

An Absurdist Mind-Set Developed in the 20th Century Tending to Make Gradually its Generation Feel an Absurdist World-View

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Abstract

*An attempt has been taken through this topic to fathom the depth of a group of writers' philosophy towards the world inflicted with materialistic pains and human beings therein taking recourse to such an indifferent realm where they are to tolerate and observe any incongruities of life versus world. Taking such an attempt the author has to be in an indifferent position to feel himself being a part of the absurdist world visualized in such pieces as *The Trial*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Stranger/The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Soldier in an Attic*, *Tale of Dreams*, etc. While scrutinizing the absurdist scenario of the twentieth century, it occurs to me that even after being deprived of any hope and life's being considered meaningless, everyone is getting bound to go with whatever they can see, feel and sense without any complaint like some self-centred and isolated persons. Being stranded in such an indifferent situation where prevails always unrest state of mind, how every frustrated human soul is at least getting a space, created by the very believers of the absurdist world-view, for taking a deep breath to feel its existence along with acclimatizing itself to its survival into this absurdist world, is my concern in this topic.*

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With the advent of cruel reality submerged into hatred, tension, frustration bestowed upon human fate after two barbaric world wars along with the literary atmosphere's getting smoggy and heavier with reckless and desperate speeches, resulted from such psychological factors as anti-God tendency and existentialism, the absurdist mind-set was being inspired by some remarkable precursors like the creator of English *Doctor Faustus* Christopher Marlowe, the creator of *Paradise Lost* John Milton, the creator of German *Faust* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Pessimistic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, Existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, Neo-Kantian Martin Heidegger, etc. Their influence got actually implanted into the minds of a few writers so much that they began to play later on a very important role in developing a space into the world literature for those other writers who tend to take a deep breath lonely to lighten the burdens of their own lives. Such writers as Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), Albert Camus (1913-1960), Akhteruzzaman Elias (1943-1997) of the 20th century built up their mind-sets leading their lives and thoughts through the man-made destructions and indifferent surroundings of the hardest periods of human history where human fate was bound to be stranded between atheistic influence of the predecessors and the consequence of two world wars along with domestic conflicts. Still in that horrible holocaust they were able to empower themselves to express their thoughts, whatever absurd they seemed to be, lurking in their subdued minds getting crushed every moment in the then reality they were observing with their sharp and keen insights.

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Such tensed and terrified reality paved the way for those writers to be prone to an absurdist view into the literary arena. Living in such an absurd realm everyone may easily realize the inner pains and pangs of the absurdist mind-set visualized throughout the pieces like *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*), *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*), *The Stranger/The Outsider* (*L'Étranger*), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), *The Soldier in an Attic* (*Chilekothār Sepāi*), *Tale of Dreams* (*Khoabnama*)

However, such exposure of anti-God haughtiness of the most prominent connoisseurs getting gradually regarded as ideological inspiration and frankness for some writers of the next generation of the masterminds like Marlowe, Milton, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Heidegger along with the alluring distraction provided by existence of materialism and destructive wars like the world war-I and the world war-II one after another through the centuries, paved in the world literature the way to welcome those types of literary genius who began to observe the human life from a very different, neutral and critical way believing only what they can see, feel and sense. They wanted inexplicable religious issues, heroism in wars for upholding the human dignity and mythological fancies or the unseen no more. They began to take refuge in the domain of introvert, self-opinionated and individualistic mind-set where they would be able to explain on the basis of the true circumstances created by the predecessors and the contemporaries as well around them. From that mind-set emerged out an indifferent sense of ungodly existentialism nurtured as brain-child of the above-mentioned literary genius creating another trend inclined to contemplating the world in abstract philosophical terms and to the feelings of angst, meaninglessness, boredom, alienation, fear, etc.

As a result, with this new conceptual element of existentialism their subjective and idealist response begins to justify the real world with abstract mind-set based on a mood of nihilism and finds it not only unchanging but also unchangeable. It usually ends up accepting meaninglessness, loneliness and disintegration as the permanent and universal condition of human existence itself. If we go through their thoughts and experiences gathered from the last part of the 19th century to the last part of the 20th century, we would observe that all those writers have undergone psychoanalysis and historical interpretations of the human conditions and their thinking implies an image of man, not as a social being, but as by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with both the world and the other human beings around him.

