

## Existence of Absurdity in Paul Auster's *Mr Vertigo*

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### Abstract

The paper entitled Existence of Absurdity in Paul Auster's *Mr Vertigo*, this novel talks about an orphan Walter Claireborne Rawley. His life change when he meets Master Yehudi. Walt is a racist and later he meets Ethiopian boy Aesop and the Indian Mother Sioux. The depiction of diversity makes the concept of Existentialism more interesting. Master Yehudi teaches Walt how to fly. Life is all about learning new things every day; Walt learns to have respect for other people and other nationalities. At a certain time Walt becomes highly self obsessed with all his success and knowledge about somersault. The Existence of Walt is Absurd. Throughout his life he waits for happiness and success. Walt is a perfect example of Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy of Existence Precedes Essence, what you are (your essence) is the result of your choices (your existence)

The paper tries to examine the absurd characters, the Androcentric absurd world the psychological absurd existence and the Narrative technique of American Writer Paul Auster in his book *Mr Vertigo*.

**Keywords:** Absurd, Existentialism, Androcentric, Identity, Nostalgia, memory

“People say that what we're all seeking is the meaning of life.....I think what we're really seeking is the experience of being alive.”

Rudyard Kipling

The notion of Absurd contains the idea that there is no meaning in the world beyond what Meaning we give it. The term “Theatre of the Absurd” was coined by Hungarian- born critic Martin Esslin in 1961. The term refers to a particular type of play which first becomes popular during the 1950s and 1960s.

According to Esslin absurd means illogical, unreasonable and ridiculous and nonsensical. Esslin states that the Theatre of the Absurd talks about the absurd human condition. Absurd plays questioned the nature of human existence by presenting a world with logic or morals, and without the using conventional dramatic language, plot and narrative. Absurd elements first made their appearance shortly after the rise of Greek Drama. Different writers has different views on the concept of absurdity some said, Absurdity is not a negative aspect; somehow it is profitable for humans as we are responsible for our life and its decisions and choices. According to some writers and philosophers animals' life is not absurd, but at the same time it is not meaningful. Some suggests that humans have a sense of the absurdity in life that makes our lives meaningful. While according to few writers and philosophers Absurdity is a negative aspect; which leads us towards death or if we are alive then we can only exist to find a meaning in life. Absurd means hopelessness towards life, wherein life seems meaningless for human beings. He examines that this modern age is an age of distress. The theory of Absurdism and the philosophy of Existentialism always talks about individual being. The people have been dealing with the problem of existence since ancient times. Every single day nomads struggled to save their existence on earth. Till today every single being is struggling to get identity and to exist on the face of earth. Existentialism stressed the meaning of human existence, freedom of choice and the uniqueness of each individual. Existentialism emerged after world war first and become influential after world war second. The two wars shattered the hopes and confidence of man about his existence and also about the existence of god. The root of existentialism was introduced by Socrates "know thyself". Socrates first questioned human existence. He saw a man as an object of discovery (why he exists, how he can enjoy absurdity etc.) Plato had many existentialist elements in thinking. Plato talks about transition from existence to essence or from essence to existence.

Existentialism emerged as a movement in 20<sup>th</sup> c. literature and philosophy. America stood somewhere separate from Europe during the emergence of Existentialism, American culture has much understanding for Existentialism and it has found a pleasurable home in America. American unlike Europe was relatively untouched by the wars, at least on its own soil. But the existential view is similar as Europe. America saw its own bloodbath in its Civil War from 1861 to 1865, between the North and the south. The civil war was a result of the controversy over the enslavement of black people. As America was born and grew up at roughly the same time as existentialism, there are unavoidable parallels in their development. The repetitive themes in modern American novels are war, revolution, disaster, images of rebellion and the theme of nothingness create disinterest in readers and therefore, the contribution of new ideas, stylistics

