



Albert Camus' Portrayal of Life's Absurdity

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Abstract

The sense of absurdity is closely associated to Second World War and its deleterious effects upon the people who live meaningless life. The world becomes of nothing except deterioration, destruction, death, diseases and poverty. It is rotten completely as everything on it has died out since it devoid of any meaning.

One of Albert Camus's absurdist philosophy is that life devoid of meaning and death is inevitable reality as all people will eventually die; hence all lives are equally meaningless. Believing in the absurdity of life makes man concentrate on the world's corporeal facets more on its communal and emotional facets as man's existence in life is of no meaning or order as well.

The abusive nature of society and its issues cause man's social isolation and emotional detachment for regarding life aimless. Man becomes completely alienated from oneself, each other, and from society as a whole; considering life as illogical, meaningless and absurd. The straight awareness of life looks different but eventual stance of it is similar to each other in terms of lack of vitality and aspiration. Despite of meaningless life, man must accept the absolute indifference of the absurd world since any effort or try to find meaning and order in this world is futile.

Key words: absurdity, life, meaningless, alienation, society, existence, reality, death.

المستخلص:

البرت كامو وتصويره لعبثية الحياة

يرتبط الشعور بالعبثية ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالحرب العالمية الثانية وآثارها الضارة على الأشخاص الذين يعيشون حياة بلا معنى. يصبح العالم لا شيء سوى التدهور والدمار والموت والأمراض والفقر. إنه فاسد تماماً لأن كل شيء فيه مات لعدم وجود أي معنى.

إن إحدى فلسفات ألبرت كامو العبثية هي أن الحياة ليس لها معنى وأن الموت هو الواقع المحتوم حيث سيموت جميع الناس في النهاية ؛ وبالتالي كل الحياة لا معنى لها على حد سواء. الإيمان بعبثية الحياة يجعل الإنسان يركز على الجوانب المادية أكثر من تركيزه على الجوانب الاجتماعية و العاطفية لأن وجود الإنسان في الحياة ليس له معنى أو نظام أيضاً.

الطبيعة المسيئة ومشاكل المجتمع تسبب عزلة الانسان اجتماعيا وانفصاله عاطفيا لانه يعتبر الحياة بلا هدف. يصبح الإنسان معزولاً تماماً عن نفسه وعن الآخرين وعن المجتمع ككل , معتبرا الحياة غير منطقية وبلا معنى وعبثية. يبدو الإدراك المباشر للحياة مختلفاً ، لكن الموقف النهائي منها مشابه لبعضه البعض من حيث نقص الحيوية والطموح. على الرغم من عدم وجود معنى للحياة ، يجب على الإنسان أن يقبل اللامبالاة المطلقة للعالم العبثي لأن أي جهد أو محاولة لايجاد معنى ونظام في هذا العالم غير مجدي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العبثية ، الحياة ، لا معنى ، اغتراب ، المجتمع ، الوجود ، الواقع ، الموت.

1. Introduction

A French author born in Algeria just before the outbreak of World War I, Albert Camus (1913- 1960) considered the history of his times a history of 'murder, injustice, and violence'. He rose in the shadow of a world war, and participated in the next world war as a member of the French resistance movement. During this period, he began to write and to formulate the philosophy that would motivate his novels and plays. In 1957, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (King, 1964:16). As a philosopher and a creative writer, he is closely associated with the doubting of existentialism; the belief that emphasizes man's realization of mortality and subsequent requirements for finding meaning in an uninterested and unfriendly world (King:20).

Camus focuses on the importance of man's existence and life's purpose as his main concern is man for being the most vital creatures in the world. He emphasizes the tragic nature of man's fate and intends to comfort him in order not to be deceived by faked reality (Masters, 1974:2-3). Camus stresses that the absurd is "born of the confrontation between the human need for meaning and the unreasonable silence of the world"(Camus,1960:21). For him, the world has no ultimate meaning only man has meaning as he is the only creature who insists on having one. His pessimism "lies not in acknowledging the



injustice, cruelty, and absurdity which governs the world, but in giving one's assent to them" (Masters: 2). Therefore, in most of his writings Camus refuses to yield to the world's injustice. The literary methods used in his novels enhance the absurd ideas found in the world and the absurd behaviors of the characters. These methods provide a mental view of the absurd for man and reveal his desire for finding meaning in life. Moreover, they disclose man's inspirations to confront the absurd (Masters: 5).

