

Absurd Lives vs. Sacred Values: Comparative Reading of Camus' the Misunderstanding and Islamic Understanding of Human Relationship

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Abstract

This study investigates how absurdity marked by silence and failure of recognition leads to the breakdown of the human bond and how Pakistani values embedded in Islam offer a meaningful framework to such an absurd existence. Concealed identity and the protagonist's inability to recognize in the Misunderstanding reflects Camus' notion of an indifferent world. In contrast to it, Islam emphasizes ma'rfaḥ (recognition), compassion and truthfulness which are the very foundation of interpersonal relationships. This study argues that modern social realities mistrust seems to be permeating force which renders relationships fragile. These modern realities can be found here and there in the play. The Islamic perspective, on the other hand, offers moral responsibility and spiritual re-awakening. The study not only offers insights into addressing the crisis of human relationships in the contemporary world, but it also concludes the dialogue between absurd lives and sacred values enhances Camus' reading of the play.

Key Words: Silence, absurd lives and sacred values, Ma'rfaḥ

Introduction

The 20 century witnessed two horrible World Wars, which rendered the world, especially the Western world chaotic and pushed it to the verge of death. The two wars did not discriminate between men and women at home or fighting in the front line. The youth in the budding were dragged into the fight of egoist nations. The nations that plunged into the devastating wars considered other nations as a hindrance to their progress and an impediment to their well-being. They did not consider them as means to happiness but an obstacle thereby, they turned blind to the rest of humanity. Putting others to eternal sleep, men of the time thought to achieve

peace and happiness. Mother Earth had to embrace and take into her lap millions of people who were put to death. Similarly, millions of people became orphans and homeless. Man became unfamiliar and impersonal to other men, even estranged from oneself. They could not trust the fellow human beings; men who were created to contribute to each other's happiness and share others' pain created an impediment to the fellow beings.

The play depicts the story of Jan who returns home after many years. He wants to surprise his mother and sister by concealing his identity. He does not reveal it to them. His mother and sister who kill wealthy travelers for money. Not knowing Jan's identity, they kill him. This tragedy results from Jan's willful silence, emotional detachment from the sacred relationship of mother and sister. Camus represents the absurd condition of human beings through the absence of communication and dialogue. The absence of communication creates a gap between the comprehensive world of senses and the incomprehensible world beyond senses. The men remain strangers to each other.

In contrast, Islam teaches compassion, love, brotherhood, truthfulness, honesty and mercy. These values are considered sacred trusts and significant components of life. Life of the last prophet and the Quranic injunctions teach empathy and encourage relationships based on truthfulness. Material things and selfish interests hold no place in Islam.

This study compares the crisis of the relationship in *The Misunderstanding* with sacred Islamic values of *Ma'rifa* (recognition), compassion and truthfulness. The study also argues that a lack of sacred values is a sure path to destruction. Also, it argues that Islamic teachings can restore lost men's lost dignity and values.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how Camus represents human relationships in *The Misunderstanding*.
- To explore themes of silence, alienation and emotional disconnection in the play.
- To explore Islamic concepts of *Ma'rifa*, compassion and truthfulness.
- To compare Camus' existential philosophy with the Islamic values of bond.
- To evaluate how sacred Islamic values can address the existential crisis of relationships.

Research Questions

- How does Camus depict the breakdown of relationships in *The Misunderstanding*?
- What role do silence, alienation and emotional disconnectedness play in *The Misunderstanding*?
- In what ways does Islam define sacred human relationships and values?
- How do *Ma'rifa*, compassion and truthfulness stand in contrast with Camus' existential crisis?
- In what ways does Islam address existential relational crisis?

Literature Review

Camus's readers readily classify and label the disavowed self-existentialist as the philosopher of existentialism. His philosophy of existence revolves around the absurdity of man who is helpless in a world indifferent to him. The helpless but conscious man of Camus and the self-absorbed revolts with no end in sight and falls prey to the inevitable conqueror, death. As a result, existentialist scholars interpret Camus as the philosopher of the absurd. The existing scholarship on Camus argues that human beings struggle in a world devoid of meaning and feeling. His essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' conveys the notion that humans yearn for meaning, but their struggle comes to a naught in the world which lacks in meaning.

Scholarship on *The Misunderstanding* interprets the play's tragedy as resulting from two directions: the absence of communication and emotional estrangement. Jan's silence leads to his tragedy. On the other hand, Maratha is obsessed with monetary benefits and worldly comforts. Her obsession demonstrated spiritual emptiness and moral decay.

