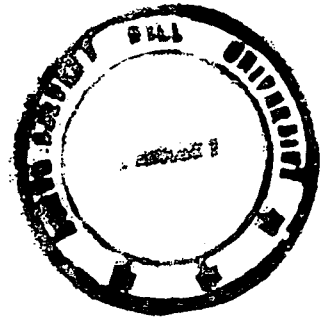


THE VISION OF THE ABSURD
IN
KAFKA AND CAMUS—A SELECTIVE STUDY

Datta
Manuj Kumar Dutta

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES



THESIS
SUBMITTED
IN
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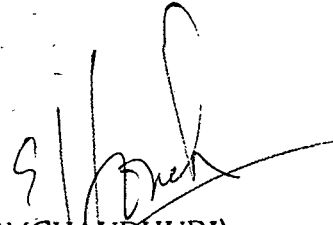
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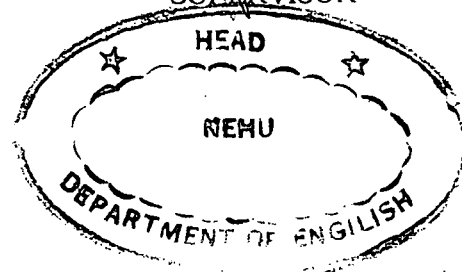
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Certified that the dissertation entitled "The Vision of the Absurd in Kafka and Camus — A Selective Study", submitted by Manuj Kumar Dutta embodies the record of original insights carried out by him under my supervision.

He has been duly registered and the dissertation presented is worthy of being considered for the award of the M.Phil. degree.

Dt. 28 November 1985.


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C O N T E N T S

Supervisor's Certificate

Acknowledgement

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SHILLONG

The 28th Nov. '85

Manuj Kumar Dutta

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PREFACE

"At the centre of European man, dominating the great moments of his life, there lies an essential absurdity."

- Andre Malraux

Kafka and Camus are two great names in modern European literature. Volumes have been written on them by writers of global reputation highlighting various aspects of their literary genius. In this work I have made a limited attempt to focus attention on a particular theme - the experience of the Absurd - which they share and to which they give such compelling expression, though in their distinctive ways.

Kafka and Camus are deeply committed to the urgency of their time. Their vision of the Absurd offers an image of the perplexity of the modern age resulting from certain tearingly felt contradictions and from the malaise of the twentieth century. The works of these two writers represent not merely the mirror-image of this age, they depict with fidelity the lived experiences of the writers. In their works we can see the living human predicament in the midst of the terrible tensions and conflicts of existence, the failure to preserve the wholeness of being - the predicament which makes for the feelings of dread, anguish and world-weariness.

Owing to the constraints of time I have had to restrict the scope of this study to the examination of some selected works of Kafka and Camus. I can only hope that this does not weaken the strength of my argument and the points I have tried to make. I have divided the entire work into four chapters, namely, (1) The Introduction, (2) Kafka and the Absurd, (3) Camus and the Absurd and (4) Conclusion.

In the first chapter I have presented a general background of the vision of the Absurd and have attempted to identify the Absurd with alienation as a social phenomenon. I have also tried to present a picture of the milieu which made the emergence of Kafka and Camus almost inevitable.

Chapter II deals with Kafka's vision of the Absurd with particular reference to his The Metamorphosis, The Trial and The Castle, where Gregor Samsa, Joseph K. and K. are perplexed beyond endurance by the intricacies, equivocations and ambiguities of the world and they find themselves in the midst of the unfathomable darkness extended to endless dimensions where their attempts to escape or advance prove abortive and they are seen eventually either to grope in the void or perish.

In Chapter III I have tried to present Camus's vision of the Absurd with reference to The Outsider and The Plague. The Outsider is a case-study of Meursault's feeling of the absurdity of existence. The society in which Meursault lives demands that

from birth to death every action of a man should be formalized in deference to certain conventionalised norms. But Meursault refuses to disguise his feelings and to perform the set hypocritical rituals. This brings contradictions which make his existence absurd. In The Plague the individual predicament of The Outsider takes a universal shape.

The final chapter, 'the Conclusion', recapitulates and reinforces the findings recorded in the earlier chapters. It also attempts a brief comparison of the insights of the two authors as reflected in their characters and situations.

SHILLONG
The 28th Nov. '85

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CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all?

- King Lear

The dictionary meaning of the term 'absurd' is:

"Inconsistent with reason or commonsense; ridiculous, illogical; contradictory; out of tune."¹ According to Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language: "An absurd man acts contrary to the clear dictates of reason or sound judgement. An absurd proposition contradicts obvious truth." Again the absurd is defined as "the state or condition in which man exists in an irrational and meaningless universe, and in which man's life has no meaning outside his own existence."² In his conversation with Eugene Ionesco, Claude Bonnefoy casually queried about Ionesco's conception of the word 'absurd' and Ionesco replied:

"The 'absurd' is a very vague notion. May be, it's the failure to understand something, some universal laws. It is born of the conflict between my will and a universal will; it is also born of the conflict within me and myself, between my different wills, my contradictory impulses: I want simultaneously to live and to

die, or rather, I have within me a movement both towards death and towards life. Eros and Thanatos, love and hatred, love and destruction, it's a sufficiently violent antithesis, isn't it to give me a feeling of 'absurdity' ".³

Charles I. Glicksberg writes:

"The myth of the absurd as embodied in modern literature contains within itself, like the literature of the absurd, a number of embarrassing contradictions. To begin with, it is impossible to communicate the absurdity of existence, it can only be suggested. No writer committed to the myth of the absurd actually believes that myth applies to his own creation."⁴

The contradiction between the reality and unreality of the universe, between its transparency and opacity gives rise to the vision of the absurd.

The absurd is the feeling of being in the world and yet of not being a part of it, of not belonging to it. It is born of a dialectical pattern of relationship, an antagonistic dualism between two elements — the irrationality of the universe and man's quest for a rational existence. The absurd illuminates the predicament or plight of man's existence in the face of the obtuseness of an incomprehensible world. The knowledge of a lack of purpose in

this tuneless universe produces an existential anguish which is noticeable in the writings of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and others. There is an insatiable hunger for authenticity in man but he faces an absurdity of life where his hunger is mocked and remains unsatiated. Man is in search of a rationally ordered universe, a companionable cosmos but instead he finds a chaotic and irrational existence, Master^s Brian writes:

"What is absurd is the relationship between man and the objects of his understanding, the link which ties man to the world. The world is not absurd, it is irrational, incongruous. The absurd is born of man's dissatisfaction with this irrationality."⁵

The absurd is therefore born of the lack of correspondence, or the divorce between the chaos of the universe and man's need for unity. "It is the eternal disparity between man's need for coherence and order, and the world's stubborn disorder and incoherence which constitutes the absurd."⁶

It is the result of man's failure to establish a relation between himself and the universe. In other words, it is the lack of correspondence between man and his universe. Man's aspirations are thwarted by the irrationality of the universe. Man's yearnings are at odds with his frustrating

experience. He wants to perceive this world as a familiar and comfortable home but this urge is frustrated by the unfamiliarity of this universe. While seeking an explanation of his existence, man is betrayed time and again by the "unbridgeable gulf between rationality and experience."⁷ Man fails to explain the irrationality of his existence in terms of reason. The patterns of his existence are felt to be without meaning and value. His reason becomes ineffective to make a value judgement of life. In short, some kind of disruption occurs between the individual and his day-to-day existence. The resulting feeling of alienation between man and his life is the most elementary way of experiencing the absurd. "In short, reason is unable to sound the human dilemma while man is condemned to live in it. Man finds himself plunged into a maze of irrationality that rests impervious to his reason. Do what he may, he remains surrounded on all sides by the walls of the absurd."⁸

Within the limits of his absurd existence man becomes a self-closed individuality, a prisoner of his own self. His search for a meaningful existence eludes him. He lives in a universe the key of which is lost and this

imprisoned condition proclaims the fundamental absurdity of his existence. No rational system is available to escape this dilemma. Now, being cut off from society, and living in an enclosed self, man becomes a fragmented being, he starts shrinking in stature. His absurdity is reflected in his divided self. He finds himself totally isolated from his setting. Ionesco in an essay on Kafka defines this absurd situation as "that which is devoid of purpose cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."⁹

The literary representation of the sense of absurdity has a long history. In modern times, the vision of the absurd has found expression in different forms in the writings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Marx, Dostoevsky, Freud, Sartre, Kafka, Camus and others. This vision can be traced back to Greek tragedy. Everywhere we find that the absurd is the result of a fundamental conflict between man and his situation. Contradiction is the fundamental diagnosis of the absurd, though this contradiction manifests itself in various forms in various times. In Greek tragedy it is the conflict between the

individual and the inscrutable divine forces. In the primitive ages it was a conflict between the individual and the preponderant natural forces. In the Middle Ages the conflict was between the individual and feudalism along with its superstructure, religion. In modern times we find writers projecting man as grappling with the problems of the vacuity or even malignity of existence, limitation of reason and absence of faith in an objective God. Modern man, confined within his consciousness, confronts an alien world outside himself. The contradiction for him results from his quest for truth and the countervailing realisation that there is no truth to be found. His search for the absolute, the craving for cosmic harmony and the quest for freedom become futile. In Marx, the absurd is born of the breach between the individual man and the system of production. In Camus, the sensation of the absurd is born out of a confrontation between man's need for clarity and unity and the irrationality of the universe. In Beckett, the act of waiting for God is shown as essentially absurd; it is a conflict with an irremediably static situation, a stagnancy of life: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful."¹⁰ Glicksberg writes:

"Beckett, in contrasting the infinite aspirations of the soul with the wretched limitations of the body, writes in order to demonstrate the impossibility of saying anything meaningful about the fate of man ... His heroes ... cannot be sure of their identity or distinguish between what goes on in their consciousness and what takes place in the world about them."¹¹

In Ionesco the absurdity springs from the anxieties arising from the uncertainty of one's own identity, from the difficulty in communicating with the mechanical conformity of society. He invests his characters with significance by disclosing the underlying meaninglessness of existence and the failure of human communication. "Ionesco's problem is that somehow the phrase whose very essence is meaningless insignificance should become significant without thereby becoming meaningful. It must visibly destroy itself, reveal its own absurdity."¹² In Kafka, the impossibility of either affirming or rejecting life reaches the climax of ambiguity thus giving rise to the absurd. The protagonist of his fictional world is caught as if in a spider's net and is punished without discernible reason. The desire of the protagonist to have a knowledge of his existence conflicts with the ambiguity and malevolence of a circumambient order. Kafka's characters are trapped in a nightmarish world.

In Kafka's major works the absurdity of man's condition has found a definitive expression. In his fictional world we find a clash between an irrational world and man's hunger for rationality. Kafka depicts this contradiction through an antagonistic co-existence of two elements — societal and individual. Society is hierarchical, hide-bound and demonic and the individual is trapped and undermined. Kafka depicts the irrationality and horror of existence through his dream-narratives. Kafka's characters find themselves both out of touch with their own setting and victims of it. His works at once reflect the experience of human isolation and the terror that results from an equivocating and malignant system imperilling man's situation. The absurdity of Kafka's characters springs from the cleavage between them and their environs. They live in a society with which they cannot interact meaningfully, a society which punishes people without assigning any reason, a society where the slightest error is followed by the gravest punishment. All through his works Kafka can be seen trying to strip the mask of hypocrisy off the face of society and to get at the truth.

In Kafka man is compelled to face the trial of life

in a universe whose pattern and temper are not only uncertain and incomprehensible but have a dehumanising and pulverising aspect. His anxiety and forlornness register in his monstrous appearances as in the case of the zoological transformation of Gregor Samsa. Kafka's protagonist tries to commune with this world but his attempts prove to be futile in the face of its contrary character. "Man's life passes in a series of crisis in which the veiled presence of 'the law', acting through impersonal agencies (the govt. the police, the office, the castle, and so forth), demonstrates the futility of human effort."¹³ It is a fundamental characteristic of Kafka's writings that his protagonists suffer and are condemned to die without any knowledge of their fault. "The protagonist in Kafka's fictional world is hunted down and caught and disposed of, without reason."¹⁴ Kafka was profoundly concerned with the meaning of human existence which he found to be enigmatic and elusive. His characters are stricken with an absurd sense of the utter futility of their quest for meaning. He presents his characters as victims of a system of justice which is incomprehensible as well^{as} irrational. In the midst of the incomprehensibility

of the world, Kafka's characters experience a corresponding sense of emptiness, a loss of identity. This loss of identity cripples them and makes them retreat within themselves. An acute sense of anxiety and forlornness slowly consumes them. Their vitality is gradually dissipated. Through the plight of his protagonists, Kafka presents the plight inherent in the age. "If Kafka is such a vital literary figure today, it is because he expressed with such controlled dramatic irony the desperate plight of twentieth-century man, cut off from all sources of transcendence."¹⁵ Kafka's characters are lost in a labyrinthine world, a world of night-marish entanglements which puzzle them but provide no exist^{ence}. They are in a perplexity from which there is no escape. Kafka's works thus present the conviction that the human condition is beyond understanding and beyond hope. He describes the horror and anxiety, the solitude and wretchedness of man who is defeated and degraded by his absurd condition.

Life, as Kafka portrays it in his writings, does not follow any rational pattern. The tensions inherent in his writings result from the contradiction between

reality and illusion. His heroes live in a mechanised world that is marked by alienness and incomprehensibility. They are uprooted from their normal setting and are cast out in an exiled state where they feel homeless and menaced. "With disconcerting irony Kafka projects the 'why' of existence against the background of the 'what', the given, and thus gives birth in his fiction to the category of the absurd."¹⁶ Kafka symbolically presents the mysterious appearances of reality, the insanity of mind, the torment of existence and the nightmare of meaninglessness. His protagonists are in desperate search of truth. But their yearning for truth is countered by the impossibility of attaining it. Here the contradiction arises and this contradiction enthrones the absurd. Kafka's "unwillingness to reconcile himself to the dominance of the irrational generates in his world a conflict which, though he is unable to resolve it, makes up the structure of the tragic vision."¹⁷ The situation of Kafka's protagonists reflects the fundamental insecurity of man's imprisoned condition. His novels and short stories describe the nightmares, obsessions and anxieties of modern man in his damning alienation. The nightmare of Joseph K. accused of a crime of

which he has no knowledge or the predicament of K, the land surveyor, or the tragedy of Gregor Samsa, uprooted from his family setting by his sudden zoological transformation and his struggle to cling to and reassert himself — all these express the absurd and the tragic situation of modern man.

✓ The Myth of Sisyphus crystallizes Camus's fundamental concept of the absurd. This book is a magnificent exposition of the central idea of absurdity and is thus of enormous importance in trying to grasp the vision of the absurd. When Camus wrote The Myth of Sisyphus, the notion of the absurdity of human condition was not entirely unknown. Both Sartre and Malraux had familiarised the world with the concept of absurdity through their works. But The Myth of Sisyphus has been the first major step in the search for positive values that could justify man's existence in a meaningless world.

Camus's writings represent an obsessive aspect of modern consciousness — the theme of the absurd — which reflects the plight of modern man's absurd forlornness

in the face of an unknowable world. In The Myth of Sisyphus man's exiled condition is called 'absurd'. Man impulsively aspires for intelligibility and coherence which is countered by the incoherence and indifference of the universe. "The absurd is born from this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."¹⁸ In Camus the absurd has been articulated with a distinct accent. According to Camus, a sense of absurdity is most likely to arise in one of the following ways. Firstly, there is the absurd routine. The mechanical ways of modern living may one day cause men to question the value and purpose of their existence. Camus writes:

"It happens that the stage-sets collapse. Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm — this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement."¹⁹

Secondly, an awareness of the absurd finds its source in an acute sense of time passing, bringing man nearer to death. Thirdly, there is the sense of the arbitrary character of life, the sheer contingency of existence, the

sudden awareness of the alien nature of the world and, finally, we may possibly experience the absurd through an acute sense of our fundamental isolation from other human beings.

