

ABSURDITY AND HOPE IN ALBERT CAMUS

Swarupananda Chatterjee
M.A., M. Phil
RabindraBharati University
Calcutta, West Bengal

In world literature a wide range of writers have addressed the absurd, everyone with his or her own elucidation of what the absurd is and what constitutes its ponderosity. For instance, Sartre recognizes the absurdity of individual experience, Kafka similarly emphasizes the absurdity of human moments, and Kierkegaard interprets that the absurdity of certain religious truths prevent us from reaching God rationally. Albert Camus, the French – Algerian philosopher, novelist and playwright, was a friend of Jean Paul Sartre, until their ethical separation, and wrote several works with existential themes like *The Rebel*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *Summer of Algiers*. Like many others, Camus regretted the existentialist label and wanted his writings to be considered with facing the absurd. Not only that, like a predecessor of post modernism he also regretted the continual label to him as a “philosopher of the absurd”. Yet in his writings, the concept of absurdity predominates, though *The Myth of Sisyphus* is his chief work on the subject, his three famous novels – *The Stranger*, *The Plague* and *The Fall* are evidently tinged with the absurd.

In the three novels Camus expresses absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a divorce between the two ideals of men. Here I will focus on the three absurd men of these three novels – Meursault (*l’Etranger*), Clamence (*La Chute*) and Dr. Rieux (*La Peste*) and my chief concern is to show how they break the fundamental principles or rules or ideals of society by their counter discourse and yet how they are devoted to the truth. Finally their sail reach the shore after the realization of the truth of the absurdity in human existence, that is, man’s futile attempt to find an inherent meaning in his living whereas no such meaning does exist actually. Hence, their understanding of ‘existence Precedes essence’.

Camus believed there was no God, and he struggled with the consequences of that premise, that is, if there is no after life and life is meaningless, is it worth living? The first line of *The Myth of Sisyphus* cuts right to this point, stating, ‘There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide’ (11) what strikes Camus as absurd is mankind’s perpetual hope for an afterlife, or immortality, in spite of man’s certain knowledge that death is inevitable. Near the end of his essay, Camus points to Sisyphus as the ultimate absurd hero, in which the mythical Greek figure keeps pushing the rock uphill again and again, though its rolling back down is a foregone conclusion, and Sisyphus himself is aware of this never changing consequence and his life’s fate. Camus concentrates most on that instant before Sisyphus heads back down the hill and the last line of the essay claims that ‘one must imagine Sisyphus happy’. (111) Thus, Camus champions the person who is wholly aware of his or her absurd plight, but who none the less chooses not only to live, but to seek out happiness and embrace life, all of it good and bad.

The Stranger aligns itself with this idea focusing on an Algerian French man Meursault, who ambivalently attends his mother's funeral, has a love affair, shoots and kills a man (who had stabbed Raymond, Meursault's friend) on the beach, and finds himself standing trial, more for not properly mourning his mother – thus not acting in accordance to society's norms and laws (discourse) – rather than for the murder itself. Germaine Bree noted, Camus' readers and critics "shared his concern with the ambient problems, political, ethical, or philosophical," and so "the terrain covered by critical studies of Camus' work is consequently very broad, and often reflects the strains and stresses of a particular historical moment" (2). The cold detachment of the book's (The Stranger) first sentence, in fact, jars the readers profoundly: "Maman died today. Or yesterday may be, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That does not mean anything. May be it was yesterday" (3). This opening indicates immediately that the world and perspective we are entering is not emotionally familiar; it is that of an outsider of this social world.

Still the question of judgment and morality looms large in The Stranger. We can see a child in Meursault as in his use of the child's word 'Maman' instead of the adult's 'Mother'. It indicates "the curious feeling the son has for his mother which constitutes all his sensibility" (Camus' Notebooks 25). Now if the child is left alone, his solitude quickly becomes unbearable but pride prevents him from venturing meekly to the family circle what can he do, then, to re-establish contact with the outside world? He must commit an action that will force the attention of the adults but that will not be interpreted as abject surrender, a punishable action, Camus thus leads readers to feel that Meursault, though technically a murderer, is the victim and that the bases for his sentencing are out of sync with reality, and in this way Camus appears to condemn judgment of any kind, claiming that no one in a Godless world has the authority to do so. In this context famous writer Jenn McKee passes an excellent comment, "Thus, again in this Godless world the pretence of being a judge is rendered meaningless: in such a context, human judges can have no power over nature" (67). All actions are thus rendered equal importance and impact: washing hands, eating an apple, shooting a man. For without religion and God, the former basis of our morality, what do our actions mean, after all?

In the first stage of his life, Camus' another protagonist of The Fall Jean Baptiste Clamence is motivated with bad faith – bad faith of the kind that seems to be describing when he talks about his discovery that modesty helped him to shine, humility to triumph and virtue to oppress. Obsessed with judgment and enslavement, Clamence is an existentialist, too, in the anguish that comes with his perception of the human struggling and its absurdity.

