

## EXISTENTIALISM VS ABSURDISM; A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S NO EXIT AND ALBERT CAMUS'S THE STRANGER

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**Abstract:** *Existentialism and Absurdism are two major philosophies originated during the nineteenth century. They were developed in the consequence of two World Wars that led to the despair, destructions, and violation of human rights. All these shaken the religious beliefs and the existence of God. Sartre and Camus are the two major figures of that time. This study aimed to analyze the similarities and differences between absurdism and existentialism. And to understand this the researchers compared the two plays No Exit by Sartre and The Stranger by Albert Camus. While comparing those plays the major notion of the philosophies such as freedom, individuality, the meaninglessness of world and bad faith are highlighted.*

**Keywords:** *Existentialism, Absurdism, No Exit, The Stranger, individuality and God's existence.*

### INTRODUCTION

The theory "Origin of Species" by Charles Darwin brought a great impact on nineteenth century's mankind. It throughout questioned the human existence and the existence of God. Because of the dominance of the science in this era Religion and Philosophy remained in the background. However, after the two major events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were the two World Wars, the man fell into the calamity and chaos. Which directly influenced the literature of that centuries. However, while putting a glance into the literature of that periods, it has been revealed that the survival and existence of human being have been made a great topic of discussion (Gnaneasekaran,2014).

Furthermore, this debate led to two major philosophies "Existentialism and Absurdism". Existentialism means "pertaining to existence" (Cuddon,1979, p.251). The term "Existentialism" was coined by Marcel Gabriel a French Philosopher and Playwright. The movement belongs to the family of philosophers Sartre and Simon De Beauvoir. According to Kaufman (Senejani, 2013), the heart of Existentialism is the rejection of any school of thought, the refusal of any adequate belief, system, or somebody and a discontent feeling with a traditional philosophy like surficial and academic and disconnectedness with life. Existentialism is a philosophy that talks about an individual who takes responsibility for his actions and does not evade his "Existential individuality" (Senejani, 2013). This philosophy carries the clear and

simple message that every individual is responsible for his/her actions and for who he/she is, and for the way he/she deals with the world. Existentialism is based on the notion that individuals change their essence with the passage of time. Moreover, existentialists believe in no objective form of truth rather they believe that truth is the product of our personal choice. Whereas, Existentialists do not support the following concepts. 1) A good life is the product of wealth and honor. 2) Individuals are controlled by their social values. 3) Individuals should accept whatever happens to them and do not try to change it. 4) Science is doing a great job in making life better. For existentialism, the important thing is every human is free and he has the choice to make nature. Sartre argued that (Flynn,2006, p.12) "the fundamental choice man makes and gives direction to his life, is made by reflecting his previous life up to present. In other words, we've made our choice implicitly". Although there are many existentialist philosophers, some of them are "theist" like Kierkegaard, Marcel and Jasper and some are "atheist" like Sartre, Heidegger, De Beauvoir. Nietzsche was an antichristian existentialist.

On the other hand, "Absurdism" is the philosophy that sometimes the sub-branch or offspring of Existentialism because of the interconnectedness with each other. The word "Absurdism" refers to something irrational and ridiculous. The word "Absurdism" is used in a very particular sense in one of his essays "Myth of Sisyphus" (1942). The philosophy of "Absurd" is based on the conflict between the human capacity to search for meaning in life and human incapability to find it. Because finding meaning in a meaningless universe is "humanly impossible" (Das. B, 2015).

Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Eugene Ionesco are the major figures who contributed to writing the Absurd literature.

This research paper focused on two major plays No Exit by Sartre and The Stranger by Camus to bring out their existentialist and absurdist views and find out the similarities and differences between the two philosophies.

### **JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND HIS EXISTENTIALISM**

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris in 1905. He was the son of a naval officer who died when Sartre was only 15 months. In 1916, her mother got married to the man whom Sartre disdained. This caused Sartre to feel abandoned and dispossessed which was later figured out in his existentialist philosophy. Later Sartre studied philosophy in Ecole Normale Superieure where he met De Beauvoir who remained one of his personal and intellectual fellows. His first novel Nausea is the representation of absurdity of existence. He wrote Le Mur a collection of stories based on the themes of sexuality, human relationships, insanity, etc. After that, he

joined the French army in the outbreak of the war. He was captured by the German army and kept in prison. There he used to write Christmas Plays for his prison fellows. This research paper will look at the following Sartre existentialist views in the play No Exit.

