

**The Absurd and the Caged Self: A Comparative Study on “A
Hunger Artist” and *The Plague***

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

This paper explores Franz Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist" and Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* to do a comparison of the texts in the light of absurdism. This thesis is centred around the notion of constitution of the self, constructed meaning and the inescapability of the futility of existence. The aim of this thesis is to connect constructed meaning, essence and identity by analysing Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" and Camus' *The Plague*. By discussing Albert Camus' philosophy of absurdism from the book *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, And Jean Paul Sartre's notion on the ego, essence and consciousness, this paper looks into how the constructed self with a sense of essence; or a purpose, creates a directive life, and how this defined sense of self confines man within the loop of futile struggle. By further analysing the characters of the texts "A Hunger Artist" and *The Plague*, this paper reached into the conclusion that the humane urge to solidify the sense of self is inevitable. The urge to construct the self that is attached with an essence, and to hold onto the delusion of the constructed meanings is inherent to humankind, even after confronting the futility and the meaninglessness of existence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“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” (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 78).

Struggles, sufferings and the certainty of death brings out an impulsive urge to forge meaning of everything. To seek reasoning is to seek an associated purpose to live with the unavoidable struggles and to find happiness nonetheless. Happiness within the meaningfulness of life is a deeply rooted delusion we tend to nurture. Human life and its contentment are inherently connected with the search for inclusion. We have an urge to become something or to be associated with something because it provides us with a sense of meaning in life. Consequently, we tend to hold onto any sort of entity we can create out of the natural or a constructed system. Albert Camus defined this association as fundamentally meaningless. The absurd, as Camus describes, is the conflict of man's attempt to construct an entity, only to confront its meaninglessness. Both Camus and Kafka have their distinct way of exploring man's way of forging purpose attached to their identity and devolving into a nightmarish inescapable endless struggle.

Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to do a comparative analysis of Franz Kafka's short story “A Hunger Artist” with Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* to find the connection between the constructed meaning, identity and essence, and the inescapability of the absurdity portrayed by both Camus and Kafka. To do the comparative analysis of *The Plague* and “A Hunger Artist”, the specific questions to look into are, how do humans bury themselves into a constructed system to solidify an entity of life? How does this very entity of life create a false sense of self that inevitably leads to endless struggle? Does Camus' idea of embracing the meaninglessness

of life is also shown through Kafka's characters? This thesis will do an extended analysis of the selected texts of Franz Kafka and Albert Camus to figure the answers to the said questions. The system provides us with an entity to hold onto. The complexity of the system of society lets us stay hypnotised and engaged. Embracing the meaninglessness is the wake-up call we fear to get. Therefore, we let ourselves stay submerged in the constructed complexity. In *The Plague*, the system is the "cultivated habit", the almost programmed life in the Oran city. The people are so deeply merged within the system that the sudden disruption of natural calamity such as the plague had them confused and paranoid to the core. This phenomenon is depicted by Kafka in his Kafkaesque world. *The Plague* show the rigid engagement to "habit", or to a system that lessens the conscience of humans and leads them into a delusional loop of struggle. In both *The Plague* and "A Hunger Artist", denial is shown as one of the elements that keep the central character(s) trapped in their own reasoning. How does denial function in case of suffering in life whether it is collective or individual? How is it connected with the philosophy of absurdism?

In both of the texts, *The Plague* and "A Hunger Artist", the inescapability of suffering is shown in different ways. Somehow, the suffering gets intertwined with constructing a reason behind the struggles. Moreover, as the texts go, these reasons become attached to the identity and become the carrier of meaning to live for. Therefore, the meaning becomes an essence, as it is shown in "A Hunger Artist", his suffering becomes his "thing", and he performs his "act" in his "setting" of misery till the end. On the other hand, in *The Plague*, the misery came as a natural epidemic, it was not in control, it was not a part of the habit for the people of Oran to react with a pre-programmed plan. This phenomenon shows that the people of Oran revolve around the idea of certainty. The certainty of the process of their living. As it is stated in 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...All three are done on much the same lines, with

