

THE CONCEPT OF ABSURDITY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S 'A MATTER OF TIME'**Ms. Sheema Quraishi**

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore 'The Concept of Absurdity' in the novel 'A Matter of Time' by discussing the character of Gopal. In this novel, I make the study of Gopal's character who abandons his family when he faces absurd in his life and how his departure is undigested by his family. I analyse in what extent he presents the characteristics of Camus' concept of absurdity which is touching to Indian surface. To avoid vagueness, I will support my statements, interpretations and findings in the light of the study of Albert Camus' The Myth of Sisyphus and Stranger.

Keywords: Absurdism, Existentialism, Meaninglessness, Deconstruction.

Introduction

"Absurdity originally means 'out of harmony' in a musical context. Hence its dictionary definition: out of harmony with reason or propriety, incongruous, unreasonable, illogical."(Martin Esslin, The theatre of Absurd-xix)

Existentialism which refers that human being has his own responsibility to give meaning of his life, henceforth, is free to make decisions and choices and asserts on nihilism while existentialism asserts on providing a purpose to life, absurdism deals with meaninglessness of life. To follow or to crave for a particular object or goal in life has no meaning, so it is meaninglessness to give meaning to life. An absurd discards the reason and logic and one of the perfect examples of 'Deconstruction'. This phenomenon of absurdity or meaninglessness, a layman confronts several times; some struck with and lost touch with the world and believes living is a futile process. Keeping aside religious, aesthetic and spiritual views an absurd tries to make him happy with present having no future and no any past. In the

eye of absurd one each moment has its own worth to live; indirectly an absurd automatically connects with the purpose: purpose of living the moment. Man is still ignorant about his beginning and this ignorance creates hurdles. The delusion leads him towards absurdism. Absurdism is a way of living with new interpretations and completely detached with old ways of living. Although, in Indian context it is very difficult to find a complete absurd like Camus' Meursault in 'Stranger' is not possible but growing and developing India's inhabitants have also some peculiar traits of absurdity from which they are ignorant. The concept of absurdity arises after Second World War in the art of drama and this theme is quite popular, now, in all genre of literature.

Analysis

'A Matter of Time' starts out the concrete and elaborate descriptions of the old big house of Kalyani whose ancestors belong to Peshwa. The comprehensive presentation of the old big house is good enough to demonstrate the prosaic and dry life of inhabiting people in it and we sense the feeling of absurdity which runs through the theme of the novel. The plot of the novel is built on the theme of absurdity and incidents are connected with easy efforts to make a balance in the story. The characters are divided into two categories: one who suffers even identify or pray of the absurdity and other one group who suffers the consequences of the absurdity felt by others.

In this novel to me Gopal is one who shows most of the traits of an absurd among other characters. The speeches he utters are out of other's understanding. Suddenly, Sumi's husband Gopal feels absurdity and he decides to go away from Sumi and his three daughters: Aru, Charu and Seema and moves on in his life. His reason of abandoning his family is beyond other one understanding. Camus says that when man becomes aware of his senseless existence in the world and he finds no charm in day-to-day activities hence the feeling of absurdity arises. To Camus, *"At any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face. As it is, in its distressing nudity, in its light without effulgence, it is elusive."*(*The Myth of Sisyphus-9*)

A man does not turn into an absurd suddenly but the feeling of absurdity is always deep buried in human mind Camus again states, *"Like great works, deep feelings always mean more than they are conscious of saying."*(*The Myth of Sisyphus-8*) Gopal does not accidentally leaves his family. From the initial stages of his life he develops absurd vision in his mind. The absurdity visibly seen several places: he abruptly leaves her sister Sudha and her family in Bombay and arrives at Shivpur without giving any reason and in the next spell of his life he leaves his university job and when Sumi decided to get married

with him, he clearly expresses his absurd thoughts about life which Sumi could not comprehend at that time but now, she gets the depth of the words. *"You said that at any time if either of us wanted to be free, the other would let go. We are not going to be tied together, you said. No handcuffs, you said."*(A Matter of Time-221)

