

"SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS AND INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY: A STUDY OF MEURSAULT'S REBELLION"

Syed Arif Ullah

Phd. English Literature Muslim Youth University, Islamabad Pakistan

arifkhaann1992@gmail.com

Muhammad Rafiq

Phd. English Literature Muslim Youth University, Islamabad, Pakistan

rafiq.academia@gmail.com

Dr. Mubasher Nadeem

Professor, Muslim Youth University, Islamabad, Pakistan

drmubashernadeem@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines Albert Camus's philosophy of absurdism through a critical reading of his seminal novel (The Stranger) (1942), with particular focus on the conflict between societal expectations and individual authenticity. While absurdism is often interpreted negatively, this research contends that it can function as a constructive framework for confronting the irrationality of human existence. Using qualitative thematic analysis, the study identifies how Camus employs the character of Meursault to depict the tension between conformity and personal freedom. By exploring Meursault's emotional detachment, rejection of conventional morality, and defiance of societal norms, the research demonstrates how absurdism provides an avenue for resilience, meaning-making, and optimism in a seemingly indifferent universe. The findings reveal that Camus redefines rebellion not as destructive resistance but as a positive assertion of authenticity in the face of absurdity. Ultimately, this study highlights the enduring significance of absurdism for understanding human existence, emphasizing its relevance to contemporary discussions on anxiety, alienation, and the search for meaning.

Keywords:

Absurdism, Authenticity, Societal Expectations, Personal Freedom, Meaning-Making

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of human life and existence have core importance in the human past and as well as in the present history. The study of absurdism provides an insight into the meaning of life. The chapter provides a background of the study, where detailed discussion is provided on absurdism and how different authors view absurdism. Furthermore, the chapter presents a short biography of the authors and a brief introduction to the texts. Moreover, the chapter elucidates the objectives of the study, research questions, problem statements, significance & rationale of the study, and delimitation of the study. Existentialism is a philosophical theory that gives one the idea that human beings are free in determining their future. There should be no external authority who decides your future. In history, there are different movements like idealism, realism, transcendentalism, rationalism but the term existentialism has its intellectual history. Existentialism is a broader term because, on one hand, it has philosophical implications while on the other hand it is considered as a literary theory. The study of 'being' is the central focus of this theory. Absurdism is based on the notion that the world is irrational and meaningless and search for order, rationality, logic, and wit is leading an individual to conflict with the universe. Different theologians and philosophers interpreted the meaning of human lives. Absurdism appeared as the only answer and the intellectual explanation of the irrational response of the world. Human questions were genuine but the response of the universe towards human rational questions was irrational. Absurdism was the beginning of optimism and end of pessimism. The present study contests the idea that absurd arises when an individual experience the irrational response of the world to his/her rational questions. The confrontation leads to the concept of absurdity. When an individual confronts the world logically, one finds if there is no meaning. The world does not answer to human rational questions. Such irrational response of the universe leads to chaos, disintegration, loneliness, and pessimism defined as 'absurd'. Accepting and understanding pessimism is a means of optimism. The present study will analyze the selected novels to emphasize how absurdism is used to find meaning in life. Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French philosopher, author, and journalist, renowned for his impactful contributions to existentialism and absurdism. Born in Mondovi, French Algeria, Camus faced a challenging upbringing marked by financial struggles. The death of his father during World War I added to the family's difficulties. For his education, Camus relocated to France and pursued philosophy at the University of Algiers. He gained literary prominence with the publication of his inaugural novel, "The Stranger" ("L'Étranger" in French), in 1942. This narrative follows Meursault, a character characterized by emotional detachment and indifference, navigating a senseless act of violence. "The Stranger" delves into themes of existentialism, the absurd nature of human existence, and the repercussions of societal expectations. Camus' philosophical treatise, "The Myth of Sisyphus," further explores the concept of the absurd, contending that the absence of inherent meaning in life necessitates individuals to forge their own purpose in an indifferent universe. The texts selected for this study is the 'stranger' (1942) by Albert Camus. The idea that human beings are free in determining their own future through the act of free will. Existentialists argue that 'existence precedes essence', which means that an individual present decision can decide his future. There is no external agent responsible for man's happiness and unhappiness; if an individual wants to be happy, he needs to decide the things which cause happiness. Absurdism is an offshoot of existentialism and frequently understood in a negative connotation, however, it may reflect fundamental positive values related to practical life, which the present study aims to explore.