the same feverish yet casual air. The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits” (*The Plague*, 1-2). This dependency on the sense of certainty leads them towards a delusional state where the arbitrariness of life, death, suffering and existence is overlooked and forgotten. The nightmare of the entrapment in a system depicted by Kafka, in Camus’ text, for the people of Oran, was a daydream they did not desire to get out. In “A Hunger Artist “, this desire to stay in the bubble of certainty and within the delusion of a solid existence is shown in a different approach. The performance of the hunger artist became his habit, his system. In both texts, there is a process of confronting life’s absurdity and futility as the stories carry on.

I have attempted to compare Kafka and Camus’s texts to further analyse this idea. In order to proceed with my analysis, I have used the philosophy of absurdism. I also addressed Sartre’s notion on the ego or the self, the consciousness and the essence to develop my claim. Along with other secondary resources, I have connected both of the texts “A Hunger Artist” and *The Plague*, with Albert Camus’ essay *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* to analyse in the light of absurdism. The paper is divided into five main chapters. Aside from the introductory and concluding chapters, I have also done a comparative analysis of the texts in two chapters. Each chapter will contain a critical analysis and comparison of “A Hunger Artist” and *The Plague*. To proceed with the comparative analysis, I have conducted my research through qualitative approach.

Background

Albert Camus and *The Plague*

Camus significantly referred to the notion of life and the lingering attitude towards the meaning of life as “the actor and his setting”. His indication towards the futility of this search for meaning is shown in his works such as *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, *The Stranger*. Born in

1913, till his death in 1960, Albert Camus has seen and suffered wars after wars. He has seen the struggle and suffering of the people of his homeland Algeria since his childhood. Has faced the horror of the wars and the aftermaths. He has lost his father to the First World War. And with his decaying health bearing tuberculosis, Camus kept wondering what is the purpose, the meaning and the connection of human life loaded with all the sufferings with no end. With no ultimate contentment, his confrontational thoughts on the fundamental meaning of life are reflected in all his works. Among those, he has shown the futility of life in a devouring social setting in the novel *The Plague*.

In the city of Oran, living a “bored life” by “cultivating habits”, the life of the people of Oran was all about “doing business” and maintaining a scheduled life. However, due to the sudden disruption by the plague, the constant fear of uncertainty disrupts everything in their life. The novel, with the stories of the epidemic in Oran, portrays the absurdity in both gains and sufferings. As the epidemic slowly disrupts the habits of living of the people in Oran, sudden increase of agonising deaths and the quarantine starts, the novel develops a setting where the impact creates a state of confusion, fear of uncertain death and suffering, fear of losing someone beloved, and the eventual desperation to seek justification, the meaning of all these. The desperation to build a reason, logic and, therefore, justification of the suffering is depicted throughout the novel via Father Paneloux, Jean Tarrou, Cottard, Joseph Grand, and most importantly, the one who found the absurdity of all the meaning till the end of the epidemic, Doctor Bernard Rieux. Whether it is a divine form of justice; as Father Paneloux wanted to believe, or the dread of Tarrou as he was unable to find any logic and peace, the inner guilt of Cottard, or the civil servant Joseph Grand with his struggle to express his emotions, Camus portrayed a rather humane setting of suffering. In this setting, the unquenchable thirst for finding meaning, or forming a sense of consolation revolves around the novel. Camus also explores the impacts of minds as the events and actions take place of a

natural calamity such as the plague, and depicts the process of the conflict within the urge to find meaning while confronting the arbitrariness of everything. The novel, with the exploration of this process of human minds seeking meaning within suffering, depicts Camus' philosophy of absurdism where the conflict of humans searching for meaning and futility of the search takes place.