Camus writes:

"A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity."²⁰

The absurd, as Camus sees it, is the result of the disparity between man and the intransigent world. : "... the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation."²¹ He says: "Absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together."²²

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The absurd is the antithetically juxtaposed rational man in an irrational world. The absurd is man-in-the-world. It is the contradictory combination of the rational man in a non-rational world. The absurd is contingent upon both elements of the opposition; it is the link between them. The world presents itself as irrational, hostile and opaque and the conflict between man's desire for complete knowledge of the world and the presence of the unknowable world is responsible for the absurd condition of man. While discussing Camus's vision of the absurd, Arnold Hinchliffe says: "The absurd, for Camus, is an absence of correspondence between the mind's need for unity and chaos of the world the mind experiences."²³

Now Camus says that the world itself is not absurd. To quote from The Myth : "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together."²⁴
The absurd occurs when two terms clash — the desire of

the human mind that the world should be explicable in human terms, and the fact that the world is not thus explicable. The absurd thus is born of man's desire for clarity in this universe, a world that can not satisfy it and the perplexity arising from the confrontation of man and the world.

Camus fundamentally differs from some contemporary existentialists who equate the irrational character of the universe with the character of man. Camus agrees that the universe is irrational but he finds man both rational and meaningful. "Separating man from his universe by virtue of this rationality, Camus agrees that human life can have value and purpose, though the chaotic universe stands in powerful refutation. In reality, then, man and the universe are antithetically related giving the age-worn struggle between good and evil the form of rational man versus irrational nature, and the good life must be lived not in harmony but in defiance of the natural order of things."²⁵ The world is seen as a gigantic and monstrous force against which man must fight a forlorn battle. When man confronts the irrational world,

he feels within him a desire for happiness and reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human appeal and the unreasonable silence of the world.

Can the absurd be overcome? Can it be either annihilated or remedied? According to Camus, the obvious response to the absurdity of life is suicide — physical or philosophical. The Myth of Sisyphus opens with the sentence ---- "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." But Camus rejects physical suicide on the ground that "If the absurd results from the clash between the demand for clarity and justice and the 'unreasonable silence of the world', it cannot be resolved by destroying one term in the polarity which gives rise to the problem."²⁶ Suicide is not a solution of the absurd because without resolving, it confounds the absurd and intensifies it. Killing oneself destroys the absurd for that individual only; the absurd will persist as long as there are men. Physical suicide means suppression of the absurd by suppressing the individual who experiences the irrationality of the world. Camus says that though life has no meaning, yet we must go on

living. Since the ultimate problem cannot be resolved by destroying life, we should accept our existence. Suicide is merely a negation of life. Camus insists that life can be better lived in an awareness of absurdity. We must learn to live with a lucidity nourished only by "the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference."²⁷ In order to destroy the tension of the absurd, Kierkegaard, Chestov, Husserl and Jaspers advocate a rationally unjustifiable leap. But Camus refuses any unjustifiable leap into a reconciliation which he calls 'philosophical suicide'. Camus does not rely on supernatural consolations, a transcendental escape. He says: "What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms."²⁸ And later: "Absurd does not liberate; it binds."²⁹ Living becomes meaningful in keeping the absurd alive. In his Myth of Sisyphus, Camus advocates that man who becomes conscious of the absurd should not surrender to either physical or philosophical suicide. Rather he should try to maintain the absurd. He should retain a courageous lucidity in the face of the ultimate meaninglessness of existence and the certainty of death. Meaninglessness of life should not make life

unlivable. On the other hand, the absurd man, bereft of any illusions about the transcendental realm, can be urged to find a better home, a better enjoyment here within his finite existence. The absurd man thus ultimately becomes a propagator of the absurd instead of being its victim. As has been observed:

"Unlike many of the existentialists, he (Camus) was close enough to the common man to know that everyman looks forward to a modicum of happiness and did not jump to the conclusion that this looking forward involved bad faith."³⁰

Shunning all absolutes, the absurd man demands of himself "to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned : he wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal."³¹ That is why Don Juan insists on life rather than escaping it. He knows that beyond this universe all is collapse and nothingness and he faces the future with utter indifference to use up everything that is given. Camus's dilemma of the absurd conforms to the mythical image of Tantalus tormented by water beyond

his reach, of Prometheus chained and become eternal food for the vulture and of Sisyphus toiling to push his rock to the hill-top even though it must inevitably roll back. Sisyphus is condemned to eternal punishment. But his futile labour gives him the knowledge of his absurdity. His perpetual task gives him dignity. He never gives up the effort. His negation of the gods makes him aware of his task and this awareness illuminates the ceaseless burden he carries and makes him acutely aware of his freedom. "Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the Gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that the all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."³² Sisyphus's happiness is contained in his struggle which reaffirms the value of life. He does not despair because he himself chooses his values and is responsible for his choice.

while Sartre or Malraux wanted to remedy the absurd by negating life itself, Camus redeemed the absurd by a

dedication to life. Camus asserted that man must find his home in this cosmic homelessness. Camus, though apparently a nihilist describing the sad frustration of the human condition, seeks to assert certain positive values of life. He refuses to yield to the absurd universe and his refusal turns into an affirmation of life. To him awareness of the absurdity of life is a beginning and not an end in itself. Cruickshank says:

"The dynamic of revolt which is produced by the absurd possesses sufficient force to carry him beyond negation to affirmation."³³

I I

ALIENATION AND THE ABSURD

About alienation Nisbet writes:

"Alienation is a historical perspective within which man is seen as estranged, anomic and rootless when cut off from the ties of community and moral purpose."³⁴

It is a social phenomenon where man is seen totally isolated from the surrounding social scene. Sometimes he is isolated even from his own self. He is not only objectively alienated but also becomes a victim of subjective

alienation. A modern man is often seen uprooted, alone, cut off from his community or any prevailing system. From the social point of view, alienation means that the laws of community make an individual a fragmented self and an individual's personal yearning for a familiar home clashes with an impersonal and mechanised society which looks "inaccessible because of the remoteness."³⁵ This gulf between the individual and the society gradually widens and becomes unbridgeable and the remoteness of the individual from society makes his existence absurd. In the face of the gigantically monstrous society, the individual fails to preserve the wholeness of his individuality and sometimes cannot even identify his own self. He primarily performs a mechanical role which makes life insipid and meaningless.

Alienation reaches back to antiquity. For example, in medieval literature alienation stands for the estrangement of sinful man from God. Hegel emphasises the objective character of alienation. Marx relates the origin of alienation with the division of labour. Marx's concept of alienation embraces the manifestation of man's estrangement from nature and from himself on the one hand, and

the expressions of this process in inter-personal relationships on the other. To Marx, alienation is a multifaceted phenomenon involving at the same time alienation of man from nature, from his labour, from the species-being and from other men. The idea of alienation spread with a different meaning during the interwar and post-war period. It referred to the malaise that had resulted from the convulsive happenings of the twentieth century: the World Wars, Nazism, Fascism, the German Occupation of France, etc. Camus's The Outsider, J.P. Sartre's La Nausea or Kafka's works emphasise this kind of alienation. This alienation often arises from man's negation of a given social system because of its ambiguous, hypocritical and demonic character. It focuses on what a man is under a given social setting and what he would wish to be. Here the contradiction becomes apparent between man's hunger for reality and the menace-filled unreality of things. This contradiction makes man's existence absurd, Man's spontaneity clashes with the arbitrariness of existence. A man is alienated from his surroundings because he finds himself pitted against an alien world. John Cruickshank says that "The absurd arises from that sense of dereliction in an alien world which people feel in varying

degrees."³⁶ He adds: "We may possibly experience the absurd through an acute sense of our fundamental isolation from other human beings."³⁷ Now this alienation which is a pervading theme in modern literature is pre-eminently the theme in the writings of Kafka and Camus and it gives rise to the overpowering sense of the absurd in their works.

I I I

MILIEU

It is necessary to make a brief survey of the social background that made the emergence of Kafka and Camus possible. A writer is conditioned by the compulsion of his time. To this compulsion a writer may respond in two ways. Either he may conform to it or he may choose to be a non-conformist. In either case, his writing provides a mirror to the age. Conflicts and contradictions, angst and forlornness are for him inescapable experiences. A writer also reacts and responds to the surrounding social, political, historical as well as cultural events of his

time. He cannot shun the events of his personal life, nor can he remain a silent spectator of the happenings around him.

About his commitment as an artist Camus said:

"Artists of the past could at least keep silent in the face of tyranny. The tyrannies of today are improved; they no longer admit of silence or neutrality. One has to take a stand, be either for or against. Well in that case, I am against,"³⁸.

Kafka said:

"..... art for the artists is only suffering, through which he releases himself for further suffering. He is not a giant, but only a more or less brightly plumaged bird in the cage of his existence."³⁹

In the West the Industrial Revolution brought about a change not only in the modes of production but also in the sphere of human relations. Initially the Industrial Revolution acted as the liberator of mankind and progenitor of individual man. But it also ushered in a mammoth growth of technology, which ultimately proved to be self-defeating. Liberation of mankind paved the way for the creation of its own captor, and the progenies of the liberated individual man of the Nineteenth century after the lapse of a

century, were now experiencing the fate of slaves in the midst of technological revolution and its fall-outs. The two devastating world wars and the ramifications and legacies of the so-called material progress left a bleak world for mankind to live in. The aspiration for the liberation of the individual self ultimately created an exiled condition. Man's alienation from his surrounding social setting has reached a point of culmination. Thus man's correspondence with the universe, society and even with his own self has been totally destroyed. There exists a radical cleavage between the individual and the rest of the world and the individual has none as his companion except his own desolated image reflected through a broken and opaque mirror. The change in the social order is total and the resultant destruction in human experience is depicted in the 'absurd' art form of Kafka and Camus. Thus the emergence of Kafka and Camus in the arena of western literature can be seen to have been not quite accidental; rather such emergence was inevitable in the given situation.

Kafka's life story provides a key to his work and philosophy. His relationship with his father was very much

strained and this can be read in his writings. Under the triumphant Fascism and shattering effects of the World War, Kafka's mind was disintegrating and, significantly, this mind in a process of disintegration is reflected in his protagonists. Society tends to become deformed, shadowy and enigmatic. Kafka's personal anguish becomes symptomatic of the general dilemma of his time.

Kafka first experienced the anxiety of isolation at home: "At home? I live with my parents, that is all. It is true I have a small room of my own, but that is not a home, only a place of refuge, where I can hide my inner turmoil, only in order to fall all the more into its clutches."⁴⁰ His family situation, instead of providing a healthy support, beleaguered his literary genius. The distance between Kafka and his family gradually widened and ultimately became a distance between his inner self and the exterior world. Kafka's endeavour to find a root in his family was thwarted by the dominant personality of his father. He blamed his father for preventing him from becoming an independent, self-reliant person. The father-complex first gave him the sensation of an absurd existence. About his father he remarked:

"You had worked yourself upto such a position by your own strength that you had unlimited confidence in your own opinion ... from your arm-chair you ruled the world .. your self confidence was so great that there was no need for you to be consistent, and yet you were always right."⁴¹

All through his life Kafka was struggling against hostile circumstances. He said:

"where I lived I was an outcast, condemned, defeated, and although I struggled my utmost to flee elsewhere, it was labor in vain, because I was trying to do something that was impossible, that was beyond my strength except for a few insignificant exceptions."⁴²

The cleavage at home extends to Kafka's office life. Here also he experiences a gap between his ideals and the bureaucratic settings of his office. Max Brod writes:

"It is clear that Kafka derived a great amount of his knowledge of the world and of life as well as his skeptical pessimism, from his experiences in the office, from coming into contact with workmen suffering under injustice and from having to deal with the long-drawn-out process of official work, and from the stagnating life of files."⁴³

The boredom and exhaustion of his sterile official work gradually absorbed him into a feeling of incarceration and pain and threatened the flowering of his genius. He worked

as an Insurance official and constantly fretted about his duties. He detested bureaucracy but had to work in a bureaucratic setting. Kafka was born into a social and cultural milieu where he was under great social constraints and where the problem of assimilation into non-Jewish society was very acute. He was a German of Jewish origin and his father migrated to Prague and built up a prosperous business there. The cultural environment in which Kafka was brought up was completely German. But in his early youth he sympathised with the cause of Czech nationalism. Unfortunately his German upbringing did not allow him to identify himself completely with the Czech aspirations. So he suffered from a sense of inner contradictions. When he came to Germany, he did find a congenial atmosphere for the satisfaction of his cultural appetite, but his Jewish origin proved to be deterrant to his complete identification with the cause of aggressive German nationalism. The instability of Kafka's status and his lack of a sense of belonging anywhere are brought out acutely by Gunther Anders: "For where indeed did he belong? As a Jew not quite to the christian world, and as a non-practising Jew - as he originally was - not

quite among the Jews. As a German-speaking Czech, not quite among Jews; and a German-speaking Jew, not quite among the Bohemian Germans. As a Bohemian, not quite to Austria. As an official of a workers' insurance company, not quite to the middle-class. Yet as the son of a middle-class family, not quite to the working class."⁴⁴

Anti Semitism which was to sweep Germany in subsequent days, was not on the surface at that time but his intuition perceived the slow but sure penetration of Nazism into the fabric of German social life. The reaction of Kafka to this growing challenge to his community was immediate and direct. He joined a Zionist group in which he thought the future salvation of his community lay. It is thus clear that Kafka derived his experiences from the contradictions inherent in his domestic life, office-setting and social circumstances and it is these contradictions which made his fictional world what it is. In his works we can trace the shattering impact of the First World War and the subsequent social changes. His works reflect the bitter experiences of many Europeans who lived in a world of nightmare, an imprisoned world of trial without error, punishment without crime. Being a

Jew who lived in the shadows of aggressive anti-semitism Kafka foretold the fate that was to overtake his people.

Camus's literary genius grew to maturity during the turbulent years of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. Camus who was aware of the writer's need for social commitment tenaciously adhered to the truth of his own experiences and proclaimed his personal view point with resolute insistence. His sense of social responsibility made him concerned with the crisis of his time. Emmett Parker writes:

"Camus believed that the artist is obliged by his very art to bear witness to man's basic right to freedom and justice in the face of the historical aberrations of his time."⁴⁵

Camus then could not remain a silent spectator of the contemporary political scene. The German occupation of France greatly perturbed him and he joined the Resistance Movement and edited the leading newspaper 'Combat'. The political injustice of the post-war society concerned him. The agony of the French people under subjection to

Nazi Germany became Camus's own agony. About Camus's commitment to his age Germaine Bree writes:

"It has been his strength as an artist to refuse to write any work that did not take into account and express directly or indirectly the latent anxieties of his generation."⁴⁶

Thus we see that The Plague represents the awful atmosphere of the German occupation of France and the hero of The Fall represents the guilt-ridden conscience of post-war Europe. Camus never sat in the ivory tower to look disinterestedly at the problems of his day. Being a man with sensitive conscience and a keen sense of the writer's responsibility, Camus sincerely concerned himself with the pre-war and post-war problems. His powerful imagination made him aware of the inhuman conditions that threatened to enslave humanity. Keats says that a true authentic experience is one that is felt 'on the pulses'. The European writers of the pre-war and post-war period were moved to review and investigate the human situation under the impact of such authentic experience as left them agonised and questioning.

