

Existential Elements in Works of Albert Camus

Dr. Sanjay Prasad Pandey
Associate Professor,
School of Humanities,
Lovely Professional University,
Punjab, India

Rakesh Kumar
Research Scholar
School of Humanities,
Lovely Professional University,
Punjab, India

Abstract-

Existentialism which is a twentieth century's probably most influential literary and philosophical movement focuses on individual existence. It has its origin in the philosophical and literary works of Sartre and Camus. Albert Camus was a prominent French novelist and philosopher who vehemently and explicitly denied the charge of being labeled as an existentialist. But there is no denying the fact that existentialist elements were an integral part of all his works. All his renowned works, *A Happy Death*, *The Fall*, *The Plague*, *The Stranger* deal with existential issues. The present paper intends to bring to fore key existential elements in the works of Albert Camus.

Keywords- Existentialism, individual, Existence, vehemently, Elements

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French philosopher, author, and a novelist par excellence. Camus along with Sartre was a major influence on 20th century novelists. He gave vehement expression to existential elements in his works. Although he strongly refuted the charge of being labeled as an existentialist, but no great writer would love to be labeled or restricted to a specific genre. But there is no denying the fact that existentialism is a very strong element in most of his works. His views played a very significant role in the rise and spread of the philosophy known as existentialism. The horrors of the twentieth century, which he calls "a century of fear", shook

him and developed in him an antitheistic existentialist thinker. Camus was preoccupied with issues such as meaninglessness of life, absurdity, irrationality, etc. He believed that in the circumstances of denial of basic rights, human beings revolt and experience existential struggle. Camus's existential aesthetics is prominently expressed in his Nobel Prize winner novel, *The Stranger*. This philosophy which originated in the nineteen forties and fifties concerns with the circumstances and the situation in which humans exist and deals with his feelings, thoughts, actions and responsibilities. Its main focus is to act on one's conviction so that one may arrive at personal truth. Existentialism's focus is to find in hostile world, meaning and purpose of life. The gist of this philosophy is that man himself is the creator of his destiny; he is not predestined by a God or by biology.

Throughout his works he expresses a longing for better life and as a positive humanist he exhorts people to revolt after being baffled by the buffets of the absurd in their life. His revolting hero has to create personal values for himself. "Meaning has to be created, not found, and it has to be created by the individual out of the actual experience of revolt" (Cruikshank 7).

He finds man deprived of grace and justice and wants this revolt to restore man's dignity and honor. In his writings, the rebel protests against the human condition in general, which means all sorts of evil. In his *The Myth of Sisyphus* he explicates that "There is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide and the feeling of estrangement between a man and his life, which sometimes ends in suicide, is the most elementary way of experiencing the absurd" (46). He observes "No punishment is worse than a task that is useless and without hope, the absurd in human being is wedded to life is our rock (164).

Camus, for example imagines man to be a reincarnation of the Greek legendary figure Sisyphus. According to him man feels himself as a stranger in a universe which is deprived of illusion and of light. Man finds himself in an exile from where there is no return for him. This great gap between man and his existence leads man to think of himself as an existential being.

It is extremely clear from the above discussion that Camus shares the prevailing existentialistic ideas of time. But once more, he himself rejects this label and considers this similarity of his ideas with the Sartrean-group as merely the consequence of their sharing the same country with same era.

Camus wrote in his essay *The Rebel* that throughout his life he has opposed the philosophy of nihilism and worked hard to go into the roots of individual freedom. Camus believed in man's ability to fulfill himself and he based this belief of himself in his own experience of humans. As Camus' thought is mostly what we call absurd is similar in temperament, tone and texture with the philosophy of existentialism and like existentialists he is opposed to certain forces or actions which were opposed by existentialists, he is called an existentialist. Although he vehemently and explicitly denied existential thoughts and who was completely opposed to being labeled as an existentialist, he is probably the most famous novelist exhibiting existentialist elements in his works.