At the end of this book, each reader will have to fathom the seriousness of Clamence's sins. Definitely they are not too awesome. Surely we are all guilty of actions almost as bad, if not worse? And exactly that is what Clamence wants us to meditate: the confession of this judge-penitent [he himself says, "As it happens, I'm not a doctor. If you want to know, I was a lawyer before I came here. Now I'm a judge penitent." (The Fall 6)] may be in reality an allegation of us. The name of the central character, Jean Baptiste Clamence identifies him as John the Baptist. The Biblical saint John plays a 'double and ambivalent role: he generally washes away sins, but he puts on Christ the burden of the sins of all mankind while baptizing him: "behold the Lamb of the God which taketh away the sin of the world".¹ but the water that, in the Bible, washes away sin, has a central but completely different symbolic role in The Fall. We find it throughout the text: in the rain and the canals of Amsterdam, of the bank of Siene, where two remarkable experiences leave Clamence questioning his own life, in the desert where water has been refused

to a dying man by him. Water, in this topsy-turvy, is not a purifying element but one which causes sins.

The inferno that Clamence dwells is somewhere as common as the bourgeois city of Amsterdam, it can be anywhere and everywhere, a microcosm of the place where we all live. At its center, we have Clamence-Sartre, concerned with the search for absolute liberty, and Clamence-Camus, obsessed with authenticity. We all strive for these absolutes that we can never attain in the aimless, meaningless world.

There is no comfort in *The Fall*, no road for the happy life, no hope for the truth, only an acceptance of sterilities and futilities. We can observe it as the lament of frustration and disillusionment of a generation emerging from the Second World War into a world that fell through to deliver its commitment of equality and fraternity but showering only absurdity.

According to Camus, 'the Absurd' is the essential concept and the first truth as death is the only truth in life. In his masterly crafted novel *The Plague*, plague is an undeniable part of Oran's life, just like death was always an imminent factor in *The Stranger*. Here plague is ubiquitous. Camus here once again puts the blasphemous questions regarding the moral concepts justifying humanity and human suffering within a religious framework.

Oran islanders cannot acknowledge the fact that the rats pose a serious health risk to human beings. Maybe they cannot understand. So they resort to rationalizing the phenomenon with inept argument. M. Michel declares that pranksters dismounted the corpse of the rats in the building where he works. Asthma patient of Dr. Rieux states that hunger drove the rats out into the open to die. Both of these rational responses are actually fully irrational. Hunger is not the proper reason of the blood spurting from the rats' muzzles. M. Michel's illustration cannot justify why there are hundreds of dead rats in the buildings all over the city.

Camus' use of the concept of 'freedom' in *The Plague* consist the novel's central irony. Under the threat of plague when the city is totally quarantined, the citizens of Oran transformed into the prisoners of the plague. But in reality, before the plague also they were never 'free'. They actually were unconsciously enslaved by their habitual discourses. Their alienation from their families, friends and lovers due to the quarantine made them fathom the intense of their love to their loved one. Otherwise they simply took them for granted. Realization comes after getting shocked.

When the murrain spreads in the city, major portions of citizens forsake their egoistic stance and join the anti-plague effort. They recognize this epidemic as a collective concern and this realization helps them rise above themselves. Thus they chose to rebel against death and suffering and from thence they began to exist because breaking away the city is just like yielding to the absurd death sentence which suppresses every human being. That is why they do not become weary. Rieux aptly said to Paneloux, "Weariness is kind of madness. And there are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt". (*The Plague* 218)

As usual the anti-plague effort becomes futile. Yet it must be acknowledged that the Oran-islanders involved in this struggle being completely aware of the result, that is, a never ending defeat. Every member of this anti-plague effort knows that the more they fight with this epidemic the more their chance of contracting plague will increase, but here they also perceive that if they do nothing at all, they will also be the victim of this pestilence. This perception makes the rebellion noble and meaningful. Actually this futile choice (between defeat and defeat, death and death) to fight and challenge has the meaning, has the ray of hope in time of hopelessness and only it can make the nation united. With this fruitless defiance against death the individual can define oneself.

Thus we realize here that Meursault, Clamence and Dr. Rieux – each of them is an absurd man yet existentialist because they began to believe that they are capable of giving their lives meaning. So scholars sometimes refer to the ‘Paradox of the Absurd’ while referring to ‘Camus’ Absurd’. The most meaningful action within the content of Camus’ this kind of absurd and existentialist philosophy is to choose to rebel – Meursault’ revolt against the fundamental social values; Dr. Rieux’s revolt against death and suffering; Clamence’s revolt against his bad faith – they rebel, therefore they exist and they always go too far, because that is where they will find their truth.

Note

John I: 29

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