The old, traditional view of God-man relationship where a benevolent God was seen to have created the world

for his chosen creature-man to live in and work out his potentialities thus gives way to an anguished vision of the human situation where man is left high and dry, intimidated, undermined and perplexed, and where therefore the notion of a beneficent deity caring for man is replaced by a vision of hapless and beleaguered man having to make whatever he can of the dismal situation all by himself without any scope for invoking a benignant presiding deity. Man and his world were not made for each other. The world has an irreducible alienness and the incurable absurdity of the situation is such that man has to make do with it.

CHAPTER - I I

KAFKA AND THE ABSURD

"Kafka's world is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come of it."

- Camus

Kafka's vision of the ~~absurd~~ has an additional dimension of depth to it which is often absent in others, in that he sees the pathos of human existence more intensely. In Kafka's novels man is portrayed as an exile, Kafka describes a world which is a frightful maze in which there is no way out of man's perplexity. His works deal with a bewildering aspect of mystery which lacks solution. Kafka communicates the momentariness of human existence. He feels no certainty about anything, demanding from every single moment a new confirmation of his existence.

Kafka's protagonists live in a high-walled prison which has an oppressive atmosphere and in which they suffer from protracted illness. In the unaired rooms of the prison they suffer acutely from the agony of infinite separation. They toil unavailingly to liberate themselves

from this horrifying and agonising situation.

To Kafka everything seems to result from a mighty, inexplicable error which rules like Destiny itself. His heroes live, as if, in a gas chamber in which they suffer from an agony of despair which provides them no truth except that they are alive in a tormented and dehumanised state. They strive to reach the truth but they lack the strength for a genuine act of defiance. They are punished and doomed and they die like dogs. His world is marked by opaqueness and absurdity. It is not a transparent world through which we can glimpse the reality above or beyond the shadows. Kafka's human beings find themselves curiously out of touch with their own setting, and are unable to foresee their own chances of survival or doom. They are trapped in inevitable perplexity and doubt and seem incapable of personal salvation. Their damnation becomes inevitable.

Kafka's heroes toil to prove their innocence in the eyes of those who regard them with so much suspicion and distrust. One can see a humble resolve on their part to come closer and justify themselves before the unknown

and unapproachable accusers. But they are always driven back to their imprisoned state. Instead of growing in stature, they shrink. Thus we see that K. in The Castle is reduced to a mere initial, Joseph K. in The Trial dies like a dog, and Gregor Samsa in The Metamorphosis is reduced to an insect form.

Kafka's world, in short, is one of despair, anxiety and forlornness although this world is not altogether devoid of hope. Kafka's heroes flounder in their struggle to come out of a world of nightmare. They aim at reaching a goal which is mysterious and unattainable. N. Sarraute says: "On the bare lands to which he (Kafka) leads us, no blade of grass can grow."¹ Nevertheless, in spite of the forbidding circumstances — circumstances such as would seem to blight all hope, K., Joseph K. and Gregor keep hoping like a Tantalus. Indeed, they keep up their struggle even when it is foredoomed to failure. Let us now examine a few of Kafka's works in some detail.

2. THE METAMORPHOSIS

The Metamorphosis opens with a startling image with which Kafka describes the zoological transformation of

Gregor Samsa who awakens from his uneasy dreams to find himself changed into a gigantic insect. Kafka is not the first writer to use the insect image in order to portray a dehumanised existence alienated from normal life. This zoological image is frequently used in modern literature as a means of symbolizing the degrading absurdity of human existence. Dostoevsky has his underground man say:

"Now I want to tell you, gentleman, whether you care to hear it or not, why I could not even become an insect, I tell you solemnly that I wanted to become an insect many times."²

Through the depiction of man in terms of an insect Kafka seeks to expose the dreadful plight of human existence. The narrative device adopted by Kafka to have the hero transformed into an insect is calculated to convey the dreadful absurdity of his situation. The crippled protagonist's state mirrors the state of humanity. The story is divided into three parts each one of which shows Gregor's attempts to reassert himself as a human being, to re-establish his communion with his family and each part ends with his attempt being rebuffed and Gregor is seen being pushed back into his prison room. The sin

for which Gregor is dehumanized remains unknown. There is no justification for his frightfully catastrophe - his transformation into a loathesome insect and for his solitude, suffering, sickness and death. Gregor is not a wrong-doer. He is rather a gentle and self-sacrificing young man. There is no explicit reason for which the catastrophe befalls him, for his dehumanization, estrangement, persecution and his death. And this is characteristic of Kafka's vision.

Camus says that the absurd is the result of a fundamental contradiction of life and this contradiction must be preserved and strengthened in order to understand the absurd work. Kafka in his works represents the absurdity in a series of parallel contrasts and these contrasts are between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the every day, the absurd and the logical. The tension of the absurd and the contradiction is present in The Metamorphosis. The opening sentence of the story announces the absurdity of Gregor's life. Everything about Gregor's physical condition is reduced to the level of an insect whereas Gregor's thoughts and feelings are still human.

Once Gregor's metamorphosis is established, there ensues a struggle on Gregor's part to seek re-entry into his family. His human feelings persuade him to try to re-establish himself in his family set-up while his insect shape blocks his way. Gregor is metamorphosed as an insect but at the same time he remains in his thoughts^q a travelling salesman. On one level, Gregor's insect form depicts his private torments and, on the other, Gregor becomes an exponent of the universal human anguish. Kafka establishes Gregor's absurdity by contrasting his insect form with his normal human feelings.

Gregor is a commercial traveller devoted to his family which he supports with his hard work. He has been compelled to take up the painstaking and monotonous job of a travelling salesman to feed his family and to pay back his parents' debts to his chief. Had it not been his duty to look after his family, he could possibly have had a much more pleasant, though less remunerative, job in an office. He not only draws a healthy picture of his family on his mind's canvas but also contemplates sending his sister to a conservatory where

she could learn to be a violinist. But once he is metamorphosed, he finds himself excluded from his family circle. This exclusion makes his existence absurd.

Gregor's metamorphosis is not an accidental phenomenon. The metamorphosis has antecedent or concomitant conditions. Prior to going to sleep Gregor has some traumatic anxieties which make him retreat within himself. Under some agonising conditions, Gregor is gradually shrinking and becoming self-enclosed. He has an uneasy dream because he is already suffering from inner unrest. His inner unrest is reflected in his dream. The circumstantial evidence of his waking life confirms his uneasy dream. The agony of his waking life is a prelude to his metamorphosis. Gregor complains not only about the physical discomfort of the commercial traveller but also about the dehumanising effect of his job which makes it difficult for him to have intimate relations with others: "Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked on! Travelling about day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the office, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant travelling, of worrying about train connections,

the bed and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends."³ Before the ambivalent and disgusting character of the head of the firm, Gregor feels humiliated and crippled. He has to work in a firm where the chief has the habit of "sitting on high at a desk and talking down to employees"⁴ and where "the smallest omission at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion."⁵ Gregor does not exactly get reconciled to his appalling official set up but is compelled to bear with it: "If I didn't have to hold my hand because of my parents I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the chief and told him exactly what I think of him. That would knock him endways from his desk!"⁶ Gregor looks forward to the time when he will have saved enough money to pay the debts his parents owe to his boss and freed himself completely from the tyrannical employer. So Gregor's zoological transformation can be seen as somehow related to what Gregor has already been for a long time. Though presented in an apparently unrealistic form, Gregor's metamorphosis is terribly authentic in the sense that it suggests that this metamorphosis may happen to any of us: "Gregor tried to suppose to himself that something like what had happened to him to-day might someday

happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible."⁷ His gruesome transformation shows the guilt without cause, a guilt that can make anybody a monster. The monstrous image first shapes itself in subjective consciousness and then is objectively manifested.

Gregor's metamorphosis gives an unpredictably fatal ^{blow} to his life. At first he tries to take everything as normal, to "restore all things to their real and normal condition."⁸ But his gigantic, monstrous appearance frustrates all hope. He seeks persistently to gain acceptance in his family even though he is rebuffed in his every attempt. He hankers after the food served by his sister knowing that this food provides him no nourishment and he must starve to death. Gregor ultimately resigns himself to the conditions of his insect life but before that he puts up a struggle. His meditations on his bed show him in isolation from the external world but still he frantically tries to overcome his temporary 'indisposition'. He does not humbly surrender to his metamorphosed condition. He even considers his physical discomfort as a temporary phase of indisposition. He wants to overcome his disability to catch the train and to follow the regular

routine of his job. He wants to come out of his room to rejoin the world but his monstrous transformation prevents him. He feels himself drawn once more into the human circle but his dehumanised appearance thwarts his desire. When Gregor opens the door after a lot of strenuous effort and makes himself visible to others, his grotesque look distresses them and they rebuff. Gregor discovers the disruption of link between himself and others. His father knots his fist to push Gregor back into his room. It is indeed piteous to see such a devoted son driven back into his room with a stick inspite of his humble entreaty that his helpless condition be realised. Here Gregor's desire to clarify his position and to find a place in his family is contradicted by his family's refusal to allow him to do so. So in the first section of the story Gregor awakens to the realisation that his life has turned absurd and he has been sundered from his family.

In the second section, Gregor tries to accommodate himself to his absurdly hideous predicament. His sister Grete realises his predicament and shows some sympathy. It is a horrible task to devote herself to the service

of her monstrous brother'. But still she takes on the duty of looking after Gregor. She offers him various foods. Gregor is at first allured by the smell of food but he crawls back with disappointment finding that his most favourite food becomes distasteful to him. Even a day before his metamorphosis Gregor's favourite food was milk but now he relishes and feels satisfied with rotten and decayed stuff because his organic sensibilities have been altered by his metamorphosis. His sister offers him humanly uneatable food and Gregor swallows it. Besides, he feels less incapacitated and afflicted by his physical discomfort because physically also he reconciles himself to his insect life.

But inspite of his physical reconciliation with his insect existence, Gregor retains an emotional attachment to his family. Hiding himself under the sofa, Gregor recollects his earnest desire in his pre-metamorphosed stage to revive his family from the catastrophe that followed the collapse of his father's business. When the family assembles at the table to discuss the financial position, Gregor takes keen interest and cannot check the temptation to join the conference. But as soon as he

appears before them, they rebuff him. His presence in the living room is violently repulsed by his father who bombards Gregor with apples.

The tragedy of Gregor's life reaches its climax and his absurdity is fully pronounced when Gregor's last hope centred in his sister in whom he enjoyed "the enthusiastic temperament of an adolescent girl,"⁹ is shattered with her declaration that he be got rid of. We see the culmination of Gregor's suffering when Grete feels repulsed by Gregor's presence and even refuses to identify this huge insect with her brother's memory. She questions the presence of Gregor's entity in the bug form and her logic is that if it were Gregor, "he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature, and he'd have gone away on his own accord."¹⁰ Gregor's alienation from his family becomes irrevocable when his sister, who was to him the last straw to catch at, becomes responsible for his death.

When Gregor's sister plays on the violin, he feels enchanted by the music and crawls out of his prison to hear the music which seems to be the food he has been

longing for. The deep effect of music makes him question his animal existence; "Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved."¹¹ Gregor's frightful advance is again repulsed by all and this time his sister takes the leading role with her verdict "we must try to get rid of it."¹² And with the third attack Gregor finally retreats to his prison room and starves himself to death. Gregor's last effort to re-enter the human circle fails.

Thus Gregor's absurd existence comes to an end when the contradiction between his desire to reassert himself in the human circle and the rebuff from members of his family is finally resolved with Gregor's death. With the nourishment still remaining unknown, Gregor expires in his room alone. Thus the story which opens with an absurd announcement of Gregor's transformation, shows Gregor's futile effort to cling to life and ultimately ends with his tragic death. So against the tradition of acceptance and affirmation Kafka's story deals with despair to the point of annihilation.

3. THE TRIAL

In The Trial Kafka deals with the fate of a modern man in a world whose meaning is not comprehensible within the compass of his experience. In this novel we see that Joseph K. is accused of a crime the nature of which is not comprehensible to him and is compelled to face the trial of life in a hostile universe whose pattern and coherence are fundamentally alien to him.

Of Kafka's "Trilogy of loneliness" — The Trial, The Castle and America — The Trial presents the passively guilty victim-hero who is trapped in an absurd situation and is unable to extricate himself from the meshes of his absurd situation. He is entangled in a gap between the apparent reality and the so-called ideal manifestation of the law which he tries to identify but which always eludes him and makes him live in a tormented situation. His case shows an absurd dilemma and he becomes an absurd hero whose feverish activity seems to be absurd and abnormal in the eyes of an unattainable, remote and mysterious court.

This novel, like The Metamorphosis opens with another explosive announcement: "Someone must have been

telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning."¹³ This unwarranted arrest of Joseph K. in his bedroom gives rise to a series of puzzling questions: who arrests K.? Why is K. arrested? And what is the nature of his arrest? And all these questions remain enigmatically unanswered throughout the novel. Any attempt to answer these questions simply tightens the knot. The more we try to grasp these questions, the more do they recede and dissolve like ripples leaving us wondering and stupefied. Our search for a clue to K's arrest and the nature of the arrest lead us only to discover new levels of enigma. After his arrest we find the situation for K. becoming more and more complicated and K. himself becoming more and more alienated from the commonplace world.

At the core of this novel there lies Kafka's vision of the absurd which springs from a disjunction in the world, the disjunction between the apparent reality and the ambiguous and equivocating character of the world. Joseph K. is in a dilemma. He wants to prove that he is not guilty of a crime and this is countered by the court's refusal to accept Joseph as innocent. The Trial is informed by a

vision of absurdity and at the centre of the novel there is a passive man dominated by his situation rather than endeavouring to change it. This novel again presents another contradiction — the contradiction between Joseph K and the court that accuses and tries him. The central problem of the novel, that of guilt, can be understood in terms of the encounter between Joseph's subjectivity and the enigmatic trial court.

The novel opens with the information of Joseph K's arrest but we never get even an inkling of any trivial offence committed by K. for which he might be arrested and tried and this brings into a tearing focus the unambiguous insistence of the hero that he is simply an innocent victim of injustice. He encounters the unjust tribunal every where on his bed, on the street, in the bank and also in the cathedral. But the court never specifically announces Joseph's crime. Joseph K. persistently seeks to justify his innocence and makes an outcry about his feeling innocent. The protracted process of self-defence culminates in the cathedral scene. In support of his argument in self-defence K. produces some papers, even his birth certificate, but his papers are pushed aside by the warders on

the ground that the decrees of the court can never be unjust for the decrees are always issued against the guilty. And the irony is that the same court convicts certain people on certain obscure and inexplicable grounds whereas others are acquitted on the same grounds. K. faces a trial before a court where all cases are conducted on a certain foregone conclusion, and the judgement is given in camera. Before this court all accused are guilty and they are condemned in advance before the cases are legally established. There is no need for further trial proceeding and they must die like dogs. Now in a court which is guided by certain foregone conclusions, it is useless to seek any legal assistance. When K. seeks the Inspector's permission to talk to his lawyer over the telephone, the Inspector says, "certainly but I don't see what sense there would be in that, unless you have some private business of your own to consult him about."¹⁴ But at the same time he allows K. to do what he wants to. K. cries: "What sense would there be in telephoning to an advocate when I'm supposed to be under arrest? All right, I won't telephone."¹⁵

Every where K. is puzzled by the events which he cannot comprehend. He is accused of a crime and is under

arrest. But when he wants to know the reasons of his arrest, he is told by the warders: "we don't answer such questions,"¹⁶ And when K. insists on their producing the warrant for arresting him, they say: "Oh, good Lord, ... If you would only realize your position, and if you wouldn't insist on uselessly annoying us two, who probably mean better by you and stand closer to you than any other people in the world."¹⁷

The most ludicrous nature of the judgement is that K. has been accused of an unspecified crime and is arrested but he is allowed to carry on his regular business, to follow his normal routine. He is allowed to do his duty in the bank. In his astonishment K. enquires: "How can I go to the Bank, if I am under arrest?" and the official most surprisingly replies: "You are under arrest, certainly, but that need not hinder you from going about your business. You won't be hampered in carrying on in the ordinary course of your life."¹⁸ The trial of K presents a mockery of justice. The punishment has preceded the commencement of any judicial proceeding. From the very first chapter through a succession of comical events, the farcical character of the court, its lack of rational legal codes, and its injustice are revealed to K. From the first chapter

where K. is arrested in his bed by the warders who come without any warrant, to the last where the priest advises K. not to seek any outside help, everything seems to be nothing but a farce, a deadly one though.

