

# Existence is Absurd: A Review of Literature

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DOI: [10.36348/sb.2020.v06i01.002](https://doi.org/10.36348/sb.2020.v06i01.002)

| Received: 14.12.2019 | Accepted: 23.12.2019 | Published: 25.01.2020

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## Abstract

Existentialism is a broad philosophy. Plenty of work of on existentialism has been carried out. The studies are built on individual writers' work and writers' overall background etc. The purpose of this research paper is to investigate majority of the writers' ideas that how they take existence and talk about it in terms of absurdity.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, absurdity, correlation.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the review of literature in order to find out that how writers see existence and absurdity while the objectives of the study are to find out that how existence is absurd and how both are correlated with each other.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Existentialism dates back to Kierkegaard who is regarded as the founder of existentialism hence one cannot overlook history. Socrates said, "If I do not reveal my views on justice in words, I do so by my conduct". Taking this view in mind, existentialism represents a long tradition in the history of philosophy which asks for "care for the self". Its main focus is on proper way of acting rather than abstract set of theoretical truths. In addition, this philosophy further flourished among the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. They focused on ethical questions while asking the proper way to live one's life (1).

In the field of philosophy, there are two different uses of truth. One is Scientific and second is Moral. The Scientific truth is more cognitive and theoretical while the Moral truth is self-formative and practical as, "to thine own self be true" (Descartes, qtd in 1). In this context, Existentialism can be traced out with broader perspective. All existentialists have their own ideas toward existence but share one thing in common that is the issue of existence.

Marcel says, "No two beings, and no two situations, are really commensurable with each other. To become aware of this fact is to undergo a sort of crisis" (qtd in 1). Existentialism is known as individualistic philosophy. Existentialists say that being an individual in one's society is an achievement rather than a starting point. The underlying theme of this philosophy is, "pull in modern society is away from individualism and towards conformity" (1).

Notably, for Kierkegaard, it is "Pleb", Nietzsche refers it to the "herd", Heidegger calls it "Das Man" and Sartre calls it "One" (1). In other words, becoming an individual is a task to be undertaken and sustained but not permanently achieved. Nietzsche speaks about the loneliness of the individual who has risen above the herd. Kierkegaard extended his concept of becoming an individual in his *Either/Or* (1843) and *Stages on Life's Ways* (1845). According to him, one stage is aesthetic, second is ethical and third is religious. The ethical phase is transition phase, the aesthetic phase is phase of immediacy and the religious phase is a phase of fulfillment (1). In addition, Lavine quotes that Kierkegaard cries at the idea of existence,

System and finality correspond to one and another, but existence is the opposite of finality. It may be seen, from a purely abstract point of view, that existence and system are incapable of being thought together; because in order to think existence at all, systematic thought must think it is abrogated, and hence not existing (2).

Kierkegaard admits that there is a paradox in life when he sees the problems of life eternally and divinely,

I put my fingers into existence- it smells of nothing. Where am I ? What is the thing called the world... Who am I? How did I come into the world? Why I was not consulted? (qtd in 2).

For him, the meaninglessness fills him with anxiety, despair, and a sense of hopelessness with deep depression. Kierkegaard elaborates that modern man lives life in despair and in this world there is no one who does not have anxiety in the face of existence. According to him, human life is not designed for pleasure but as a matter of fact, the time which one has for his existence is; when he strives for happiness in order to escape anxiety and depression. Anxiety is not objective. It is subjective. It is the fear of nothingness of human existence. However, he clarifies that only absolute faith and inclination to God can remove the elements of meaninglessness, anxiety and depression (qtd in 2).

