

Existentialism in Modern Fiction: A Critical Review of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Outsider*

Tasmia Moslehuddin

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Manarat International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Email: tasmia@manarat.ac.bd

Keywords:

Absurdity,
free choice,
nihilistic despair,
alienation

Abstract: The research aims to address the existentialist values which arise in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus's *The Outsider*. Starting its journey in the 19th-century Existentialism focuses on an individual's existence, that the world is nothing but chaos, and a human being lives here as an isolated person, not as a social human being. Existentialism gives a person flexibility of choice and obligations to face the consequences. Being the 20th-century and mid-20th century writers Camus and Kafka got influenced by the philosophy of Existentialism and that has been credibly presented in their novels.

Introduction

Born in Algeria in 1913 Camus is known as an existentialist because his writings deal with meaninglessness and absurdity. Though Camus denied the concept of Existentialism, many critics have found the philosophy in his writings such as *The Outsider* which is a story of a man who leads a meaningless life and lives at present rejecting his relationship with his mother and girlfriend. Throughout the novel readers find the man to choose everything for his gratification.

On the other hand, Kafka was born in 1883 in Czechia and influenced by Nietzsche he thinks there is nothing hopeful in this world and human beings are entrapped in this chaotic world. His philosophy is realistically presented in his novel *The Metamorphosis* which is made on an absurd plot that the protagonist finds him to be transformed into a huge bug, after that his life and his surroundings get changed. Kafka's intention to focus on the meaningless life of human beings and the absurdity of the universe have been merged in the novel which is also an example of existentialism.

John Sutherland proposes in *A Little History of Literature*, is the paradoxical result of a type of literature that takes the meaninglessness of life as its premise.

*Sutherland introduces Kafka's literary mission to assert the pointlessness of literature, and discusses his influence on another writer who grappled constantly with the problems of existentialism and absurdism, Albert Camus.*¹

In the article *Joseph K. Claims Compensation: Franz Kafka's Legal Writings*, Robert M. Kaplan says:

*Kafka described the alienation and exclusion of the individual in the face of modern bureaucracy.*²

¹<http://blog.yalebooks.com/2015/09/16/the-absurdity-of-existence-franz-kafka-and-albert-camus/>

²https://file.scirp.org/Html/4-2810042_44439.htm

Austin Cline in an article talks about Camus:

*A principal theme in Camus' novels is the idea that human life is, objectively speaking, meaningless. This results in absurdity which can only be overcome by a commitment to moral integrity and social solidarity.*³

According to Oxford Learners Dictionary, existentialism is:

A philosophical theory that emphasizes the existence of the individual person... determining their own development through acts of the will.

The term was first adopted by Jean-Paul Sartre who says:

*Existentialism, a passing ideology of great conversation during the mid 19th century, exists on the notion that in a lifetime, each person must make countless choices. These choices, whilst perhaps indicative of past experiences, are ultimately that person's choice and only that person's choice to make. When a person is faced with two suggested options, even if one option is being forced upon him by pain of death, it remains his choice and his choice alone.*⁴

It was later defined by Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855, founder figure of Existentialism) whose philosophy is that every human being, not anyone else is responsible for his or her life. Jonathan Webber argues that “as originally defined by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values” (2018: 2)⁵

Existentialism is a philosophical advancement especially of the 20th century that stresses the individual position as a self-determining pro careful for his or her choices. In Existentialism, the thought of the individual is significantly energized. The individual's starting point is characterized as “the existential attitude” which incorporates a sense of confusion or perplexity in a broad complex world. This was in parcel due to otherworldly ruins after the War which driven various to address what the meaning of life was.

Existentialism claims that human existence always cannot be understood by physics, psychology, or biology, there is something more than these, something beyond the normal course of life. Every human action is not followed by logic, sometimes something happens that seems to the human being unusual. Absurdity, nothingness, the meaninglessness of life, the chaotic universe, and anxiety is the features of Existentialism to be found in Kafka and Camus' novels.

Presentation of Free choice in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Outsider*

Existentialists believe that men are born as individuals and they can choose anything for their lives. In “Existentialism & Humanism”, Jean-Paul Sartre states, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (SARTRE, JP. 1948. P28). According to Sartre, this is the first principle of Existentialism. Hence a person is free to wish anything for him being prepared to face the consequences. Camus' *The Outsider* is the representation of a free-willed man who does whatever he wants to do. His activities, “I ate at Celeste's restaurant, as usual” (is it a usual day when someone's mother dies?), “I slept almost all the day” (nothing changes at his mother's death) after hearing his mother's death news. After he reaches the old home (where his mother has been for the last three years) the warden after a conversation expects him to see his mother but paradoxically, he stops the

³Cline, Austin. "Albert Camus: Existentialism and Absurdism." Learn Religions, Aug. 27, 2020, learnreligions.com/albert-camus-biography-249944.