The court sits in a dirty, dingy place, in an abominable, unjudicial atmosphere where the Examining Magistrate does not even know anything about the convict, and has no qualms about his lamentable ignorance. In the court the proceedings are kept a secret from the accused and the accused has no access to the court records. The legal records and charge-sheets are inaccessible to the accused and his counsel. The judges wield power which they are not normally supposed to possess. Greenberg says: "The judges are comedians who condemn to death. Their justice cannot justify."¹⁹ K's situation is really baffling. He hires a lawyer, sees judges, receives advice, yet never gets any hints about the crime he is accused of. He is referred to one judge after another but never sees the High Judges. The whole mechanism of the court has been active against K. for a sin which is not defined. "K is torn from the pattern of an ordered society, where familiarity with things is mistaken for understanding of

them and security is to be found in an accepted and unquestioned body of conventions, and plunged into a position where he finds himself alone and isolated, not knowing the rules, not knowing if there are any rules; life itself at stake, and no 'path or friendly clue' to be his guide"²⁰ K. faces a gigantic and monstrous judicial body which is not only unknown to him, but unknowable. It is an unjust tribunal to which K. as an individual remains an alien. Bithell says:

"In his efforts to reach his judges he gropes like a grotesque automation through the swiftly moving ghost-like happenings of a nightmare, impelled forwards but held back."²¹

About this dark, inscrutable organisation K says:

"There can be no doubt that behind all the actions of this court of justice, that is to say in my case, behind my arrest and today's interrogation, there is a great organisation at work. An organisation which not only employs corrupt warders, stupid Inspectors, and Examining Magistrates of whom the best that can be said is that they recognize their own limitations, but also has at its disposal a judicial hierarchy of high, indeed of the highest rank, with an indispensable and numerous retinue of servants, clerks, police, and other assistants, perhaps even hangmen."²²

When K faces such a farcical trial before an unjust court,

he feels that the pattern of his past experience is destroyed and he is drifting towards a place with no anchorage, a situation of unanswerable riddles. He finds himself trapped in a vacuum. His familiar relationships become uncertain. The insecurity of his existence is mirrored in the last chapter, 'In the Cathedral'. He gets a warning of his sentence from a sermon preached in the Cathedral and in the end he is stabbed to death by two officials of the court.

The anguish that pervades this novel becomes a universal anguish. Ronald Gray writes:

"within those confines one is stifled along with Joseph K, baffled by the same endless arguments, confused by the inscrutability of the court and relieved when execution is carried out and claustrophobia ends."²³

The tragedy of Kafka's protagonists is that they are put to death as though by slow poisoning.

✓ The opening sentence of The Trial, like that of the Metamorphosis, announces the captivity of K. and he is seen drifting towards death by slow degrees. The interval between the arrest of K. and his execution is a

prolonged nightmare, a horrible vision for him. The slow but protracted trial gradually overwhelms and crushes K's will. He fails to affirm himself because before the cumbersome machinery of the court, the outrageous absurdity of his trial, his feeble voice sinks. He lacks the strength to face up to a world that is so inscrutable and so hostile. His failure to encounter the monstrous machinery of the court subtly instills in him a feeling of guilt. The tragic end of K's life has been summed up in the following words by Friedman:

"The world of Joseph K. gradually changes from the everyday business world that he takes for granted into a mysterious Gnostic hierarchy that, like some gigantic Octopus, wraps its tentacles around the whole of reality until it finally crushes him to death — and most startling of all, does so with his compliance."²⁴

According to Hubben, Kafka's major theme "is an ever-present sense of guilt."²⁵ In The Trial also the existence of a guilt is assumed but its nature remains unknown and unexplained. The root of this unspecified guilt may be traced to different concepts. The unspecified guilt may correspond to the theological concept of original sin but the possibility of the presence of such a guilt

in the case of The Trial is not evidently present. There is also the possibility of the existence of guilt which relates to K's whole way of life. Such guilt cannot be specified because it involves the whole being of the person concerned and the punishment of such guilt can only be death. Such guilt can be removed by the total annihilation of the protagonist. The guilt may also be explained in terms of some psychological complex as a result of which the son may feel an infinite sense of guilt in him when the stronger personality of the father eclipses his comparatively weak self. This type of guilt is present in The Judgement and in The Metamorphosis. The son feels guilty subjectively when he contradicts a stronger opponent in the objective father, gradually shrinks within his own self and the feeling of guilt takes deep roots. In The Metamorphosis Gregor at first tries to assert his innocence with regard to his sudden physical dehumanisation but his father infuses in him the feeling of guilt by refusing him participation in the human circle and then pushing him back into an exiled state by pelting him with apples. In The Trial such guilt has been generalised and depersonalised.

Joseph K. tries to know the nature of the guilt for which he is arrested but in the face of the apparent hostility of the court his desire for clarity becomes meaningless and because of his ignorance of the charge, he ultimately resigns himself to self-examination so that he can know his guilt. In the face of the silence of the court, K tries to discover the guilt in his own self. But one may suggest that the central problem of guilt is ultimately focussed neither on the hero's subjectivity nor on the unjust court that tries him, but on the encounter between the two.

✓
K. always lives in an atmosphere of intrigue and conspiracy. His sincere effort to come to terms with the universe is frustrated by the dualistic nature of the world which K. fails to comprehend. He is thus embarrassed and constrained by the ambiguity of events around him. His arrest has been announced but he is not under detention. He goes about his daily work but he always encounters his strong opponents everywhere. His life becomes absurd to him because he is trapped midway between good and evil whose contradiction is never resolved till he dies like a dog.

Man is in a perpetual state of siege and in spite of his honest effort he cannot interact with his society. K. has done nothing wrong and wants to be known as such. But he is treated by his society as a criminal. This supposed criminality in him makes him guilty and K finally gets rid of this guilt in his execution.

4. THE CASTLE

The Castle, like Kafka's other novels and short stories, presents an oppressive atmosphere, full of frustration and dread. Like a riddle, the Castle invites K. with a tantalizing call but it always remains inaccessibly remote. Though perceived as a benevolent institution, the castle always remains mysterious and unattainable and nothing can be definitely predicted about it. As a rule, Kafka writes on different planes at once, and this is true of The Castle as well. One plane is that it presents the picture of the world that is not rational and the irrationality of this world contradicts man's search for rationality. Through the irrationality of this world, Kafka wants to expose the essential absurdity of

things. Kafka's world is full of enigmas and torments where man is presented as an outcast, debarred from acquiring a link with his own community. The plight of man is intolerable and there is no solution for him. Some unforeseen catastrophe descends upon him, the authorities declare him an outsider without adducing any reason. He persistently struggles to gain acceptance in the world but miserably fails. The world of K. is such that while he believes in the reality of the Castle, his image of the Castle collapses and dissolves in his encounters with the Castle officials. On another plane, The Castle represents the predicament of a Jew in Europe, and lastly the novel may be interpreted as a representation of the spiritual anguish, as a symbol of a tortuous religious quest.

Kafka lends a deep insight into the absurdity of human existence. In this novel Kafka presents another document of the predicament of modern man for whom the world is a puzzle. K. desperately wants to be recognised by the Castle authorities but for him the doors of the Castle always remain locked. K. is in a dilemma. He can neither gain entrance to the Castle nor can he become

disloyal to it. He frantically continues his journey to reach the Castle. Though he stubbornly keeps up his attempts to enter the Castle, his stubbornness immobilizes him because of the silence of the Castle officials. Kafka here deals with the theme of the fate of modern man in a world whose meaning cannot be understood within the purview of human experience. The purpose of life for a modern man finally becomes an endless but futile quest for the meaning of life. Man makes frantic efforts to establish an organic relationship with something which lies beyond himself but which always excludes & evades him and this exclusion and evasion make his existence meaningless and absurd for him.

K. claims to have been appointed and summoned as Land Surveyor by the Castle which rules over the village at which K. arrives. But on his arrival he receives a negative response from the Castle. He is not even allowed to sleep in the village inn because to sleep in the inn one must have a permit. The young man who introduces himself as the son of the Castellan, says:

"This village belongs to the castle, and whoever lives here or passes the night here does so in a manner of speaking in the Castle itself. Nobody may do that without the Count's

permission. But you have no such permit, or at least you have produced none."²⁶

And the young man sternly says, 'you must quit the Count's territory at once.'²⁷ Although K. has been asked to come to the village to work as land-surveyor, he is denied the privilege of settling in the village. K. gradually gets entangled in the maze of ambiguity. He confesses to the teacher: 'I am to be staying here for some time and already feel a little lonely. I don't fit in with the peasants nor, I imagine, with the castle.'²⁸ K. wants to adapt himself to the new setting but he is bewildered everywhere: 'He felt irresistibly drawn to seek out new acquaintances, but each new acquaintance only seemed to increase his weariness.'²⁹

As K. resumes his walk towards the Castle, he finds himself lost in a tortuous street, a labyrinth which only puzzles him: 'For the street he was in, the main street of the village, did not lead up to the Castle hill, it only made towards it and then, as if deliberately, turned aside, and though it did not lead away from the Castle it got no nearer to it either. At every turn K. expected the road to double back to the castle, and only because of this

expectation did he go on; he was flatly unwilling, tired as he was, to leave the street, and he was also amazed at the length of the village, which seemed to have no end.³⁰ The Castle refuses to admit his claim and treats him with injustice. K. consistently tries to establish his claim, spends his energy on successive stratagems for getting closer to the officials of the Castle, particularly one named Klamm. But his attempts to justify his claims remain thwarted.

Every intermediary through whom K. wants to reach the Castle fails him. Everything K. encounters is deceptive, elusive and incessantly fluctuating. The women whom K. meets are also ambiguous. Gardana, the landlady, allows K. to be left alone with her but challenges his presence there. Olga, Amalia, Frieda, Pepi - all elude K. with their enticing charm and leave him in bewilderment. K. goes, as if, from mirage to mirage, hovers between uncertainties and can settle nowhere. He wants to work in the village and marry and settle and at the same time he wants to learn the secrets of the Castle. But his calculations fail and he seems to be caught between the ambiguities of the two worlds.

Kafka is one of the most sombre advocates of modern man's predicament in this world and his endless struggle with nothingness. His protagonists are engulfed in a deep sense of anguish. His frighteningly ambiguous world is pervaded by a vision of absurdity where the human beings grope in the midst of an unintelligibility and incomprehensibility and where everything ends in despair. This world is enveloped in nothingness and shadowiness because the endless search for truth proves to be futile and the search for certainties of life ends in death. The Castle is concerned with a man's efforts to belong to an inaccessible Castle and its inhabitants but these efforts take him nowhere. K's every attempt at identification with a higher authority is thwarted. In every chapter of the novel there is an attempted expedition, an attempted progress towards an unknown, enigmatic world. K. always has a peripheral existence. He lives outside the boundary of the castle and the Castle always remains intractable. The Castle looms obscurely over the horizon of his mind. K gets occasional glimpses of the higher world but a full view is always denied to him. 'Now, he could see the Castle above him clearly defined in the glittering air, its outline made still more definite by the moulding of snow

covering it in a thin layer.'³¹ But soon K's image of the Castle collapses: 'The castle above them, which K. had hoped to reach that very day was already beginning to grow dark, and retreated again into the distance.'³² When K. hastens his steps towards the Castle, the image of the Castle dissolves: 'The Castle, whose contours were already beginning to dissolve, lay silent as ever; never yet had K. seen there the slightest sign of life — perhaps it was quite impossible to recognize anything at that distance, and yet the eye demanded it and could not endure that stillness.'³³ K's existence becomes absurd when his hunger to have a fuller knowledge of the Castle, a closer identification with it, is countered by the refusal of the Castle officials to accept him.

In this novel, too, Kafka deals with the enigmatic character of human existence. Man and the universe are at odds with each other; they are at loggerheads. They do not fit each other. Here Kafka draws the picture of a society which is inimical to our interests. An individual is vulnerable at the hands of a deceptive society. We cannot be sure of our locus standi in this world; we do not know where actually we belong. Our existence is always

uncertain, always in jeopardy. There is a quest, a determined kind of search to know the actual nature of our existence, but everything seems to be so treacherously mysterious. Society is marked by a lack of trust or faith, a sense of incredulity. K. is summoned to the Castle but he also seems not to have been summoned. The Superintendent says: 'The only thing I will not agree to is that you should be taken on as Land Surveyor, but in other matters you can draw on me with confidence.'³⁴ He wants to belong to the place, to accommodate himself to the situation but in vain. He suffers from a sense of non-belonging, a sense of rootlessness while he wholeheartedly wishes to belong. His existence is of a floating character. The landlady says: 'You are not from the Castle, you are not from the village, you aren't anything.'³⁵ K. is thus enticed to the Castle and then threatened with being thrown out. In the midst of an enigmatic and hideous society, his whole being is at stake. He strenuously keeps up an existence - 'which is threatened by a scandalous official bureaucracy.'³⁶ K's tenacity is very much evident in his struggle to reach the Castle, to establish a rapport with the Castle officials. But the Castle with its opacity remains a mystery to him. He remains a

stranger to the people of the village, to the authorities of the Castle. K's predicament is that he is neither repulsed nor accepted by the Castle inhabitants but everywhere is treated with suspicion. He is regarded as an outsider, an alien.

K. is baffled by the enigmatic nature of the Castle authorities at all levels. When he reaches the village he begins his journey towards the Castle but he never gets a full glimpse of the castle because "the Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him."³⁷

On a deeper level one can see that K's quest is for truth. He has a deep craving for truth which the Castle alone can satisfy. He is tormented by the problem of justifying his existence. When he comes to the village, he is hopeful of fulfilling his mission. But his struggle to achieve certainty is frustrated by the knowledge of the futility of his quest. The Castle stands shrouded in mystery

and it is beyond K's capacity to unveil this curtain of doubt. Although the Castle hill is "veiled in mist and darkness" when K. arrives in the village, he stands for a long time "gazing into the illusory emptiness above him". At first he is convinced that the emptiness is only apparent and later on he encounters the endlessly phantasmagoric vision of the castle. He continues his quest to know the reality but this quest is ultimately nullified by the ambiguity of reality. Kafka's works are fragments of an infinite quest leading to endless futility.