Actually, the literary works like *The Trial*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Stranger/The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Soldier in an Attic*, *Tale of Dreams*, etc have contained some fundamental traits of modern individualism, the determination to trust one's own experience while distrusting the many and varied forms of authority, the attempt to face the absence of transcendence and to enjoy this life. Truly speaking, these writers did not just confine themselves to anti-God tendency; rather they began to scrutinize the human life and their surroundings from different dimensional viewpoints in a neutral psychoanalytical process. In this regard, it would be suitable to realize such observation as having been exposed by Albert Camus himself in the following manner:

“L'homme absurde entrevoit ainsi un univers brûlant et glacé, transparent et limité, où rien n'est possible mais tout est donné, passé lequel c'est l'effondrement et le néant. Il peut alors décider d'accepter de vivre dans un tel univers et d'en tirer ses forces, son refus d'espérer et le témoignage obstiné d'une vie sans consolation.”ⁱ(Camus,1.57)

Such life without consolation has been reflected throughout all those above-mentioned pieces if it is possible to grasp the absurd aspects inherent in their subject-matters. Then let's observe the first chapter in *The Trial* that begins with the unexpected arrest of Joseph K. So, K. has to show appearance with full of indignation into his first courtroom, and why not? No one has ever told him why or on what evidence he has been arrested. Even the court itself is stuck in so congested an attic in a rundown apartment complex that like K. anybody would take it so lightly. At the time of his delivering speech he seems to be mocking and entertaining the audience; thus making the investigating magistrate inform him of his case's having been hampered irreparably. *The Trial* throws light on Joseph K.'s subconscious ideas, instincts and desires, his professional career, his promiscuity with women and his apathy towards guilt. Here consciousness is rendered powerless. Faith has to substitute knowledge and one has to submit knowledge to fate, but need not to rebel or become angry. This is what K. refuses to do. He does not follow his instincts. The lawyer in the novel represents the suppressed angst of the human spirit. The lawyer's illness is symbolic of others' sufferings. Dog-like submission is the only answer to religious hope. Kafka presents a frightening world where conscious life is going out of control.

Accused as Joseph K. is, he has remained always ignorant of the accusatory reason. In spite of his being doubtless eager to defend himself, he doesn't know even why he remains careless about the situation getting serious and out of control. So, the lawyers find his case difficult. Still through this difficult situation he continues to act like a normal person being eager to love, to eat, or to read his paper. Then he has been judged in that crowded, congested and dark courtroom in such an informal manner that he doesn't realize much or bothers realizing its gravity. He merely assumes that he is condemned, but to what he barely wonders. He acts as if he has predetermined the consequence of this mockery. Some time later two well-dressed and polite gentlemen come to get him and invite him to follow them. Most courteously they lead him into a wretched suburb, put his head on a stone, and slit his throat. Before dying, the condemned man says in a tone of hatred: “Like a dog!”

Clearly, Joseph K. has failed to have faith in his life and also to live an absurd life. Kafka has presented such many absurd traits in *The Trial*. The end part of this novel does raise the query as to what K. could possibly have done to deserve such an extreme execution, particularly since K.'s only failing in the novel seems to be either arrogance or sexual promiscuity. K.'s final act of defiance – his refusal to kill himself, thus sparing the executioners the labour involved in killing a man – suggests that perhaps he is being punished for not completely submitting to the will of the court, which seeks to eliminate any and all expressions of individuality. K.'s last words: “Wie ein Hund!” sagte er, es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben.”ⁱⁱ (Kafka,10.92) voice his protest over his utterly inhumane end.