In his writings, Camus concentrates on different themes, mainly the world's absurdity, the futility of man's existence and life, alienation, loss, man's rebellion and exclusion. By using different themes, he expresses the scope and depth of his concerns particularly the ethical and political issues (Ellison, 1990: 22). Throughout his novel *The Stranger* (1942) Camus used specific literary techniques, such as symbolism, irony, and foreshadowing in order to convey very accurate meanings and to enhance the absurd ideas and behaviors of man, giving him a mental image of the absurd. By using such techniques, Camus shows man's efforts and motivation to find meaning in life against the absurd but futile (Ellison:26)

2. Existentialism and Absurdism philosophy:

Existentialism is known as a philosophical movement that appeared in the 20th century in Germany and France. The failure of social, political, economic, ideological and intellectual mode of thoughts is the main reason that caused the emergence of this movement. Therefore, existentialism is regarded as a new way of philosophical thinking concentrating on man as conscious subject (Macquarie, 1972: 14-15).

Many writers like Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre work hard to develop this movement. They not only focus on man but on existence, agony, absurdity, nothingness, death and alienation as well. Its attitude is "existence precedes essence" (Breisach, 1962:5), meaning existence over essence. This movement considers man as a conscious subject and not an object that external essence controls him. According to this movement, life begins with no precise reason, is lived with absence of desire and ends by chance. Hence, life becomes illogical, meaningless and absurd. For existentialists, man's freedom is very important as he should be independent of any exterior influence. Moreover, they concentrate on man's sense of nothingness and alienation that affect greatly his thoughts and behaviors as Breisach avers (9).



On the other hand, the term 'absurdity' describes man's futile attempt to find rational order and meaning in life where nobody exists. Like existential movement, the absurd emphasizes man's freedom where no good or bad choices can be made. Man's desires struggle with the indifference of the world as King remarks (56). The main absurdist writer, Jean Paul Sartre says that "there is the split between man's search for unity and the conflict between mind and nature and the split between man's affinity with infinity and the finite character of his existence" (Sartre, 1962 : 109). In *The Stranger*, Camus deals with chance, death, the beauty and truth in nature, the desire to revolt and the ineloquence of reality. Sartre describes this novel as:

a work detached from a life, unjustified and unjustifiable, sterile, momentary, already forsaken by its author, abandoned for other present things. And that is how we must accept it, as a brief communion between two ... the author and the reader. (121).

3. Alienation and Absurdity in *The Stranger* :

The Stranger (1942) is considered as one of Camus prominent novels of two parts. In this novel, Camus portrays the main protagonist, Meursault as a marginalized man for the unequal and abusive nature of society. By considering life meaningless, Meursault becomes socially isolated and emotionally separated from social life; refusing the ambiguous appearances and values of society that subsequently strengthens his existential crisis (Thody, 1957: 33). Hence, it is obvious that social factors are responsible for increasing the sense of alienation and the detachment of emotion. Title *The Stranger* shows the case of a man living enduringly apathetic and having no ability to distinguish between right and wrong, real and false.

Meursault, a Frenchman, who is accused of killing an Arab is the novel's central protagonist through which the writer has discussed the idea of absurdity (Brombert, 1948: 119-123).

The Stranger echoes the sickness that dominated man's existence during and after the destruction of two world wars. Because of refusing outdated life and having no aim in modern world, Meursault feels stranger that increases his rejection to everything; faith, future and even the motivation for living (Bloom, 2001: 22). At the beginning of the novel, Meursault is invited to the funeral of his mother where he does not show any sympathy or even cry as he considers everything around him reckless. For Meursault life and routine are as absurd. His attitude and indifference are detested and condemned by others. The novel begins with a soliloquy, Meursault talks with himself: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday, I can't be sure"



(Camus, 1988: 1). This refers to a relationship with his mother and shows his alienation from her "I told him that, so far as I knew, they kept stray dogs in the pound for three days, waiting for their owners to call for them .After that they disposed of the dogs as they thought fitFor some reason, I don't know what, I began thinking of Mother" (Camus, 1988: 50).

This novel is often regarded as an existential novel because in an absurd world existence precedes essence. The first part exposes Meursault as a moral idiot who expresses himself by a meaningless action whereas the second part shows how he takes part in the conventional world that he despises and expresses himself with relationship in which he finds himself due to the circumstances that push him to participate in the world. Meursault's world and principles makes way from society. Since this novel comprises a strong meaning of his philosophical idea of absurdity, Camus believes that man lives and his existence have no clear significance. But no one accepts this awful reality; hence man always attempts to make sense in his life (Levine, 1988: 14).