The world of Kafka is marked by darkness and illusions of hope. Kafka presents a nihilistic picture of the world which centres round man's loneliness and isolation. Kafka dwells on the senseless character of human existence, an inevitable fact of living in suspense, where man is haunted by a sense of fear, where he has lost all inward ties with his fellowmen and where life lacks a true foundation. In this novel, The Castle, K's experiences are symbolic of Kafka's experiences of life. The real experiences of a Jew have been filtered into the texture of the work. The experience embodied in this novel quite closely fits Kafka's own experience, the sense of ostracism he often

suffered from during his life time. Kafka lived his life in extreme desolation. All through his life he suffered from the pangs of alienation. He had a fluid station in life and never found solid ground to stand on. He was isolated from the Czechs as a German, from the Germans as a Jew, from his family because of the overbearing nature of his father. He lived as a lonely man and suffered intensely from the feeling of having remained unaccepted in life. Kafka's works symbolise this alienation from society, from his family and even from his profession. He was denied due recognition during his life time, though he is highly admired and widely read posthumously. He suffered from a feeling of rootlessness and uncertainty in life and like K. in the castle was certain of nothing and needed at every moment a fresh confirmation of his existence, K. in The Castle becomes a prototype of a particular ethos. His alienation from the village people as well as Castle authorities reflects the feeling of alienation of the Jews who were eyed with suspicion and contempt in Europe. Harry Slochower writes:

"Kafka's work depicts the lonesomeness of the individual in a world where hierarchial impediments are intertwined with the nature of existence. Human existence appears as a series of tortuous compulsions and crucifixions, exacted

by an anonymous, ubiquitous enemy. The aloneness and helplessness of the modern Orphan generation, of the alien and alienated, in short, of the Jew, has nowhere been as sustainably expressed as in the works of Franz Kafka."³⁸

Being a Jew Kafka came from a race with an ingrained feeling of isolation in a hostile world. Kafka belonged to a race which had been isolated and persecuted intermittently for long years and it was difficult for a Jew to feel at home in a non-Jewish atmosphere.

Indeed, we can not isolate Kafka's work from his real experiences. Kafka perpetually searched for a city that would welcome him. But for his entrance to the city Kafka had to justify his own existence in the eyes of others. Kafka's works are documents of his agonies of social isolation. Living among Czechs under the Austro - Hungarian rule, as a German - speaking Jew Kafka was acutely aware of his odd position in life. This isolation and a feeling of rootlessness heavily weighed upon Kafka and reflected through his works. For Kafka loneliness becomes a recurring theme and this loneliness emerged from his isolation from the family, his isolation as a member of a Jewish community. As a German-speaking Jew Kafka was in a tormenting situation.

He was nowhere fully assimilated. As we said earlier, as a Jew, he was a suspect in the eyes of Czechs and Germans around him, and a suspect as a German and a Czech among the Jews. *K. of the Castle* represents this absurdity of Kafka's life. He is neither welcome nor totally repulsed. In *K. of The Castle* one can identify the perplexing situation of a Jew who wrestles miserably in a hostile world, who is persecuted without reason, who wishes to reclaim his rights but dares not, who has been subjected to a lot of arbitrariness, while trying to fit himself into the inimical situation, and who is ultimately consumed by his agony and resigns in the face of a fearful leviathan. He is seen as an outcast who is perpetually kept away. He suffers from a sense of alienation, which reflects Kafka's own feeling of isolation in a dark, iniquitous and hate-filled system. Cut off from the mainstream, having no solid ground to stand upon, a Jew always strove to belong to the larger humanity. The alienation of *K.* from the village people and the Castle officials reflects Kafka's own alienation and his persistent striving for assimilation.

The Castle can also be interpreted as a religious

allegory. It may be interpreted as the symbolic representation of a religious quest. K. of the Castle may be considered not merely as a Land Surveyor who has been summoned but who cannot do his work because his calling is not recognised, but as a soul who is not sure of God's will. The Land Surveyor K. cannot ascertain his position; his relation to the enigmatic Castle remains mysterious and undefined. He can not ascertain the will of God. He frantically tries to reach the Castle but the Castle remains unapproachable. In spite of his failures, K never gives up his quest. The higher powers that dwell in the Castle remain incomprehensible, yet K. asserts his humanity against that. The struggle of K. to assert his claim reinforces the pattern of the absurd.

Now regarding Kafka's religious faith, there are diverse interpretations. Kafka's friend Max Brod sees the inaccessible castle as the mystery of God's rule and divine grace. Brod is responsible for the theological interpretation of Kafka's works. He was the first man who described Kafka's theme in The Castle as the incommensurability between man and the divine and who focussed on man's attempt

to achieve divine grace. Brod's interpretation has been further supplemented by John Kelly and Muir who consider the novels of Kafka as dealing with the relations between man and God. Muir even compared Kafka's novels to the overtly religious work, 'Pilgrims' Progress' and affirms that Kafka's works follow the lines of mystical revelation. Camus in his essay on Kafka also discovers in him an attempt towards religious leap.

Thus the subject of Kafka's work has been seen as an attempt to reconcile the finite with the infinite. But the theological mode of interpretation has not been accepted by all. Glucksberg writes:

"There is no strictly religious element in his novels and short stories, no reflection of the divine, only an intimation of the absurd that is beyond reason."³⁹

Greenberg says that Kafka's religious faith is not a belief in God but a hunger for a lasting meaning, it is an eternal trust of man in something indestructible, something permanent. Religion for Kafka is not an unshakable faith in God but a perpetual quest for truth in life.

"Kafka does not affirm God, however negatively or paradoxically, in his work. He does not care about God, he does not care about theism or atheism, he leaves all that behind; his world is entirely the human world."⁴⁰ Kafka wants to overcome this world, packed with lies, by affirming his faith in a system of truth though his attempt is negated by the nature of existence. Kafka's works appear absurd because man's hunger for truth remains unsatisfied in the face of the unreality of existence. Margaret Chatterjee comments that Kafka describes "a godless world in which there is no one way out of man's perplexity."⁴¹

K. in The Castle is also in quest of truth. He strives to find the right way to reach his goal but he stumbles because he ultimately finds that there is no way for him to reach his goal and he sometimes even finds that goal itself is not visible and known. K's religious quest fails to get any where. It remains only an attempted transcendence. Leaving aside the muddles of religious controversies, it cannot be gainsaid that the tension of the absurd is conspicuously present in The Castle. It is a tension that exists between K. and his world which remains unknown and inaccessible to him. The contradiction that

K. faces is between his striving to reach the Castle and the mysterious and unpredictable nature of the Castle.

K. becomes an alien, a stranger to the place where he actually wants to belong. This novel presents another haunting example of an absurd fiction where the enigma of absurd existence remains unresolved.

CHAPTER - III

CAMUS AND THE ABSURD

"For if there is a sin against life, it lies perhaps less in despairing of it than in hoping for another life, and evading the implacable grandeur of the one we have. These men have not cheated. They were gods of the summer at twenty in their thirst for life, and they are still gods today, stripped of all hope."

- 'Summer in Algiers'

Camus belongs to an era of non-transcendence which witnessed man seeking to grasp the essential truths of life and posing with singular honesty and force the questions germane to the human condition. He deals with the fundamental questions of human existence which lend themselves to the 'absurd'. The key word 'absurdite' had already been definitively pronounced. Camus found himself at the point of history when "western man finding himself in a universe whose key has been lost can do nothing but proclaim the fundamental absurdity of his existence."¹ He belongs to the tradition of Nietzschean proclamation of the 'death of god'; or Marxian atheistic proclamation of 'the negation of God; or Malraux's declaration of the 'death of man'. But Camus's proclamation of the absurdity of the human condition and of non-transcendence is more articulately made than that of his predecessors.

Camus's works return to the fundamental questions of human existence without any metaphysical aid. His works show an empirical quality of inquiry and vision. They suggest a naked authenticity of human knowledge which comes only through the senses. Cruickshank says:

"What is real for the author of Noctes,
is what can be experienced by senses."²

Camus proposed to clarify the proposition of the absurd forlornness of man's condition in the face of an irrational world. In this chapter we shall try to identify the vision of the absurd in selected works of Camus. We begin with The Outsider. This short yet powerful novel may be taken as an illustration of the philosophy of the absurd set forth in The Myth of Sisyphus. Whereas in The Myth of Sisyphus the philosophy of the absurd is propounded, in The Outsider the absurd is experienced and lived. Nathan Scott writes: "In the Stranger we are made to experience the sensation of the absurd with a degree of immediacy and in Meursault, the little clerk in an Algerian shipping firm, we have one of Camus's purest renderings of the absurd man."³ Sartre sees The Myth of Sisyphus as an explanation of The Stranger and Meursault's

absurdity as given rather than achieved. Meursault is seen as an example of the 'Homoabsurdus' of The Myth of Sisyphus. Within the simple tale of an Algerian young man, Meursault, Camus has enclosed the world's absurdity. Meursault becomes a prototype of the hero of the absurd.

In The Outsider we have the essential themes of The Myth of Sisyphus illustrated: the refusal to abide by daily automatism, the temptation of hope confronting death, the revolt and lastly the urge to live. In Meursault we see an individual at odds with his society. Meursault shows an honesty of feeling and attitude which are at variance with social mores. His native truthfulness which is indifferent to the hypocritical demands of society makes Meursault appear to us as a stranger. He is a stranger to himself because he cannot give a meaning to his life. Finally, he is a stranger to those who meet him. This strangeness of Meursault to society, to himself and to others makes for an alienation which is further accentuated by the unresponsiveness of the world.

In The Outsider, Meursault passes through the stages

depicted in The Myth of Sisyphus. At first he is very much influenced by the blind mechanical movement of every day life; then he liberates himself, rejects the temptation of hope and, in the face of the finality of death, instinctively chooses not suicide but rebellion. His reward is the richness of feeling and the miraculous experience of the present moment. King Adele writes :
 "The Stranger records man's struggle with the external word as well as his conflict with society. The novel is a concrete image of what Camus terms the absurd confrontation between man's desires and the indifference of the universe. Meursault shares the fundamental traits attributed to man in The Myth of Sisyphus, a desire for life and a desire for truth. He encounters, however, the limitations that the universe places upon his desires."⁴

The Myth of Sisyphus tells of the sudden discovery of the monotony of daily life. The Outsider is also largely concerned with the theme of ^{meaningless} mechanised everyday existence, ~~which results in the feeling of absurdity.~~ This ~~novel~~ depicts the cyclical rotation of mechanical, monotonous life which makes the existence of Meursault absurd. Meursault finds his own experience of the surrounding

world at odds with his actual yearnings. His first experience of the sensation of the absurd springs when his natural response to life contradicts the mechanical nature of existence. Meursault is somewhat in a state of dormant feelings so far as society is concerned. Neither the death of his mother nor the love of Marie could rouse him from that state. After the death of his mother, Meursault just goes through a routine proceeding. About the death of his mother he apologetically said: " it's not my fault,"⁵. At the news of his mother's death, he is not seen grief-stricken or over-powered with remorse. He reacts with passivity to the news of his mother's death and her funeral. The very opening of the novel shows Meursault's indifference : "Mother died today, Or, may be, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: 'your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy.' which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday".⁶ On receiving the telegram Meursault seeks leave and starts for the Home for the old where his mother lived and died. On his way to attend his mother's funeral, Meursault looks quite listless. On the other hand, he is alert enough to record every flicker of every

emotion he experiences and every small thing he does, sees or hears.

Meursault is unable to react with the expected modicum of grief at his mother's funeral. At the funeral Meursault sees others performing certain mechanical rituals associated with death and funeral. They wear aprons, look grief-stricken and shed tears. But Meursault dispassionately observes their behaviour. He acts as an onlooker at the ritual in which he is supposed to be the chief performer. At the wake he is so sleepy that he can hardly keep his eyes open. Responding to his natural urges he smokes and drinks at the wake. He is seen responding to the immediate dictates of his senses, " the coffee had warmed me up, and through the open door came scents of flowers, and breaths of cool night air. I think I dozed off for a while."⁷ Instead of lamenting the death of his mother he observes the details of clothes and manners of the persons assembled at the wake. Meursault's behaviour astonishes others and they look at him curiously and Meursault says: "For a moment I had an absurd impression that they had come to sit in judgement on me".⁸ The mechanical procedure at the wake gives

Meursault a feeling of absurdity. He feels alienated from the mourners. In the first part of the novel there are several reflections which suggest Meursault's alienation thus making him a stranger, an absurd hero. During the wake Meursault exhibits such reactions as may be expected of a man who sits among a group of mourners without belonging to them. There are instances which not only denote a recognition of the absurd but also a deep-seated estrangement from others.

The novel begins with a note of lack of emotion on the part of Meursault - such a degree of emotion as we usually encounter on specific occasions and as society expects of us, no matter whether the emotion in question is genuinely felt. ^{A not.} The emotional stasis in Meursault is evident in his reactions to events around him, in his ability to grasp their socially sanctified significance. Meursault fails to establish an emotional contact with society and for his lack of understanding, of sympathy and respect, he is eventually condemned. His lack of reactions to certain established social norms ^{may appear} looks ~~looks~~ scandalous in the eyes of the convention-bound society. He is a stranger because he plays a lackadaisical role

to be

in the social drama.

The absurdity of The Outsider falls in line with that of The Myth of Sisyphus since it is based upon the principle of divorce and contrast. In many ways Meursault resembles the absurd man of The Myth of Sisyphus. From the very beginning he displays the indifference of the absurd hero. The Outsider follows almost totally the patterned routine outlined in The Myth: In The Outsider the absurd springs from Meursault's encounter with society. He faces a confrontation with society because he is a non-conformist, ~~though just a natural one and~~ not of the ideological variety. After his mother's death, society expects that Meursault should adhere to its established norms. But he shows an unconscious indolence and ~~an~~ indifference to these procedures. He is reluctant to accept as binding those reactions which are expected of him and refuses to comply with formalities. For example, society expects to see Meursault terribly grief-stricken on account of his mother's death but Meursault has a blank, non-descript sort of feeling. The strangeness of his mental state finds expression when he goes to his employer asking for leave and when he catches himself

saying apologetically that it is not his fault that his mother is dead - an utterance which he recalls with shame later. At ~~the~~ Home Meursault refuses to see his mother's body when exhorted to do so and does not refrain from smoking during the wake. He does not show proper filial grief.

At the wake Meursault ignores the coffin. He pays more attention to the behaviour of the mourners assembled there. The coffin is a dividing line, a wall between Meursault and others. Sitting on the other side of the coffin Meursault feels himself isolated from the rest. He cannot emotionally participate in the common bereavement. In this confrontation of consciences Meursault's uneasiness arises from a feeling of being separated and excluded from the community of mourners. His failure to put up a show of extreme bereavement, and his inability to experience sorrow create in Meursault a feeling of estrangement. He is a spectator, an observer in a world which is alien to him and his alienation is reflected in his relations with people. Meursault refuses to follow the conventional formula or to be a pretender. "Meursault never says more than he really feels.

This honesty about his own feelings makes him an outsider, where society is concerned;"⁹. During the funeral Meursault's incomprehension of the visible manifestations of emotions becomes obvious. Instead of responding to the manifestations of emotions, Meursault reflects on how he might enjoy a walk in the country. The point to note is that his adherence to truth serves to expose the pretentious behaviour of society. Eugene Falk writes: "I

"In contrast to his own feelings, we watch with Meursault's eyes the feelings and emotions of others. We see them either as mere records of surface appearances, or ridiculous expression of stiff formality or of sentimentality,"¹⁰.

Meursault does not play the so called social game. He is an outsider to the gigantic social mechanism. Everything seems to be meaningless and incomprehensible to him. He feels constrained by the mechanisation of a self-righteous society. He is surprised by the formalism of the telegram. "Your mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Deep sympathy."¹¹ Similarly the formalism of the mechanical burial process confuses Meursault. The entire funeral mechanism seems to be very ridiculous to him. Finally, the mechanical trial process exposes

society's artifices. Meursault's longing for clarity contradicts the vagueness and incomprehensibility of the universe.

When we first meet Meursault he is only objectively alienated from the social set up. He lacks that dimension of mind which is of the essence of a subjective alien. Unlike Sisyphus he does not reflect on his separation and it is not until he is condemned to death that Meursault actually becomes conscious of his alienation. He is a stranger in the eyes of society because he cannot just conform to the social stereotypes. But Meursault himself does not feel estranged or uprooted from the milieu. He is well attuned to it. He responds to immediate physical stimuli. His feelings are often influenced by his physical condition. He is well attuned to the physical reality and is incapable of getting beyond the literal. He takes interest in what other people say. He gets pleasure from his relationship with Marie. Sentiments or passions do not interfere with his physical demands. His physical desires such as hunger, thirst and sleep and ^{his desire} for periodic swims are stronger than any demands that society may make

upon him. That is why he drinks and smokes at the funeral. Meursault discovers a lack of correspondence between himself and the ritualistic behaviour of others.

