

Confronting Absurdity in the Modern Perception of Suicide: A Study of Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus'

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Abstract

Suicide is basically personal or a subjective phenomenon. However, this issue has objectively drawn a world-wide attention. A thorough research in this area reveals that nobody dies or hastens to self-killing without any reason. It stems out of a cause which may either be personal, psychological or social. Taking this perspective of self-killing, in this article, I would deeply focus upon Albert Camus' philosophical responses and project the experience of nothingness and absurdity that would find their substantial expression by taking into consideration, his seminal work 'Le Mythe de Sisyphus' (The Myth of Sisyphus) published in 1942, where he outlines the several approaches to the absurd life and philosophic response of retaliating this angst of embracing the self to death. Thus, finding a new dimension of life, despite anguishes and mental traumas.

Key Words: Suicide, Absurd, Existentialism, Psychology, Modernism.

There are multiple reasons behind a suicide. Sometimes, a frustrated person, unable to find any meaning of life is tempted to commit suicide. This is purely a psychic matter. Even a drug addict or a neurotic comes under this category. It is often observed that a person suffering from a cancerous disease is depressed enough to commit suicide. People suffering from mental insanity or psychiatric problems are prone to this suicidal tendency. It is a common social phenomenon that economic constraints arising out of poverty, loan or insolvency drags the middle-class proletariat to self-killing. In the similar way, farmers committing suicide due to the burden of mounting unpaid loan is a common tragedy in the current society.

In the literary context, almost all Shakespearean tragic heroes commit suicide due to some noble reasons; it is due to this, that the dramas are labeled under the critical framework: 'death ennobles the Shakespearean tragic heroes'. However, in the contemporary context, this idea might be a little 'idealistic' or 'unrealistic'. Quite intriguingly, these kinds of multiple socio-psychological issues now pertain to an academic campus or educational institution

where the over ambitious Macbethian intellectuals themselves, sometimes fall into the pit of 'suicidal cauldron'.

Furthermore, suicide or prevention of suicide has been now-a-days found to have cultural and ethnic roots. For example, some Muslim fundamentalists prefer their own suicide with a gruesome killing of innumerable innocents at the same time, thus becoming 'human bombs'. They consider it as a form of *Jihad*, while Hinduism, a part of *Sanatan Dharma* exclusively bans this instinct.

Suicide is most frequent in developed American society where the materialistic pursuit of life alienates the human beings from the real meanings of life. The American dream of becoming rich or affluent overnight is retaliated in a grievous suicide. How to become prosperous in day-to-day life is a ridiculous matter of suicide. This is vehemently reflected in Arthur Miller's Plays, which is connoted as the 'modern tragedy', after the death of 'real tragedy' with Shakespeare. Even the traumas of the colonized society or the post-colonial liberated societies force a victim towards self-killing. Practice of *sati* in colonial society is fanatically culture related and ruthlessly pushes an innocent widow for self-killing. Even the post-colonial liberated colonies bear the brunt of the then imperialistic regime and create an environment for torture or punishment which becomes ultimately the cause of self-killing.

Prior to this, the Western 'nihilism' or 'absurdity' – finding a greater meaning to life where human existence is a great question and an unanswerable silence to man's frequent query about the meaning of life, otherwise called 'existentialism', is another cause of suicide. In the similar context Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan point out the problems of existentialism: "Existentialisms are responses to recognizable diminishment in the self-image of persons caused by social or political rearrangements or ruptures" (1).

Hence, it is logically clear that no one commits suicide without a solid reason. Cause of suicide is multi-angled. Thus, cause of suicide is very subtle and delicate to deal with. Sometimes, the confession notes of suicide collected posthumously makes the reason obvious, but it is a baffling crime that needs a thorough study. It is no denying the fact that suicide is a burning world-wide enigma and a social malady that needs thorough attention and a befitting solution to overcome this 'end-game'.

Coming to the crux of the matter, the method to be employed in this study is purely qualitative, where Albert Camus' philosophical responses would be taken up quite seriously. In this context, the experience of nothingness and absurdity would find their substantial expression taking into consideration, his seminal work 'Le Mythe de Sisphe' (The Myth of Sisyphus) published in 1942, where he outlines the several approaches to the absurd life and philosophic response of retaliating this angst. Camus' approach is the reconfiguration of Greek Mythology. In his non-fictional essay, he does not exploit by reiterating the story of Sisyphus, rather Sisyphus is utilized as an allusive metaphor to throw light on this universal predicament. According to him, absurdity is the unreasonable silence of the universe, a sense of nothingness or futility, all compact together drives a man towards an act of suicide.