and techniques could bring interest in the existing genre of absurd readings. The American Absurd fiction writers imitated others' forms and subject matter without focusing on the idea to imitate 'Life'. However, it was felt that the American Contemporary Novelists can consider both, the themes of meaning in life and meaninglessness in life equally, developing them simultaneously in an organic manner. Thus, the form and themes should not be imposed upon writers. Some Famous American Existential writers are; Eugene O' Neill, Edward Albee, Saul Bellow, Walker Percy, Paul Auster etc. The meaning that is to be found in this world must be established by each person from within the sphere of her own individual existence. A person who supposes that the meaning comes readymade or that there is an ultimate purpose of human existence established externally by a deity or deities is shying away from reality and living a lie. The basic themes of existentialism are the gap between abstract reasoning and life, the problem of communication, the problem of Transcendence Man and God, Existence Precedes essence, Time is of the essence, Humanism, Freedom/ responsibility and ethical considerations are paramount.

**Paul Auster** was born in New Jersey in 1947. He is an American writer and film Director. He wrote fiction, poetry, screenplays and essays etc. He is the author of *Mr. Vertigo*, *Leviathan*, *The Music of Chance*, *Moon Palace*, *In the Country of Last Things*, and the three novels known as The New Trilogy: *City Of Glass*, *Ghosts*, and *The Locked Room*. His other books include *The invention of Solitude*, A memoir; *The Art of Hunger* etc. Major themes in Auster's writings are solitude, identity crisis, lack of communication and portrayal of aesthetic life. Some readers described him as the epitome of the postmodern others have described him as virtually premodern, while some criticized him for not developing full characters. *Mr. Vertigo* has different themes like failure, identity and genres like Absurdist fiction, crime Fiction and existentialism. While on the other hand *The Book of Illusions* is a novel in which Hector Mann is a character who was in search of Mr. Zimmer. Mr. Zimmer lost all his happiness, when he was working as a silent comedian. While Hector Mann found his happiness when he was saw a silent movie of Zimmer.

Vertigo means a sensation of whirling and loss of balance, associated particularly with looking down from a great height or caused by disease affecting the inner ear or giddiness, loss of balance etc. The writer shows the development of the story, along with the development of the protagonist Walt. The story is like a roller coaster reader enjoys the ride whether it goes up or down. In the beginning Walt is nothing as the story proceeds he become something and then again at the end nothing. In the beginning Master Yehudi said 'You know nothing because you are nothing' (*Mr Vertigo*, 3) at the end of the story we found Walt said 'You can't get something for nothing, and the bigger the thing you want, the more you're going to

have to pay for it' (Vertigo, 277) Walt is a perfect example for Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy Existence Precedes Essence. Walt is the result of his choices. Throughout his life he worked hard to become an artist. The art which he learns by Master Yehudi is to fly. In the beginning when we found that Walt is learning how to fly, the art of flying looks absurd. How can a man fly, it's for birds but later Walt made us realize that nothing is impossible for hard work. As he said: 'If I failed once, I failed a thousand miles, and after a while I felt so disgusted, so bedeviled by incompetence, that I look to throwing tantrums and pounding my fists on the floor. At last, in the full flush of anger and defeat, I picked myself up and jumped straight into the wall, hoping to smash myself into unconsciousness'. (Mr Vertigo, 80)

This shows that Walt is a character who failed many times but never stopped learning; it's a journey from nothing to Walt a Wonder Boy. The other characters are Master Yehudi, Aesop, Mother Sioux and Uncle Slim. In this novel we can notice that the women characters are very less. The one is Mother Sioux and another is Aunt Peg. We can say that the novel is Androcentric. Most of the American Absurd writings and writers are Androcentric, like Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka etc, the Protagonists in their writings are also male. This is how in this modern era women are neglected and the other reason could be that only male is the victim of Absurd conditions. In most of the famous Absurd Plays i.e. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the absence of female character makes Absurd plays Androcentric.