- “Existence precedes essence” means that human first exists and then he searches for his/her essence in this world.

- “Human is condemned to be free” that, all human beings are free to choose and live free according to their will.

- “Bad Faith” refers to the idea that an individual avoids his freedom and responsibility because of the fear and anxiety of that responsibility and let the other people make the decision for him (senejani.2013).

- “Being for itself” (it is related to one’s own reality, subjectivity and existence) and “being in itself” (refers to the reality of the external world to one or the objectivity) (Mart. C, 2012).

- Human nature does not exist neither there is God as Nietzsche stated, “God is dead” (Martr.c,2012).

### **ALBERT CAMUS AND HIS ABSURDISM**

Algerian village of Mondovi is the place where Camus was born (1913-60). He belonged to a family where most of the family members were illiterate. His father died during the first World War. Camus was one of the bright and intelligent students of his time and really admired by his teachers. During his secondary level education, he suffered from tuberculosis which affected his studies. His life experiences are reflected in his later works such as, “You are strong, and I have to be open and honest. What I can tell you is that you are about to die” (Verrips, 1997, p.17). And because of these experience, Camus came to conclusion that "life is absurd". In 1957, he got a Nobel Prize in literature. Camus is known as an Existentialist but he himself rejected to be, and more willing to be called himself an absurdist. The Plague, The Stranger, The Myth of Sisyphus and Caligula are his major literary contributions.

Camus explains the term absurdism that, it is the conflict between human capacity to search meaning and its inability to find because he is in a cold, irrational universe where it is impossible. “man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, 1955, p. 28).

Camus and Nietzsche describe that a man is left with three options when he searches for a purpose in a purposeless world, the leap of faith, suicide, and facing

the absurdity (Roskowski. M, 2013). Whereas, Camus does not prefer the suicide and leap of faith suitable answers. Separating from the Nietzsche view he says, that human should believe in its existence and his physical reality because that's the only thing he can feel, touch and believing in what is present is logical. Believing in one thing which is beyond human limitations means to deceive your present. Leap of faith means that a man develops spiritual belief but still if the life is absurd than everything in it is absurd. The best solution in his view is to know and face the reality that life is absurd and spend life with this ultimate truth (Camus,1955). Some of the Camus's principles of absurdism are the denial of God, sense of isolation, freedom of choice, suffering and other versus individual as the center of the world (Ozyon. A, 2012).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

"Being and Nothingness" (1995) is a book written by Prof. Spade. In which he described Sartre's Existentialism that includes bad faith, abandonment, despair, transcendence etc.

A book "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1995) by Camus is an essay in which he made his argument about absurdism before writing *The Stranger* and *The Rebellion* to open the way for his idea that he was going to reflect in these works. He took a Greek character Sisyphus as an absurd hero who encountered himself to an absurd life. He was punished to roll up a stone onto the peak of a hill and then watch it roll down to the earth and he had to continue this as immortal punishment. Instead of committing suicide he accepted this absurd truth and lived with it happily.

Ruskin. R (2001) made a critical study on "Camus's critique of Existentialism". His research showed how Camus argued about existentialism as a destructive mode of life, nature, and history.

In 2005 Herring conducted a research in which she studied the character of Meursault *The Stranger* as an Existentialist as well as a Post-Modernist hero. She found such characteristics in her character which were related to both the philosophies.

Jess M. Bering in one of his research argued that how socially conscious experiences and human developed psychology is related to each other through the help of *No Exit* by Sartre.

Tales from the hard side; A French existentialist perspective on Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (2011) is a research conducted by a group of researchers James. k, James. M, James. Land Susan. P. their research was based on the analysis of Japanese novel through the lenses of French Existentialism philosophy.

Mart. C, 2012 in his research on Existentialism stressed out the major themes of existentialism by examining two plays of Sartre *Dirty Hands* and *The Flies*.

Ozyon, (2012) in his research on the play *The Stranger* made a critical study on the protagonist of Camus named Meursault. In his research, he analyzed the character through the lenses of existentialism concerning its principles.

Shah. M, (2012) argued that Camus Absurdism led to avoid transcendence and therefore, he was found an immanent philosopher. He wants the man to live without transcendence and believe in the notion that "God is dead".

Senejani. A, (2013) in his research on *No Exit* focus on Sartrean Existentialism.

Robert, (2013) explored the human condition in the organization and intellectual legacy of Camus.

