

**Absurd and its Lasting Legacy: A Study of the
Existential *Metamorphosis* and *The Outsider***

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“Books don’t change the world, people change the world, books only change people.”

- Mário Quintana

The world has witnessed a great deal of change due to the holy trinity of secular humanists including Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin during the last century. Despite their engagement with divergent fields, the trio influenced morality in an unprecedented way. Their works have doubtlessly revolutionized the masses from all walks of society. There is nothing hyperbolic in what Caplan and Jennings write about them: “[T]hese men and the theoretical movements they inspired have fundamentally reoriented our modern understanding of biological nature, society, and the human mind” (Caplan xi). The writers of existential and absurd works have not been able to stimulate the human psyche as successfully as these great masters. Nevertheless, these works fuel the sensations of an individual with a queer numbness and transport the being into another world. Despite being apparently meaningless, these works of absurd succeed in fascinating the intellect. The contrast between the absurd literature’s ostensible incoherence and its representation of life’s meaninglessness at a deeper level is probably its most captivating aspect. These pieces of existential, absurd literature have raised applause in the auditoriums in the ‘first world’ and in the ‘third world’ alike. Martin Esslin, in his seminal essay “The Theatre of the Absurd”, opines that the audiences applauded the absurd plays “fully aware that they could not understand what they meant” (Esslin 3). He goes on to declare in his essay that the absurd portrays the picture of our own world which is “a world without faith, meaning, and genuine freedom of will” (Esslin 6).

“Absurd” has been subjected to varied definitions. Sartre defines absurd as “[t]hat which is meaningless. Thus man’s existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification”. Camus criticizes Sartre for “thinking that life is tragic because it is wretched”, and argues that “the realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning”. Absurd, as per Albert Camus, is “absence of correspondence or congruity between the mind’s need for coherence and the incoherence of the world which the mind experiences” (Cruickshank 41). He saw it “as the confrontation between the human desire for a rational account of the world and a world that resisted any such explanation.” The term “[a]bsurd came to suggest more a widespread feeling of human malaise than of any tightly argued philosophical system” (Hughes 5).

Existentialism is a study of existence. When Christopher Panza and Gregory Gale write that “[e]xistentialism is the philosophy that makes life possible”, they imply that if all we want is to breathe, we need only oxygen, but if we want to live an authentic, rewarding and fulfilling life, we need “a healthy dose of existentialism” as well (Panza 9). The need of the philosophy of existentialism among other philosophies took birth out of the alienation which was ubiquitous among the philosophers during the post-Industrial revolution period when people had started feeling disconnected from the traditional belief system which they had otherwise subscribed to, generation after generation. Panza defines existentialism as the philosophy that involves questions and answers pertaining to the existence of humans.

Existentialism also implies that rationality is not the only or primary mode of human understanding and relating to the world. Thomas Flynn, in the preface of *A Very Short Introduction to Existentialism*, suggests that “[t]he mood [of existentialism] is one of enthusiasm, creativity, anguished self-analysis, and freedom” (Flynn, Preface i). Flynn writes that “[d]espite its claim to be novel and unprecedented, existentialism...” extends “...back at least to Socrates” (Flynn 1). Nevertheless existentialism came of age in the 19th century when Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche appeared on the scene, the former, a devout Christian and hence an exponent of Christian existentialism, and the latter, of atheist

existentialism. Other existentialists that can be appended to the list are Martin Heidegger and the great French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. Kierkegaard had the themes of “absurdity and forlornness of life, the importance and weight of choices, and the need to live passionately and authentically” (Panza 16), which became the reappearing motif in many existential texts. Nietzsche showed the world through his existentialist philosophy that when we tear down the falsehoods that we have inherited over time, the world shall appear before us in a way that we shall be able to love it. Heidegger formulized and systematized existentialism and Sartre, being a well-known figure in various fields of life, popularized existentialism among the people to whom it was most relevant. Indeed, it is the trio of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus that make existentialism accessible most as they are the writers of novels and plays, and are philosophers at the same time.

The recurrent themes of existential works are those of absurdity, rejection of meaning-giving narratives, alienation, anxiety, forlornness, responsibility, authenticity, individuality, and death. Many well-known authors experimented with these themes in the works they produced. Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karmazov* (1880), Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938) and *No Exit* (1943), Camus’s *The Plague* (1947) and *The Fall* (1956), Genet’s *The Maids* (1947), Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1949) and *Endgame* (1957), Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Adamov’s *Ping Pong* (1955) are some of the best-known existential works with many of these adapted numerous times for theatre and cinema.