According to Camus, humans, via engaging themselves in the struggle of pursuing life, tend to seek, or construct a superficial meaning. Without the meaning, the value of life seems perishable. However, even with the never-ending nightmarish engagement in life, the meaninglessness of it takes up space. The acknowledgement of the meaninglessness drives a man to the angst of estrangement. As Camus states in his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, "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 like an alien, a stranger" (6), the confrontation on the meaninglessness snatches away the "familiarity" of a world with built-up meaning and reasons. The void that is left, is referred to by Camus as "Divorce between man and his life". To quote, "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" (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 6). The urge to escape from this nightmare, as Camus states, takes place. This truth of futility in the struggle becomes the quicksand humans cannot escape from. And, therefore, the delusional meaning is constructed and held on to by humans as a desperate drowning man holds onto a plank. Denials take place and the sense of meaning slowly feels more real. The futility in the struggle to seek the meaning of life is defined as absurd.

Franz Kafka and “A Hunger Artist”

On the other hand, the inescapable nightmare of the helpless struggle of life is depicted by another writer, almost contemporary to Camus’ time, Franz Kafka. Kafka created the Kafkaesque world full of bizarre surreal experiences cluttered with tedious reality. Franz Kafka, born in Prague, 1883, in a Jewish family with an overly dominating authoritative father and a subservient mother. Kafka, being the eldest and only alive son in the family, had suffered a lonely and abusive childhood being unable to meet his father’s expectations. Kafka was a feeble person who, like Camus, also suffered from tuberculosis. Kafka had struggling health both mentally and physically. Against his wish, to meet his father’s expectations, Kafka studied law at Charles University in Prague, had an unpleasant job at the Generali Group as an insurance officer. The agonising long hours at the office and the dreadful job makes Kafka more drained out. Kafka’s characters in his writings have the anguish and the distressfulness and the similar portrayal of living a life in a complex and grim setting. The sense of lostness is more clearly depicted in the bizarre story of “A Hunger Artist” where the hunger artist lost his liberty to perform as an artist and became a lost spirit with constant dissatisfaction, inability to please his audience and himself. Going overboard with his performance, the hunger artist completely lost himself and eventually starved to death unnoticed and left alone. This short story profoundly depicts the idea of forging a sense of meaning within art and life, a sense of honour as an entity to validate existence even through sacrifices. Even the grim reality of losing self among the conflict of getting mere acknowledgement from the audience, or from the ego of own.

In “A Hunger Artist”, the artist is in a constant desire to perfect his art of fasting and he seeks that the audience will acknowledge his art just as he himself does. The artist eventually becomes obsessed with his ambition to perfect his art of fasting and seek the

acknowledgement of his art. The story shows a muddle of ego, honour, alienation, the futility of dedication, and the conflict of art and the monetary value of art. Within this muddle, there is a search for validation and admiration that the hunger artist becomes more blindly urged to obtain. In his art of performing fasting, he depressingly urges to carry on so people can admire his performance. Consequently, the artist loses himself in the process of his performance. The short story shows that the futile struggle of life and the attempt to make it seem meaningful is an inescapable complexity. This complexity makes people lose their sense of self while trying to get a grip on the self. Kafka portrayed the gruesomeness of losing the sense of self in the process of pursuing life. The self-denial leads the characters of Kafka's novels into inevitable decay. On the other hand, the characters from Camus' novel *The Plague*, show that the struggle is the certainty that creates a sense of purpose, and even if the purpose is pointless, denial takes place for the humans to keep clinging to life.

Whether it is in a form of denial, delusion or an inherent urge, this lingering frame of mind towards a meaningful life, or the meaningfulness of existence, brings out the question that if man has the ability to grasp on the arbitrariness of existence. Even with the confrontation to the futility of existence and the absurdity of life, man keeps the notion of the self, attached with a sense of purpose preserved within. This perseverance, as shown in *The Plague*, can function as the destruction and the anguish reflected in Tarrou as well as the people of Oran. On the other hand, it is shown as the inevitable decay within the hunger artist. Kafka's portrayal of the human interior reflects this perseverance as a rotten soul entrapped in a nightmare. While Camus's world portrays the absurd wrapped around the whole game of constructing the meaning in order to have a sense of "living" the life. The ultimate indifference of every existence float around the absurd. For the hunger artist, his ego vividly reflects this indifference and the humane resistance towards the world outside the comfortable familiar confinement. The purpose to perform absorbs the endless possibility of

the self to be. However, the “madman” attitude towards the arbitrariness of the self is embraced, advocated and sought by Kafka. As Camus’ notion goes on the absurdism, Kafka’s notion also shows embracement of the arbitrary of exitance and the absurdity of life.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Absurd in Kafka and Camus' Texts