The Stranger is a 1942 novel by Camus. This novel's theme and outlook are often cited as examples of Camus's philosophy of existentialism. The publication of this novel marks a watershed in the history of existentialist literature. Camus in *The Stranger* gave to the literary world probably the greatest existential protagonist named, Meursault. Meursault is "a man who has lived a life of the senses in total simplicity and innocent enjoyment, but whom society eventually roots out, humiliates, and crushes." (Masters 19). The main reason for Meursault being excluded by society is that he from the beginning till the end of the novel exemplifies the characteristics of an existentialist man who has no regard for social norms and shows little interest in adhering to them. He showcases the features of an existential hero as delineated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He has a totally indifferent attitude towards life, he lives in the present moment, he believes in his personal will to deal with his destiny and he shows no regard or respect for social conventions and revolts against them. He is a clerk, who is around his thirties and he lives a life of total indifference. In other words it can be said that he does not show any interest towards what is going around him and in his life and he does not act in accordance with society's customs and expectations. Similar to Camus' absurd man in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he "enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules" (44). He reacts in a strange way to the telegram that notifies him of his mother's death.

When we closely observe the character of Meursault he indeed gives a strange feeling about himself and reveals the absurdity of his character. The way he reacts to the news of his mother's death is strange but even stranger is what he does afterwards. He shows as if everything

is normal, he does not show any remorse, he boards a bus to the old people's home where his mother used to live. He takes a sound sleep during the course of his bus journey and after reaching there does not show any wish to have a look at his mother's dead body. Throughout the night he just kept sitting by the coffin disinterestedly, smoking cigarette, had coffee, and even dozes off in the room where his mother's dead body was lying. Even on the day of funeral his behavior was very strange, he focuses on the weather, the sun and even the landscape. He even narrates the very minute details of his surroundings "for quite some time now the countryside had been alive with the humming of insects and crackling of grass" (20). He gave a very vivid account of the weather thus: "All around me there was still the same luminous sun-drenched countryside. The glare from the sky was unbearable" (21). The most startling, disturbing aspect of his personality comes to fore when he gives his observation of the attendees of the funeral.

The way Meursault describes in detail peoples' outward appearance clearly shows his attachment and interest towards what is physical. He does not even spare a thought for his mother and felt no need to reminisce about time spent with his mother or to pray for her soul he just kept on watching the surroundings attentively. He behaved in a strange way as if he was on a tour observing the people closely. He relates further: "I also looked at the warden. He was walking in a dignified way, without a single pointless movement. A few beads of sweat were forming on his brow, but he didn't wipe them off" (21). After the burial of his mother he feels relieved and "joy" at the thought of "going to go to bed and sleep for a whole twelve hours" (22). His extremely indifferent attitude towards his mother's death continues on even during the days of mourning after the funeral. He flirts with, Marie, a former colleague has sex with her and he explains his physical pleasure of the sky, the summer, the water very elaborately:

I was good and as if for fun, I let my head sink back onto her stomach. She didn't say anything and I left it there. I had the whole sky in my eyes and it was all blue and gold. I could feel Marie's stomach throbbing gently under the back of my neck. We lay on the buoy for a long time, half asleep. When the sun got too hot she dived off and I followed. I caught her up, put my arm round her waist and we swam together (24).

Even as we progress in the novel Meursault shows many other existential traits in his personality. No relationship matters for him. Even when a relationship sprung out between him and Marie, he takes it in very casual manner.

The Fall(1956) is a philosophical novel by Albert Camus. This novel is set in Amsterdam. This novel is in the form of a dramatic monologue. It consists of a series of dramatic monologues by the self proclaimed “judge pertinent” Jean Baptiste Clamence. During the course of the novel he delivers a series of dramatic monologues as he reflects upon his life to a stranger. Clamence narrates in detail in a confessional mode his success as a wealthy Parisian defense lawyer, he was extremely respected by his colleagues; his crisis and his ultimate “fall’ from grace, which was meant equivalent to man’s fall in the Garden of Eden.