Camus says when once man feels absurd he tries to analyze what is true and what is false. He suspects in the working of universe and the ways of God and he becomes strangers in his own life and he sustains the void inside him. The feeling of emptiness hovers him all the time and at this stage he accepts the absurd. While accepting the absurd, man feels no meaning in life henceforth he tries to commit suicide but Camus asserts that suicide is not the revolt of an absurd. An absurd always livens absurd inside him until death happens naturally. Suicide is never the path on which Camus' absurd run. Gopal, after facing the absurd does not commit suicide. He remains absurd throughout this life and never accepts God's ways of life. Camus thinks that many people commit suicide because they do not find any meaning in life but the same meaning causes the reason of their death. Camus' absurd asserts that life should be lived whether it has meaning or not. *"Living is keeping the absurd alive."*(The Myth of Sisyphus-36) He says, *"In its way suicide settles the absurd. It engulfs the absurd in the same death. But I know that in order to keep alive, the absurd can not be settled. (The Myth of Sisyphus-36)*

Gopal is a perfect exponent of an absurd in Camus' term. When Gopal identifies the absurdity in life, he tries to rethink about each happening and no longer believes in the truths which are long deep lie in human mind. For Gopal life exists only in what we have faith. If believe starts to shake, everything gets changed in a blink. In his facing the absurd Gopal thinks what makes man is only his belief. He says, *"These beliefs are part of people's life; to do away with them is to make a rent in the fabric of their lives."*(A Matter of Time-99)

After abandoning his family Gopal lives with his old student's home and works in his printing press. News no longer remains hideous and gets hold of his family. All one by one comes to know the reason and to persuade him for returning. Gopal rounds off his reason and shows his absurd feeling and thoughts, prepares speeches. When at first, Ramesh comes to see him, he fumbles the perfect words and sentences so that he could let him easily grasp his absurd walk from their lives. He thinks, *"It's a kind of illness, a virus, perhaps, which makes me incapable of functioning as a full human being, as a husband and father."*(A Matter of Time-41) His disbelief in life is more clearly seen in the next line he says. *"I stopped believing in the life I was leading suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I knew I could not go on."*(A Matter of Time-41)

Kalyani, the mother in law of Gopal, aghast and comes to persuade him. Her all surmises when do not fit in Gopal's account and she does not find any satisfactory and desirable reply she irritates and leaves him with complaint. Aru, too, visits with the same purpose as other did; she tries to know the reason on her way but fails, and returns empty handed. Gopal wants to tell her that he was suffering from emptiness inside him which never lit him to go on an easy way, he thinks to tell her, *"I was frightened, Aru frightened of the emptiness within me, I was frightened of what I could do to us, to all of you with that emptiness inside me."*(A Matter of Time-50) He apprehends the void in him unable to fell with anything. In this concern Camus' views are to those of Gopal. Camus states *"Between the certainties I have of my existence and the content try to give to that assurance the gap will never be filled. Forever I shall be a stranger to myself."*⁹(The Myth of Sisyphus-14)

In developing India, where less people read Camus, Kierkgaard and other absurdist writers, it is very typical for an average Indian to understand Gopal's absurd leaving. In India, where rituals, puja, faith in God and the sense of responsibility or duty is the part of man's life, it is almost a crime to leave three daughters: two of marriageable age and one a child. Like a true absurd he senses of being free from all responsibilities and duties. In his contemplations, he utters, *"was a man to be tied to his duties forever? Could he never be free?"*(A Matter of Time-45) Gopal could be free from all duties by embracing absurd as he did. Camus says:

The absurd man feels released from everything outside that passionate attention crystallizing in him. He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules. It can be seen at this point that the initial themes of existential philosophy keep their entire value. The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represent the first step of absurd freedom.(The Myth of Sisyphus-39)

