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Philosophical Exploration of Absurdism and Existentialism: A Comparative Study of Kafka's Work *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*

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Abstract *The philosophical stance about the existence of being and the meaning of life has been a widely discussed subject among philosophers and critics. Existentialism says that a man can construct his own meaning of life by making judicious use of his awareness, free wills and personal responsibilities, but absurdism believes that there is no meaning of life out there. The focus of this study is to explore the absurdist and existential aspects in Kafka's fiction The Metamorphosis (1915) and The Trial (1925). This is qualitative comparative research, and the data which have been collected for this purpose is through purposive sampling techniques. In this study, Camus' theory of absurdism and theory of existentialism has been adopted as a theoretical framework. The study explores in what ways the traces of absurdism and existentialism are present in Kafka's fiction The Metamorphosis and The Trial. The findings show that characteristics of absurdism and existentialism are found in both the works of Kafka and are comparable with each other. For future recommendations, a comparative stylistic analysis of these selected novels can be carried out.*

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Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical and literary movement that started in the mid-to-late 19th century and got the popularity in the mid-20th century in France. The philosophical stance of existentialism is that human beings have to define their own meaning of life while living in a meaningless world. They have to make rational decisions while being in an irrational world. The existentialists put their emphasis on the human existence, actions, freedom, decisions that they take and the free choices that they make. Existentialism is the movement that started right after the deadly world wars. They started thinking that there is no transcend force. There is no God who can save them and restore their lives because if there had been God, he would have saved them from the devastations and the destructions which the world wars brought to them. So, according to existentialists, humans have the task to search for their meaning in life. Human beings can accomplish this task of finding the meaning of life by embracing the feeling of nothingness. This is the point where existentialism overlaps with the theory of absurdism. The theory of absurdism was proposed by Albert Camus in which he suggested that man tries to search for the meaning of life, and in the end, he comes to know that his search is all meaningless. What he was searching for, he is never going to find it. Then the individual goes through three stages of life which are: Philosophical suicide: at this stage, he tries to seek help from the religion. Physical suicide: at this point, he starts seeing his life as nothing but boring and meaningless. He believes that by ending his life, he can get some relief. Acceptance: at this stage, he starts accepting the absurdity of the world. He comes to know that the meaning of life cannot be found and embraces the absurdity which he encounters in the world. Existentialism is the reaction towards the three schools of thought which are: the

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atheists-who do not believe in the existence of God; the theists-who do believe in the existence of God, and the agnostic-who say that the question of God's existence or non-existence is irrelevant. The proponents and the great influencers of this movement include Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche; although neither of them used the term 'existentialism' in their writings, they did promote their idea of existentialism through their seminal works. Other existentialists who played an important role in the development of the movement are Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka (1883-1924). Existentialism in the mid-20th century was adopted by other exceptional writers, including Jean-Paul-Sartre, Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). All of these writers utilized the existentialist themes in their works to the fullest. These themes are dread, boredom, pointlessness, meaninglessness, nothingness, absurd freedom, alienation and commitment. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness (1943), Nausea (1983)*, and *No Exit (1944)* used the themes. Likewise, Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)* discussed the pointlessness, nothingness, existential crisis, meaning and purpose of life.

The characteristics of existentialism are the pessimistic vision: the existentialist writers tend to provide pessimistic thoughts and induce feelings of uneasiness in their readers; they probe into the *deep questions* which address sensitive issues such as the existence of human beings, the existence of God, the man-divinity existence, the meaning of being, nothingness and time. They think of these questions as some profound questions which require a profound solution; next is the freedom of choice, in which they say that every human being has the freedom to make choices. So, if he is alive in this world, it is because of his decision of staying alive. Then comes the human existence, who must know the difference between the real being and the abstract entities that he comes across in this world. Individualism and individual ethics are the sixth characteristics that deal the human beings as an independent individual entities, not as a 'part of a whole. Existentialists view individuals without the tags of racism and ethnicity. They are only focused on what is left behind after the removal of these tags, and these are the essence and thought. Individual ethics say that individuals have individual freedom. So, whatever he does by using his freedom does not require justification or explanation. The last feature of existentialism is *emotion*, in which the emotions are paid more attention. As emotions are connected with the process of choice and decision, so these play their pivotal role in the understanding of existentialism. The characteristics of absurdism are somehow closely related to it. The feature of nothingness, pointlessness, and the existence of things that have their meaningless explanations, alienation, tend to dominate the absurdist fiction.

