

# **The Emergence and the Essence of the Absurdity**

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#### الملخص :-

استخدم مصطلح العبثية في العديد من الاعمال المسرحية والقصصية والشعرية لتعبر ان حالة الإنسان حالة عبثية وبرزت في أعمال هي نفسها عبثية. امتدت جذورها من الحركتين التعبيرية والواقعية واعمال الكاتب فرانز كفكا. ظهرت هذه الحركة لأول مرة في فرنسا بعد الحربين العالميتين الأولى والثانية كرد فعل ضد معتقدات وقيم ثقافية تقليدية تضمنت افتراضات تؤكد ان البشر مخلوقات عقلانية تعيش في عالم عقلاني وجزء من التركيبة الاجتماعية المنظمة والقادرة على البطولة والكرامة .

أظهرت هذه الحركة التخوفات والاحباطات والشكوكية واللاادرية والقيم البطولية معكوسة والمرتكزات الدينية والفلسفية مبعثرة ومدمرة والبطل الزائف عصابي ومعلول ذهنيا ان لم يكن جسديا . أصبحت عند ذلك مظاهر السلوك والقيم الأخلاقية غير مقبولة

#### Abstract

The term of absurdity is applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction which have, in common, the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd. This movement has its roots in the

movements of the expressionism and surrealism as well as in the fiction of Franz Kafka. This current movement emerged in France after the horrors of the World War II, as a rebellion against essential beliefs and values of traditional culture and literature which had included the assumptions that human beings are fairly rational creatures who live in partially intelligible universe that they are part of an ordered social structure, and that they may be capable of heroism and dignity. This movement gave the rise to fears and frustrations, skepticism and agnosticism. Heroic ideals were topsy-turvy and beliefs in religio-philosophical anchors were shattered. The anti-hero 'is neurotic' and 'crippled' emotionally if not physically. Moral and ethical values are no longer accepted as absolutes.

## **1. The Social Background**

By the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a complete breakdown and a rapid social change noticed in every sphere of life. Industrialization and urbanization brought, in their wake, their own problems. The atmosphere has increasingly grown more smoky and noisy.

This period of time ushered in an era of moral bewilderment and uncertainty. The rise of the scientific spirit and rationalism led to a questioning of accepted social beliefs, conventions and tradition. This new situation of the existing order, from the different angles, has increased the bewilderment of the common man. Frustrated and at bay, he does not know what to accept and what to reject.

Skepticism, general disillusionment, cynicism, irony...etc, has become the order of the day. Consequently, the pessimism and despair of the age is seen in the picture of the man. Such pessimism holds out no hopes for man; it regards man as doomed and his struggle as hopeless.

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In case of political scene, nationalism is no longer accepted as enough, and imperialism has come in for a great deal of criticism. The relations between the nations of the world have been based on the basis of political subjection and imperial supremacy. Nationalism becomes in conflict with internationalism.

The devastation and brutality of the world wars I and II heightened these feelings. The imagery of people, chocking the death on their own blood after poisonous gas attacks, made it very easy for many to accept the death of God as Esslin says in this regard:

***The number of people, for whom God is dead, has greatly increased since Nietzsche's day, and mankind has learned the bitter lesson of the falseness and evil nature of some of the cheap and vulgar substitutes that have been set up to take His place. <sup>(1)</sup>***

Thus, the problem of every man, in the contemporary social system in modern industrial world, is that he stands on walkways of the world desolated and deserted.

Through the absurdist literary movement, we see deformed and crippled human beings who live in a static world, deprived of dynamic motion, and through these figures, we see the mordant disintegration of western civilization, and we see no hope for man in other kind of state, no hope for salvation to a suffering and wretched humanity. Martin Esslin, in this regard, "presents the audience with a picture of a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose—an absurd universe."<sup>(2)</sup>

This universe is deprived of all illusions and of light. Man feels strange, and lacks hope of a promised land to come. The

world has lost its objective standards of reality and its central explanation and meaning. Lawrance and Federman say in this point:

*Man...is alone thrown into a meaningless World; a closed world; he is chained to the process of waiting. He is tied to the hope of delivery by something outside the self.*<sup>(3)</sup>