Nothingness and meaning of life are contradictory notions. Individual freedom owes much to these concepts. The reason for conducting this study is to add to discussions about books and philosophy. We want to take a close look at Meursault's character in "The Stranger" by Albert Camus. Our goal is to better understand how societal expectations and being true to oneself interact in the philosophy presented by Camus. This study is very significant to highlight anxieties that are spread due to misconceptions, little understanding of the external world. The study helps the researchers to point out solutions to that anxiety caused by the misconceptions of the least understandings of the world. The rationale behind this study is to delve into the themes of individual authenticity within the framework of absurdism in Albert Camus's "The Stranger." By scrutinizing Meursault's interactions with societal norms, the research seeks to unravel the significance of absurdism and its implications for understanding human behavior and existential choices. The research questions aim to dissect the nuances of individual authenticity, contributing to a deeper comprehension of the philosophical underpinnings presented by Camus. The significance of this research extends to the broader understanding of existentialist thought and its practical applications in navigating societal expectations and fostering individual authenticity.

Existentialism and Absurdism

Existentialism is a philosophical approach that had given the idea that human beings are free in determining their future through the act of free will. Existentialists argued that 'existence precedes essence', which means that an individual present decision can decide his future. There is no external agent responsible for man's happiness and unhappiness. If an individual wanted to be happy, he needs to decide the things which cause happiness and vice versa (Lawler, 2005). The advocates of existentialism were of the view that through free will, awareness and a person's responsibility can make a sense of the world that has no meaning at all (Warnock, 1970). The existentialism explained by Kierkegaard had more religious elements than rational elements (Ferguson, 2005). Before existentialism, in Europe, people of Europe were familiar with the concept of nihilism. Fredrick Nietzsche was the advocate of this theory. According to Nietzsche, 'nihilism was the idea that all ethics were baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated (Gillespie, 1995). Nihilism was considered a pessimistic approach because it did not provide any solution to human problems. If there was no meaning in life, life would become more nihilistic and least optimistic (Weller, 2005).

Absurdism provided an opportunity that a realization that life has no meaning, is, in fact, a basis for living life to the fullest (Demastes, 2005). The notion of the absurd was that the universe was irrational and meaningless and that the search for meaning could bring an individual into a constant clash with the world (Cornwell, 2016). When an individual reached the point of the irrationality of the world, the individual then understood the meaning of existence (Morris, 2009). Those individuals who attached themselves to hope they remain, while those who did not, they perish (Bennett, 2015). Life was not a quest for pleasures, nor power but a pursuit for meaning (Bowker, 2008). The great achievement of an individual was to find meaning in life (Pytell, 2015). Camus offered an interpretation of the meaning of existence that the world was not reasonable at all to answer human philosophical questions because the world in itself was irrational and that is all can be said (Bralina & Shilke, 2012). Camus in his theory of absurdism, described revolt as an act of heroic resistance to the state that oppressed humankind (Mohseni, Iranpour, Naghibzadeh-Tahami, Kazazi, & Borhaninejad, 2019). The opposite of meaninglessness was meaningful

and that was the point where Camus shifted from existentialism to absurdism (Bennett-Hunter, 2009). The external universe did not care about the problem and questions of human beings. It did not answer to a human philosophical question. Existentialists did not find ways to counter this problem of pessimism (Dienstag, 2014). Our very existence was irrational and inappropriate (McMurray, 1977). When humans faced difficulties, diseases, and deaths then such questions came to mind unconsciously that why humans were targeted through the divine plan. An individual became directionless, purposeless, helpless, and meaningless in this universe because his feelings of humanism were suppressed by the feeling of materialism (Michie, 2011). Camus was of the view that why we humans penetrate ourselves in sorrows and pain when in the end we all die at the same point (Henke, 2013). Life is a continuous struggle (Sjöling, Ågren, Olofsson, Hellzén, & Asplund, 2005), one should not quit this struggle for meaningless, if life did not respond to our serious and philosophical questions then as a whole we need to stuck with a hope (Pözlzer, 2014). As the world was a very difficult place to live so there was no point in committing suicide or to frighten from this world, one needed to be very well prepared and positive and spent life with full zeal (Johnson, 2018). The modern man only has subjective thought and he wants to be noticed by society (Koltun, 2018). These worldly passions let the man work extra hard to attain all these things in his life (Candelaria, 2018). Camus was of the view that we must believe in Sisyphus to live life happily (Byala, 2008). Camus considered the universe as irrational but he did not recommend suicide as a solution to world problems (Bertman, 1971). Whenever we change our decisions the next moment we change our future (Olley, 2010). Everything is constantly changing. There is no fixity even in the language (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010). When all the philosophies failed to respond to human unhappiness, Camus stands to flourish happiness in human lives (Neves, 2003).

Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore Albert Camus's philosophy of absurdism, delving into its impact on "The Stranger" and how the theme of individual authenticity is intricately portrayed through Meursault's choices and actions.
2. Examine Meursault's psychological facets, investigating the factors influencing his detachment from societal norms and the importance of his emotional indifference in "The Stranger."
3. Explore how societal norms of the time shape characters and themes of absurdism and individual authenticity in "The Stranger."

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature and within that exploratory and explanatory methods helps to analyze the fictional text. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes or patterns of meaning within data. It illustrates the data in detail and deals with diverse subjects via interpretations (Boyatzis 1998). The thematic analysis allows the researcher to determine precisely the relationships between concepts and compare them with the replicated data. The focus of this study is on the research technique adopted and used for this study to achieve the research objectives. Qualitative research type emphasizes both organization and rich description of the data set and theoretically informed interpretation of meaning. Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French philosopher, writer, and journalist renowned for his influence on existentialism and absurdism. Born in Algeria, Camus' upbringing in poverty and adversities significantly shaped his perspective on life. "The Stranger" ("L'Étranger") by Albert Camus is a novel that explores

existentialist and absurdist themes through the life of its protagonist, Meursault.. "The Stranger" revolves around Meursault, an emotionally detached Algerian navigating life with indifference. The novel explores themes of societal expectations and individual authenticity. Meursault's unconventional response to his mother's death and involvement in a fatal conflict lead to a trial where his refusal to conform becomes central. Against the backdrop of colonial Algeria, the story examines the consequences of living authentically in a world dictated by societal norms. Ultimately, Meursault faces judgment not just for his actions but for his defiance against conventional expectations.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Absurdism as Portrayed in Albert Camus "The Stranger" (1942)

Albert Camus work "the stranger", (1942) was eminent in the field of literature. It stands tall against the mighty waves of time. The time cannot rust his work. The writings of Camus have the outcomes of the political background of his time. Camus in his novel was trying to find out meaning in meaningless scenarios. He further explores societal expectations and individual authenticity. His novel explores that how individual authenticity strengthen his decision-making power. Following the repercussions of world war II, his writing was not devoid of such incidents. Camus was not happy with the political power of powerful people. In the war situation it is the responsibility of an individual to find out meaning in this meaningless universe. We are living in a world that have no ultimate meaning at all, however from meaninglessness it does not mean that one has to sit idle and depressed. From the character of Meursault's character, we reached to a point and we can suggest that there is always a clash between the society and an individual, an individual most of the time goes in an opposite direction from societal norms. In other words, the protagonist was in nonconformity with the external universe and with the society. Protagonist wants an individual freedom but society bounds him. Society expects something from an individual on the contrary individual wants an absolute freedom. one such example was his mother death. Such conditions demand mourning and grief but the protagonist handle such situation with calmness and not expressing his grief. It was the first confrontation of the protagonist and society. He was even unaware that when his mother died. He never cares for the problem of this world. We can say that he turned a deaf ear to worlds problems. People considers death as a great loss and considers it a major loss. The death of a loved one's scatters people while the protagonist was careless about the situation. In our society attends funeral and death with great loss while no such philosophy exists in the mind of a protagonist. When someone talks about the death of his mother, protagonist replied that life has its own pace and it will pass. The life of people get stuck when they face the death of their loved ones. On the other hand, despite the death of his mother Meursault believes in the continuity of life. It was a great response to universal irrationalities.

"It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed". (Camus, 1942, p.4).

The conversation with the nurse, where she cautions Meursault about the potential dangers of either moving too slowly or too quickly during the funeral march, brings attention to the established societal norms linked with the grieving process. Meursault confronts a quandary, symbolizing the inner struggle between adhering to societal expectations and remaining authentic to his own essence.

The nurse gives a guidance that it is necessary to go on proper pace for attending the funeral of his mother. It was a point to how follow the societal norms and in the reaction protagonist goes this social norm and proved his individual authenticity.

"I felt a little lost between the blue and white of the sky and the monotony of the colors around me—the sticky black of the tar, the dull black of all the clothes, and the shiny black of the hearse". (Camus,1942, p.15)

Meursault, the main character, pays attention to small things during the funeral, like the coachman's hat and the red earth on the casket. This shows that he's not feeling the emotions that people usually have at funerals. He's not following the normal way people act in sad situations. Instead, he's focused on everyday details. This difference highlights the conflict between what society expects at a funeral and Meursault being himself.