It creates a gap, or a cleavage between Meursault and others. But Meursault is not divorced from his natural milieu. He clings to his spontaneous life and instinctively responds to his physical cravings. At this stage Meursault is a stranger to others but not to himself. On his return from his mother's funeral Meursault does not mind going to a film with Marie and enjoying a bath with her. She seems to be a thing of nature, immensely pleasurable to him; "while I was helping her to climb on to a raft, I let my hand stray over her breasts. Then she lay flat on the raft, while I tread water. After a moment she turned and looked at me. Her hair was over her eyes and she was laughing. I clambered up on to the raft, besides her. The air was pleasantly warm and, half jokingly, I let my head sink back upon her lap. She didn't seem to mind, so I let it stay there."¹² The death of his mother is not much of an incident in his life. It was not unlike all other surrounding events: "It occurred to me that some-

how I'd got through another Sunday, that Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual. Really, nothing in my life had changed"¹³. Meursault is in every respect contemporary everyman who is self-enclosed and who reacts rather non-chalantly to the happenings around. He returns to his normal rhythm of life and recommences his life after the briefest interruption giving the impression that he would continue to live undisturbed, as though, forever.

Meursault exhibits a complete indifference to everything except immediate physical sensations. At the funeral he has no regrets; rather he feels the physical inconveniences. He notes automatically and objectively everything which strikes his eye. The day after the funeral he goes for a swim with Marie. He takes her to a comic film, sleeps with her in his bed. But even in his affairs with Marie he shows no more affection or feeling than he had shown for his mother. He does not feel excited at her proposal of marriage. When Marie asks him to marry, he remarks calmly: "I did not mind; if she was keen on it, we'd get married"¹⁴. About Marie insisting on his marrying her he says: "I explained that it had no

importance really but, if it would give her pleasure we could get married right away. I pointed out that any how the suggestion came from her; as for me, I'd merely said 'yes'." ¹⁵. On account of his oddities, his indifference and lack of responsiveness Marie calls him 'a queer fellow'. / He responds equally indifferently to a lucrative proposal of promotion with the tempting prospect of moving to Paris. The prospect of promotion means nothing to him. Referring to it he says:

"I told him (the employer) I was quite prepared to go; but really I didn't care much one way or the other. He then asked if a 'change of life', as he called it, didn't appeal to me, and I answered that one never changed one's real life; anyhow, one life was as good as another and my present one suited me quite well." ¹⁶

Phillip Thody remarks:

"Meursault is a man, who, apparently quite unconsciously, accepts the premises on which The Myth of Sisyphus is based. He recognizes the complete pointlessness of life and the 'deep lack of any reason for living' of which the essay of the absurd speaks. He illustrates by his want of interest in all that happens, 'the senseless character of this daily agitation'. He believes in none of the things which normally give significance to life. Family, affection, love, friendship, ambition, none of these has any meaning for him. Only the sensation of being alive either remains or seems to matter." ¹⁷

Meursault is a stranger because his acts are reflexes whereas in a society it is expected that some set rules, some established norms should govern one's behaviour. Meursault's strange behaviour is seen as a threat to the well-established structure of society and society jealously and stubbornly starts to guard its norms. It cannot allow individual whimsical behaviour to threaten the collective adherence to a system. Meursault is a stranger among his fellows with their pasts and their futures, their rituals and norms, their bereavements and aspirations. Being so different from them, Meursault is virtually an exile and alone. Camus brings out this strangeness of his hero by contrasting him with others, first by showing how he sees other people, and then by showing how others see him. "Meursault's passivity is so total that he is wholly indifferent to the relative importance of courses of action which are proposed to him. Drinking a cup of coffee or going to bed with Marie have the same significance in his mind. . . . He thereby reveals himself as the 'stranger', the 'intruder', the 'interloper' who has entered the territorial group from the outside and does not belong."¹⁸ Paradoxical as it might appear, Meursault has a

passionate infatuation with life. His only real pleasure is sensuous pleasure and his spontaneous, sensuous pleasure is rooted in the present. He entertains neither remorse nor hope because he neither looks back nor looks forward. Robert Champigny presents Meursault as an epicurean pagan hero who adapts himself to what he has and makes the most of it.

Meursault's preference for a spontaneous life contradicts society's demand for an elaborate ritualistic life. He acts in accordance with his own instinctive responses whereas society demands some prescribed displays of sentiments and sensibilities even when not genuinely experienced, thus rendering such displays hypocritical. That is why Meursault's calmness at the death of his mother, his failure to display a show of mourning or weeping shock others. They demand that he should have been overpowered by shock, he should have wept profusely, he should have had an irrepressible desire to see his mother's body and he should have practised extreme penance or contrition.

Meursault is an 'alien' to his society. He is an

excellent example of a man totally alienated from the people and society around him. His alienation is the result of the feeling of not being on the same wave lengths with others, his failure to share their views and interests. His alienation reflects his exclusion from social participation. He is also alienated in the sense that the social events affecting him seem to be quite incomprehensible to Meursault. He suffers from a kind of social isolation in the sense of dissociation from the set norms of his society. His alienation is produced by the juxtaposition of his stubborn, though unconscious, adherence to the truth of his being and society's obstinacy in adherence to certain formalities.

For Meursault there is only one life, the life of the moment, the life he knows very well, the life comprising a measure of physical and mental ease - smoking, drinking, the swims, Marie's soft body and transparent dresses - a life that needs no lamentation or tears. Meursault is a man who is animated by a passion, the passion for the truth of the moment. He prefers to die rather than tell lies and this adherence

to truth alarms the society which cannot bear to face the truth. Meursault never says more than he really feels. This honesty about his own feelings makes him an outsider in the hypocritical society. Not knowing how to follow the conventions of society, Meursault displays a kind of inattention towards the events around him. He is "simply unaware of the emotional reactions expected of him in different social situations. He is completely oblivious of the fact that he is expected to express certain sentiments at his mother's funerals; to allow a certain period of time to elapse before establishing a liaison with a girl, to tell this girl that he loves her, when he simply wants to make love to her; to appear anxious to rise to a higher position in his office."¹⁹

The contradiction between the demands of his authentic self and those of a hide-bound society results in a clash and creates a cleavage between Meursault's spontaneous life and the conventionalised system of society. Here the absurd is enthroned in this clash. Meursault clinically observes the details of life around him but is bewildered to see the unusual interpretation

attached to these details and their unusual connections. These interpretations and connections are merely "arbitrary conventions designed to give a superficial veneer of logic and familiarity to the inexplicable fact of human existence."²⁰ Meursault's attitude reveals by contrast the hypocritical and superficial codes with which we disguise this incomprehensible fact of existence. He becomes a social martyr because he cannot be other than authentic. Meursault is condemned simply because he does not play the game of society. He is a man who refuses to be a liar: "Meursault, although an outsider in society and a stranger to himself, is by no means completely indifferent to the world. His domain is the physical life. To swim, to run, to make love, - to these experiences which have given him happiness and which make him wish to live the same life again. His indifference is not towards life itself but only towards those emotions to which society, living on the dead belief that the world is reasonable and significant, attributes an arbitrary importance. He is the outsider who refuses to play the game of society because he sees the emptiness of the rule, and his failure to conform causes society to will his death."²¹

Thus, for his rejection of conventional emotions,

society condemns Meursault as a criminal. He faces the silence of the world with taciturnity. The laconic behaviour of Meursault is looked upon suspiciously by society. So the absurdity of the situation is born of the confrontation between his true self and the mechanical behaviour of social reality. It is a link between the world and his self - a link based on confrontation. The absurd results from Meursault's conscious awareness that his meaningful life is becoming meaningless whereas the meaninglessness of the world is posing to be meaningful. His nostalgia for unity is thus countered by the disunity and trauma of his experience. Meursault is to increasingly feel the intolerance of a system that is opaque and primitive in its hostility. The absurd is the proof for Meursault that he is part of the world but at the same time no organic part of it.

In the middle of the novel Meursault is seen committing a murder. He kills an Arab. The murder is a mere accident. His crime is no more than the mechanical result of a series of accidental events. Meursault does not regard the killing as a conscious, diabolic event. It is an error caused by the blinding presence of the

sun: "I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs.

"Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver."²²

Meursault is sorry. His heart sinks, but not so much because of the crime as such but on account of the inevitable disturbance of his relation with a natural world: "I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day."²³

He attempts to give a 'natural' explanation because for him it is the only valid explanation. There is no sign of criminality in his action. He committed the murder because he could not bear the brightness of the sun. The glare of the sun worked upon him to the point where he found himself doing what he had had no intention of doing. "It struck me that all I had to do

was to turn, walk away, and think no more about it. But the whole beach, pulsing with heat, was pressing on my back."²⁴ The fateful act is over and he becomes aware that through the commission of that act he has destroyed the equilibrium of the day.

Characteristically, Camus's characters, because of their innate paganism, respond more naturally and more powerfully to natural stimuli, like those of the sun, the moon, the sea than to the stereotyped unnatural demands of society. They are at odds with a pretence-based society but they are in love with nature.

Meursault would embrace the elements as he embraces Marie. His killing the Arab is no vengeance-driven consummation of passion but the unconscious act of one befuddled by the sun.

Meursault is tried and sentenced to be guillotined. It is only after his trial is over and sentence pronounced that Meursault becomes more keenly aware of the fundamental absurdity of man's position in the universe. The smouldering feeling of rebellion turns him into a conscious

rebel. During the process of his trial Meursault recognises the arbitrariness of death to which we all are sentenced in one form or another. This revelation engenders and raises to the highest level of consciousness a sense of physical solidarity with a world where there is so much to stimulate and release his faculties.

The judicial machinery is seen very active against Meursault. The prosecutors are making investigation into Meursault's private life. Police enquiries confirm that Meursault has shown great callousness at his mother's funeral. Witnesses are summoned to give evidence. All of them testify that Meursault showed unconventional behaviour all through. The warden of the Home was surprised by Meursault's coldness of response on the day of the funeral.

Then the judge hears the door-keeper say that Meursault had declined to see his mother's body, had smoked cigarettes and slept and drank. When the judge asks Meursault to reply, Meursault says that it is true that he smoked and drank. He clings to truth. He can not be a pretender. He can not lie to escape death. After listening to the evidence of the witnesses the prosecutor

comments: "Gentlemen of the jury, I would have you note that on the next day after his mother's funeral that man was visiting the swimming-pool, starting a liaison with a girl, and going to see a comic film. That is all I wish to say."²⁵ Then he adds with great vehemence: "I accuse the prisoner of behaving at his mother's funeral in a way that showed he was already a criminal at heart."²⁶

Meursault is condemned to be hanged, not because he has killed an Arab, but for his refusal to play the game of society, a game of lies and hypocrisies. He is condemned to die for his repudiation of the validity of social ritual, for his refusal to exaggerate his feelings.

From the prisoner's box Meursault observes every thing detachedly and listens to the trial proceedings as if it concerned somebody else. He follows his trial with the dispassionate curiosity of an outside observer: "The prospect of witnessing a trial rather interested me; I'd never had occasion to attend one before"²⁷ and then says "It is always interesting, even in the prisoner's dock, to hear oneself being talked about."²⁸ Albert Maquet remarks: "His absurdity emphasises the absurdity

of the miserable comedy in which his destiny is at stake."²⁹

Meursault's trial process presents a mockery of the judicial process. The judicial process seems to be very puerile and ludicrous to him: "For the tenth time I was asked to give particulars of my identity and, though heartily sick of this formality, I realized that it was natural enough; after all, it would be a shocking thing for the court to be trying the wrong man."³⁰ The trial process ironically portrays the hollowness of the social order. To Meursault everything appears to be absurd. He finds no relation between his previous actions and the crime reconstructed in the court. As we have said, he goes to the guillotine not so much for killing a man as for not having shown proper filial grief during his mother's funeral vigil. The prosecution tries to prove that Meursault's criminal nature is demonstrated in the acts during and after his mother's funeral. The arguments presented by both prosecution and by defence counsel dwell on unrelated events in Meursault's life between his mother's death and the murder. He comically remarks: "And certainly in the speeches of my lawyer and the

prosecuting counsel a great deal was said about me; more, in fact, about me personally than about my crime."³¹ Faced with the fabricated reconstruction of the crime, he begins to feel that he is being ordered out of life because he did not play the sacrosanct game, because he refused to adhere to the funeral rituals. Germaine Bree says: "Meursault becomes a kind of social martyr, a man who 'dies rather than lie' in answer to a question."³² The society rejects Meursault as a 'stranger' who with his obtuseness refuses to be one of them. It pretends to be shocked by Meursault's calmness and demands a display of sensitivity. But Meursault refuses to play the conventional game of regret. He does not show that willingness to pay homage to conventions which most men uphold as sacred. The contradiction which is the mainspring of the absurd results from the irrational demands of society that Meursault should show a socially acceptable pattern of behaviour and Meursault's refusal to play any such role in the drama of social justice. Meursault's obstinate refusal to play the game poses a threat to society which now flexes its muscles to shield its conventions by casting out Meursault. "Meursault will not don the mask of hypocrisy, will not observe meaningless



social rituals, will not play in the social comedy. For these reasons he becomes a scapegoat and is executed."³³

As noticed earlier, in the first part of the novel there are several reflections which establish Meursault's estrangement from others. He is present as an absurd man set apart from the body of mourners. He is an object of curiosity, even of suspicion.

In the second part of the novel Meursault becomes fully aware of his alienation from society, "of the profound disparity between his individual quantitative morality and the absolute qualitative moral standards of the community, of the dissimilarity between his thirst for truth and attachment to nature and society's rituals and adherence to conventions."³⁴ So in the case of Meursault the absurdity is established by a series of contradictions that exist on various levels - Meursault's responses to instinctive impulses and society's adherence to conventional formula; Meursault clinging to truth and society donning a mask; Meursault's attempt to maintain authenticity and society's attempt to set it at naught. Patrick Henry very acutely observes that the two parts

of the novel represent the two sides of Meursault's absurdity — in the first part, the unreflective routine life of Meursault helps to create the feeling of absurdity whereas in the second part the introspective side of his personality creates consciousness of absurdity.