A proposal given by Gnanasekaran, (2014) was based on the psychoanalytical interpretation of the character Meursault. The research aimed to analyze the consciousness of Camus and how this state is reflected in his characters.

Caroline and Christian, (2015) in their article analyzed how the philosophical theories of Sartre are transferred to dramatic form and how the message is perceived by the audience and to understand this they took Meisner method.

Jennifer. L, (2015) in one of her essay made a comparison between the work of Sartre *No Exit* and American Native Playwright Sterlin Harjo's *Good Night Irene*. The major focus of her study was Sartre way of presenting Hell which did not contain the fire or something destructive but still, it was torturous for the character that was out there.

Das. B, (2015) studied absurdism with special reference to *The Out-Sider* and *Waiting for Godot*.

Bhoyar. T, (2016) in his research brought out Meursault *The Stranger* as a sexist, racist and colonialist hero.

The above researches have explored different dimensions of existentialism and absurdism. The present study will focus two plays *The Stranger* by Camus and *No Exit* by Sartre through the lenses of Existential and Absurdism philosophies. While analyzing the characters of the plays the researcher will explore that, to what extent these two philosophies are connected and what makes them separate.

## **DISCUSSION**

Sartre shared his view about their plays that, they are striking, precise and circled around a single event, they contain less number of players and are organized in short period of time sometimes only consist of some hours and it would not be wrong if it is said that, they follow the principle of "three unities". Few entrances

and exits and strong arguments of the characters-defending their individuality passionately establishes a distance from the great fantasies of Broadway.

### **NO EXIT BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE**

No Exit a one-act play is consists of four characters (Valet, Garcin, Ines, and Estelle). At the beginning of the play, Valet is leading a man named as Garcin into a room. Soon the audience comes to know that this room is a Hell which does not contain windows, mirrors and only has a single door. Further, he is joined by a lady Ines Serrano and then another woman Estelle Rigault. After that, the valet leaves and the door got closed. Everyone is expected to be tortured but no tortured occurred. In fact, all three are put together to probe one another's misdeeds, desires, and not so good memories. Soon they come to know that they are the torture of one another as said: "Hell is other people".

Initially, they see the events on earth that are related to them but then they are left with personal thoughts and with the other two. In the last, Garcia tries to open the door to get out of the room but nobody leaves because of the unknown fear and hate and especially to Garcin who wants the validity from Ines that he is a coward.

Garcin is a coward and calloused man. He ran from the army during the second world war and cheated on his wife glaringly. Even, he without showing sympathy for his wife brings affairs home and asks her to bring coffee on the bed. He dislikes Ines because she knows his faults and lusts for Estelle because he will feel manly if she treats her as a man which is not actual reality.

The second character that enters the room is a woman Ines, a lesbian. A postal clerk whose sin is twisting a wife opinion against her husband and the murder of a man who is Ines cousin. She seems to be the only among three who is a good manipulator and has a better understanding of the power of opinion. She is the only character who dares to accept the sins that she, Garcin and Estelle has committed and accept the reality that she is a cruel person. Estelle is an aristocratic lady who married a rich for sake of money and was also involved with a young man. She kills her illegitimate child by throwing into the river before her lover and that forced her lover to commit suicide. She tries to get close toward Garcin so, she would be able to define herself as a woman in relation with man. She has a lust for "manly men" which Garcia shows to be. Her sins are betrayal and murder. The fourth character is the Valet and the audience know little about it. He only speaks to Garcin and we come to know that his uncle is head Valet who do not have eyelids and cannot blink eyes. The play No Exit has a very interesting setting that is Hell. But, the strange thing is that there is no apparent torture as real Hell has. This hell consists of a room

with three couches and no windows, no mirrors only a single door. There are no human luxuries which are available in the normal human world and even the common human privileges such as tears, sleep and even blinking eyes are taken away. Each of three was introduced to Hell by a well-mannered Valet and they realize that they are dead. The place takes shape into its real essence when slowly and gradually everyone started revealing about themselves.