The question that arises out of this negotiation between the social and psychological dimension of human mind is: whether the realization of absurd, a temptation towards suicide? Camus strongly refutes this interrogation and equips an individual with a rational deliberation to revolt the urge of suicide by crushing with an inbuilt potentiality. In the old story of Sisyphus, an unending toil of lifting a load of stone up to the mountain and its usual fall towards the bottom is portrayed in a dramatic way. Sisyphus rejoices in this act of incessant toil, rather than compromising with submitting to suicide. Camus concludes the essay "The Struggle itself ... is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." ('The Myth of Sisyphus' 111).

Suicide is often linked with the meaning of life. Many people die because they think that life is not worth living. Hence, there is a close connection between individual thought and suicide. A man thinks that human life is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose. The world is full of irrationals. These irrationals haunt him in every aspect of life. He feels like a stranger or outsider. Camus in this context logically vindicates:

Man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of the lost home or the hope of the Promised Land. This divorce between man and his life ... is properly the feeling of absurdity. (13)

Absurdity comes out of a contradiction. The fundamental human need is to find the meaning to life but there is an 'unreasonable silence' of the universe in response. The man tries to find reason and unity in the universe and on the other hand, the universe gives him nothing but mute and meaninglessness. Logically, absurd does not exist either in man or in the universe, but in the confrontation between the two. This realization of absurdity does not require suicide. It, rather, demands 'revolt', in the language of Camus. If we try to compromise with these double contradictions, it is apt to confront absurdity. Living with this conflict is a way of overcoming this problem of absurdity. Camus' 'Sisyphus' is a mythical stature. He knows that this life has no meaning. He is condemned to take the load of stone on his shoulder to the top of mountain. But the stone falls down on reaching the mountain-top. The irony is that he is sure of this fate. Despite this, he does not refrain from this practice. He takes the load of stone to the mountain-top incessantly. To an ordinary eye, it seems boring and useless. But he always resumes the same work with a sense of resignation. He never thinks of committing suicide rather hopeful, tries to overcome it with a spirit of retaliation.

As long as man is alive, he will be confronting this absurdity. Sometimes, this utterly absurd must be haunting him with an unresolved suicidal question. As man is firmly rooted to this kind of social system where it brews a sense of nothingness. It does not mean he has to yield to this situation simply by committing suicide. He must try his utmost to weave out a sensible solution of overcoming the situation. The point is to live with resilience and struggle. 'Influence' by the existential philosophers namely, Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Fiendish Nietzsche, Jaspers and Chestov is interpreted differently. Camus argues that life is

essentially meaningless, although human beings try to impose order on existence and find out answers to unanswerable questions. Jasper claims to find transcendence by means of illogical leap, just at the point where reason breaks down, Chestov asserts that the absurd is God. We need God only to help with impossible and incomprehensible. Kierkegaard is famous for that 'leap of faith' where he equates God with irrationals. Husserl is a complicated phenomenologist who 'seems to embrace the absurd'. Each one of these existential philosophers tries to resolve the conflict between human reason and an irrational universe one way or other. They all refuse the human reason and equate irrational universe with God. All these existential philosophers yield to the state of absurdity by a sense of transcendence. This way they all commit philosophical suicide. Camus is not refuting these thinkers; rather he substantiates the reason why their thinking is unsatisfying.

It is important to note that Camus does not deny the existence of God or that there is some inherent meaning or purpose behind everything. To him, the Greek legend of Sisyphus is a metaphor for the individual's unending struggle against the absurdity of life. According Camus, first an individual must do is to accept the fact of this absurdity. If for Sisyphus, suicide is not a welcoming response to stop this unending toil, the only alternative is to struggle by rejoining in the act of lifting the boulder up the hill. Camus holds his argument that cheerful acceptance of that struggle against defeat, the individual gains definition and identity. Camus asserts that the absurd is a fundamental truth. This is too our fundamental relationship with the world.