In contrast with Camus' notion of an unfeeling world, Islamic scholarship argues that the human bond is rooted in divine consciousness which brings harmony and understanding. The Quranic injunctions emphasize that everything in the world is created with a purpose. Human beings are called upon to know themselves and God. Brotherhood lies at the heart of Islam. It encourages values of Ma'rifa, compassion, truthfulness, forgiveness and care for not only fellow human beings but everything in the universe. Without understanding of such spiritual values, human beings will be vulnerable to selfishness, greed, treachery and deception.

Camus has been read widely. The scholarship on him pivots around themes of existentialism and absurdity. The play is rarely seen through the Islamic philosophy. This study fills this gap, compares the play with Islamic teachings and analyzes it through the Islamic concepts of Ma'rifa, compassion and truthfulness.

Theoretical Framework

The study applies a comparative ethical and literary framework by combining existential literary criticism with Islamic philosophy of life. Camus' perspective of absurdity and existentialism is interpreted through the Islamic teachings taken from the Quran and the life of the last prophet, Hazrat Muhammad (SAW). The framework focuses on three Islamic concepts: Ma'rifa, compassion and truthfulness.

Ma'rifa of divine consciousness lies at the heart of Islam. The divine recognition begins with reverence for fellow human beings and is mindful of everything in the universe. It encourages understanding of the intrinsic value of things. Tragedy in play occurs due to the lack of recognition. Jane conceals his identity

Compassion central to ethical values. The first Surah of the Holy Quran describes Allah as the Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate. Every Surah begins with this reminder. Hazrat Muhammad (SAW), the last Prophet, was sent as mercy for the world. Maratha's coldness stands in contrast with the Islamic values of compassion and kindness.

Truthfulness establishes harmony and understanding. Jan decides to hide his identity. It creates confusion and misunderstanding.

Analysis and Discussion

Ma'rifa and Human Recognition

Jan, the protagonist, hides his identity. His mother's and his sister's failure to recognize the sacred relationship symbolizes spiritual blindness. It results from material obsession and worldly comfort at the expense of divine recognition.

One of the Hadith says, 'He who knows himself knows God'. Ma'rifa in Islam argues for recognizing the divine presence through the signs in human beings and in the universe. It enhances awakening and spiritual consciousness. Human relationships contribute to spiritual elevation. Had Jan introduced himself, he would have averted the tragedy and have united with his mother and sister. Similarly, if Maratha had recognized human worth rather than monetary gains she would have been much happier. Also, the mother fails to listen to her inner voice.

Compassion vs Maratha's coldness

The Enlightened idea in the 17th century brought a shift from God-centeredness to man-centeredness and disturbed the keel in the world of thinking beings, especially in the intellectual heritage. To discover one's potential and earn identity people became engrossed in the self. The shift intensified in the 20th century and grew into a deeply rooted tree. Narcissism took deep roots and an individual deemed themselves self-sufficient. This resulted in doldrums, melancholy, moral depressions and Weltschmerz. The solipsistic orientation shattered the very foundation of the human tie that human beings are tied to. People became commodities and ends to means. To modern man, they are detrimental to progress and prosperity. They are taken as barriers. Therefore, nations upheld the idea of wiping out other nations and putting them to eternal sleep. Maratha is obsessed with worldly comfort. Islam argues that the killing of a single person is tantamount to killing the entire humanity. Maratha stands in contrast to it. Her hard-heartedness and emotional coldness embody her existential frustration. She lacks empathy, a virtue that brings human beings closer.

Islam rejects such coldness and greed. It offers the message of love, peace and understanding. Islam insists on being kind to parents, siblings, neighbours and even strangers. The difference between the Maratha's character and Islamic teachings stands at odds. This contrast highlights two fundamentally different aspects of life: one rooted in separation and pain, and the other in sacred moral duty.

Silence and Misunderstanding

Language is the title page of culture. All animals speak with their actions but human beings with language. Conflict management and negotiation requires that you put your view point across clearly and timely. In doing so something running in the mind of interlocutor can be viewed by the collocutor.

Failure to do so may invite consequences beyond redress. This is why man is granted the kingdom of the Earth. By listening to others viewpoint, understanding their stand we can minimize distance and brush aside looming troubles.

Jan wanted to fulfil his duty to help his mother and his sister. Despite Maria's frequent entreaties he withholds his identity. Had he communicated who he was, he would have avoided his death, spared Maria of loneliness which his death caused, slipped away his mother's suicide and helped his understand life by seeking happiness in simple ways of life without scorching sun and without sea. Crisis he invokes is the belief that whatever goes on in the mind of an individual should be in the mind of another individual. A human being has to understand and resign to the fact that he can never be the god on the planet. He can never attain the position to read and decipher the secrets buried in the minds and the hearts. It is only the Prerogative of the real creator of the world. He had better embrace this Reality beyond contestation and question whatsoever. He can never create that utopia and heaven on the Earth. What Jan perceives is unlikely to be perceived by the rest. Havoc he incurred is symbolical to the havoc the world incurred in the first half of the 20th century by not listening to the rest of the world. In his play 'The Rebel' Camus advocates plain use of language, for he believes that misunderstanding leads to death and it was the failure to communicate his identity on Jan's part that leads him to his death.