Each of Gopal's relative visits to talk and solve the mystery of his leaving but his mind is beyond of their reach. Premi, Sumi's sister, too, reaches there and she too gets what other had in the response; an unintelligible reason of him. Gopal tries to explain Premi the truth of life and death. He finds life is mere pretensions, a lie which people do not comprehend. He also expresses people's ignorance of their own death which is near to come a day. They go on and on in life while believing in mortality. The emphasis and assumption on suffering, old age, loneliness and death is made but not for their own. He further explicates: *"the day we face the truth that se too are mortal, this is our fate as well, it well become difficult, almost impossible to go on. And it happens to all of us...it happened to me. I stopped believing.*(A Matter of Time-134) Camus opines: *"What we fancy we know and what we really know,*

practical assent and simulated ignorance which allows us to live with ideas which if we truly put them to the test, ought to upset our whole life."(The Myth of Sisyphus-13) He reacts favorably to the meaninglessness of human life and cast asides to be lived for others. *"The meaning has to be found in your own life."*(A Matter of Time-134)

On Aru's emphasis Surekha fixes her meetings with Gopal and Sumitra but she gets only a bit from Sumitra's part. While going through a long discussion with Gopal, Surekha becomes aware about his views which she does not easily digest like others. Gopal says to her, *"our journeys are always separate that's how they are meant to be. It we travel together for a while, that's only for a coincidence."*(A Matter of Time-212) Like a true absurd, Gopal disposes the reason. He does not find any reason to marry Sumi. He believes it was preordained. *"The truth that I was going to marry Sumi, was already there, waiting for me."*(A Matter of Time-66)

The novel widely shows Deshpande's reading of great philosophers: Camus, Kierkgaard and Freud through the character of Gopal. In this novel, he clearly exhibits his reading of them in several places. And this is the main reason that Gopal could easily understand his absurd situation through his speech when he quotes Kierkgaard and Camus *"Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards. Said Kierkgaard."* (A Matter of Time-98) and another place there is elusion from Camus' writing to turn this novel absurd one. *"History exists in the final analysis of God."*(A Matter of Time-99) Gopal's interpretations of Destiny resemblances with one of Freud's theory of conscious and unconscious, when he says, *"Destiny is just us, and therefore inescapable because we can never escape ourselves. Certain actions are inevitable because we are what we are. In a sense we walk on chalked lines drawn by our own selves."*(A Matter of Time-26)

He does not believe in Fate or Destiny or something which is responsible for human actions and is preordained. He thinks human will is responsible for giving different contours to life. *"Beginning lies in desires"* but in some places Deshpande puts contrary views as sometimes he finds some unknown forces working on human mind. Camus reiterates, *"If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable."*(The Myth of Sisyphus-80). Sumi's sudden accidental death shakes her family and the readers too. For Gopal death is nothing but it a battle against life and at a point the battle stops. Sumi's death too could not bring Gopal back in his family. Death leaves only nothingness and blankness but for Gopal it has nothing. He admits the fact and let go on in his way. He cognizes power of time which is a great healer. He thinks, *"Nothing is lost, each*

*moment remains encapsulated in time.”(A Matter of Time-238*After few days of Sumitra's death he left Aru and Kalyani to let them go in their way)

Conclusion

Hence, from the above discussions it can be asserted that the shifting in man's attitude by adopting unique ways is apparent in India. Resemblance of Gopal's character with Camus's conception of absurdity is only to show germinating seeds of absurdity in Indian society which is the main purpose of the writer. Gopal's feeling of absurdity hustles and bustles the life of his family. But life is a continuous process which alters with different course of time and man has unique quality to make pace with time for survival. Although Gopal's departure disturbs other's life but slowly and slowly they learn to cope with the calamity. Gopal's sojourn is the sojourn of modern man who believes there is no permanence in the universe as he says *“acceptance is all”*. (A Matter of Time-244)

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