In this world, man tries hardly to find rational order and meaning in his life. For Meursault, both his outside and inside worlds; meaning his living world and his world of beliefs and manners have devoid of any order. He has no obvious reason for his two decisions, to marry Marie and to kill an Arab. Society nevertheless tries to enforce strong elucidations for Meursault's foolish acts. Sometimes things happened without reason. The novel's second part, the trial system reveals society's effort to create normal order. Both the prosecutor and Meursault's lawyer present motives for Meursault's crime that are centered on reason and result. These clarifications are only means to save the scary idea that the world is irrational. Thus, the trial is considered as an illustration of absurdity and a request of man's useless effort to enforce prudence on an unreasonable world:

As if this great outburst of anger had purged all my ills, killed all my hopes, I looked up at the mass of sighs and stars in the night sky and laid myself open for the first time to the Benin 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. For the final consummation and for me to feel less lonely, 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 (Camus, 1988: 69).

Throughout the novel, Meursault gradually moves toward the realization of the world's indifference, but he does not fully hold it only after his argument with the chaplain at the end of the novel. He understands the indifference between him and his world. He believes after his death that he will be of no importance. Believing in the inevitability of death, Meursault does not care whether he dies by execution or naturally after being an old man. This understanding



makes him leave his dream of escaping execution and tries to find a lawful request. He considers the illusory hopes that worried his thinking before have no meaning for not creating untrue sense that one can avoid death.

Meursault realizes that his hope for continued life has been a weight. His release from this untrue hope means he is free to live life and his remaining days as they are.

The Chaplin knew the game well too, I could tell right away: his gaze never faltered. And his voice didn't falter, either, when he said, 'Have you no hope at all? And do you really live with the thought that when you die, you die, and nothing remains?' Yes, I said (Camus, 1988: 75). Meursault concentrates on worldly things only and nothing else since he believes that man's existence in life is of no meaning or order as well. He concentrates on his physical relationship with Marie, on the weather and on other physical elements that surrounded him. One important example is the heat during the funeral procession that causes him great pain more than the thought of burning his mother. Another example is the sun on the beach torments him severely that during his trial he identifies his suffering under the sun as the reason that caused him to kill an Arab. In addition, his style of narration reveals his interest in physical. He always used brief and simple description in discussing subjects like nature or weather (Brombert: 131).

From Meursault's viewpoint, the world is devoid of any meaning, continually not only refuses other characters' endeavors to create logic but discards both spiritual and worldly determinations for finding sense as he only believes in this life and physical experience. It is obvious that any effort to engage Meursault in secular life is useless as he refuses all submitted offers. One of them is his boss' offer to give him a position in Paris. The boss expects that Meursault will be happy but on the contrary, Meursault shows no ambition saying; "I had lots of ambitions...But when I had to give up my studies I learned very quickly that none of it really mattered" (Camus, 1988: 79). Even when Marie asks him whether he likes to marry her, she expects his acceptance but he shows his indifferent towards this subject and thinks "it didn't mean anything" (Camus, 1988: 81). He does not have meaningful attachment to her. In addition during his trial, Meursault is confused by the futility of the justice system trying to enforce rational and meaningful structure. Thus, he describes the guilty judgment as self-important.

Meursault's insisting on life's nothingness upsets the people who try to change his thinking in order to be like them. But he used to say "Do you want my life to be meaningless?" (Camus, 1988: 86). This emphasizes the emptiness of his heart that to be "an abyss threatening to swallow up society and casting Meursault as a threat to social order"(Camus, 1988: 93). Moreover, the strain between his feeling of life's nothingness and others insistent to impose life's meaning reveals Camus's own philosophy of life's absurdity.

Man wants understanding life and the world, but he "stands face to face with the irrational; he desires reason, but this world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said...what is



absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (Camus, 1960: 21-28). Due to the absurdity of the world, man must admit that any endeavor to find meaning in this world is useless, so he has no other choice but to admit the world's irrelevance. Therefore, only forthcoming death makes Meursault recognize life's meaning. Despite the refusal of important meaning's belief, Meursault's execution gives him wish for living that reverses specified aim of existence "level-headed", seeing life and death as same promises.

Man seeks meaning and purpose in this world which of no response, silent and indifferent to his demands. Consequently, the feeling of absurdity makes him stranger not only to himself but to the world as Camus observes (1960:6). William Barrett (1990: 22) believes that man's existence is full of uneasiness and unhappiness that assurances only a grave. Accordingly man's existence is nothing more than a meaningless and momentary.