### **THE STRANGER BY ALBERT CAMUS**

The Stranger is a novel that revolves around the story of a young man Meursault a cold, detached but an ordinary man. He lives in French Algiers and works as a shipping clerk. The story begins with a telegram received by Meursault which was about the news of his mother's death. He attends his mother funeral. But his unusual, calm, and detached behavior on his mother's death surprises all other attendees. Over the next day, he met a beautiful woman Maria and gets attracted towards her. They spend time with each other watch comedy movie and sleep together. Maria gets surprised when she came to know that Meursault has lost her mother just yesterday. However, the next two weeks of Meursault's life are spending in so unusual was as if nothing tragic has happened to him. Hangover with the new girlfriend, going to a beach on vacations with friend pimp and girlfriend having dinners with the friend and taking naps to look like this man is so weird and detached. During vacations, Meursault and his friends were confronted by Arabs. One of the Arab was Raymond's wife brother who cheated on him and then beaten by her husband. Raymond was Meursault's friend. The Arab was shouted by Meursault and the only explanation Meursault had for his murder was the striking sun on his face.

During his murder trial, it is observed that the court is much more interested in his cold behavior on his mother funeral than his actual crime. He was judged as an odd, mysterious, unconfirm and misanthrope. He is sentenced to death. The chaplain arrives three times, tries to convince Meursault to seek pardon but all times he refuses. Even he was so much annoyed by him that he tries to beat him, and he clearly denounces the Christianity and the existence of God. He wants freedom and a new life but in such a way that he could remember the present one but he does not believe in an afterlife. For him, everything is useless and meaningless so there is no reason to seek pardon.

### **THEME OF DESIRE**

In the beginning, Garcia seems very nice gentleman and noble individual but as soon we go ahead the play we realize that's not at all. In fact, he according to Sartre the worst pain that hurt humankind. He had a wife who unconditionally loved him

but he hated her for no reason. And the only thing he recalled of her memories is that how “she got on his nerves”. While talking about his life events, he narrated a story that is a good reflection of his character;

"Well here's something you can get your teeth into. I brought a half-caste girl to stay at our house. My wife slept upstairs; she must have heard- everything. She was an early riser, and as I and the girl stayed in bed late, she served us our morning coffee" (No Exit, p. 25).

This narration also shows that he was a sexual pervert and he was a womanizer. He used to dominate his wife and used other women for sexual desires. The words indicate his unsexual relationship with his wife but still, she craves for him. This is meant to impose the theory of desire.

The second example is the lovely Estelle an objective materialistic character only conscious of her makeup, she wants to be liked by man all time even in Hell. She throws glances on Garcin just to become his center of attention for physical affection.

Garcin: "And you didn't want one [ a baby]?"

Estelle: "I certainly didn't. But the baby came worse luck. I went to Switzerland for five months. No one knew anything. It was a girl. Roger was with me when she was born. It pleased him to no end, having a daughter. It didn't please me! There was a balcony overlooking the lake."

As the reason behind her presence in Hell was the betrayal and murder, she was so much indulged in materialism that she ignored her lover's love and kill her own daughter. The above lines show that she that the only reason she was with her young boyfriend was her desire for sexuality neither his love. in Sartre theory of sexual desire, he believes that sexual desire is so enticed that cannot resist. And physical activity is the only way to satisfy this feeling.

The third example of Sartre's sexual perversion is Ines who calls herself cruel one. She desires for Estelle as the same she had for Florence but she did not have any emotional attachment neither she misses her in Hell.

The same desire can be observed in the character of Meursault who was more absorbed in Marie's body than the feeling she had for her. Even we can see that at the time of prison he misses his cigarette and his physical attachment with Marie. In all cases we find that all four are slaves of their desire of sexuality and none of them have any feeling of love instead, they show their detachment towards it. They take love as for granted and they deal their lovers, not as human rather as objects that fulfill their physical needs.



Sartre and Camus are of the view that the world is meaningless and it is us who give meaning and interpretation. Their idea can be seen in their work as Ines stated

"[We must try] To forget about the others? How utterly absurd! I feel you there, in every pore. Your silence clamors in my ears. You can nail your mouth shut, cut your tongue out- but you can't prevents your being there. Can you stop your thoughts? I hear them ticking away like a clock, tick-tock, tick-tock, and I'm certain you hear mine..."

The setting of drawing room supports their idea. This indicates a limited Universe that does not contain anything attractive and it seems very tiny to the people. And we find that as this world is meaningless to these three characters, Meursault found the same. He is so indifferent to the world and its interpretations are given by other consciousness that he is not affected by the great incident of his mother's death but affected by the sunlight striking on his eyes.