Acceptance of this absurdity means reconciling with the contradiction between the desire of human reason and the unreasonable world. This acceptance is otherwise the rejection of suicide. Without man, the absurd cannot exist. This kind of organic interdependence must exist; accordingly, the contradiction must too exist. This way, reason and its limits must be acknowledged. However, the absurd can never be permanently accepted, it requires constant confrontation, constant revolt. Travis Bogard and William Oliver rightly: "All action, all values, all hope is absurd because it is imperfect, transitory or illusory". (11)

Nothingness or futility seems to be the only reality of this life. All human activities sound nonsense. Thus, it amounts to doing nothing. This sense of nothingness had had its realistic presentation in the theatre of absurd. Absurd playwrights of 1950s of Europe agreed with the Existential Philosopher Albert Camus's philosophical expostulation in his essay 'Le Mythe de Sisyphe'(1942) that human situation is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose. Samuel Beckett, the Irish playwright, dramatizes this gruesome absurdity through two tramps – Estragon and Vladimir in his play *Waiting For Godot* (1952). They are without any certainty whom they are waiting. They are waiting for Godot, but they exactly don't know who this 'Godot' is whether He will come or not. In the end of every act someone comes and informs that Godot will not come today. Their patient waiting for Godot is a great existential question and beyond certain limit, the hope of being united with Godot disappears. It becomes a hope against hope. They ultimately decide to commit suicide. Even, they don't come out successful

in their attempt to commit suicide. Thus, the play has the resonance of utter absurdity with the dialogue of Estragon: “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It’s awful.” (41)

It thus, generates a feeling that a man is an utter failure in this world. He can no longer be away from this state of absurdity. It haunts him in every moment that he is a part of it. It results an anxiety in his mind which leads him to anguish and depression. He thinks the only way of escaping from this anxiety is an invitation to suicide. It ultimately proves the collapse of his strength of mind. This absurdity or futility of life is as permanent as the light and dark. What Albert Camus realizes during World War-II and reflects it in his works, Shakespeare has envisioned it much earlier in 16th century, around 400 years back during the heyday of Elizabethan World. In his greatest tragedy *Macbeth*, Macbeth after committing series of murders to fulfill his over ambition has been exhausted and confronted with this greater reality of this nothingness and says: ‘Life is a tale told by an Idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing’.

Sisyphus of Greek mythology in this context is exemplary. He is praised only for his tenacity of hope and defeating suicide. His idea about the meaning of life is all absurd and illusory. Absurd is always the contrary of hope. Here, we can argue that one might commit suicide under certain constraints. But the important thing is that one must die un-reconciled. In this limited universe, what is important is not best living but living to the utmost – A long life may give one large experience but man’s prime energy is his self-killing which brings a full-stop to a sustained experience and maturity of life.

Man is the only creature who has a sense of reason. But his reason is not sufficient to solve the labyrinthine intricacies of life. His reason fails to study the subtlety of life. Finally, his reason yields to the confounding situations of life. He ultimately loses his self-confidence nearest to self-murder. Thus, the best man is he who alone solves the problem of life and it is cowardly to commit suicide.

The above things logically carry forward suicide not only comes out of personal sorrows or mental anxiety, but out of an awareness of absurdity of existence. So long a man lives the earth, these things will remain here. His due approach to life is to gather energy and courage to overcome these odds of life. Camus on this life confirms that suicide is mere an existential problem. His exploitation of Sisyphus legend is knowledge for entire mankind. If he would have committed suicide on the way of steadfast determination of repeating the same thing for ever, his life would have ceased to be the matter of much scholarly discussion. Finally, we can say that whatever difficulties life may pursue, we are to confront it with utmost conviction. We may not believe in God, but it has no logic to commit suicide.

Camus precisely means to say that absurd is our fundamental relationship with the world. It is essentially a conflict, we demand meaning, but the universe gives us nothing. This brings about dissatisfaction in our life, which is fundamental to absurd. If there is any kind of attempt to resolve this dissatisfaction, this is equally an attempt to escape from absurdity. Camus complains that each of these four philosophers in their own attempt tries to escape

from absurdity. Jaspers, Chester and Kierkegaard reject the reason and purpose in the world. They welcome the idea that the world is absurd and find the existence of God in this absurd. They avoid the question that seems to be fundamental to Camus: do we need to assert that there is something more in order to live. Camus' problems is a hypothetical one: if there is nothing more than rational humans in irrational universe, can we live with the absurdity of that situation?