Such individuality of Joseph K. and the beginning with unexpected and absurd events are prevalent in *The Stranger* in which it can be observed that Meursault's self-explanation about the exact time of his Mother's death just after getting the telegram has indicated his indifference from the very beginning:

“Aujourd’hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J’ai reçu un télégramme de l’asile: «Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués.» Cela ne veut rien dire. C’était peut-être hier.”ⁱⁱⁱ (Camus 1.1.44)

In *The Stranger* the figure of Meursault, who shuns introspection and is devoted to sensuous experience, reminds us of Joseph K.'s Promiscuity. Obviously Albert Camus has deepened the concept of indifference, which in Meursault is an unexplained mixture of inability to feel and protest against inauthentic emotion as visualized in the following thought of the last moment:

“Comme si cette grande colère m’avait purgé du mal, vidé d’espoir, devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d’étoiles, je m’ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. De l’éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j’ai senti que j’avais été heureux, et que je l’étais encore.”^{iv} (Camus 2.5.98)

As regards his feeling towards absurdity, Albert Camus himself says: “What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.” (Camus, 1.6)

His concept of absurdity may be regarded as the reminiscent of *The Stranger*: the daily routine of work, which is rendered tolerable by habit, can trigger an onrush of futility; man lives for the future but ahead of him lies nothing but death; a landscape may by its very beauty indicate its indifference to man. Even it's been realized that such nothingness and indifference Camus feels as much in himself as has been in Sisyphus in ‘*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*’ while saying:

“On a compris déjà que Sisyphe est le héros absurde. Il l'est autant par ses passions que par son tourment. Son mépris des dieux, sa haine de la mort et sa passion pour la vie, lui ont valu ce supplice indicible où tout l'être s'emploie à ne rien achever. C'est le prix qu'il faut payer pour les passions de cette terre. On ne nous dit rien sur Sisyphe aux enfers. Les mythes sont faits pour que l'imagination les anime. Pour celui-ci on voit seulement tout l'effort d'un corps tendu pour soulever l'énorme pierre, la rouler et l'aider à gravir une pente cent fois recommencée ; on voit le visage crispé, la joue collée contre la pierre, le secours d'une épaule qui reçoit la masse couverte de glaise, d'un pied qui la cale, la reprise à bout de bras, la sûreté tout humaine de deux mains pleines de terre. Tout au bout de ce long effort mesuré par l'espace sans ciel et le temps sans profondeur, le but est atteint. Sisyphe regarde alors la pierre dévaler en quelques instants vers ce

monde inférieur d'où il faudra la remonter vers les sommets. Il redescend dans la plaine"^v(Camus,4.110)

Now, let's turn to another absurdist position holder Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Different matters in the play reflect Beckett's belief in Absurdism. His belief that a person can never be able to know anything about human destiny has been reflected throughout the play 'Waiting for Godot'. Within this play, the readers are left ignorant of what is going to happen to Estragon and Vladimir. This ignorance plays an important role to create suspense in understanding what there is in Beckett's mind. Perhaps Beckett himself didn't want a resolution because in his philosophies, there can't be one. Beckett's repetition of boredom towards life reflected into the speeches of different characters throughout the play indicates that the purpose of life is beyond human recognition. Absurdity is prominent here as it is realized that the absent entity 'Godot' cannot be regarded as a representative of any one idea, ideal or person, precisely because he represents a void entity. Beckett perceives him to be the void at the centre of human existence. Even the tramps have been seen waiting for Godot as well as encountering the wayfaring couple having no remarkable individual identities, barring a few biological, temperamental and situational traits. They are perceived, 'at this place, at this moment of time', not as four distinct personalities but as two radically truncated and grossly generalized images of all 'mankind', which, is expressed in an important portion of Lucky's mad 'holocaust of phrases':

"---l'homme en bref enfin malgré les progrès de l'alimentation et de l'élimination des déchets est en train de maigrir---"^{vi}(Beckett, 1.60)

Beckett's point in the play *Waiting for Godot* appears to be that we all spend our lives waiting for something that may or may not come. The main characters, Estragon and Vladimir, spend days (days that they are not even keeping track of) waiting for someone who they don't even know, and aren't really even acquainted with. They don't even know what Godot would look like if he passed. The two men spend their days contemplating what they should do to fill the empty space while they wait endlessly for Godot. There are many times when one asks the other what they should do to pass the time.

Incapable of any significant action or initiative, they (the tramps) imply an utterly pessimistic view of man as a helpless victim of his fate. The entire play woven with repetitions offers basically the same sequence: the tramps reunite, wait, contrive ways of passing time, encounter Pozzo and Lucky, receive Godot's disappointing message, contemplate suicide, decide to leave and do not move; besides, it contains a variety of verbal repetitions, the most important of which are—'Rien à faire'^{vii}(Beckett,1.9) and 'On attend Godot/Ah!'^{viii}(Beckett,1.16).