In this research paper, the characteristics of existentialism and absurdism are studied. There are most of the existentialist absurdist features found in the fictions *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* written by Franz Kafka.

Research Questions

- In what ways the traces of absurdism and existentialism are present in Kafka's fiction *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial.*

Significance of the Study

This study aims to approach the text of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* through both the philosophical stances, i.e., absurdism and existentialism and studies these aspects comparatively in detail.

Literature Review

Mondal (2018), in her article, explored the aspects of absurdism and existentialism in Kafka's novel *The Trial (1925).* In her article, she illustrated the novel from Kafka's absurdist view of the world as being unreasonable and devoid of any logical connection with man's existence. In the end, she explains the need for a correct judicial system for the proper functioning of the world, and without it, the world becomes as much unreasonable as it is depicted in the novel *The Trial (1925).*

Another researcher Baysa (2018), investigated the Czech play *Temptation (1985),* which is written by Vaclav Havel. It is a fine mix of absurdism, surrealism and has some traces of futurism. She claimed that the characters long monologue is basically centred upon the theme of absurdism. The monologue keeps pointing fingers at the real reason for the existence of man and the universe. The protagonist of the play is

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offended as even science has terribly failed to explain the actual reason for the existence of the universe.

Couder (2017), in his article, explored Joseph Heller's novel *Catch 22 (1961)* in the light of absurdism. In this novel, the absurdity emerges as a result of the war, which makes everything confusing for the characters. But this absurdity was deeply embedded in the humor; hence the novel represents absurdist humor. The researcher thinks that the mixture of absurdity and humor has proved to be more captivating by the readers, and the message is easily conveyed and comprehended by the readers.

In the same way, I am also studying the traces of existentialism and absurdism in Kafka's fiction *The Metamorphosis (1915)* and *The Trial (1925).*

Methodology

This is a descriptive qualitative comparative study of Kafka's fiction *The Metamorphosis (1915)* and *The Trial (1925)*. These novels had been selected for having being written on the philosophical stances, which are: absurdism and existentialism. These works had been written in the time when absurdity and existentialist views hit the people of the world and shook them to the core. The data had been collected by intensive reading, highlighting the text while reading and coding the text according to the themes of absurdism and existentialism. After that, the selected and highlighted texts had been compared and analyzed according to the aspects given by Camus.

Analysis

Absurdism

Absurdism is defined as "human inability to find any purpose in the purposeless, meaningless and chaotic universe". Prahaladaiah (2019) writes in his paper *"Existential Approach To Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis"* According to Camus, the absurd is produced via a conflict, a conflict between our expectation of a rational, just universe and the actual universe that it is quite indifferent to all of our expectations" (Cline, 2018).

The elements of absurdism are very clear in this novella. It starts from the very first page. The protagonist woke up in the morning "from a troubled dream" (Kafka,1915, p. 01) and found out that his whole body was totally transformed into a beetle or bug type creature. (Kafka,1915, p. 01). Moreover, "The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment" (Kafka,1915, p. 01). After reading the first page, the feeling of absurdity is aroused in mind the of the reader. This becomes hard to digest someone's transformation into a bug. Another anxiety that strikes the mind of the reader is that how that person is going to live in his new body. All of these questions result in more absurd and sorry feelings for the protagonist. This absurdity gets the intensity as the story proceeds. The protagonist, who was a salesman and had a tough routine, and other tensions going on in his life, when he tried to speak for himself, he found out the voice which was just coming out of his mouth seemed unfamiliar to him. "As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it" (Kafka,1915, p. 04). He could not recognize that the squeaking voice was coming from his mouth instead of his real one. Now, it can be seen that not only his body is transformed, his voice, which is part and parcel of person's identity, is also gone. Moreover, the pain which is caused to the protagonist somehow connects the reader to him and his critical situation. He tried to get up and get ready to travel, but he could not do so. Then the chief clerk showed up and asked for his absence; he again tried to get up and, in that struggle, he fell on the ground and hurt himself. The anguish and struggle from which he was going can also be felt by the reader, and so the absurdity.