To quote Franz Kafka from one of his diaries of 1910-1923, "I never wish to be easily defined. I would rather float over other people's minds as something strictly fluid and imperceivable, more like a transparent, paradoxically iridescent creature rather than an actual person" ("A Quote by Franz Kafka"). The idea of not being an "actual person", rather, an "iridescent creature" makes Kafka someone who is not willing to submit into the idea of a constructed self with a defined purpose, life and existence. Kafka has his very own stream of a world where his characters become the vessel of an empty interior. Suffering and struggling with the nightmarish system that eventually and inevitably turn them into a decaying spirit. He builds the Kafkaesque world with the sense of entrapment and losing self within the maze of a web of worldly systems and conflicting egos. In the process of finding, defining and surviving in this indifferent universe, the self becomes caged animals, and man forgets it is him who mould himself into who he thought he is. This depiction is shown not only in Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist", but in *Metamorphosis*, *The Trial* or in *The Castle* and other writings of Kafka where the characters are trapped. Their inner self, most importantly, is also trapped due to their own attempt to fit in within the defined self. Consequently, Kafka shows the decay, the bleak and lost interior of his characters. In the article, "Franz Kafka and Albert Camus: Parables for Our Time", the author Heinz Politzer connects the characters of Kafka with Camus' portrayal of Sisyphus. As he states, "The image of Sisyphus was too obvious a metaphor of modern man's condition to have escaped Kafka" (Politzer, 51), he further states that the "barren humanity" portrayed by Kafka through his characters, as depicted by Camus as the "absurd hero".

Sisyphus, as the absurd hero portrayed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, has the ability to conquer the never-ending torment by embracing the futility of his fate. As Politzer claims, “His Sisyphus, who conquered an unintelligible and cruel fate by consciously scorning it reinstates the dignity of suffering mankind by assuming an attitude which is both absurd and heroic. To be sure, Camus tried to identify his vision of Sisyphus with the tormented shadows of Kafka's principal figures” (Politzer, 51). Kafka’s characters carry the “barren humanity” and the never-ending torment. Camus repaints this torment with this “assuming attitude” towards the futile suffering by replacing Sisyphus as the “stronger than the rock”, and the one who is “superior to his fate”. In such a phenomenon, Kafka and Camus both revolve around the fluidity of existence as their characters delude themselves with their constituted sense of self and inevitably face the ultimate futility of everything. The constant conflict of meaning and meaninglessness builds the absurd world. Unlike Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist”, Camus’ *The Plague* explores this absurdity with a glimpse of embracement. Where the artist in “A Hunger Artist” dies within his decayed spirit, the central character of *The Plague*, Dr Rieux, declines to surrender to the idea of defining himself with an idea. The two settings of “The Hunger Artist” and *The Plague* explore despair differently and portrays the humane urge to preserve their determined idea of self. The characters from both Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” and Camus’ *The Plague* experience sufferings. And the futility is presented in both settings from different perspectives.

The Absurd and the Estrangement

Camus explains the absurd world as the inevitable confrontation man will face as he will attempt to seek reasoning. The urge to figure an absoluteness drives a man to either create a “meaning” or face the futility. The absoluteness is refuted by Camus. To him, the reason is the consolation that provides “familiarity”. To quote Camus, “Just as reason was