⁴<https://thenorthernmonk.com/2013/03/22/dissertation/>

⁵<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/>

caretaker going to unscrew the coffin and says, 'No' to see the dead body, after asking the reason he says, 'I don't know. He leaves the place in the middle of the funeral ceremony and becomes joyous with the thought of a "twelve hours" sleep. Throughout the novel he does what he wills, murdering the Arab without having any reason, in his love affair with Marie and after the murder when he is put into jail.

On the other side, Kafka's story *The Metamorphosis* tells the readers about the lack of free will in Gregor Samsa's life as he cannot do everything he wishes to after being transformed into a bug. By presenting two different characters, one real and another fictional Kafka points out a human being's existential crisis as a social being.

Presentation of Absurdity

Sartre in *An Explication of The Stranger (The Outsider)* says:

"Men also secrete the inhuman", writes Camus. "Sometimes in moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures and their senseless pantomime make everything about them seem stupid" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*)

For Albert Camus, life is not controlled by any supreme power; if it would have been then the supreme power must have helped human beings in their sufferings. He thinks that the universe is absurd where many absurd activities go on as found in *The Outsider* that the hero Meursault dates with his girlfriend Marie leaving his mother's funeral ceremony in the middle. Is not it too absurd that a son goes for gratifying his pleasure principle without attending his dead mother's funeral ceremony! He is even not sure about his relationship with Marie, and the readers find that in his voice:

A minute later she asked me, a moment later, if I loved her. I answered that it didn't mean anything, but that I probably didn't love her. (Camus, p.38)

His mental state in the jail, his carelessness regarding the engagement of any lawyer for him, his thoughts about love and marriage is a credible reflection of absurdity that how a man could be so reluctant towards his life and the happenings!

Starting with the transformation of Gregor Samsa from a human being to a huge bug catches the readers' attention towards the absurd worlds where there is no value of human existence. As the story advances readers find the misbehavior of Gregor's family to him and till the end the reason for his transformation is not made clear. Being the reflection of human society and mind *The Metamorphosis* upholds Kafka's views about life, human existence, and human relationships. No reason is shown that Gregor's metamorphosis is due to any specific cause, or misbehavior, or any crime, rather Gregor has been a too good son and a brother. He is someone who was paying his father's debt being engaged in salesmanship that he did not like. But after he is transformed into an insect all the members of the Samsa family treat the occasion as if he were a stranger to them which is also a part of the absurdity. Gregor becomes anxious because of being missing in his working place as it is related to the financial condition of the family; he is not a bit bothered about his transformation. On the other hand, his beloved parents and his sister take his change as something disgusting or terrifying. They do not take him to a physician or try to stay beside him, because it is a shame to them or somehow, they feel uneasy with it thinking about other people's attitude towards their family. Their attitudes sound absurd to the readers though life sometimes goes on like this. A human being cannot predict everything of their future. And that is why life becomes meaningless to some people and some people suffer from nothingness sometimes.

Alienation in two novels

“A multitude of people and yet a solitude.” — (Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities) is found in both novels. Meursault’s uncommitted acts to attend his mother’s funeral and his lack of seriousness in the love affair with Marie make him a stranger to the world. After his mother’s death the warden says:

You’re a young man, a different generation, and she must have been bored living with you. (Camus, p. 10)

Meursault alienates himself in such a way that his thoughts get meaningless, for no acts he finds a logical answer or reasoning. Why does he leave his mother’s funeral in the middle, why does he kill the Arab, why cannot he be sure about his marriage with Marie—everything is unknown to him. He leads such an isolated life that he does not hesitate to make him isolated from God also as found in his conversation with the chaplain that he did not believe in God and he thought that nobody could help him to get out of his trouble as is found in the last part of the story:

‘Have you no hope at all and do you live in the belief that you are to die tonight?’