Meursault is regarded as a mirror reflecting the dreadful truth of society. He can be examined as a conscious subject both physically and psychologically. Exercising complete freedom makes him accept the values and standards of society. This is shown when he borrows a black tie and armband from his friend to attend his mother's funeral and when he accepts to marry Marie though he does not believe in traditional notion of marriage. These two acts reveal his physical and psychological consciousness of existence over any social standards stating:

I'm very fond of white coffee, so I accepted and he came back a few minutes later with a tray. I drank. I then wanted cigarette. But I hesitated because I didn't know if I could smoke in front mother. I thought it over, it really didn't matter. I offered the caretaker a cigarette and we smoked (Camus, 1988: 14).

This speech shows his feelings of existence over the essence as such behavior is shown in the funeral against the essence of society. For Camus, life must be lived through suffering and challenging. So through the Meursault's character, Camus mirrors the conflict in term of his existence and essence of society. Despite of his psychological freedom, Meursault cannot exercise it under social realities in the trial as social essence stands against his liberty and feeling. We find that the justice system is not absorbed in his crime whereas judicial system is unfair, considering him as a danger based on unusual qualities. It is clear that because of his non- conformism he is executed. Abraham Sagi (2002: 15) observes that Meursault lives in a complete absurdity because of his society that affects him greatly and turns him to alienation.



The sense of agony, the fear of nothingness and the loss of faith in all existing and external structures or essences of society turn him to alienation.

At the last moment of his life, Meursault realizes the meaning of life and expresses his feeling by saying; "Finding it so much like myself, in fact so fraternal, I realized that I'd been happy and that I was still happy" (Camus, 1988: 117). This speech suggests as Maher (1998: 276-281) observes that Meursault is often like to express his feelings towards many things around him such as, the affection for his mother, the loving memories of Marie and most important is the feeling to live life full of freedom. This reveals that he is not indifferent to life and the world, on the contrary "the universe is indifferent to his fate, which life will carry on after he has gone" (Camus, 1988:280).

The hopeless longing for meaningful world leads Camus to shed light on suicide's issue; "Does the absurd dictate death? Should man continue living in an inherently meaningless universe?" (Camus, 1960: 9) he asks. But according to Camus, man must face the absurd and not to be disillusioned by it in order to understand his existence. Moreover, man should overcome the alienation and life's absurdity as purpose does not resolute them on the contrary, it hides the absurd and truth of man's reality. Hence, absurdity becomes vague that alienates man from the world (Camus, 1960:11).

Meursault works as an employee in a private farm makes him enjoys nature but he does not have many friends. The lack of friendship makes him alienated from people. The sense of alienation affects him passively and makes him behave in unnatural way. Especially in the first part during his mother's funeral, he even not looks at her face, instead he starts to smoke and drink white coffee. Also Meursault's cruel act by killing an Arab accidentally that caused his execution in public. Despite of the world's beauty, its injustice creates cruelty. Hence, Camus concludes that "man's purpose is vain and there is nothing beyond it" (1960: 9) and admits that "the world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational"(14). Man lives "longing for clarity, happiness and meaning"(28).

Hossain, Al Mamun (2012:55) sheds light on the conflict between man and the society concentrating on how the society judges man based on his personality and how the imposition of social order limits man's liberty in the realest sense. Mamun discusses Meursault's



ambiguous and imperceptible practices against the society in term of his relation with the people and society. The relation that exploits man in many ways and makes him alienated (59).

Ashkan Shobeiri (2013: 820) discusses the concept of absurdity in term of Meursault 's happy attitude towards the existence' absurdity of both life and death; "Meursault's achievement of happiness is nether transcendent nor sensual; it is, in reality, an affirmation of the dignity and value of life" (838). Shobeiri also shows the progressive development in Meursault's character from being an undecided absurd man to be a happy absurd one, a symbol for modern man who "is neither a stranger to the world nor to himself though he is a stranger to the world of those who have deluded themselves into believing in a transcendent spiritual union between people" (844). Hence, in such a world, Meursault is regarded as "a victim of society, absurd happy man, scapegoat of modern civilization"(p.850) as society is managed by definite principles and motives in time the realization of freedom obsessed him. For Meursault social institutions are worthless so he chooses natural human relations with others and be away from any kind of social relations. As a matter of fact, his alienation causes his failure to understand other people of society. Even his lawyer cannot understand him when he explained himself:

I'd have liked to have kept him back and explained to him that I wanted to be friends with, not so that he'd defend me better, but, so to speak, in natural way. The main thing was, I could tell that I made him feel uncomfortable. He didn't understand me and he rather held it against me. I wanted to assure him that I was just like everyone else, exactly like couldn't be bothered (Camus, 1988: 65-66).