able to soothe the melancholy of Plotinus, it provides modern anguish with the means of calming itself in the familiar setting of the eternal” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 33). Herbert Hochberg, in the article “Albert Camus and the Ethic of Absurdity” explains Camus’ statement as the refutation of Plotinus’s philosophy on the “Absolute One”. To quote from the article, “Camus sees the Absolute as a threat to man's freedom. “Freedom,” linked to “spontaneity,” is opposed to what is explainable” (Hochberg, 91). This statement clarifies the idea of meaning and the desire to seek or forge meaning as the restraining of freedom in the name of being “explainable”. Camus believes that the attitudes of keeping the familiarity, the comfort alive, man limits the liberty yet thinks they are being “directed” in a well-defined life with a legitimate purpose. That life is, in that case, is “explainable”, or, rational. However, the ultimate indifference of the universe, the futility of existence stays within the consciousness. And, as Camus gives examples, like a “nothing” in the mind, the absurd resides within, and “in any street corner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face. As it is, in its distressing nudity, in its light without effulgence, it is elusive” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 9). And facing the absurd is only facing beyond the veil of constructed rationality. Melissa Payne, in the article, “Discussion of the Absurd in Albert Camus' Novels Essays and Journals”, explains this as man’s attempt to understand the world. As he says, “As man tries to understand the world and find "clarity" or meaning in it, he reduces the concept of the universe into thoughts he can comprehend” (Payne, 8). And this comprehensible world only keeps man within his own perception of the world. Therefore, the conflicting confusion never goes away. And the conflict “...causes man to realize that he is absolutely aware and certain of nothing. In the midst of the Absurd, he finds no truth...Man begins to recognize that life is a futile cycle of knowing nothing” (Payne, 8). This “cycle” or the loop holds the man in between confronting that his life, or to say his existence is, in fact,

out of his ability to shape, grasp or reason with an explainable logic or meaning. The conflict that creates the absurd thus permanently resided within.

This conflict also goes into the interiority of the self. The futility brings out the “divorce” between man and life as the absurd tears the string of meaning and existence. However, Albert Camus’ philosophy of absurdism, just as he portrays in *The Plague*, advocates the embracement of the absurd world. Camus denounces the construction of meanings of all kinds and declares that it is how the absurd is taken lies the drive of humanity. The understanding of the indifference of the world, the futility of purpose is understanding the absurd. As Idnopulos further explains Camus’ approach to the philosophy of absurdism, he refers to Camus’ notion as doing goods, advocating humanity, for humanity’s sake. As his statement goes, “Confronting the world as it is, learning to struggle with it as we find it, not as we would wish it to be: This is the highest good that human beings can practice, a stoic ethic of human realism made effective for the present day. In this perpetual Struggle” (Idinopulos, 56). His statement denotes the humane claim of Camus regarding the philosophy of absurdism, where Sisyphus’s torment is only a torment through the eyes of God. The importance of the purpose of rolling the rock and taking it to the top of the mountain, is, also, defined by the god. To fulfil the purpose is the destiny of Sisyphus. Therefore, the ultimate failure to reach that very destiny, the futility of rolling the rock all the way to the top, is Sisyphus’s punishment. However, it is a punishment to Sisyphus himself only if he lives by this definitive purpose. Camus claims that the rock is Sisyphus’s thing, the torture, is torture only if Sisyphus is conscious of it. If he makes it as his torment. Camus imagine Sisyphus as the absurd hero. To Camus’ Sisyphus’s happiness is contained within him. His fate is not the determining purpose assigned by the god but his fate belongs to only him. Camus imagine Sisyphus acknowledging the futility and finding his happiness within the embracement of the absurd. The “hopeless labour”, thus, reflects the futility which can

either be ignored, or be taken as it is, and embraced by humankind. However, the urge to seek meaning, is, always there. Man tries to define the self, shape the existence with meaning and reasoning and keep themselves submerged.