The paper tries to reconnoitre how existentialism has influenced the psyche of the modern world. Theatre of the Absurd and existentialism have revamped the psychological theories on the basis of their fundamental notion that existence precedes essence. This paper seeks to explore the changes that such seminal works of existentialism have stimulated through depiction of disordered, irrational and meaningless existence where humans are practising the futile exercise of finding rational order in a world which is devoid of logical justice. The unusual thought process of the protagonists in the fictional works such as *The*

Outsider (1942) and *Metamorphosis* (1915), and the chain of events that occur due to their psychological stubbornness lead to further alienation of their already-estranged selves and finally to death. Camus's *The Outsider*, a tale of absurdity and death, dealing with the theme of loss of human identity, is arguably the most-widely read existential work being a part of the curriculum of countless schools and colleges across the globe and owing to the fact that it has been translated into more than forty languages.

In *The Outsider*, Meursault's inexplicable conscientiousness about his job and annoyance of his boss when he is away for two days to his mother's funeral defies logic since he is so detached from the fact that he has lost his mother. One looks at Meursault empathetically when he empathizes with his boss over a rather minor inconvenience after showing no emotion of a son who has just lost his mother or for his mother's friends at the home who are genuinely upset due to the loss. To him, nothing has really changed. His mother's burial is only one in a string of occurrences to which he remains indifferent. Bloom notices that "the narrator exist[s] in his own world, unconcerned with others' needs for answers and unconcerned with following accepted etiquette" (Bloom 22). The first name of Meursault is never unleashed throughout the novel making him "less of an individual" (Bloom 23).

Camus's characterization of Meursault is self-destructive probably because Camus himself was a child of the generation that had faced "the spectre of nuclear destruction" and "a death instinct [was] at work in the collective history of his times" (Hughes 1). Meursault is devoid of the emotion that is perceived fundamental among all humans. He does not behave in a manner expected from someone in mourning immediately after death of a close family member. What bewilders the reader is that Meursault does not act in a way one expects from the protagonist during the whole course of the novel and what makes the absurd fascinating is the unusual choice taken by the protagonist between two options in any situation. It seems unbecoming and unnatural for a son to make the matter of lights, which are turned on, more conspicuous than the visiting mourners after his mother's death. When he enters the mortuary where the dead body of his mother is placed, he is more concerned with the brightness of the

room rather than the coffin in which the body lies. Meursault is not even interested in having the last glimpse of his mother's body and stops the gatekeeper from uncovering her. Grief, agony and anguish are not cognizable in the behaviour of the protagonist who does not even cry upon his mother's death. One naturally recalls some fond memories of the deceased, and the truth that one would never encounter the deceased person again dampens one's eyes. Rather than reminiscing on the old memories of his mother, Meursault is occupied in noticing the peculiar sucking sound the old residents of the home made "inside their cheeks" (Camus 9) and a friend of his mother whom he did not know emitting "a little choking sobs" (Camus 8) which caused him irritation. His visit to Marengo seems to him more of a holiday and a break from his routine, and he enjoys being in the country after "ages". He relishes sipping "white" coffee and the idea of walk strikes his mind which would have been "agreeable", "if it hadn't been for Mother" (Camus 9). He notices the things one would on a leisure trip such as "hum of insects and the rustle of grass warming up" (Camus 11). He is indifferent and when the undertaker asks his mother's age, he replies, "Well, she was getting on" as he does not know her exact age. He rather feels relieved after reaching Algiers at the thrill of pleasure as he enters its "brightly lit streets" (Camus 13). The very next day of burying his mother, he spends time swimming with Marie and the same evening, he watches a comic flick with her and indulges himself into physical intimacy with her. As the weekend is over and he is back to his work, he contemplates that "nothing in [his] life had changed." (Camus 17)

An unusual deportment can be witnessed in his manner in all the situations he stumbles upon even later in the novel. His distaste for law enforcement officers when Raymond beats his girlfriend is stronger than Marie's desire for him to call police. He thinks of his mother when Salamano cries for his lost dog. When his boss offers him to work in Paris, he is not enchanted with the idea. He rather says that people's lives never really change. His insistence throughout the novel that actions do not matter fails him once he shoots the Arab. His actions such as his unusual behaviour after his mother's death, smoking a cigarette at that point of time, seeing a comic movie the day after his mother's funeral come back haunting during the proceedings of his trial. His responses are at times bizarre, his answers self-disparaging. For the most part, Meursault seems to be unaware of the full import

of the situation he finds himself in. In the courtroom, his responses do not correspond with the demands of the gravity of his situation. He is distanced from his own reflection and voice.

Henry Winthrop writes, “The novels of existentialist writers like Sartre and Camus are powerful testimonials to the suffering of men and women as a result of alienation in their lives” (Winthrop 289). Winthrop further says, “Existentialist writers... ...have sought to promote disalienation by translating into the language of mood and feeling...” (Winthrop 293). Just like Camus’s Meursault does not feel for the loss of his mother, the family members of Samsa do not comprehend gravity of his situation and after initial hiccups, they gradually start accepting his fate probably because they are too “preoccupied with their immediate troubles” (Kafka 37).