"He had not held his head carefully enough, though, and hit it as he fell; annoyed and in pain, he turned it and rubbed it against the carpet". (Kafka,1915, p.9)

The traces of absurdism can also be observed in another fiction of Kafka *The Trial.* From the beginning to the end, the novel is loaded with absurd instances—the trial of Joseph. K is absurd in its nature. Neither K. knows the reason behind his arrest, nor it is discussed in the entire story; for example, "he knew he had nothing wrong but, one morning he was arrested" (Kafka,1925, p.1). Moreover, whenever he asked them, they used to say, "that's something we're not allowed to tell you" (Kafka,1925, p. 03). This leaves absurd feelings in the readers.

The place where the hearing of his case was going on was so absurd as well. The room was full of people, and they all were closely standing

actually; they all were pressing each other. The ceiling was also too low that "many of them had brought pillows that they put between their heads and the ceiling so that they would not hurt themselves pressed against it" (Kafka,1925, p. 34). In addition to it, K. observed that neither his case is the ordinary one nor the system of the court and the condition of the offices were according to the norms. He found the court offices situated in the attic where no one would imagine there would be any office of this sort. He was so struck by absurdity when he read the piece of paper "Entrance to the Court Offices" and thought to himself ", was the court offices here, in the attic of this tenement, then?" (Kafka,1925, p. 52). K. was told that the conclusions to which this court had arrived and the decision which they had taken were kept too discrete from the public that even the judges were also not allowed to know them.

In *The Trial,* one of the characters discloses the absurd and superstitious believes of the people about the defendant, which was, the shape of the lips tells whether the defendant will be proved guilty or not. This is what they believed that they would get the idea of the defendant's case by paying attention to the shape of his lips. He also added more absurdity to it by telling Mr. K. that the shape of his shows would be penalized soon. Bypassing through different levels of absurdity, the novel ends by presenting the absurd death of the protagonist, who walked to the altar confidently with two strangers and brought to death by one of them.

The Myth of Sisyphus

The Myth of Sisyphus was given by Albert Camus in 1942. He used the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is condemned for eternity, to roll a rock up a hill, only to have it roll to the bottom again each time and in doing so, he found his meaning of life. This myth is related to absurdity. Following lines of the novella also gives this concept of Sisyphus. Samsa, in order to kill his time, was seen crawling up and down the ceiling, walls, furniture and everywhere.

"To entertain himself, he got into the habit of crawling up and down the walls and ceiling" (Kafka,1915, p.34). "He began to crawl about, he crawled over everything, walls, furniture, ceiling, and finally in his confusion as the whole room began to spin around him, he fell down into the middle of the dinner table" (Kafka,1925, p.40).

The concept of Absurdism given by Camus says that man tries to search for his meaning of life, and in the end, he comes to know that his search is all meaningless. What he was searching for, he is never going to find it. Then the individual goes through three stages of life which are: Philosophical suicide: at this stage, he tries to seek help from the religion. Physical suicide: at this point, he starts seeing his life as nothing but boring and meaningless. He believes that by ending his life, he can get some relief. Acceptance: at this stage, he starts accepting the absurdity of the world. He comes to know that the meaning of life cannot be found and embraces the absurdity which he encounters in the world.