Sartrean existentialism is similar to Kierkegaard but the idea of God is different. Sartre views life as an irrational and meaningless sphere. According to him, existence is absurd; life has no sense, no purpose and no explanation. He further says that death is an icing on cake making life more intolerable and ridiculous. He feels nauseated by this vastness, emptiness and pointlessness of life. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) studies humanity and nature of being. He says that arguments for and against the existence of God are equally balanced and no rational arguments can provide final words. Sartre's concept of God is very unique and different. He says that believing in God limits freedom and affects a person's responsibility. He suggests that instead of praying to God and seeking answers in prayers, one must come up with own solutions because man is condemned to be free. He gives three principles of life and existences. These are as under:

- The Problem: Existence is absurd. Life has no meaning. Death is the ultimate absurdity. One is born by chance and dies by chance. There is no God.
- The Solution: One must make use of freedom. Only freedom of choice can allow one to escape nausea.
- The System: Existence precedes essence. Our acts create our essence. Humanity alone exists. Objects simply are. Plants and vegetables occupy an intermediary position.

According to Sartre, existence, freedom of choice and responsibility make essence. He says that existentialism places existence before essence. Man exists before becoming anything hence his existence

precedes his essence. According to Sartre, a man's existence precedes his state of becoming and an individual is responsible for making himself into an essence. According to Sartre, freedom depends on a man's choice. Freedom of choice has three stages expounded by Sartre. These are as under:

The first is the man he compares to a stone; is he; who makes no choices and is happy in his no-choice life. He refuses to take the responsibility of his life. He continues his passive habits. Sartre scorns this type of man. Tutor's portray is an example of this type of man in *The Flies* (1943). The second type is the man whom he compares to plants and he is not happy. Yet, he lacks the courage to take responsibilities for his actions but he obeys others. This is the man who suffers from nausea. The third and last type is the man whom he compares to stones and plants. This man suffers from freedom. He has the nobility to use freedom for the betterment of his life. Sartre admires this type of man hence he says that a man who wants towards become free cannot desire the freedom of the others (3).

Taking about man's conscious being, Lavine says that if one tries to discover human existence by sense perception then one will find that this is a trap because sense perception does not lead to conscious subject. It only leads to external observation. On the other hand, if one tries to find out the path of crisis of communion, a crisis when it happens, it jolts your everyday life. In this situation, you cannot react with your everyday habitual responses and are thrown back to yourself and find yourself in blackout. Lavine [2] says at this moment you become aware of your existence with clarity. Self-discovery is second to existence. Self - discovery can happen any time. This self-discovery further leads to nausea, nothingness, timelessness and absurdity.

#### **In order to define how existence is absurd, six pertinent existentialism themes are given below:**

- Existence precedes essence: This is Sartrean theme. Sartre says that man is a conscious subject. Man is not to be predicted and manipulated because he exists as conscious being.
- Anxiety: It generalizes uneasiness, fear or dread which is not for any specific object.
- Absurdity: The existentialists say that existence is absurd.
- Nothingness and void: It refers to nothingness if there is no existence existence then it refers to nothingness.
- Death is the core of existence: Nothingness in the form of death leads to final nothingness.
- Alienation of individual leads him towards the absurdity and nothingness of life (2).

Griffin [4] says that the existentialists are interested in a man's concrete individuality. They are

interested in discovery and only an individual can understand his state. Above are the two existentialists' ideas about existence. It is noticed that these three philosophers differ in ideas and opinion. Now the question is what actually existence is and how it is absurd? Lavine [2] says that it is about man's conscious being. Existentialism cries out that a man in his conscious being is neglected by philosophy, science and religion.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus scorns the meaninglessness and absurdity of life while Nagel says that absurdity arises from our subjective and objective perspectives on life. According to Camus, the divorce between man and his life; and between the actor and setting constitutes absurdity (5). According to Esslin, absurdity means, "out of harmony" or "ridiculous". Further, Ionesco defines that absurd means devoid of purpose and cut off from his religious and metaphysical life. Ionesco explains absurdity happens when a man and his actions become senseless, absurd and useless (5). The writers of absurd seek to express senselessness of life and inadequacies of the rational approach. The Theatre of the Absurd tries to achieve unity between life's basic assumptions and the form in which these assumptions are expressed.

