that we

all are strangers and that all our creations for getting distinction in life or making our stay in this world permanent, is bound to frustrate us in the end". He further explains that, "we labour to achieve distinction and permanence only to find that our assessments are perspectively incomplete and therefore never wholly effective. All our creations are doomed to decay as we ourselves are doomed to death. We create in order to identify ourselves in some semblance of permanence but our creations become autonomous facts the instant we have created them and do not identify us... and then therefore, the more we strive for definition and permanent distinction the more absurd we are" (wordpress.com).

Styan describes it: "Absurdist plays fall within the symbolist tradition and they have no logical plot or characterization in any conventional sense. Their characters lack the motivation found in realistic drama and so emphasize their purposelessness. The absence of plot serves to reinforce to monotony and repetitiveness of time in human affairs. The dialogue is commonly no more than a series of inconsequential clichés ... they do not discuss the human condition" (Styan 126).

Features of the Absurd Novels are:-

- Meaningless and miserable life.
- Inevitable futility of man's efforts
- Unbearable Reality:
- No action for plot.
- Comic or absurd situation.

Camus himself has said, "Being aware of One's life, one's revolt, one's freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum". Meursault is the hero of the play *The Outsider*. Life for him is a routine affair. The opening: "Mother died today. Or may be yesterday, I do not know" (1) and in the concluding part of the novel he says, "my last wish was that there should be a crowd of spectators at my execution and that they should greet me with cries of hatred" (117). He seems hardworking and sympathetic and leads a quite normal life. Meursault calls him an honest and decent chap. He seems heartless while attending his mother's funeral as he thinks everyone has to die. When the warden asks him if he would like to see his mother, Meursault stand up without saying anything. He supports his friend Raymond who has differences with his mistress. Meursault and his mistress Marie settle the domestic issue of Raymond and normalize his life. His boss insists that Meursault should change his lifestyle and work as chief of the new branch but Meursault seems disinterested. Raymond informs Meursault that the brother of his mistress has been following him to take the revenge. When the quarrel takes place between Arab and Reymod, Meursault keeps himself aside of fight as he thinks that he will fight only when the third Arab will attack. He snatches away the loaded gun from the hands of Raymond to resist further mishap but the mistaken Arab thinks Meursault to be his enemy and attacks him with a knife. Consequently, Meursault shoots him dead in self-defense. Meursault refuses to admit and regrets his guilt before the crucifix, so the magistrate recognizes him 'Mr. Antichrist' (70).

While prosecution takes place in the court the public persecutor fails to understand Meursault's case. He levels several charges against Meursault: I accuse this man of burying his mother like a heartless criminal (93). The other charges against Meursault are: he kept a bad company and he

killed an innocent man. Meursault does not believe in self-deception. He confesses that he hasn't killed Arab with intention. According to the lawyer of the defense: Meursault was an honest chap, a regular and tireless worker, who was faithful to the company that employed him, popular with everyone and sympathetic to the misfortunes of others. He is a model son who had supported his mother for as long as he could". (100)

Camus shows the dilemma of Meursault's life. He thinks that if he is not declared a criminal and be offered pardon, he'll have to live there in that pitiable condition, on the contrary if pardon refused, he will have to die premature death. Though, Camus seems to discover the faults with the exhausting legal procedure. Meursault does not pay attention at the Chaplain's advice to turn to God and apologies for his crime. The Chaplain wants to know why he refuses to see him; Meursault replies that he doesn't believe in God. Rather he seems to show that the issue of reaching reconciliation with God for him is of little importance, since the charge of murder has not been justified properly. He realizes that he never intended to kill the Arab or any human being; hence he will die with all innocence. On the contrary, he appreciates the vicinity of nature in place of God.

Hence, the facets of existentialism and the idea of absurdity are vividly manifested in Camus' novel *The Outsider* at numerous stages.

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