The reaction towards absurdity and the acceptance of absurdity can be witnessed in *The Trial*. In the first scene, when the two policemen appeared and asked him to get ready to meet the supervisor, and left him in the room to get dressed. He came across a wild suicidal thought that they left him alone in the room, where he could kill himself in many ways. After that, he thought about it and found it all meaningless and pointless. In the last chapter of the novel, it can be observed that K.'s response to his trial was changed. When after one year, two strangers again entered his room and took him with them. He thought, in the beginning, he just wanted to get over with this trial, but when it ended, all he wanted to start it afresh.

Pessimism

This is the first characteristic of existentialism which talks about the pessimistic vision of the world. The pessimistic aspects are discussed as in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*. The pessimism can be observed as follows:

Alienation: Samsa, right from the first day of his transformation, felt that he was being alienated not only from his own body but also from all the family ties and the job he was used to doing. K. also was being alienated by his surroundings. Almost every person he met knew about his trial and used to see him as a suspect.

Dehumanizing Treatment: Gregor not only received this dehumanizing treatment from his family but also from the cleaning lady, who was very rude towards him and used to call him out with different names to degrade him. Moreover,

she also hit him with the chair to show her power over him that she can hit him any time she wants. (Kafka,1915, p.51)

In the same way, K. received dehumanizing treatment from the policemen who came to arrest him and the court which was hearing his trial. His authority of asking about his situation was snatched, and no one was telling him the crime by which the charges were pressed on him. He was continuously being treated badly by them (Kafka,1925, p. 05).

Nothingness

This is one of the elements of existentialism and absurdism that a man feels that whatever he does ends up in nothing and gives him no benefits. This is the situation of Gregor Samsa; no matter how much effort he put in his work, all ended up in nothing. He always craved affection, and this is what he never received in his life. "They took the money with gratitude, and he was glad to provide it, although there was no longer much warm affection given in return" (Kafka,1915, p.29).

In the same way, K. was also struggling hard to prove himself innocent, but in the end, he was murdered without letting him know his crime.

Pointlessness

Pointlessness is also like nothingness and one of the elements of existentialism. In *The Metamorphosis,* Samsa tried hard to get up from the bed and continuously moved his thin little legs, but in the end, he realized there is no point in putting effort into it, as in the following lines, it can be observed.

"If he wanted to bend one of them, then that was the first one that would stretch itself out, and if he finally managed to do what he wanted with that leg, all the others seemed to be set free and would move about painfully. This is something that can't be done in bed, Gregor said to himself, so don't keep trying to do it". (Kafka,1915, p.6)

Similarly, in *The Trial,* the existential element is also present. K's trial was something of a different kind. He was continuously told that the effort that he was putting in to prove his innocence was not going to give him any sort of fruit because all the struggles that he was making were pointless (Kafka,1925, p. 96). He was incessantly advised that he had to confess his guilt; otherwise, he will obtain the pointless result just like his pointless efforts. Moreover, the pointlessness is also observed in the organization's purpose of arresting K. about which he remarked, the organization's "purpose is to arrest innocent people and wage pointless prosecutions them, which, as in my case, lead to no results" (Kafka,1925, p. 40).

Hopelessness and Helplessness

Hopelessness and helplessness are one of the greatest features of absurdism and existentialism. This can be seen in every character of *The Metamorphosis.* This is seen first in the protagonist, who hoped to see his mother and then gave up that hope (Kafka,1915, p.35). Then he hoped to be helpful to his mother and sister but still, due to his metamorphosis, he was unable to lend them his hand. "Gregor poked his head out from under the couch to see what he could do about it. He meant to be as careful and considerate as he could" (Kafka,1915, p.38). And when his mother saw him and had a panic attack, he also rushed out to help his sister and mother, but again, he stayed there and proved to be of no use (Kafka,1915, p.40).

Likewise, in *The Trial,* the same level of hopelessness and helplessness is discussed by Kafka in an exceptional manner. The trial of Josef. K. created a lot of trouble and anxiety for him. By keeping in view, the corrupt system of court and extraordinary unknown guilt of K., he was told that maybe in future, the trial might arrive at such stage "where no more help can be given" (Kafka,1925, p. 109), and all the work that he had done, and the documents over which he had invested a lot of time are nothing more than "worthless scraps of paper" (Kafka,1925p. 109).