As stated earlier, according to Camus, the first reaction to the experience of the absurd is suicide. But suicide evades one of the principal aspects of the experience, viz consciousness. The absurd is born of consciousness and must live as a truth; the absurd demands continuance of truth. The second answer to the experience of the absurd is hope. Hope is the affirmation that one day everything will be explained. But hope, like suicide, is not the proper answer to the demands of experience. Camus says that the experience of the absurd can be maintained by rebellion. Revolt is directed towards the absurd. If we judge that the absurd is true, we must preserve it and it can be preserved by an act of revolt. Revolt will provide a basis for making value judgements, even in a disordered world. Man must, Camus says, maintain a state of revolt by being conscious of the nature of the world. Camus's absurd heroes become rebels by

choosing to live in the present. They have no regrets for the past and no hope for the future. Sisyphus thus revolts by despising the gods, hating death and maintaining a passion for life. Camus writes:

"Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory."³⁵

what we notice in the case of Meursault is that in the face of the horror of death, he defends his life as the only value he has and defies the society that has condemned him. He becomes a rebel not by fleeing from life but by fleeing into it. His last option is for life. Meursault's spirit of rebellion is stirred by the visit of the prison chaplain who asks him to repent and to prepare his soul for immortality. Meursault feels exasperated by the chaplain's requests and defends the absurd life he has led, a life with no transcendental value, a life which is the only value he can cling to: "I started yelling at the top of my voice, I hurled insults at him, I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me; it was

better to burn than to disappear."³⁶

His revolt is the refusal to accept the consolations of eternity offered by the prison Chaplain. It is a defiant attitude in the face of death and this defiance brings only a greater intensity to the sensation of being alive. Meursault refuses all transcendental beliefs which create a value other than that of life on this earth. The religious consolations offered by the Chaplain lead Meursault into a violent affirmation of the only certainty — that of this life. Even in the face of annihilation he is not deluded by the hope of an after life. For him there is nothing beyond the finite existence, no object of faith beyond the orbit of human awareness. Here Meursault becomes a prototype of the absurd hero. Glicksberg comments:

"The absurd hero, who is absurd even when he rebels, struggles painfully but resolutely towards the goal of full disclosure. Nothing can deter him from this passionate commitment to the truth."³⁷

Meursault has full realisation that though life be absurd, it must be lived. He affirms: "A life in which I can remember this life on earth. That's all I want of it."³⁸

Meursault frankly says that he does not believe in God and rejects any flight from life and thinks that in spite of its meaninglessness, life must be lived. He does not despair. Like Sisyphus he struggles with the senselessness of his condition.

Camus always adheres to truth and the truth for him is the love of life. He repudiates those who turn their back upon life and seek spiritual comfort. He wants to face life totally with all its imperfections and injustices. Being a passionate advocate of life, Camus maintains that man should not abandon the struggle with the absurdity. Man should, on the contrary, nullify the absurd by accepting life. Camus's rebellion begins as a challenge to the hostile universe. Thus it is that Meursault's impending death intensifies his love for life. Just before his execution Meursault manifests the consequences of the absurd: Freedom, revolt, scorn for death and passion for life.

Meursault's consciousness of the absurdity of existence is thus finally awakened. Within his prison cell the world is made clear. His anger with the priest

has washed him clean and emptied him of hope. A slow persistent breeze blows towards him and purges away all the ideas that people tried to foist on him in the years behind him.

"What difference could they make to me, the death of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers. Surely, surely he must see that? Every man alive was privileged; there was only one class of men, the privileged class. All alike would be condemned to die one day; his turn, too, would come like others. And what difference could it make if, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he did not weep at his mother's funeral, since it all came to the same thing in the end?"³⁹

When he awakes from his long sleep he finds that the stars are shining down on his face and the cool night air soothes his cheeks, thus inviting him to live this life more intensely. He comes to understand why his mother, on the verge of her death took a fiance: "With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again."⁴⁰ Meursault feels a new bond of comradeship with the inhuman absurd that confronts him. His final gesture is an act

of absurdity; his passion for life is reinforced in his final words: "Gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe."⁴¹ He discovers a bond that ties him more closely to the rest of humanity. His final wish strengthens the bond that exists between himself and other men: "On the day of my execution there should be a large crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration."⁴² The presence of the howling crowd would at least make him feel less lonely.

Camus's contention is that, like Sisyphus, we can conquer the absurd by facing up to it. Sisyphus does not despair; his struggle brings its own reward. Like Sisyphus, Mersault chooses to struggle against the absurdity of life by living life to the full in spite of its meaninglessness.

He goes to the guillotine with the conscious realisation that, though life is absurd, it must be lived. Man bears the full responsibility for his destiny in a

universe which is hostile and which offers no justification. It is that ultimate responsibility which impels man to retain his authentic self and face courageously the knowledge of the inevitability of death. Camus's hero wants to transcend nihilism by an ethic of human responsibility. In the face of the absurdity of life, he chooses to anchor himself on earth. He wants to overcome his own exile through refusing any longer to accede to his alienation from the human world. At the end of The Outsider Meursault's final wish to see the presence of a hateful crowd is his recognition of the bond that exists between himself and the players of the social game.

He discovers in the game a bond that ties him to the rest of humanity. Here we find Camus's final solution to the absurd. Robert Sayre writes:

"The solution to the anguish he feels in an absurd universe lies in total acceptance of life as it is; by living as intensely as possible in the present; tasting deeply the pleasure of sun and sea, he can become united with the universe from which he felt estranged."⁴³

Camus adorns life with a great passion, embraces it fully and to him the passion for life compensates for its absurdity.

2 - THE PLAGUE

"while L' Etranger showed the individual moment of awareness, and Le Mythe de Sisyphe an individual opposition against the absurd, Le Peste is a portrait of collective struggle"⁴⁴, thus Brian Masters characterises The Plague of Albert Camus. The individual predicament of The Outsider becomes a universal predicament in The Plague. Andre Maurois comments: "The Plague is to collective life what The Stranger was to the individual life".⁴⁵ In The Stranger the protagonist fights a lone battle against a hostile and incomprehensible world whereas in The Plague the people of Oran are afflicted by a bubonic plague and the plague-stricken people fight a collective battle against this disaster. Both these novels symbolise a universal predicament - man's plight in an absurd world. It may be said that the predicament experienced by a single man in The Stranger becomes a mass plague in this novel. In The Stranger Meursault is seen cut off from other men of society whereas the plague-afflicted people of Oran are cut off from the rest of the world. To resolve the experience of the absurdity and apparent sterility of the world, Meursault rebels individually. But in The Plague the revolt becomes

collective.

The Plague can be studied from different angles. The general structure of the novel follows the separation of the whole community from civilization by an unwarranted disaster, the agonies and suffering of a whole community in the face of the horrors of death caused by the deadly scourge of the plague. On another level the plague represents the incomprehensibility and cruelty of the absurd world and the possible reactions of men in such situation. The exiled condition of the people of Oran represents the universal human destiny — the failure of man to correspond with his surroundings, a basic reason for the sensation of the absurd. On still another level, a very cogent and relevant one, the plague can be seen to represent the German occupation of France.

In The Myth of Sisyphus Camus says that the experience of the absurd may be born of the mechanical nature of human existence. This mechanical existence makes human life insipid and absurd. Man may encounter the absurd by his sudden awareness of the monotonous, mechanical and meaningless character of life. The sensation of the

absurd may be experienced by a single man or by a community as a whole. The absurdity results from the automatic responses to everyday existence. This awareness of an absurd existence turns into a conscious revelation when man reflects upon his mortality in the face of death. Then the feeling of the absurd becomes an awakening. The Plague deals with this awakening of the inhabitants of Oran. Camus insists on the banality of life in Oran and shows how the people of Oran are governed by certain set habits. He makes the coming of the plague represent various misfortunes in human life such as loneliness, suffering and death. But the plague conditions also evoke the mechanical character of much of modern life, the deadening routine of modern bureaucracy. This mechanical existence creates a dislocation between the people of Oran and the life they could have lived. They follow a stagnant pattern of life and this stagnancy makes their lives absurd to them. The banality and ordinariness of life had been emphasised at the very beginning of the novel: "Perhaps the easiest way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die. In our little town all three are done on much the same

lines, with the same feverish yet casual air. The truth is that every one is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits."⁴⁶

This monotonous, routine life is further stressed in the lines that follow:

"Certainly nothing is commoner nowadays than to see people working from morn till night and then proceeding to fritter away at card-tables, in cafés, and in small-talk what time is left for living . . . At Oran, as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have to love each other without knowing much about it."⁴⁷

This absurd way of living synchronizes with the ugly setting of the town. The town is treeless, glamourless and soulless with its back turned on the bay: "Lack of trees, the hideousness of the houses and the absurd layout of the town"⁴⁸ provide an appropriate setting for the novel.

The novel holds the key to Camus's consciousness of absurdity. It presents Camus's belief that since all men must die, human existence is meaningless. It also provides Camus's belief that men who are fighting

against the plague, a common enemy to them, can ultimately give some meaning to their lives and achieve a sense of human solidarity.

In this novel one sees the emphasis placed upon the absurdity of the world and of the human condition devoid of justice. Life continues to be meaningless; Man acquires nobility and dignity in living it. Camus shows us how it is possible to acknowledge the fact of the absurd without either evading it or surrendering to it. In The Plague Camus focuses on the human predicament in an absurd universe where people are separated from their near and dear ones by the sudden invasion of the plague. People are aware of a sense of separation because the town is cut off from the outside world. This isolation of the people from those to whom they are closely attached and also from the rest of the world creates a forlorn condition for them. The plague like a social disease spreads everywhere, penetrates every nook and corner of the town and creates havoc on the lives of the inhabitants. The first contradiction that the plague brings out is the struggle between the epidemic and the community. Though at first

taken aback by the sudden coming of the disastrous plague, the people of Oran gradually know how to live with it, i.e., they reconcile themselves to the plague conditions. The plague conditions gradually get assimilated into their habit. Thus we hear Cottard says: "I've been feeling much more at ease here since the plague settled in."⁴⁹ But gradually their consciousness is stirred up and they put up a fight against their common enemy. Rebellion against the plague becomes their choice. The plague is a common concern for all and they fight in a body:

"The plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all."⁵⁰

Everybody is involved in the resistance because the plague threatens all equally: "The plague was no respecter of persons and under its despotic rule everyone, from the Governor down to the humblest delinquent, was under sentence."⁵¹ During the plague days everybody is in the same boat. This collective concern of the people has been put in the following words by Andre Maurois:

"It is no longer a single Sisyphus but a city of Sisyphuses who find themselves crushed by disaster."⁵²

Let us now have a more detailed view of the work. The setting of the plague is the Algerian coastal town of Oran, whose inhabitants are suddenly bewildered by the unexpected sight of rats coming out of their holes to die in the streets. At first the rats die by twos or threes and then they tumble out of every hole and die in batches. Then the inhabitants of Oran are themselves infected by the bubonic plague and fall victims. At the initial stage the town authorities are hesitant to apply the necessary prophylactic measures. They even hesitate to utter the word 'plague' but when the number of victims increases at an alarming rate, the town authorities decide to declare a state of siege and Oran stands separated from the rest of the world. Then the authorities order the closure of the city gates. Oran ceases to be in touch with the rest of the world by normal means of communication and all correspondence with the outer world is forbidden. With the closing of the gates the people of Oran find themselves in a closed

world of isolation and suffering. They are in an exiled state. There are two principal initial human experiences of the plague-ridden town. In the first place, the plague sets the inhabitants face to face with the reality of suffering and death, and, secondly, by segregating the people of Oran from the rest of the world, the plague suggests that there is no escape from realities. So the initial emotion shared by all the Oranians is "the sense of exile and of deprivation, with all the cross-currents of revolt and fear set up by these."⁵³ And this feeling of exile is nothing but the absurd as defined by Camus. It is life without future and without hope. The strongest emotion the plague brought to the town is that of exile and it is nothing but "that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, and those keen shafts of memory that stung like fire."⁵⁴ This exiled condition makes the life of Oranians absurd: "Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom men's justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars."⁵⁵

The narrator adds: "Each of us had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky."⁵⁶ They have to suffer from a sense of abandonment and futility in a world whose indifference and caprices they cannot understand: "They had been sentenced, for an unknown crime, to an indeterminate period of punishment."⁵⁷ This existence under the plague may be characterized as 'absurd' as identified by Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus. The plague by its emphasis upon isolation, is an allegory of the hostile nature of an existence that like an unpredictable fatality sets up the state of siege and imposes the final punishment of death.

The absurd negates all belief in the future except the possibility of living in the immediate present. Nothing is left with the plague-stricken people except a series of present moments. The absurd which takes the form of the plague makes man prisoner of the immediate moment. The plague becomes an appropriately dreadful symbol of the absurd, because like the absurd, it presents the same evil of separation, the same sensation

of a yawning void.

Father Paneloux at first asserts that the plague is a just punishment inflicted by God on a sinful people: "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it."⁵⁸ He continues his sermon: "The just man need have no fear, but the evil-doer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff."⁵⁹ But this seemingly unshakable faith in God ultimately crumbles when he witnesses the death of an innocent child. In him Camus portrays the rational man who cannot stand up to the reality of the absurd. He is caught in a dilemma. He can neither abandon God nor accept God's world. Father Paneloux stands for that absurd man who cannot get reconciled to the plague condition and at the same time lacks that strength to rebel. He believes in God and he is concerned with absolutes. Dr. Rieux says:

"Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar
He hasn't come in contact with death;
that's why he can speak with such assurance
of the truth -- with a capital T. But every

country priest who visits his parishioners, and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed, thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence."⁶⁰

Doctor Rieux, the author of this chronicle, has a unique response to the plague. Like other inhabitants, he also suffers from a sense of isolation. He is separated from his wife who left Oran before the outbreak of the plague and finally died in the sanatorium. His reaction to the scourge is that since no religious consolation can help one to evade it, one must fight against it as one finds it and not just accept it. The plague engenders in him a challenge or a spirit of rebellion to transcend all the evils of the world within the limits of existence. He knows that though the world cannot be transformed, it can at least be resisted. In the midst of widespread suffering, Doctor Rieux refuses to accept Christianity as a remedy. He says that since God allows evil to exist, it is better not to attempt to understand a problem beyond human comprehension: "Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him, and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our

eyes towards the heaven where He sits in silence?"⁶¹

He knows that the plague is "a never-ending defeat" and his "victories will never be lasting."⁶²

Yet there is no reason for giving up the struggle. Doctor Rieux, like Sisyphus, carries on ceaseless struggle knowing that it may be proved futile. The struggle for him is a real battle against the absurd and he wants to make as much of it as possible. The plague must be fought tooth and nail and there must be no bowing down: "The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical."⁶³ Rieux never looks up to divine help to overcome the plague but looks it in the face and puts up the utmost resistance to it. In his struggle with the plague he tries to wrest a meaning for humanity. At the end of the novel we find that the fury of the plague subsides, the serum begins to be effective and the town returns to normalcy. The disappearance of the plague makes people rejoice. But Rieux

knows that the victory cannot be a permanent one; it is merely a temporary respite. He knows that the bacillus of the plague never dies. They are only in a passing state of inertness and will revive again to strike. Dr. Rieux's relentless struggle is best seen against his knowledge that the battle is in the long run futile. The point for Camus is that it is through such resistless struggle waged by the absurd man that meaning is acquired and values are born; such meaning and values transfigure the otherwise meaningless existence. "And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy was always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city."⁶⁴ Dr. Rieux's rebellion is a contention with the absurd, while

trusting in the meaning that arises from this contention. He gains a clear understanding of the permanent and sphinx-like evil in the world. His is no suffering without a struggle. His protest is charged with revolt. But he protests without hope. The plague suggests that the condition of man is such that he must learn to live without hope. He knows that his protest will die in the face of the silence of the universe. But still he clings to his rock like Sisyphus. This is his tragic situation: "Camus calls on men to take up Rieux's task of healer in the never-ending struggle to wrest meaning from the dialogue with the concrete situation, from the absurdities of history and society."⁶⁵

As we saw earlier, this work can be understood at one level with reference to the contemporary political situation. Camus responded to the demands of his time with a unique sensitivity. He emphasised the vital role a writer should play when facing the social, political and philosophical problems of his day and this belief led him not only to participate in the French Resistance Movement but also to concern himself with social and political problems of the post-war France. He focussed

his writings on the problems and controversies that ran through the crisis of the war period and also of the post-war world. Having a keen sense of the writer's responsibility and gifted with a vigorous imagination, Camus was well aware of the terrible conditions in which vast numbers of human beings were condemned to live and it was Camus's concern not only to protest against these inhuman conditions but also to involve others in the Resistance Movement. War had to be resisted, otherwise it would mean the occupation of Europe from which there would be no recovery. So he appealed to all Europeans and people of the world to build up a united resistance against war. Dr. R. Haggis remarks:

"It is (Le Peste) among other things, a book about the Second World War: through the fictional account of an outbreak of plague Camus conveys to us the experience of the defeat of France in 1940 and of German Occupation that followed."⁶⁶

Camus took an active part in the underground movement against Hitler's armies who turned France into a prison. The plague becomes an image of fascism, of the occupation of France by Germany.