It is said that the philosophy of existentialism emerge after world war 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. The blood bath of war arouses the questions on human existence. In the novel Mr Vertigo the Ku Klux Klan kill Aesop and Mother Sioux and set the house fire. This makes our life more absurd. Life and death are two major symbols of existence. It is said that we all are waiting for death. Death is our ultimate destination and for achieving this destination we accept our existence whether It's Absurd or not. In Albert Camus Essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the protagonist Sisyphus Accepts the Absurd life enjoys. Camus, in this philosophical essay suggests that the acceptance of absurd life doesn't mean committing philosophical or psychological suicide. Camus has used the character of Sisyphus, a figure from Greek Mythology in order to explain the idea of Absurdity in life. His punishment, to roll a rock up a mountain only to have it roll back down to the bottom when he reaches the top, symbolizes the absurd human condition. At last, Sisyphus tried to find happiness in his absurd life without any hope of success. In the novel *Mr Vertigo* the death of Aesop, Mother Sioux, Uncle Slim and Master Yehudi symbolizes that how life is absurd. Walt who witnessed every ones death understands the meaning to life, as he said;

'When a man comes to the end of the line, the only thing he really wants is death.' (Mr Vertigo 254)

Waiting for death makes our life more absurd but at the same time it gives an opportunity to enjoy that absurdity. In the complete novel the only reference of Vertigo appeared twice once Master Yehudi calls Walt that he will change his name as Mr Vertigo if he will fail as Walt the Wonder Boy. Then at the end Walt open a night club by the name of Mr. Vertigo. This shows that how Walt's life is losing balance and he is struggling to get an identity as the owner of a night club.

The narrative technique of an absurd writing makes it more absurd buy adopting certain techniques, like short, cryptic sentences, lack of communication, importance of silence and absurd environment. The modern American Writers are still following the old techniques of writings. They should have followed only the theme of absurdity. The new techniques could bring more interest in Absurd writings. The narrative technique of *Mr. Vertigo* makes this novel more interesting the story moves forth and back which brings suspense and interest to the readers. The story is in the voice of protagonist Mr Vertigo. The use of short sentences gives it an effect of absurd writing i.e. 'I know who I am' (20) the lack of communication makes this novel more absurd in very few scenes we found Walt and Yehudi sit and talk and whenever they talk they talk about Somersault. Communication brings understanding in our life and the lack of communication makes our life difficult. In this novel the symbol which makes the environment more absurd is death of approx every major and minor and major character and Night club is also an important symbol of absurdity. Club is a place full of noise and in the contrast night is a symbol of peace and silence. This makes our life difficult and shows that life is like a night club either we can concentrate over the darkness around us or we can concentrate over a little noise in between the darkness and we can enjoy our absurd life. The other important symbol is hope from the beginning till the end Walt never lose hope as he said; '...Following whatever road would take you in a right direction...' (198) the character of Walt is just like Camus's Sisyphus from the beginning till the end he is very hopeful towards life. Walt accepts his absurd life and enjoys it fully. It is said that art is a way to escape from this absurd life for a short period of time. In this book also the art of Somersault is a way to escape from this real absurd life for a short period of time. Just like Somersault writing is also a way to escape from this absurd life. In the book we found Aesop wants to write autobiographies about which he was confused.

"One day he was going to call this book *Confessions of a Negro Foundling*; the next day he changed it to *Aesop's Adventures: The True history and unvarnished opinions of a lost boy*; the day after that it was going to be *The Road to Yale: The life of a Negro Scholar From His Humble Origins to the Present*. (Mr Vertigo 84)

We can say that every writer writes to escape from the real world and live a new life in their writings. The same for a reader who reads a book in order to escape from the real life and try to find happiness in other illusionary world for a short period of time. This book Mr Vertigo by Paul Auster is also an escape from his real absurd life. The art of fly is Absurd the whole novel is based on Absurd elements which makes the environment more absurd. This novel is a perfect example of existence of absurdity in this modern era. In this materialistic modern era we all are searching for our meaning of existence. In our existence the existence of absurdity is a part of our life now it's up to us how we enjoy this Absurdity.

### **Work Cited**

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