The two basic facts of human existence are our need for reasons and the silence of the universe. There may be a meaning to life but there is no sure way of knowing what this meaning is. The absurd is the conflict created between human reason and an unreasonable universe. The utmost attempt to live with absurdity results: revolts, freedom and passion. Thus, it firmly counters the notion of suicide and on the contrary, advises living life to its fullest amidst absurdity. The primary thing we must be aware of that we are reasonable human beings condemned to live a temporary life in an unreasonable world and then to die. Equally, we must be conscious of our inherent conflict between our desire and reality. Sisyphus' revolt against this absurdity or meaningless repetition of the same thing is his revolt with every breath against the notion that he must die. Suicide, like hope, may be a kind of alternative step to escape this absurdity, but this is an outright defeat.

We generally live with the idea of freedom – that is, we are free to make our own decisions and define ourselves by our actions, and then we move towards our fixed goals. We can create our identity by our own choice of actions. This idea of freedom is metaphysical we can choose our own course. The absurd man has the absolute metaphysical freedom to reject everything. In this regard Mersault in *The Outsider* could be referred as a metaphor for absurdity. On the day of his mother's death, he is free from all kinds of preconceptions or prejudices. He is completely a free man. He does and says whatever his freedom of mind or action directs. Like an absurd man, he abandons all notion of values.

There is no meaning or purpose what we do. There is no reason for doing one thing rather than another. We cannot apply any standard of quality to our experience, rather than standard of quantity to our experience. Camus does not mean a long life but the passion of a full life. Sisyphus is determined to live in the present by rejecting suicide, not by accepting suicide.

Revolt is supposed to be the primary essence of human existence. He must live in 'revolt' without any of success. To him, revolt is the unending state of conflict which characterizes an absurd man. He must not wish to find unity and order in the society which is well-nigh impossible. This concept of revolt without the hope of achieving success largely defines an absurd man and characterizes the myth of Sisyphus. This actually constitutes the theme of the essay and Sisyphus is Camus' ideal absurd hero. This myth is actually dramatized in his fiction *The Outsider* where Mersault is the present day ideal absurd hero.

Freedom is another theme employed in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This implies a free from cosmic or metaphysical restraints such as God or religious taboos or physical laws. Camus interrogates and debates too can we do and think what we wish to do on earth. The

opposite of freedom is that a man is repressed by Government or the unchanging earthly influences. The absurd man is free in this sense because he has given up the idea that life has any meaning or any value. He does not feel being restricted by any kind or binding social laws or religious taboos. He is free from any kind of constraints of thought that we usually conform to in our day-to-day living. He acts freely in response to reason, not according to a blind impulse.

The absurd man is not concerned with the future, nor preoccupied with the past. The present seems to be much more intense and he must live with a passion. The absurd man does not hope to achieve more than this life has actually given him. All his actions are limited only to this world, not a world beyond. The absurd man is amoral, not immoral. Either the morality comes from God or it is invented by humans. The absurd man does not believe in God and he has no justification of proving the existence of God. He is guided by his own integrity and his integrity is not controlled by certain moral code. As he is free from morality, he is free from the bites of guilt or wrong-doing. Camus describes the absurd man as ‘innocent’.

His first example of the absurd man is the famous seducer or womanizer, Don Juan. He changes his bed from woman to woman, with the same skill or maneuver. He never keeps a personal relationship with one woman. He is busy of meeting the second one as his next victory. Here Camus dismisses all blemishes upon Don Juan in his context of absurd man as free man. On the contrary, Camus portrays Don Juan as man who lives with the passionate intensity of the present moment. He lives without any hope of metaphysical elevation in life. He understands the meaninglessness of his seductions. He is not covetous of true love, but he wants to experience the frequent shifting of bed from woman to woman. He is not bitten by any conscience that he is doing wrong. He is interested in quantity, not in quality. Don Juan does not seduce woman in the hope of getting love. He seduces for the joy of seducing. He has understood that this life is meaningless and has no significance beyond the consequences in this life. It is a paradox in the matrix of Christian ideology that he is sinful, but he is innocent as per his own norms. The Christian life focuses upon the inherent struggle between sin and guilt. However, the innocence of the absurd man negates any kind of guilt or sin. He leads a life that reciprocates with interests and desire. He is not constrained by any moral code – “What I like is good and what I dislike is bad.” In Camus’ philosophy of absurd, an absurd man is no more harmful than an ordinary person. Camus’ concept of absurd man in many ways is similar to Nietzsche’s concept of ‘free spirit’.