The Life “Worth” Living

To further look into this urge to shape existence, the desire to stay in the sense of certainty comes in. Humankind has the interest in entrapping themselves into a defined system, to forge a sense of certainty, or to proceed with a purpose in life even though the result is futile and death is, as always, inevitable. This interest, however, does not keep them from suffering. Additionally, this interest does not eliminate the uncertainty of everything and questioning the purpose, the system and the certainty. Therefore, this raises the question, why does the inherent urge to seek and construct meaning emerge in human life? Albert Camus addresses this question in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* by indicating suicide. Other than the philosophical suicide, Camus also hovers around on the literal act of suicide. More specifically, when people commit suicide as their lives become “not worth living”. This idea of life being worthless to live brings out the preordained notion that life, is, in fact, in need to contain a sense of worth. Camus indicates that “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 4). To live, there has to be a life that is “worth living” become the unfortunate notion that butchers the life itself with terms and conditions. Camus states that this search for worth, therefore, search for meaning is an “urgent question”. To quote, “I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living...I, therefore, conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (*The Myth Of Sisyphus And Other Essays*, 4). In this statement, there is a crucial aspect of “reason for

dying” for an “idea or illusion”. People die or get killed for the very reason, as Camus states, that provided them with a reason for living. Camus synonymised this “idea” as “illusion”. The abstractness of the provided reason, or a purpose to live, however indifferent and disconnected with the universe, gives man an urgency to preserve the illusion as the sorcerous of living. This sorcery, however, becomes the curse that lingers around life with the notion that life is only valuable because of this very illusion of meaning. Therefore, life is nothing if the meaning is gone, if the idea is violated, or the illusion is not there anymore. Consequently, men urge to seek logic, reasoning, or to say, meaning to make life worthy.

This urgency of seeking meaning in a completely arbitrary existence is the universe, in many forms, has been approached by humans and the outcome is, as Camus defines, fundamentally absurd. The author Jeffrey G. Sobosan, in the article, “Tragic Absurdity: Hopelessness and Stories of Life”, states that this form of seeking out meaning and the level of absurdity fall under two categories. According to him, the one level of absurdity, the most common one, is, “an unreasoned existence led mechanically and divorced from any real passion or meaning” (Sobosan, 181). This common level of absurdity conducts a life of a dead fish for humankind. The existence is mechanically led, and the passion gets detached from men. Like automated parts of a bigger machine such as the society, the humaneness gets reduced to the functional survival mode. The absurdity strikes in this survival mean where the idea of “reason to live” is uprooted. Life becomes an automated programmed device. To quote Sobosan, “...and the continued disjunction between his deeds and his reason is so enormous that the relationship becomes ludicrous. It is an automatistic existence, naive slavery in which the individual is completely unaware of the currents moving him” (Sobosan, 181). This form of absurdity in life is the vivid picture of not only Kafka’s characters, but it also exemplifies the mechanical life of the characters in Camus’ *The Plague* before the epidemic, when life was all about “doing business” and maintaining the schedule even in

order to love someone. The unawareness of the “current moving him” is the “automatic existence” vividly seen in a capitalistic society where men are reduced into a “performance” or a tool to play their dedicated role in the immeasurable entangled system. Kafka’s nightmarish Kafkaesque world depicts this very level of absurdism. In “A Hunger Artist”, the artist becomes the embodiment of his own performance. The hunger artist’s performance, as the text goes, becomes a continuous action where even after forty days of fasting, the artist did not want to stop. To him, it “was so easy to fast” because his “art”, his perfecting performance becomes an inseparable part of him. He would perform fasting even if there was no audience to witness his performance. To quote from the text, “...during the period of fasting the hunger artist would never, under any circumstances, have eaten the slightest thing, not even if compelled by force. The honour of his art forbade it” (“A Hunger Artist”, 1). This notion of a performance, a deed, or action becoming an inseparable part of life, exemplifies the vivid engagement in a system where the continues “cultivating habit”, as mentioned in *The Plague*, become the endlessly running hamster wheel. The endless cycle of this wheel might or might not provide a foggy sense of “reason to live”. This reason to live can be “the honour”, a greater purpose, hope, survival, or ambition towards collective happiness. However, the “disjunction of deeds and reason” inevitably become prominent. Man forgets the reason and the absurd notion of keep doing the deeds till they die become the force that keeps life continued with an inner hollowness.