On the other hand, Giraudour, Sartre and Camus discuss their sense of irrationality of the human condition in logically constructed way. In this regard, the theatre of Sartre and Camus is less adequate than the theatre of the absurd. Ellison says about Camus, "In our disillusioned age the world has ceased to make sense, he did so in the rationalistic and discursive style of eighteenth century moralists in constructed and polished way". Sartre argues,

Existence comes before essence and human potentiality and the freedom to choose itself anew at any moment, he presents his ideas in plays based on brilliantly drawn characters that remain wholly consistent and thus reflect the old convention that each human has a core of immutable and unchanging essence (5).

The playwrights of the absurd try to discover inner contradictions by instinct and intuition rather than by conscious efforts. Particularly, The Theatre of the Absurd argues about the absurdity of human condition by presenting it through concrete images. In addition, The Theatre of the Absurd gives a radical devaluation of language with objectified images of stage itself. Another salient element of the playwright of the absurd is that they represent life in unfulfilling manners, disappointing and frustrated. Nothing seems nonsense than inactivity, hopelessness and waiting and no one comes to eliminate wait and suffering [6].

"The Theatre of the Absurd presents a reality twisted by the distorted existential beings who inhabit it". He further says that alienation and inconsistency result from the irrationality of the society. Characters' senseless routine and unproductive actions present the absurd existence of human life. In this context, majority of the plays have no beginning and no end [6].

Similarly, the chaotic and absurd language produces anxiety and human struggle against existence on the contrary the absurd does not fail to represent reality. Beckett's work is a product of consciousness that is words are incapable of conveying any meaning and inner self. According to Beckett, language is constitutive of the identity of the self this is why the despair of human condition (in his plays) depends on language. In his work, words move in an orbit without any center. Likewise, Ionesco also protests against the language and he is anti- realist as he presents his characters without any communication by language. *The Lesson* (1951) is an appropriate example of destruction and difficulties of communication. Yet, language is seen as an instrument of power in *The Lesson* (5). The professor increases the role of power by using language and words and by giving meaning on his own (5).

Opposite to this, Kafka's work is a guide to perplexed. Kafka, throughout his life tried to attempt that the world is bewildering and his readers are perplexed. His each text cries out for solution yet no solution is given (7). Adorno (8) says about Kafka, "each sentence says interpret me and no one will permit it. Each compels the reaction, that the way it is and with it the question 'where have I seen it before'".

This is evident in his majority of the work like in *The Trial* (1925) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915). The protagonists got nothing except death and Kafka left his readers perplexed and confused. Koelb (7) says that Kafka's writing suggests that life and death are at stake. Moreover, Kafka's writings have methodological qualities. He highlights helplessness, failure and perplexities. Likewise, Broach suggests, "the mythic figure behind Kafka's mythic making stories is the child because children embody the qualities of powerlessness (7).

The writers of the absurd plays are not only concerned with its invention and poetic image they evoked; they are also concerned with the reality and truth of the vision they embody (5). They try to deal with the ultimate human condition in terms of communication through truth and experiences. Particularly, they try to prove that there is a difference between knowing something and experiencing something (5).

Existence is absurd. It is evident in the works of the existentialists and in the work of playwrights of The Theatre of the Absurd. If in the theatre of the absurd words and actions are emptied of meaning, then the existentialists talk about no-being by referring to anxiety. As a matter of fact, anxiety leads to absurdity of life. If the writers of the absurd plays talk about meaninglessness of life then the existentialists try to find meaning in life.

Existentialists say that adopting social or political cause and giving freedom to one's self was one way to giving purpose to a life while the pioneers of The Theatre of the Absurd say that man is helpless and pointless and existence in world is without any freedom and purpose. In addition, the existentialists argue that it is necessary to wonder and to seek meaning for life on the contrary the playwrights of the absurd argue that nothing to be done because no one comes and no one goes.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion indicates that existentialism centers on freedom and choice in order to make life meaningful while the playwrights like Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco build their work on lack of communication, nothingness, timelessness, suffering and chaos. The

protagonists of Sartre and Camus struggle against life but face death while the heroes of Pinter, Beckett and Pirandello remain inactive while saying "finished, it's finished, nearly finished". Thus, based on the above review of literature, it is evident that existence is absurd no matter how one struggles for life by keeping one's self active and by keeping one's self inactive.

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