Ultimately this nothingness and boredom shown by Estragon and Vladimir leads us to such an absurd state of mind, seen to be possessed by the persons like Joseph K., Meursault and Sisyphus, in which human beings feel and sense many unexpected matters in their subdued minds to express and to protest but find nothing to be done.

This sort of frustration and depressive mood has also been found to be prominent in Aktheruzzaman Elias's *The soldier in an Attic* in which Osman Gani alias Ranju has been seen to be so much engrossed in the nuances happened in his introvert life impounded by the four walls of a prison-like attic. He observes what is happening around; listens, joins the processions and the meetings; but does not do anything sincerely. His frustrated and obsessed mind finds no ideal place other than that attic. That's why, it is seen that in his dream he has expressed his sensuality even at his father's funeral as he says in the first chapter:

“----cold rainfall is happening on the thickened thighs of Sicilian miss world. Keeping it in the front masturbation can easily be done between the thighs under the blanket.”^{ix} (Elias, 1.1)

This absurd act of Osman reminds us of the promiscuity of Joseph K. and Meursault's obsession with the thinking of the women in the prison. But in his other novel *'Khoabnama'* some characters like father of Tamij, Baikuntha, etc represent another frustrated scenario of this world where all their movements, searchings, thinkings, worries, excitements and plans get activated only in their sombre slumber. Even they have lost their sense to imagine the causes and reasons in the cruel reality. So, it has been observed that Baikuntha is afraid of having dreamt of an ominous omen lurking in the darkness around him. They can just weave dreams and tale of dreams; find nothing but hopelessness and frustration with empty stomach. That's why, Baikuntha is seen to have heard from the distant world Fakir Cherag Ali's voice:

‘Whose birth in this world equals to death
Possesses no guts to have such dream’^x (Elias, 52.315)

However, through Elias's novels it is to be realized that his insight into the subtle aspects of human character, his use of physical and psychological detail, his sarcastic treatment of hypocrisy, etc are the indications of the latest consequences derived from the cumulative ideas and concepts piled up centuries after centuries into the minds of the absurdist intelligentsia of the 20th century.

Although the absurdists are conscious of the importance of having knowledge of religious values, they are prone to maintain the balance between the reality and the imagination based on his own neutral analyses to trace the dignified position of the humanity in this world where most of the people are deprived of their true identities in the wake of the merciless power of capitalism, huge devastations of the world wars, increasing lack of faith and hope in human being's innate goodness, self-realization and self-motivated progress.

So it is to be observed that all the characters created by the absurdist never seem to complete one task or another. They contemplate suicide but decide that it may not be for the best because they are born to play the absurd game between them and the nature. To them, life and everything around it are nothing but a hopeless act to go with it!

The meaning of human life, as Beckett puts it, is that we wait for something to happen or for someone to come and show us the way. For that cherished way his characters have always been seen waiting, even after the boy's informing them that Godot wouldn't be coming that day. In both the acts, it has been observed that Estragon and Vladimir both discuss leaving and not waiting any longer but neither makes the move to do so. It is likely that they would like to believe that to find meaning, we have to realize the pulse of our surroundings and talk to those therein crossing our path, as Pozzo and Lucky crossed Estragon's and Vladimir's. But it has been observed that at the end of their tether all those characters do nothing but wait and find themselves at a loose end.

To Camus, "it is certain that a new torment arises wherever another dies. The childish chasing after forgetfulness, the appeal of satisfaction is now devoid of echo. But the constant tension that keeps man face to face with the world, the ordered delirium that urges him to be receptive to everything leaves him another fever. In this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures. Creating is living doubly. The groping, anxious quest of a Proust, his meticulous collecting of flowers, of wallpapers, and of anxieties, signifies nothing else. At the same time, it has no more significance than the continual and imperceptible creation in which the actor, the conqueror, and all absurd men indulge every day of their lives. All try their hands at miming, at repeating, and at recreating the reality that is theirs. We always end up by having the appearance of our truths. All existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd. Creation is the great mime."(Camus, 3.60)