Sobosan’s statement on the second level of absurdism is, however, the example of the hopeless urgency to curiously seek meaning and construct a reality where there is none. To quote, “On this level, a man is painfully at home with his passions, his desires for knowledge, power, permanence, and happiness” (Sobosan, 181). This remarks the opposite side of the previously described absurd condition of living an “unreasoned” automated life. The passion, desire for knowledge and most importantly, the urge to seek and confront life and the

meaning of life are more intrinsic nature of man. To seek reason and meaning is to seek a definitive form of “being”. To exist or to have the impression of existence. Man tries to reach a sense of justification by forging a rational reality. “But these very desires, which seem to harbour ultimately his sense of reality and definition, are echoed in the uncaring and unordered universe only to mock him. The universe remains immense in its silence to his questions, and his mind can only vainly probe and prod it for an answer” (Sobosan, 181). The silence and indifference of the universe have been engulfing the mind of men and instigate more endless thirst for defining life and shaping meaningfulness out of the “nothingness”. This desire gets its fuel endlessly from the anguish of the arbitrariness of human suffering and the constant conflict of hope and futility. The collective suffering in *The Plague*, or the desperate longing of the misunderstood hunger artist, only keep the spark of “restless searching” alive. In this case, even in this level of absurdism, the entrapment of the endless cycle of seeking reason continues. Camus states this irrational endless search for meaning as a part of “longing for happiness”. To quote, “...At this point of his effort, man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 20). Therefore, the longing for happiness, unavoidably, gets conditioned with the longing for contentment where the contentment lies in finding reasons, defining life with a purpose, and the hopeless attempt to rationalise suffering by any means. The absurd thus contains the elements of forging a purpose, hope, and, most immanently, a constant urge to cling onto a forged identity. An idea of “being” or an essence to grasp on, keeps the conflict eternal. The absurd never goes away.

The Urge to Seek Comfort in the Confinement

It feels liberating to a man to get the guarantee of his own life with a purpose that essentially defines who he is. However, in this case, “freedom” is the non-existent illusion that only bounds a man to his own shackle of “purpose”. To connect with Sartre’s bad faith, staying within the defining cage feels more home than confronting the anguish of the arbitrary of existence. To quote Thomas Nagel from the article, “The Absurd”, “...it is usually possible to imagine some change that would remove the absurdity-whether or not we can or will implement it” (Nagel, 718). The “aspiration”, as Nagal explains, is always there as the consolation that the absurdity can be erased or solved. However, as life continues, the subtle yet constant reflection of absurdity is always there. As Nagal continues, “The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself” (Nagal, 718). Camus compares the existentialists and their philosophy as the spectrum that only ends up reflecting on the conclusion that “nothing is clear”. As he states. “The world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational...these men vie with one another in proclaiming that nothing is clear, all is chaos, that all man has is his lucidity and his definite knowledge of the walls surrounding him” *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 19). Camus address the anguish of existentialism and states that the confrontation of the absurdity must be “clung” with life. The hopeless hovering around the chaos is where the absurd is born. Camus find the attempt of reasoning as a “forced hope”. “To an absurd man the reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason” As Camus states (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 25). On the other hand, the everyday man lives a directive life with hopes and thinks of himself as a free man. The purpose has man filled with the sense of liberty which, as Camus asserts, contradicts the idea of liberty. The absurdity here creeps in with the separation device that

takes away the illusion of contentment within the “aim” and purpose of life. While the futility of this illusion of the meaningfulness and the constructed system is explored and depicted by many authors, this paper addresses the gap in the notion of ego and essence functioning as a constructed system that entraps man with a delusion of meaningfulness. As Kafka’s characters in the Kafkaesque world and Camus’ absurd heroes reflect the futility of existence and the complex maze of the constructed system, the very idea of self, being the invisible entrapment gets overlooked by man. The analysis of the texts “A Hunger Artist” and *The Plague* is specifically centred around the ego and essence as a constituted system and the inescapability of the absurd within this system.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