"I didn't mind being his pal, and he seemed set on it. He repeated his remark and I said, 'Yes.' I didn't mind being his pal, and he seemed set on it. He repeated his remark and I said, 'Yes.' I didn't mind being his pal, and he seemed set on it. He sealed the letter and we finished off the wine. Then we sat and smoked for a while without saying anything". (Camus,1942, p,28)

Meursault's behavior may be explained as a defiance of societal norms. The recurrence of the statement "I didn't mind being his pal" emphasizes his indifference to the potential societal judgment of his choice. From the perspective of absurdism, it is mandatory to go in favor of liberty and individual freedom as it will enable an individual to have a sharp decision-making power.

"When we'd gotten dressed again on the beach, Marie looked at me with her eyes sparkling. I kissed her. We didn't say anything more from that point on. I held her to me and we hurried to catch a bus, get back, go to my place, and throw ourselves onto my bed". (Camus, 1942, p.38).

Meursault's manner in the starting passage, involvement in a romantic connection with Marie was free of substantial emotional investment, showing his indifference toward societal expectations concerning love and relationships. The absence of verbal exchange and the emphasis on physicality accentuate his sense of detachment.

"Then he asked me if I'd expected him to hit the cop back. I said I wasn't expecting anything, and besides I didn't like cops. Raymond seemed pretty happy. He asked me if I wanted to go for a walk with him. I got up and started combing my hair. He told me that I'd have to act as a witness for him. It didn't matter to me, but I didn't know what I was supposed to say". (Camus, 1942, p.42).

Meursault's willingness to state on behalf of Raymond, even in the absence of a complete comprehension of the circumstances, highlights his irrelevance to societal rules. His seeming disregard for the potential repercussions or moral complexities resonates with the theme of absurdism, stressing the encouragement for individuals to make decisions ingrained in personal values relatively than conforming to external expectations.

"Afterwards he wanted to go to a whorehouse, but I said no, because I don't like that. So we took our time getting back, him telling me how glad he was that he'd been able to give the woman what she deserved. I found him very friendly with me and I thought it was a nice moment". (Camus, 1942, p.48).

Camus stresses Meursault's unconventional decisions, such as his denial to entertain the idea of visiting a brothel, indicating his departure from societal norms. Absurdism encourages individuals to challenge and discard conventional expectations, embracing personal freedom in their decision-making.

Furthermore, Meursault's apathy towards Salamano's predicament regarding his missing dog serves to underscore his detachment from conventional moral considerations. In the realm of absurdism, where life is often perceived as arbitrary and lacking inherent meaning, individuals are inclined to distance themselves from societal expectations and moral judgments.

These instances are in harmony with the themes of absurdism, highlighting Meursault's tendency to lead an authentic life by making choices based on personal values rather than conforming to external expectations. The narrative paints a portrait of a character navigating life with a sense of indifference towards societal norms and moral assessments, embodying the existential philosophy inherent in absurdism.

CONCLUSION

When we go deeper into the text of Albert Camus's "The Stranger" through the lens of absurdism, chiefly concentrating on themes linked to societal expectations and individual authenticity, it provides profound insights into the complexities of the human condition and navigating societal norms. We reached to a point that this study is utmost important in this regard. The concept of absurdism let an individual to find meaning in this meaningless universe. An individual wants one thing and society expects something else, through this confrontation an individual leads a life full of chaos and disintegration. This study is significant in a sense that it challenges those norms and values that have maintained by society from thousands of years. The society exercise an absolute power over on an individual the current study is important in a sense that it holds a mirror to society cruelty. the decisions of the society are not the final words, rather it can be changed and challenged as challenged by protagonist of the novel. There is nothing bad in this to challenge the established norms of the society. With this challenging the society will get evolved with the passage of the time.

Moreover, we can draw a conclusion that human beings are the conscious creatures of the universe. Humans can differentiate between good and bad. They need to exercise this power. Rebellion was considered in a negative connotation, however studying deep this novel it helps the reader that rebellion is a positive value. Through questioning the established norms, one will be able to find meaning. We can say that absurdism providing a roadmap in this chaotic universe. Humans through their rational faculty can find their own meaning. Individual authenticity is of more importance than societal norms. The society is society because of the people. People have sometime a slave morality. Human mind and human brain have that capacity to bring human out of this chaos and fear. Those societies get stagnant that have low decision-making process.

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