Albert Maquet writes:

"At the moment when the book appeared, minds barely delivered from the nightmare of the dark years of the war quite naturally were inclined to recognize the plague as being the German Occupation and the struggle against the epidemic as the very action of the Resistance."⁶⁷

The plague describes the horrible atmosphere of the German Occupation of France and the collective fight put up against it. Camus uses a plague-stricken city, cut off from the rest of the world and its inhabitants quarantined, as a model of the situation of the world as he experienced it: War and Occupation, the infection of Nazi ideology, the display of strength in the struggle against Nazism and Fascism.

Here in this novel Camus celebrates the human communion which is established by a collective rebellion against the common evil. Germaine Bree writes:

"La Peste installs the temporary but despotically dreary, petty, and deadly round of endless collective regimentation and privation in an atmosphere of weary horror — the atmosphere of the German Occupation of France."⁶⁸

But this is certainly not the deepest level at which Camus' vision as it emerges in The Plague can be treated

and grasped. The Plague may be seen immediately to be rooted in the French history of a certain specific period, but what the author does is to give the tale and vision a power and suggestivity whereby it rises and expands beyond the specific context and acquires a definitive universal significance: man is in an absolute predicament in this world under the sentence of death; there is nothing beyond this world except perhaps a malevolent deity. In this absurd scheme of things where there is no means of communication, far less understanding between man and his situation, the only way of making the menaced human situation worthwhile and bearable is to take up the gauntlet against the unfeeling, even cruel fate and act courageously and doggedly in obedience to one's sense of solidarity with the fellow-mortals in peril. It is man alone who can come to the aid of man when nothing else does. Like the doctor in The Plague, one must, like a little Prometheus, declare war, as an act of faith, against man's enemy, as in the Greek myth, and all this with the lucid consciousness that death will finally win and that the next generations will have to take up the fight again.

CHAPTER - IV

CONCLUSIONS

"A man has need of happiness, true. But he needs, too, to find out what he is."

- Camus.

In their fictional world Kafka and Camus render the tortured, yet authentic quest of the twentieth century mind. The task which Kafka undertook and left unfinished, was carried by Camus in his lucid manner to its natural culmination. Kafka built upon the intellectual experience of the early twentieth century and Camus, who had passed through the agonising days of the Second World War and Fascism, was in a position to depict this absurd situation with more acutely felt experience and emboldened conviction. The absurd world of Camus was not qualitatively a different one from that of Kafka. Only Camus found the world, because of the time element, more irrational and hollow. Both Kafka and Camus portray their characters having feelings and experiences which are universal, which are latent in all men. Their characters represent the anxieties and isolation which afflict the contemporary society. Their characters are strangers bound to an indifferent and incomprehensible world; they are aliens in a universe whose

illogic and illusions stare them in the face. Both Kafka and Camus explore the agonising experiences of the modern man who, if a generalisation is permissible, undergoes an unjust trial without any guilt.

Camus was provoked and held by the themes of Kafka's works. His works reflect the Kafkaesque qualities of writing. In his essay on Kafka 'Hope and The Absurd in the work of Franz Kafka', Camus discovers and recognises the paradoxes and contradictions which characterize Kafka's works. He says that Kafka's works are absurd because they represent the fundamental ambiguity of life. Camus writes:

"These perpetual oscillations between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the everyday, the absurd and the logical, are found throughout his work and give it both its resonance and its meaning."¹

These are the paradoxes which, Camus feels, must be enumerated and the contradictions which must be underscored in order to understand the absurd work. Camus says that the absurdity can be given form in a series of parallel contrasts and Kafka expresses tragedy through the commonplace and the absurd through logic.

Camus's concept of the irrationality of the universe has many affinities with that of Kafka. Both are concerned with the fate of man in a universe whose logic and justice are not comprehensible. In the thoughts of both Kafka and Camus the feeling of absurdity arises from the clash of the desire of the human mind that the world should be explicable in human terms and the fact that the world is not so explicable. The search for life's meaning and the search for truth are constantly defeated by the irrational world. For Kafka and Camus are profoundly disturbed by this alien world where people die for trifling reasons or for no reason at all. Both the novelists have exposed the unauthenticity of ^{the} society where K. dies like a dog without any specified fault or where Meursault is condemned to die for smoking at work. It is a false social structure where false values win at the cost of authentic ones. In the face of the iron structure of a false society, the characters of Kafka and Camus find themselves alone and helpless. They symbolize man caught in a hostile world and the strangeness of the world makes them strangers. They yearn to move in harmony with the world but because of the incomprehensibility of the world, they fail to

communicate with it. Camus says that in the strict sense of the term the absurd means a strange but unavoidable link between the world and man — a link based on confrontation. The absurd stems from the shock of discovery that human desires are just insupportable and without consequence. The works of both Kafka and Camus represent the most modern theme — the theme of dislocation and alienation. Their characters experience a displacement, a discordance that exists between themselves and their world. Their desire for rationality is incongruously juxtaposed with the alien thrust of an impervious universe. Thus, we see Meursault becoming a victim of the hostility of a theatrical society. His spontaneous responses contradict and offend the insincere, hypocritical codes of society. The people of Oran become victims of the sudden onslaught of a bubonic plague and fight an unequal battle for survival. In Kafka Joseph K. of The Trial is accused and executed for an undefined crime and K. of The Castle is caught in a vacuum from which there is neither exit nor retreat. Gregor's desire for continued participation in the family business is rebuffed by those for whom he had to accept a self-annihilating job and suffer the tortures of the damned.

But one fundamental difference between Kafka and Camus regarding their approach to the absurd should be noticed at this stage. Camus's protagonists try to assert the value and purpose of their living though the regimented universe stands in powerful refutation. The violent outrage of this irrational and unjust universe cannot subdue inherent human virtues. Camus says that though the universe is irrational, man must find his happiness within the limits of his finite existence. Camus defines absurdity as a magnificent struggle between man and the world. Camus's protagonists possess a spirit of rebellion and throw a challenge to the hostile universe and attempt to establish a harmonious relation with it. Thus Sisyphus wants to find a meaning in his hopeless job. Though he is condemned to unrelieved and fruitless labour, he never gives up his struggle, never loses heart. Meursault, a scapegoat for a hypocritical society, ultimately feels a sense of a physical solidarity with the existing world. These characters are unflinching in the face of tragic destiny, they exhibit resolute endurance, their spirit is never totally exhausted by the absurd. About Sisyphus Camus says so memorably, 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy' and Meursault lays his heart open to the 'benign

indifference of the universe'. In The Plague Doctor Rieux will never give up the struggle. On the other hand, he unflinchingly encounters the Plague that has wrought such a havoc. He knows that the germs of the plague cannot be totally and finally destroyed, They remain hidden and in a dormant state to revive again and one must prepare oneself to fight the plague as and when it should recur.

Kafka, who died early at the age of fortyone, had the agonising experiences of the First World War. Those experiences, coupled with the tragedy of daily existence at which we glanced earlier, deeply touched and tormented the sensitive youth and as a visionary Kafka could anticipate the chain of tragic reactions that would follow the Great War. In his novels and short stories Kafka undertook a sustained enquiry to diagnose the roots of the social malady and in the process he placed before his readers a world tormented by nightmares, hollowness and futility.

Camus repeatedly writes about violence, absurdity and death. But even then he attempts to avoid the nihilistic pessimism of Kafka. He never abdicates faith - his faith in men, his fellow-men. He never loses faith in regenerative action even when it can only bear temporary

results. Kafka, on the other hand, presents a nihilistic universe in spite of the flickers of hope that seem to sustain his characters.

Kafka presents a gloomy and despairing picture of man's position in a demonic universe. He presents^a neurotic obsession in his works, "neurotic because his characters are from the start stricken with an absurd sense of the utter futility of their quest for meaning."² The quest for meaning on the part of Kafka's protagonists always ends hopelessly. They suffer from an acute sense of emptiness, an erosion, almost a loss of identity. They just drift in the sea of life without any rudder or anchorage. They wander about and are ordered about even when they seem to have chosen a path to follow and a destination to reach. This nihilistic aspect of Kafka's writings has been convincingly described by Glicksberg in the following words:

"Man wanders, lost and alienated, in the night of being, without a fixed destination, but he keeps on wandering, asking himself in perplexity what he shall do to be saved while realizing all the time that there is nothing to be done. Kafka could never make clear to himself the meaning of human existence. Like a sleep-walker he groped his way through the labyrinthine corridors of a dream without end, a dream within a dream, trying to find an answer when he was inwardly convinced no satisfying answer was to be found."³

Kafka was convinced that the human condition was beyond understanding and beyond hope and beyond redemption. Thus his characters, inspite of their urge to live, are condemned to die with hellish torments. Gregor Samsa thus starves himself to death in an imprisoned state before being swept away with the other rubbish and Joseph K. dies like a dog.

Kafka presents an oppressive world in which his men live. They live in a dark, unaired room where they are puzzled by the horrible images of themselves reflected in their consciousness which in its turn, reflects the hideous Organisation of human relationship. In their prison-room they suffer terribly from the agony of infinite separation. His is a world of human debasement and dehumanization in which the characters gradually shrink. Think of Barnabas and the family of Olga and Amalia, and the contrasted images of the Castle and the village impinge powerfully on our awareness. The world of the Castle is one of libidinous, jealous, spiteful and vengeful lords in their hierarchical order while most villagers, men and women are kept waiting, guessing and hoping - all in a state of ignominy and eroded self-respect. Kafka's is a grotesque

and ambiguous world where sickness and disgust combine to make the mortal's existence absurd, horrible, painful and pathetic, Kafka describes a frozen, degenerate world in which the hero is paralysed and this agonising paralysis extends over all his works. His characters are ridden by fear and guilt which ultimately dissipate them, exhaust them to death.

The presence of the chilling image of a grotesquely monstrous phantom is not seen in Camus. The disconcerting gloom and cloud which mark Kafka's world, is not visible in Camus. Camus's characters are often seen breathing in a sunny atmosphere. While Kafka's characters choke in closed chambers, Camus's characters get a full view of the open sky. The trial of Joseph K. is held in a dingy room; K. meets the Superintendent in a faint light and Gregor sits motionless in his prison room staring at the darkness. Meursault, on the other hand, is seen having a bath with Marie on the sea-beach with the sun shining, if somewhat tyrannically over their heads. The warmth of a female body, the odors of the sea, the soothing light of the moon make Camus's characters cling to the natural universe and resign themselves to the grandeur of the universe. Thus in The Outsider we see that even in the prison cell stars shine

down on Meursault's face and the cool night air fans his cheeks. Gregor in Kafka starves himself, dies of suffocation under a sofa and his starved and dried out body is swept away with rubbish. Kafka often reminds one of Webster's torture chambers as in The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil on the one hand, and Hitler's gas chambers on the other. The psychology of Camus's protagonists is generally different. Meursault, even on the verge of death, wishes to start life all over again and opens his heart to the "benign indifference of the universe."

Joseph K. in The Trial and K. in The Castle are always under restraints and their existence becomes absurd because they cannot freely choose their way of life. Camus's characters, on the other hand, seem to defy the barriers imposed on them. They prefer natural life and this preference contradicts the superimposed barriers of the society and thus makes existence absurd. While Joseph K. moves under the strict vigilance of the sphinks-like tribunal, Camus's Meursault moves under the open sky. Kafka's characters suffer to be intimidated, fear-stricken dwarfed and diminished, while Camus's protagonists unflinchingly

wrest life in the face of death.

The unedifying, slimy character of the world that Kafka presents is not a little due to most of his women characters who are often given the role of tools, of accessories in relation to their dark masters. One can usefully recall in this connection the many mistresses in The Trial and The Castle. Of easy morals and ambiguous intent, they would seem not to have known self-respect and dignity. While both Kafka and Camus present the impossible situation of men, their approach to the solution of the problem is different. Despite striking affinities, Kafka and Camus have some fundamental differences so far as the remedy of the absurdity of life is concerned.

To transcend the absurd condition, Kafka seeks solace, though remotely, in religion. But Camus, branded as an atheist, rejects all theological consolations, and ultimately his half-hearted optimism seeks reconciliation with this material world. To him it is better to wage even a hopeless fight in the known world, than to aspire for an unknowable and unattainable paradise.

Individual man, according to Camus, is facing a

world that provides no rational justification for his existence and consequently he might be forced to resolve the dichotomy of the situation by self-annihilation. As noticed earlier, Camus rejects this solution as self-defeating, since an individual decision is not a real solution to a universal and perpetual dilemma. Camus prescribes a reconciliation with the absurd, because what cannot be cured must be endured and human endeavour should be to add honour to this endurance. To strive for discovering a meaning in this meaningless world might be a hopeless exercise but Camus urges upon man to undertake the task since he believes that that way and that way alone man could justify his unjustifiable existence. J.P. Sartre remarks:

"Albert Camus's views are entirely on earth, and Kafka is the novelist of impossible transcendence; for him, the universe is full of signs that we cannot understand; for Camus, on the contrary, the tragedy of human existence lies in the absence of any transcendence."⁴

For Camus, there is no life after death. Camus's hero does not believe in heaven or God. Though he is at the mercy of alien and unpredictable forces, he does not look

upward to heaven, which is an unknown land to him. He does not catch a glimpse of any religious significance in his life to mitigate his unrelieved suffering. He rather seeks to assert his solidarity with the human existence because he knows that there is no supernatural power for him in which he can take refuge. For Camus there can be no meaning beyond his human condition: "Having thrown off all illusions, or so he thinks, Camus's absurdist hero faces the universe without any lofty faith to sustain him."⁵

For Camus God does not exist. So it is a folly to rely upon any external aid. Man must find out the compass of his enterprise within himself. He must decide his own course of life. Camus refuses to accept any doctrine of divine transcendence. Camus is concerned with the natural and does not attempt at an affirmation of values that lie beyond the sphere of the natural. And since for Camus there is no world beyond, man must make his finite experience an end in itself. It is not, as in the case of Kafka, a means to reach a religious goal.

Camus sees "the human voyager as utterly alone and with nothing to rely upon except the compass of his mind

and heart. Man must give himself his own directions: it is up to him, and to him alone, to decide where he shall go."⁶

For Camus no illumination is possible. But in the case of Kafka the light of transcendence occasionally flashes but never totally illumines. These occasional flashes simply dazzle the eyes and never blaze the path. For this reason Kafka's universe is more nihilistic than that of Camus. In Camus there is no attempt at transcendence at all. Man must seek his solidarity with this world. But in Kafka there are attempts at transcendence but such attempts remain always unrewarded. So the basic difference between Kafka and Camus lies in the fact that the former seeks to find consolation in a spiritual faith while the latter questions the validity of spiritual quest and seeks solidarity with the environing material world.

It is an image of the imperilled human situation that both Kafka and Camus get across to the reader in their powerfully distinctive ways. If our examination of Kafka's texts (those we have chosen for the present purpose) nearly reveals a vision similar to that of Gloucester in King Lear. "Like flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods; they

kill us for their sport", Camus's world would seem to suggest a situation where the invitation of the earth, the only place conceivable for humankind, incongruously coexists with a pitiless repudiation of human cravings.

Both the writers survey the scene with a naked integrity and peer into the fate reserved for man unflinchingly.

Both can be seen to stand in an organic relationship with their predecessors right since the Greek tragic writers (for both) are seeking to come to grips with man's predicament with as much sympathy and courage as any writer of the past with a similar thrust of mind.

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