‘Yes,’ I said (Camus, p112)

This is the way he isolates himself from God, the people of his surroundings, and his beloved ones. Unlike Meursault, Gregor does not isolate himself willingly but he is made isolated due to his physical changes. The people for whom he has worked a lot become the strangers and reject to sympathize him as Gregor says:

‘If I didn’t hold back for my parent’s sake, I would’ve quit ages ago’ (Kafka, p. 5)

Through this Kafka shows that people get nothing working for others, so they should think about themselves always which is the supreme thinking of the Existentialist. After the transformation Gregor’s mother becomes too afraid in his company, sister gets annoyed as she says:

‘My dear parents,’ said the sister banging her hand on the table by way of an introduction, ‘things cannot go on any longer in this way. Maybe if you don’t understand that, well, I do. I will not utter my brother’s name in front of this monster, and thus I say only that we must try to get rid of it. (p. 68)

and father gets too angry that he sometimes hits Gregor. He gets locked in a room and later on, he dies due to his psychological wound. By the absurd transformation of Gregor and his isolation Kafka conveys the bitter truth of life that everyone is alone here, everyone lives alone, dreams, and leaves the world alone. Though people believe themselves to be the part and parcel of society and the world, nobody is sharing his dream or his pain.

Nihilistic despair

Existentialism expresses the extreme of nihilistic despair so characteristic of our generation, says Charles I. Glicksberg in *The Literature of Existentialism*. Nihilistic despair means the rejection of all moral and religious values with a belief that life is nothing but meaningless, hence it is full of despair. It is the philosophy with a view that nothing has got a real or permanent existence; everything is either temporary or relatively true.

Meursault’s perception of life, death, love affair, and marriage show that he is a nihilist. Till the end, he says that he does not believe in God. His final inner thoughts are the mirror of his rejection of life, his despair and acceptance of freedom through death as echoed:

*So close to death, mother must have felt liberated and ready to live her life again.
No one. No one at all had any right to cry over her. And I too felt ready to live my
life again (Camus, p. 117)*

Through Gregor Samsa's evolution, Kafka unfolds the mystery of human existence that anything can happen anytime. Regarding the transitoriness of human existence, a famous Bengali writer Munir Chowdhury in his famous play "Kabar" in 1953 says:

*People rot when they die, change when they live, change for no reason.*⁶

Gregor's physical change along with the changes of everything in his life gives us a view that we have come to this world for a time being and anytime the death bell can toll to take us away.

Conclusion

Though Existentialism became a significant movement after the second world war, a long time ago it was present in the play *Hamlet* of William Shakespeare (1564-1616). When Prince Hamlet could not take revenge for his father's murder he also suffered from the existential crisis "To be, or not to be: that is the question:" (Shakespeare, Act III Scene 1). He was also in the middle of choosing life and death. Though there is a century's difference between Shakespeare, Kafka, and Camus; their anxiety and despair are the same. Being modern novelists Kafka and Camus uphold the modern philosophy of human existence-existentialism fully in their novels. . To some critics Kafka sound a bit crazy in his dealing with the metamorphosis theme, some critics think Camus is too careless and machine-like in his character sketch of Meursault but the real truth is, worldly human life is temporary and full of crisis where people are to fight for this or that to survive, sometimes they get tiresome, sometimes lonely, sometimes exhausted and self-centered sometimes: life seems to be nothing to them full of emptiness. So, like Meursault or like Gregor Samsa people many times queries, "Who am I?" or "What is the real value of my existence?" "Does anybody care for me or do I care for anyone?" The answer is always, "Nada" (Hemingway, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place")

References

- [1]. Camus, A. *The Outsider*. Penguin Books, 1982. Print.
- [2]. Hemingway, E. *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*.
- [3]. <https://www.nrcs.net/Downloads/A%20Clean%20Well%20Lighted%20Place.pdf>.
- [4]. Kafka, F. *The Metamorphosis*. A Norton Critical Edition, 1996. Print.
- [5]. Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet*. Act III Scene 1.
- [6]. https://shakespeare.folger.edu/downloads/pdf/hamlet_PDF_FolgerShakespeare.pdf.
- [7]. SARTRE, JP. "Existentialism & Humanism", 1948. P28.

Webography

- [1]. (PDF) *Existential Approach to Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330901095_Existential_Approach_to_Franz_Kafka's_The_Metamorphosis [accessed Aug 30 2021].
- [2]. GLICKSBERG, C. (1948). The Literature of Existentialism. <i>Prairie Schooner, </i><i>22</i></i> (3), 231-237. Retrieved August 31, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40624001>.
- [3]. <https://thenorthernmonkee.com/2013/03/22/dissertation/>, Retrieved August 31, 2021.
- [4]. <https://www.daily-bangladesh.com/feature/219382>

⁶ <https://www.daily-bangladesh.com/feature/219382>