Here, Meursault confirms that the unexamined life is worth living, and affirms that life is absurd. Under the influence of the burning hot sun, Meursault returns to the site of the ambush and is fascinated into shooting the Arab five times. He claims that "the sun's gleam off of the Arab's knife and the beating pressure of the boiling sun causes him to shot the Arab" (Camus, 1988: 77). The waiting for his execution makes him realize that nothing existed other than simple pleasure in nature.

To reveal the indifference of the world towards man's life, Camus used many symbols such as the sun's heated intensity without regard for physical relief or peace of mind represents the overall indifference that the world has for man. Accordingly, man's life is basically meaningless and of no order to be searched for as Meursault observes that:

The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward. I knew that it was stupid, that I



wouldn't get the sun off me by stepping forward. But I took a step, one step, forward (Camus, 1988: 98).

Camus emphasizes that the uncertainty not only dismiss man from the meaningless life but everything; stating:

What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject—this is what counts..... I can refute everything in the world around me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos..... I do not know if this world has a meaning which transcends it. But I do know that, if such a meaning exists, I do not know it and that it is impossible for me just now to know it (Camus, 1960: 38).

When Meursault is accused of being guilty, he says nothing but that the murder of the Arab is meaningless of no personal intention; a truth that the court refused.

It is obvious that the word stranger has a two-fold meaning that is paralleled with the Christ and antichrist figures. Christ-like figures usually are strangers to the society and traditional ways of the people. Meursault is a stranger to society and to life where no one can recognize him so he represents the antichrist character. Meursault is aware of the absurdity in life, but he cannot understand society which pushes him to condemn it. And despite of his unjustified execution, he keeps determined until the end of his life to understand the truth.

In this novel, Camus has the capability to "motivate man to evaluate the significance in his life. Man struggles with Meursault as he is condemned and absurdly isolated, but does man empathize with his character " (Sagi: 10). Man's nature is to find meaning in life, therefore Meursault is considered as a lesson to man who faces the absurd conditions in life with determination of hope. Man must be satisfied to live his life and not search for superior meaning. Meursault's alienation makes him reach a "tranquil homeland where death itself is a happy silence" (King: 56). Meursault's absence of resolution is directly associated with uselessness as Brombert illustrates that to Meursault "nothing has meaning, there being no aim. Both Meursault and the world are indifferent to his existence, to the events and activities of his life"(120). Meursault wants to live for the sake of life and not for other thing but his death proves the absurdity of life. In the prison he becomes a completely desperate man as he is faced with the indifference of the world. Alienated man is loneliness to the world and in revolt to face its absurdity.

Conclusion:



Absurdism is the school of thought which contends that the world has no meaning but the absence of meaning never prevent man from living his life freely. Albert Camus main concern is to find meaning in life. During his lifetime, he realizes the insignificance of the world and the dreadful reality that man's life is meaningless and useless; man's life is of profound absurdity. For Camus, nature can offer both beauty and absurd. His philosophy of life is that man has to live each day as if next will not come. Therefore, he believes that man must insist to find meaning in life and in nature as well; struggling to achieve it.

In *The Stranger*, Camus portrays his main character Meursault as blindly wanders through life for believing that is absurd, aimless, meaningless and useless. The true meaning in life is completely absent. Meursault cannot show his sorrow for killing the Arab randomly, meaning that life helixes effortless. In addition, he also forgets his mother's age. In fact, the absurdity of life affects man's behavior and thoughts that makes him alienated from himself, his close people and the world. When Meursault knows that he will spend all his life in jail and eventually will die, he recognizes that death is unavoidable. For him this is the only true thing in life, feeling happy that his life will be ended sooner or later.

The absurdity of the world makes Meursault's words and actions of no meaning. He keeps silent giving no explanation about killing the Arab. It is obvious that Meursault's ambiguous views link to vainness of man's situation, incapability and hopeless fight to find out any determinate meaning in the exterior world. The absurdity of his life makes him never care about his death, his mother's death or any other one as man after his death will be forgotten by everyone.

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