Even the human beings' attempts to contact with each other and with the world, in which they live, are doomed to failure, because they become unable to do more than dreams. James Knowlson says, " *There can be little or no communication between man and man*".<sup>(4)</sup> The same author adds, " *we are left with an image of creatures, seeking to communicate in a world where real communication is virtually impossible.*"<sup>(5)</sup>

Human beings lack vitality, the strength and the force to preserve the accepted values against a hostile universe. Browne says in this point: " *Anything that was honorable is gone and the codes of the past have become anachronistic and ridiculous in the present.*"<sup>(6)</sup> Thus, man contemplates suicide as a way of escaping the hopelessness and despair. Man is cut off from religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots; he is a lost soul bereaved of all the sustaining sources.

## **2. The Absurd Life without God**

Many had begun to question even the existence of God, and the basis of their faith. This idea of a Godless universe created both despair and uncertainty, and could make trails and sufferings for man in his every day life which seems pointless. Thus, religion was considered as a counterweight to the

emptiness of the liberalism and the rigidity of conservation. In addition, religion offers the advantages as a protection against tyranny which is created by the industrial society that creates people detached from tradition and alienated from religion. T.S. Eliot says in this regard, "*We escape from this strain by attempting to return to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more particular stage.*"<sup>(7)</sup> The problem of humanism is undoubtedly related to the problem of religion. T.S. Eliot points out that, "*Humanism is insufficient without religion.*"<sup>(8)</sup> He admitted that "*In the past humanism has been allied with religion.*"<sup>(9)</sup> Accordingly, religion puts morals in their proper place, and humanism is a form of which is quite untenable and meaningless without a religious foundation. T.S. Eliot adds that "*Humanism makes for breadth, tolerance, equilibrium and sanity. It operates against fanaticism.*"<sup>(10)</sup>

The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religion of faith in progress, nationalism and various totalitarian fallacies. And beliefs were shattered by the war. As a result, man lives in a universe where there are no certainties, principles or absolutes and his awareness stems from the decline of the religious beliefs. Camus says in this point, "*The certainty of the existence of God would give meaning to life and has far greater attraction than the knowledge that with out Him one could do evil without being punished.*"<sup>(11)</sup> So the absence of God would be disastrous. Albert Camus adds, "*From the moment that man believes neither in God nor immortal life, he becomes responsible for everything, for everything that born for suffering is condemned to suffer from life.*"<sup>(12)</sup>

Man has lost faith in religion, which has been eroded by science and materialism. This feeling makes man suffer from emptiness, isolation and a feeling of insecurity. His suffering increases and he becomes down-trodden; his restive living leads a primitive animal-like existence. Pascal once said, "*I know not*

*who sent me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what myself am. I am terribly ignorant of everything. I know not what my body is, nor my senses, nor my soul."*<sup>(13)</sup>

### **3. The Absurd as Literary Movement**

The word 'absurd' or 'absurdity' has no rational or orderly relationship to human life: meaningless, also lacking order or value. Soren Kierkegard - a Pre-World war II German existential philosopher, defined absurdity as "*That quality of Christian faith which runs counter to all reasonable human expectations.*"<sup>(14)</sup> Jean Paul Sartre - a post-World War II French philosopher, felt that absurd was '*the sheer contingency*' or '*thereness*' or '*gratuitousness*' of the World."<sup>(15)</sup> Both of these definitions are hard to interpret. Albert Camus gives his interpretation of absurd in his book '*The myth of Sisyphus*' at which man realizes that all struggles that we put forth in repeated daily cycle are in all actuality completely meaningless.<sup>(16)</sup> Absurd originally means 'out of harmony' in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: "*out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.*"<sup>(17)</sup> Eugene Ionesco defined his understanding of term as follows:

*"Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."*<sup>(18)</sup>

The absurd has been one of the most pervasive movements in literature and philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It emerged as a reaction to preceding literary movements, or as a consequence of the radical changes in society or traumas that the world has gone through. In addition, the Two World Wars and traumatic experience played a tremendous role in the emergence of the absurd as a school of thought in literature and in philosophy.