The Fall considered by many as Camus’ the greatest novel explores the themes of imprisonment, truth, innocence and nonexistence. All these elements are very dominant in existentialist philosophy. Jean Paul Sartre considered *The Fall* to be “perhaps the most beautiful and the least understood” of Camus’ novels. When we deal with *The Fall* which is one amongst Camus’ short masterpieces we come across the most highly personal account of the evil which is located within the individual.

Contrary to Meursault the main character of *The Stranger* whose drawback is that he is pursued by a blind fate and who involuntarily kills an Arab, and who is misunderstood by a hypocritical society, Jean- Baptiste Clamence, The chief protagonist of *The Fall*, is guilty of a specific crime of passivity, he is morally immobile and unable to act, when needed to do so. The central event of the novel is the scene of the bridge in which he does not act and into this inertia, Camus sinks his reader into the darkness of the human condition, offering no improvements or solutions. Readers are left to make for themselves their own judgments. Although the novel is very short but brevity of the words is made up by the quality of the words printed on the page. As one goes through this wonderful piece of work one can feel the effort put in by Camus to produce this piece of excellence. This novel is written in second- person and is a series of broken up monologues as a former lawyer, who describes himself as an ‘intelligent man’ struggles to find meaning in his life. Clamence’s biggest weakness and the overarching theme of the novel is his fear of being judged. When Clamence sees people laughing it fills fear in him as he assumes that people are mocking him. So in a sense laughter for Clamence becomes personification of

judgment. The biggest fall of the novel is the fact that he knows that despite his love for himself and his being judged by others, he knows that he will never stop judging himself. He has reached that stage of life where he has had the self realization that he is a person with flaws, faced with his own guilt of his actions and more importantly his actions and passivity. The lesson that one learns from *The Fallis* that we are never going to be free from judgment. In the modern world of mass media one cannot escape being getting judged.

A Happy Death was the first novel by French writer and philosopher Albert Camus. The existentialist theme of this book is the “will to happiness”, the conscious creation of one’s happiness, and the need that one has of time and also money to find that. This novel draws on the memories of the author. This novel was written and reworked by Camus between 1936 and 1938, but then due to some unknown reasons he decided not to publish them. It was published eventually in 1971 , over 10 years after his death. *A Happy Death* is clearly the precursor to Camus’ most famous work *The Stranger*. It seems that Camus wrote this novel just to hone his skills as a novelist and to test the waters of the literary circles. The chief protagonist of *A Happy Death* is “Patrice Mersault”, similar to *The Stranger’s* main character “Meursault”; both of them are French Algerian clerks who kill a man in cold blood. The only marked difference between these two novels is in the narrative techniques, while *The Stranger* is written in the first person, *A Happy Death* is written in the third person.

The novel is very precise and to the point and is of just over 100 pages. This novel consists of two parts. Part 1 is titled “Natural death”, which describes the vague, hollow and monotonous life of Mersault describing his boring office job and a meaningless relationship with his girlfriend. During the course of the novel Mersault gets to know the rich invalid Roland Zagreus , who shows Mersault a way out of his mundane life; “ Only it takes time to be happy. A lot of time. Happiness, too, is a long patience. And in almost every case, we use up our lives making money, when we should be using our money to gain time.” Mersault then decides to kill Zagreus (probably with his consent) so that he may create his happiness with the rich man’s money.

Part 2, which is titled “Conscious death”, follows Mersault’s trip to Europe in the search for true happiness. He travels from one place to other, from one city to other, but he is unable to find peace anywhere. This also showcases his existential crisis. He then returns to Algiers, buys a home there high above the sea with three young female friends. Although the place is full of all

kinds of luxuries he is unable to find peace even there. He yearns for peace over there. Then subsequently in order to find true happiness he marries beautiful woman he does not love, buys a house in a village by the sea, and moves in alone. He finally retreats within himself, lives a solitary life devoted just to the will to happiness. He achieves a degree of happiness but eventually he falls severely ill and dies a happy death.

So with the help of above study it is evident that existentialism is a very key element in all the works of Albert Camus. There is no denying the fact that Camus played a very important role in the evolution and spread of theory termed as existentialism. He is probably the greatest novelist adhering to the key elements of existentialism.

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