In *Metamorphosis*, when Gregor Samsa wakes up as a vermin on an otherwise ordinary day, more than his conversion to an insect, what bothers him is the question how his boss will trust his words. He is excluded from his family and indeed he is cut off from his own self. In the circumlocutions of his daily routine of getting up when the whole world is asleep, catching an early morning train to reach his workplace, working diligently with a few things on his mind – his sister’s admission at a music school, better prospects for his parents’ old age, betterment of his house and, lastly and least importantly, his personal life. He is so much into the thoughts of his family that he cannot see himself even in his own reveries. One can assume that the clock had already turned Gregor into a vermin much before he was actually metamorphosed into one. He “has procrastinated ... in regard to a decision about his unbearable situation at work” (Czermak 12). The reader “is left in doubt about the source of Gregor’s doom and the existence of enough personal guilt to warrant such a harsh verdict” (Czermak 12). The critics have found many similarities between Kafka and Gregor Samsa. After finishing “*The Metamorphosis*”, he had written in his diary: “I am living with my family, the dearest people, and yet I am more estranged from them than from a stranger.”

Rolleston finds that his “soul-shaking encounter with Kafka’s story” made him understand Aristotle’s *Poetics* in a much better way as “it was the text that had made [him]

identify with the emotions... .. of pity and fear” ascribed to tragedy by Aristotle (Rolleston 34), because the tragic horror may not lie in the protagonist’s turning into a bug as per the actual physical condition, but in “potentially a universal condition” of “isolation” and “horrendous disgust” (Rolleston 33). We come to know that no one is much happy with Gregor, either at office or at home. Despite his diligence at work and devotion towards his family, he has never been able to win confidence of his manager and love of his family. J. Brooks Bouson notices upon Gregor’s “initial confrontation with the office manager and his family”:

Gregor satisfies his desire for attention and his grandiose wish to exert magical power over others. For when he makes his first appearance as an insect, his father clenches his fist as if to strike, then falters and begins to sob; his mother collapses; the loathed office manager, obeying Gregor’s unconscious wish to get rid of him, slowly backs out of the room.” (Bloom 25)

Both these are testimonial works of fiction which resonate with the philosophical notion of absurdity that is characteristic of the writers of the existential angst. Readers can relate to the irrationality and the undeserved fate of the protagonists in both the works which reflect the essence of the myth of the condemned Sisyphus.

There is not now, and probably will never be, another purely existential philosopher of the magnitude of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre. Although we feel the philosophy is as relevant today as it ever was, its contribution to the human discussion has been made, and its major tenets were already developed in the classical works that fermented much excitement in its heyday. Interest in the classics of existentialism remains strong and their influence persists not merely in philosophy, but also in today’s culture, arts, and attitudes. Existentialism has always been a very personal philosophy that addresses the real human issues everyone faces. The measure of its impact isn’t the number of academic philosophers developing its theories, but the number of people who are meaningfully affected by its perspective.

The absurd has influenced literature, theatre and films alike. Albert Camus's novel was adapted into a film titled *The Stranger* in 1967 which was directed by Luchino Visconti and was released in Italy. The director Chris Swanton adapted *Metamorphosis* into an eponymous film in 2012. Some of the highly rated absurd films on IMDB include Room Service (1938), Murder by Death (1976), Blue (1993), Wild at Heart (1990), Black Moon (1975), Zelig (1983), Holy Motors (2012), Cold Souls (2009) and The Machinist (2004) among others.

Probably Margaret Atwood had rightly said in an interview that "books do not save world" but one can imply that even though books do not entirely change the world, yet these absurd and existential works have played an apt, however small part in evolution of the world. David Carroll, in his essay "Rethinking the Absurd", writes that:

[An Absurd artist's] joy is not in changing the world, overcoming the gap that at the same time distances him/her from and links him/her to life, and certainly not in any illusory transcendence of or escape from the human condition itself. Joy comes rather in withstanding and thus maintaining the gap or divorce constitutive of the Absurd. For if the Absurd is an irreducible given of human experience, if it is the climate in which thought takes its nourishment, then the choice cannot be between whether to affirm or deny the Absurd but rather whether to live or die of it. (Hughes 60)

So where does this legacy of the absurd and the existential take us? Are these works by the writers of the existential and absurd valid today? These works are highly creative and hardly fail to invoke questions and responses. The complexities of life are portrayed in these works in a way that these works are "difficult to interpret as reality itself" (Esslin 13) and the readers have to "attempt their own interpretation" (Esslin 13). Even though Camus had declared during the mid-1950s that "[absurd] was a phase" which has already been "worked beyond", yet the "tag has [still] persisted" hitherto (Hughes 5). The conflict in the mind of the reader while labeling the characters of the likes of Meursault and Samsa as "poor fool[s]", or

“innocent” (qtd. in Sartre 74) does not let the mind forget these stories and characters easily. The reason why people connect with the absurd even today might be the presence of an uncanny absence which subsumes lack of meaning, purpose and coherence in the lives of people across the world. David Carroll seconds a similar thought when he says that “the momentary feeling ordinary people sometimes have that life suddenly no longer makes sense” (Hughes 56).

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