When everything that gave meaning and purpose to life and to existence turned out to be illusions, the old and familiar World became an alien one in which man felt lost and an exile. As Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942):

*A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger.*<sup>(19)</sup> Thus, the world was no longer a unified whole, but a disintegrating world that had lost its unifying principle. In such a world, it is quite natural for man to feel alienated since it is no longer possible for him to know "*why it was created, what part man has been assigned in it, and what constitutes right actions and wrong actions.*"<sup>(20)</sup> So, the universe for the absurd writers and philosophers is an irrational universe, man's existence becomes meaningless and purposeless.

The absurd is frequently regarded as a movement descended from Existentialism. It is a philosophical movement that influenced many diverse writers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But it refuses to believe like the existentialism, that man has a free will, and disowns the traditional approach that man is a rational being, who lives in, at least, a partially intelligible universe. It disowns heroism and dignity of man. The absurdists displayed that life has lost its sanctity; traditional values are in the melting pot; man is thoroughly disillusioned about things. They presented man, suffering from metaphysical anguish.

The absurdists have eschewed conventional plot, story and character, and created a dramaturgy that reflected their anguished vision of universal reality through apparently meaningless, illogical, unrelated and unsequential dialogue and action. They regard language not as a means of communication but as an obstacle to it. They preoccupied with the problem of communication between people. They refuse the adequacy of language as a tool of communication. They believed, "*the attempt to communicate where no communication is possible is*

*merely a simian vulgarity, or horribly comic, like the madness that holds a conversation with the furniture.*"<sup>(21)</sup> Since the world has lost its meaning, language also becomes a meaningless buzzing or incoherent babblings. Language falls short in conveying man's thoughts and emotions because man lives "in a world subject to incessant change, (so) his use of language probes the limitations of language both as a means of communication and as vehicle for the expression of valid statements, an instrument of thought."<sup>(22)</sup>

One of the major reasons contributing to the sense of absurdity is "the decline of the religious beliefs which has deprived man of certainty...when it is no longer possible to accept to complete closed system of values and revelations of divine purpose."<sup>(23)</sup> The absurdists believe that the attempt to attach meaning to life is futile, and it is merely an illusion that man should avoid. The absurdity itself is a characteristic of neither the human being nor the world solely, but of their interaction. Camus wrote in this point, "The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other."<sup>(24)</sup>

Such writers and absurdists considered to belong to the absurd tradition as Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Pinter, Albee and others attempt to portray "the sense of the metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition."<sup>(25)</sup> In their works, their chief concern is to depict the absurdity of the human condition, and man lost and trying to find his way desperately in a world devoid of meaning, sense, and purpose. According to the absurdists man, who is ignorant of his true condition, is the one who is deprived of human dignity since "dignity... comes of awareness."<sup>(26)</sup> For them, modern society is mostly composed of such individuals who lead a mechanical existence by means of illusions and habit, so they lack the sensitivity and lucidity essential for recognizing the absurdity. As Camus says in this regard, "At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of

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*their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them."*<sup>(27)</sup> Esslin points out, " *this is the feeling of deadness and mechanical senselessness of half conscious lives.*"<sup>(28)</sup>

This literary movement, between 1950 and 1960, revolutionized both English and world drama, connected the dramatists Edward Albee, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, Vaclav Havel...etc, whose work is an expression of their personal experience and which Albert Camus in his book of essays '*The Myth of Sisyphus*' characterized as 'Absurdity'.

The absurd theatre, a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images. As Esslin says:

*The theatre of the Absurdity is a theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence, and, therefore, it uses a language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech.*"<sup>(29)</sup>

In doing this, it uses visual elements, movements, lights. Unlike conventional theatre, where language rules supreme, in the Absurd theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery. It emphasizes the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It aims to create a ritual mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams which are featured in many theatrical pieces. Mircea Eliade says in this point:

*Theatre of the Absurd is the use of mythical, allegorical, and dreamlike modes of thoughts....For there is a close connection between myth and dream, myths have been called the collective dream images of mankind.*<sup>(30)</sup>

The Theatre of the Absurdity sought to express the individual's longing for a single myth of general validity. As Martin Esslin says, "*Theatre of the absurd mirrors real obsessions, dreams and valid images in the subconscious mind of its author.*"<sup>(31)</sup>

Absurd drama or modern drama has passed through miscellaneous stages in order to reach its final form that expresses its characters in the light of the modern world. That is to say, the twentieth-century plays seek to find their figures within that of the century itself. Thus, modern drama tries its best to reflect what the modern world really is. Therefore, each phase of the century witnesses the rise of a new movement in theatre or drama. Among these movements is the Theatre of the Absurd.