K. appeared helpless from the beginning of the story. He found that he had no control over the situation, which is the message of absurdism and existentialism. The higher authorities and the people from whom he sought help all proved to be exploiting and harassing K. His helplessness can be felt in the following sentence when he said to Leni, "Yes, they're harassing me" (Kafka,925,p.180). He knew that he was being harassed and manipulated but could not do anything against it.

Anxiety

From the very beginning of the novella, the protagonist was shown to be tangled in a busy, strenuous and tough routine. He had to wake up early in the morning, prepare his samples and

catch the train and reach his office in time. All of these things put extra anxiety on the human brain. He also thought that the profession he had chosen was not fit for him. Unlike other people, he was not enjoying his life (*Kafka, 1915*, p.2).

Similarly, in *The Trial,* the protagonist is also having anxiety regarding his job. As he got entangled in this unexpected case which started giving him trouble at his job, he constantly remained anxious and could not give the proper bank time to the work. Instead, he used to come early to the bank in order to do some of the work for his trial.

Limited Freedom

Limited freedom can be observed in both the novel. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor was remained limited to his own home, and in that home, he was asked to remain inside his room. Only limited freedom was available to him; either he would "lie there the whole night through, not sleeping a wink but scratching at the leather for hours on end, or he leans on the window to stare out of it" (Kafka,1915, p. 32).

K.'s freedom also became limited when the charges were pressed on him. Almost every person he met knew about his extraordinary trial, which had just limited his freedom. Because after getting arrested, he was told that "you can't go away when you're under arrest" (Kafka,1925, p. 02). He was not properly under arrest or not behind bars. But he knew that his trial was going on, and he was bound to stay in the country and be conscious in his actions, as he was no free man anymore.

Dissolution vs Execution

Dissolution is a gradual decay of a human being which can be defined as someone's gradual death. In *The Metamorphosis,* when Samsa faced extreme unacceptance, rejection and agitation from the family for. He slowly started decaying. This process grew faster when his sister, to whom he loved the most, condemned his presence in the house and asked her parents to take him out of the house. After listening to their conversation, Samsa could not hold on to his sadness and disappointment; as a result, he died (*Kafka,1915, p. 61,62*).

Whereas in *The Trial,* K. did not get the slow death; it was more of an abrupt than a gradual decay. He was executed by the two strangers who came to take him to the altar. The scene went like this, K. was made to take his position. One of the gentlemen took out the knife and held it high, and the other gentlemen held the throat of K. The one with the knife pushed the knife inside K. twice (Kafka,1925, p. 202), and with it, the light in K.'s eyes went away.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* contains the aspect of absurdism and existentialism to the fullest. These aspects are absurdism, pointlessness, nothingness, unpredictability and undecidability of the world and other systems; the dehumanizing treatment which Gregor Samsa and Josef. K. received from their surroundings; the hopeless and helpless situation; the anxiety and the continuous struggle; and the absurd and heart-wrenching death of Samsa and K. The whole setting of the novels is based on the absurdity that they induce absurd feelings inside the reader. These two masterpieces of Kafka are loaded with the saddening stories of Samsa's transformation into vermin and K.' baseless trial and the meaningless reason behind his execution that a reader cannot help but being gloomy about these character's soul-crushing death. In Samsa's case, he did not die after being hit by an apple or by a chair; he died when he stopped receiving love from his family. He died because he was very much disappointed and heartbroken. In K.'s position, he died after being the victim of absurd politics of the system. He could not break himself free from the twisting knots of the system and was executed absurdly. In the end, both the characters lost all their hopes and submitted themselves to the world while accepting their absurd situation and left the world.

Future Recommendations

For future recommendations, a comparative stylistic analysis of these selected novels can be carried out.

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