The other existential concept is "existence precedes essence" it allows the man to choose the essence for himself he is not bound. The major idea underlies in this doctrine is the rejection of God. whereas, in the play No Exit there is no apparent rejection has been observed but the immoral deeds done by all three characters are implying that they do not have any spiritual connection to deity. On the other hand, being an absurd hero, Meursault has a very clear rejection of God and Christianity because he knows they are unworthy and beyond physicality. As he argued with chaplain;

"I said that I didn't believe in God. He (chaplain) wanted to know if I was sure and I said that I didn't see any reason to ask myself that question: it seemed unimportant. (...)"

"I was just afraid, which was only natural. "Then God can help you," he said. "Every man I have known in your position has turned to Him." I acknowledged that that was their right. It also meant that they must have had the time for it. As for me, I don't want anybody's help, and I just didn't have the time to interest myself in what didn't interest me".

Bad faith is another notion of existentialism and absurdism that relying on other to create your essence is the cause of bad faith because one is unable to take responsibility for his actions. Garcin and Estelle are the best examples of bad faith.

When the door opens Garcin is unable to leave because he is unable to take responsibility for his actions and cannot face his decision of running away from his army which was cowardice act. Therefore, he let the door close again and choose to be judged by Ines and allow her to create his essence as he states;

“ It is because of her [Ines] that I’m staying. yes, you [Ines] anyhow, know what it means to be a coward. And you know what it means to be a coward. And you know what wickedness is, and shame, and fear. There were days when you peered into yourself, into the secret places of your heart, and what you saw there made you faint with horror. And then, the next day, you didn’t know what to make of it, you couldn’t interpret the horror you had glimpsed the day before. Yes, you know what evil costs. And when you say I’m a coward, you know from experience what that means”. (No Exit, p.43)

Estelle too relies on other. She believes in her existence when she saw herself in the mirror as other people do. She does not accept the responsibility of her lover's suicide. She believes in what Ines tells her about a pimple on her face when Ines becomes her mirror. This shows her essence developed by Ines, not by herself. This concept of bad faith is supported by Sartre statement that “Hell is Other People”.

Ines, on the contrary, is strong in her opinions and can make decisions. She knows how to control and influence other as she did in Hell. Like Meursault, she is honest about her actions and misdeeds that she has done. Both Ines and Meursault do not afraid to take responsibility for their actions and they are happy along with that. And this is the major characteristic of Absurdism.

“Ines:...I crept inside her skin, she saw the world through my eyes. When she left him, I had her on my hands”.

“Ines: When I say I’m cruel, I mean I can’t get on without making people suffer. Like a live coal. A live coal in another one’s heart”. “she saw the world through my eyes”, (talking about Florence).

Garcin and Estelle are incapable to leave their past. They still recall their past events talk about their lovers and friends on earth and can't concentrate on their present. But Ines and Meursault are among those who live in their presence without thinking of their past and bothering about the future. To Ines, it is useless to recall her past because it does not contain meaning as she says, “all you own is here”. She does not believe in justifying herself in terms of what sort of person she used to be rather, she lives in her present and chooses her freedom to establish her essence and accept the reality that she is in Hell. As it is said by Sartre “life begins on the other side of despair”.

“Relations with other people, encrustation, and freedom...are the three themes of the play. I should like you to remember this when you hear that hell is other people”. (The Drama 100, p. 411).

Meursault and Ines are mostly similar in their opinions. He asserts the same as Ines does. To Meursault, no matter where and in which condition you are live happy along with it. Despite being prisoned he was happy. His happiness was not because he was hopeful or certain rather he admitted the reality that he will die and nothing can stop him from dying. He also believes in the present and wants to live with full passion. He was such free that he wanted to live again despite so close to death as he said, "start life all over again".

He is conscious of what he does and denies the moral good or bad.

"I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he (the Chaplain), sure of my present and of my death that was coming".

As an absurdist, he does not believe in abstract things. He appreciates Marie's dress, body, and laughter because that is concrete but does not look for her love. He does not feel grief on her mother's death because grief is abstract and he does not possess it. He believes in what he can sense such as the sunlight which he called his enemy.

### CONCLUSION

"No Exit" and "The Stranger" are the most profound plays to understand the concept of Existentialism and Absurdism. By comparing them, it has been known to the researcher that both philosophies are almost carried the same concepts except little difference in them for example, Ines choose to be free to live in his presence and she creates her essence that was to torture the other two in the Hell, Meursault also choose freedom but he does not create his essence rather he is free because he accepted that "life is absurd" and he knows that creating essence in this world is also absurd.

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