The writers of this movement depicted man as a mixture of contrastive aspects: spirit and material; goodness and badness; right and evil; heredity and environment and so on. Therefore, any attempt to understand man and reflect this understanding to the others should not neglect or take any side of human character at expense of the others.

The universe, for the absurd writers and philosophers, is irrational, defying logical explanation, and in such an irrational universe, man's existence becomes meaningless and purposeless. Man has the desire to make everything clear, but he cannot achieve this through his limited reason: "*The absurd is born precisely at the very meeting point of that efficacious but limited reason with the ever resurgent irrational.*"<sup>(32)</sup>

To Albert Camus, "*The absurd is essentially a divorce between man and the world,*"<sup>(33)</sup> and that is why he depicts his characters in their relationship with life. So the philosophy of Camus is a philosophy of the absurd, and for him the absurd springs from the relation of man to the world. Man has always been in such of the answer to the question. "*Who am I?*" He is fated to failure in his search for his self since self is not fixed but

fluid and indefinable. It is impossible to capture the self which is in a continuous" *process of renovation and destruction that occurs with change in time,*"<sup>(34)</sup> and only death can put an end to this otherwise never-ending process.

The dramatists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century epitomize man suffering from metaphysical anguish. He is thoroughly disillusioned about things. He deprived of illusions, light and colour. He is alone, alone in the wide sea of life. Man is a stranger, an outsider, an exile. He has no hope or light. He is divorced from life and purpose. These dramatists are concerned with the ultimate realities, which cannot be conveyed by orthodox language. They have to evolve a new pattern of language. "*By putting the language of a scene in contrast to the action, by reducing it to a very subordinate role.*"<sup>(35)</sup>

### **Notes**

1. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Double day, 1961 and Pelican books, Harmondworth, 1968, p. 389.
2. Ibid., p. 401.
3. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, *Samuel Beckett: Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Henley and Boston, 1979, p. 52.
4. James Knowlson, *Happy days by Samuel Beckett*. London: Faber and Faber, 1978, p. 92.
5. Ibid. , p.113.
6. E. Martin Browne, *Tennessee Williams; Sweet Birth of Youth, A streetcar Named desire, The glass Menagerie*. Penguin Books, 1949, p. 107.
7. T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards the definition of culture*, p. 68.
8. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1932, p. 428.
9. Ibid. , p. 482.
10. Ibid. , p. 488.
11. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942, p. 94.
12. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*. New York: Vintage, 1956, p. 103.
13. Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts or Reflections*. Edited by Louis Lafuma. Translated by John Warrington. London: Every Library, 1960, p.11.
14. James W. Woelfel, *Camus: A Theological Perspective*. Abingdon press, 1975, p. 40.
15. Ibid. , p. 41.
16. Ibid. , p. 44.
17. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*. P. 23.

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18. Eugene Lonesco, *the chairs*. Paris: no. 20, October. 1957.
19. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyhus*, p. 5.
20. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*, P.313.
21. Samuel Beckett, *Proust*. New York: Grove Press, 1931, p. 32.
22. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*, P. 84.
23. Ibid. , p. 391.
24. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyhus*, p. 21.
25. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*, P. 23-24
26. Ibid. , P. 391.
27. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyhus*, p. 11.
28. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*, P. 291.
29. Ibid. , p. 393.
30. Mircea Eliade, *Myths. Dreams. and Mysteries*. London: Marvil Press, 1960, p. 27.
31. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*, P. 411.
32. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyhus*, p. 27.
33. Ibid. , p. 23.
34. Martin Esslin, *the theatre of the Absurd*, P. 69.
35. Ibid. , p. 398.