His first Play *Caligula* appeared in 1939 and dramatizes the theme of absurd. Camus relies more on the life of an actor than a writer. An actor with the somebody has expressed the innumerable emotions or feelings of any other man on earth. A writer might think of posterity or eternity, but who has seen the life beyond this limited span of life. The idea of playing a role is central to Camus’ ideal of the absurd man. The absurd man has understood that this life is meaningless and whatever he does have no cosmic significance. Absurd life is consciously emulating a three-hour span of an actor’s life. This life is simply pretending or

mimicking the lives and passions of people, who are not truly living. Thus, it convinces that living the absurd life is the only way that we can truly live. An absurd life is characterized by revolt, freedom and passion. These three instinctive characters are found with an actor. He plays as many lives as possible in the limited span of life like an actor.

The passion of the absurd man is a matter of living in the present with the intensity of experience. An actor delivers the great passions of hundreds of different lives and compresses an enormous wealth of experience into a very short span of time.

The third example of the absurd man is the conqueror. The absurd man is drawn to rebellion and conquest because that brings about humanity's fullest potential. The seducer, the actor and the conqueror mingled together are three examples of an absurd man. Absurdity does not entail a certain style of life, rather a certain frame of mind. As a member of the French Resistance and written during the Second World War, Camus is more concerned in this myth about protest or rebellion. To an absurd man, all struggles are meaningless and no victory is also eternal, but the struggle without hope is really the life of an absurd.

Camus is primarily influenced by Nietzsche's concept of 'will to power' – that is, a will to assert our won independence and to impose our will upon others. 'Will to power' implies a brutish desire to subjugate and dominate others. Each brute person wants to rule and be ruled. Thus, he tries to master himself first rather than other people. He learns to overcome his animal instinct and to think and act independently. In such a case, he is both a ruler and ruled, creator and creature. Nietzsche calls this process of enriching one's life is 'self-overcoming'. Importance of rebel's struggle is not the victory over others, but it is a triumph over his own self. Victory is as meaningless to the conqueror as fame after death to the actor. Camus' own life can be equated with seducer and actor. However, his discussion of the conqueror is autobiographical. This mode of rebellion against a system is an outlet for self-expression and self-realization. The conqueror of Camus possesses three characteristics of the absurd man – revolt, freedom and passion. By rebelling, he revolts to accept the laws and orders imposed on him. He feels for his own freedom to act and think what he chooses. The absurd man's struggle focuses his potentiality on the present moment, on himself and on the people around him.

In the third part of essay, Camus examines artistic creation – fiction writing in particular as the epitome of the absurd life. The absurd man lives out a kind of mime in which he acts out his life. If the absurd life is considered as a mime, the author's act of creation in absurd play, or fiction or essay, is the greatest mime of all. The artist has invented an entire world that mimics our own. He does not hope to explain our life, but describes only it. The creative act of the artist epitomizes the revolt, freedom and passion of the absurd man. Our impulse to think and our impulse to create comes out of the fundamental contradictions of the absurdity of our lives.

Camus asks a question whether people use art to escape from the absurd to him, a philosopher works from within his system; whereas an artist creates from without. Both

works to build up a particular perspective on the world. Just as the absurd man cannot hope for transcendence, absurd art cannot promise transcendence. A good artist is equally good at living. He is vigilant about his nature of experience. Like a philosopher a good writer creates an entire world where he lives. He translates his experiences through images rather than reason because he prefers clear-cut delineation of the matters to remain true. An ordinary person is driven by hopes and ambitions. There are certain things in life that are worth-doing. The absurd man by opposite standard, means to say nothing really matters. The absurd man is free of illusions. To him, all our deeds, passions and thoughts are ultimately meaningless. At the same time, he has no other alternative, but to continue living. He is aware that he is acting out a role, while the ordinary man remains blissfully unaware of. Camus would appropriately agree with Shakespeare who says, ‘all the world is a stage and all the men and women merely players.’ Absurd man is aware that he is an actor, while the ordinary man thinks high of himself.

Much earlier Aristotle has said art imitates life. For this, he uses the word ‘mimesis’, where comes the word ‘mime’. Thus, it is true to say an absurd is a mime. Art is mimetic because it imitates life. Camus suggests that life is also mimetic because we are just actors on a stage, unconsciously playing out our own roles. We play out our roles that imitating a life that has no meaning. The absurd man behaves similarly. He is only pretending.

His style is what he recommends for fiction but *The Myth of Sisyphus* is not a fiction. Though it conveys thought in an artistic way, but it is an attempt at explaining ‘this is life’.

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