In portraying the absurdity an introvert and indifferent personality like Kafka tends to brush the quintessence of the whole human condition with his own colourless views and visions. The everlasting discordance between the divine law and the human law, and Kafka's inability to solve the discrepancy implant the roots of the cognition of alienation from which his protagonists suffer. No matter how hard Kafka's heroes strive to come to terms with the universe, they are hopelessly caught, not only in a mechanism of their own contriving, but also in a network of accidents and incidents, the least of which may lead to the gravest consequences. Kafka's heroes are lonely because they are entrapped midway between a notion of good and evil, the periphery of which they are unable to determine and the contradiction therein they cannot resolve. They are isolated to the point where meaningful communication fails them. When the typical Kafka hero, confronted with a question as to his identity, cannot give a clear-cut answer, Kafka does more than indicate difficulties of verbal expression: he says that his hero stands between the two worlds — a vanished world to which he once belonged and a present world to which he does not belong. This is consistent with Kafka's world, which consists not of clearly delineated opposites, but of an endless series of possibilities. These are never more than temporary expressions, never quite conveying what they really ought to convey — hence the temporary, fragmentary quality of Kafka's stories. Kafka has been interested in tracing the human reasoning process in great detail up to the point where it fails. He remains indebted to the empirical approach and is at his best when he depicts his protagonists desperately trying to comprehend the world by following the normal way.

Kafka, Beckett, Camus, Elias—all these avant-garde writers of the 20th century certainly remained fascinated and overwhelmed by the major theme of all varieties of existentialist thinking, namely the difficulty of responsible commitment in the face of an absurd universe. Deprived of all metaphysical guidelines, a man is nevertheless obligated to act morally in a world where death renders everything meaningless. He alone must determine what constitutes a moral action although he can never foresee the consequences of his actions. As a result, he comes to regard his total freedom of choice as a curse. The guilt of existentialist heroes, as of Kafka's, lies in their failure to choose and to commit themselves in the face of too many possibilities — none of which appears more legitimate or worthwhile than any other one. Like Camus' Sisyphus, who is doomed to hauling a rock uphill only to watch it roll down the other side, they find themselves faced with the fate of trying to wring a measure of dignity for themselves in an absurd world. Unlike Sisyphus, however, Kafka's heroes remain drifters in the unlikely landscape they have helped create. Mersault in Camus' *The Stranger* — these men are really contemporaries of Kafka's "heroes," drifters in a world devoid of metaphysical anchoring and suffering from the demons of absurdity and alienation; whereas, Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are frustrated ones who wait for something hopeful and are afraid but find nothing. Even Elias' characters like Osman in *Chilekothār Sepāi* and Baikuntha in *Khoabnama* are so frustrated as to equalize their lives with their death as they are afraid of dreaming let alone being hopeful!

However, it seems to be strange in any case that works of related inspiration like those of Kafka, Beckett, Camus and Elias—those, in short, of existential novelists and playwrights completely oriented towards the Absurd and its consequences—should in the long run lead to that tremendous cry of hope. Such painful hope nurtured in the absurdist mind-set would naturally be bent on making its present generation and the next generations feel the existence of the World and the human beings surviving therein from an absurd philosophical viewpoint.

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Endnote

ⁱ Trans: "The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation." (See Camus 1955, 1.40)

ⁱⁱ Trans: "Like a dog!" he said, it was as if the shame of it should outlive him" (See Kafka 2012, p.165)

ⁱⁱⁱ Trans: "Mother died today. Or maybe 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 been yesterday." [See Camus 1983, Part-I: Ch-I, p-9]

^{iv} Trans: "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. And finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy, and that I was still happy." (See Camus 1983, Part-II, Ch-V, p-117)

^v Trans: "You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain." (See Camus 1955, 4.76)

^{vi} Trans: "--- man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation is seen to waste and pine---" (See Beckett 1989, 1.73)

^{vii} Trans: 'Nothing to be done' (See Beckett 1989, 1.39)

^{viii} Trans: 'We are waiting for Godot/Ah!' (See Beckett 1989, 1.44)

^{ix} Translated by the author from the original (See Elias, 1986)

This indistinct indication of masturbation in this quotation seems to remind us of Meursault's masturbating in the prison in Stuart Gilbert's translation- 'Next day I did like the others' (2.2.49) is accepted on the basis of Patrick McCarthy's (p.106) explanation

^x Translated by the author from the original (See Elias, 1996)