Metaphorically it is failure of humanity to understand the unsaid voices, to read between the lines and buried emotions. A failure to feel the pain of others as their own is the failure of intellectual journey and of tall claim of reading the universe. Man did not make use of sanity to benefit from intellectual heritage. The Misunderstanding is the misunderstanding of lessons of empathy and of brotherhood. The misunderstanding makes us think other way, for man-centeredness has also failed man. This play questions the very sensitive tie of a mother, sister and wife. Failure to understand respect these relations is the failure to understand the world. Camus does so beautifully by getting his readers to understand that the world is indifferent.

Political-cum-religious dilemma:

"Europe is so sad and she can look vainly for a happy face." Maria

Maria's remark is a reference to a war-torn and war-hit world, rendering Europe into a state of burning. The wars have deprived people. They are not in a happy state of affairs. She asks her husband vehemently to return to their country where they had all: happiness and peace of mind. The two wars that Europe witnessed were meant to gain a superior political hand by challenging all, especially religion so as to serve the vested interests of the nation which proves her power over other. The display of power by killing other people. Albert Camus is the product of such times. In such time people also grew nationalist and patriot in a renewed vigour. Patriotic and nationalistic spirit replaced happiness. Jan is the epitome of this spirit when he tells his wife that happiness is not everything. It is the duty which is of prime importance. And his duty is to find his home and his country.

He thereby chose and used literary genre to express his political and religious dilemma. Similarly uses political philosophy but questions religious philosophy which

creates a gap between the comprehensive world of senses and the incomprehensible world beyond senses. On a similar note Camus questions the injustice and cruelty in this world so as to question the next by declaring everything absurd. Camus failed to realize this very fact that man is both body and soul and the body without soul is rotten simply to be disposed of. Martha's concern aptly points out this fact that she has yearning to go to a place where she can have her soul killed by the sun. Martha's yearning for a place where she is left with no questions can't be the place on this planet even if the sun is scorching. As the powerful nations consider other nations in the way of their happiness so she deems soul in her way of happiness. This orientation creates anguish and metaphysical dilemma and breeds epistemological waywardness. In the words of Rene Descartes a being is both soul and body and it is through the mind that a human being can define and understand the body. He also advocated that religious truths are beyond sensorial experiences so they cannot be substantiated and subsequently stand groundless.

Caught between religious and no religious world, between Algeria and France, he feels pricks of his conscience. This agony is reflected in Martha's mother. She is exhausted of killing people. The nature of human beings is so designed that she feels inclined towards religion. The mundane world in the metaphorical sense has no appeal any more for human body. Everything and all the charms of life grow pale, dull and insipid. She confesses that there comes a time in the life of a being where he finds no place to rest. With it comes the death of high hopes, of making name, of tall and grand buildings to own. This is the built-in voice in human conscience that is revealed in the yearning of Martha's mother. She puts her inner voice before her daughter who convinces her that the voice has no substance. As a result of ignoring this voice, she loses her son who had come to her to be her hand. When she found out that she had killed her own son, the world lost meaning for her and becomes absurd. She becomes indifferent to Martha. The pangs of her conscience become intolerable to her to commit suicide. It resulted from paying no heed to her inner voice.

After Maria discovers that her husband had been killed by her sister, calls on God, for her words fail her, she feels terribly alone. She prays to God because she believes that He will bless her with courage in the face of severe calamity fallen on her. To respond to her prayers, an old man enters and asks if she called him. By doing so he renders religion null and void. He mocks and disparages the notion of God and tries to convince his readers that no help comes from Him. This was the thinking that lead Nietzsche to declare (God Forbid) the death of God. Lack of belief creates an epistemological void and philosophical anguish.

Conclusion

The play presents a hopelessly tragic picture of human reality. It is the reality that is entrapped by silence, emotional disconnectedness, and worldly comfort. Camus' world lacks emotional sensitivity and fails to find intrinsic spiritual meaning. The picture of the world that he paints is uncertain. Language fails and the human

relationships fall apart. Individuals become strangers even within their families.

On the other hand, Islamic values of Ma'rifa, compassion and truthfulness are necessary for recognizing human dignity. These values bring human beings closer, create harmony and preach love. Absence of these values will lead to calamity. And the tragedy in the play is largely due to the absence of these values.

The study argues that Islam provides a moral and spiritual framework necessary for uplift of humanity. It offers a healthy and constructive response to Camus' absurdist philosophy.



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