The Fluidity of Existence

The “beingness”, or the essence has been debated under the umbrella of existentialism. The philosophy of absurdism can be traced back to the philosophy of existentialism. Existentialism is defined, debated and explained with the connection of reason, meaning, value, awareness of self, the notion of ego in a transcendent form or not, or even consciousness being internal or external to the self, freedom of existence, and the indifference of universe at the end of it all. Existentialism is explored by many philosophers through distinct lenses. The context of the “beingness”, the essence and the perception of existence connected with the solidity of the self is examined through this lens of existentialism. Eventually, it gets shifted towards the track of absurdism with the debate the meaning or reason of existence. The fundamental debates on the existence, sense of self and essence is explored by existentialist philosophers, writers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre. However, for the analysis, I am focusing on Sartre’s perception, especially on the sense of being connected towards existence. Sartre states, “We are condemned to be free”, the notion carries the burden that links Camus’ absurdism where the meaninglessness of existence sets men free along with the anguish of that suffocating freedom. In the essay “Existentialism is Humanism”, The statement goes, “...men are condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does” (Sartre, 5). The damnation of existing with no preordained purpose or duty is what Sartre’s claim on having absolute liberty. It decodes that man cannot define his acts and life with the “excuse” of transcendental meaning, purpose or goal. He is “what he makes of himself”. Jean-Paul

Sartre refers to existence with its relation with human's projection of the self with a purpose to "be". In other words, the "subjectivity" of human life. To quote from "Existentialism is Humanism", "Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life...Before that projection of the self, nothing exists...man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be" (Sartre, 3). This topic of subjectivity occurs as the essence that, according to Sartre, does not necessarily create existence, but only let humans "attain" it. Just like the whole universe, the existence is there, as the arbitrary existence of everything else. However, it is clenched into the fist of human consciousness via the "projection of self". After grasping an idea of the "I". This attained existence possesses a sense of purpose and identity. The "I am" -ness is the essence that comes as a validation of existence.

The Constitution of Ego and Essence

To proceed with this notion that the I am-ness, or the Ego is the attainment of existence, it is important to indicate that the ego itself forms an entity. The entity allows the existence to "be". It, however, does not carry the inherent idea of existence. As Sartre defines in the book *Being and Nothingness*, the consciousness of the ego, or to say, the "I", or "me", is not the representation of the consciousness itself. The consciousness is not the ego. Therefore, the acknowledgement of self does not necessarily establish consciousness. The consciousness is excluded and it states the ego, the "I" for the world as an outer identity. And this ego is man's "being in the world", the statement of existence, and it is, as Sartre asserts, external to consciousness. In the section of translator's introduction of the book *Being and Nothingness*, as the translator, Hazel E. Barnes analyses Sartre's conception on the relation of ego and consciousness, he explains that Sartre rejects the Cartesian cogito, the popular statement, "I think, therefore I am"; given by Rene Descartes. To quote Barnes on Sartre's notion about the cogito, "He objects that in Descartes' formula-"I think; therefore, I am"-the

consciousness which says, "I am," is not actually the consciousness which thinks. (Sartre, p. 92) Instead, we are dealing with a secondary activity" (Barnes, 2). This simply implies the exclusiveness of the consciousness itself. The "purity" of the consciousness as the ego is external to it. This notion depicts the distinction between an entity and the consciousness that inaugurates the entity as the "I". Therefore, the sense of self is constituted, grasped and held onto by man.

Without the consciousness of the self, the essence is not there. The constitution of self enables man to further constitute purpose, essence and mould himself into a being. As it becomes an interior of himself, the man takes his entity as the life force. The sense of necessity, the purpose is speculated in order to continue with life. As Camus' philosophy of absurdism joins in, it states this necessity as the constituted rationality that comes between the reason to live and to end life. Kafka' portrayal of the hunger artist is the reflection of the ego becoming the parasite that paralyses the hunger artist. Eventually eliminating his sense of free will, or the absolute liberty that Sartre addressed. The deception that the hunger artist feeds himself with corrupts his sense of freedom. To the hunger artist, he could not find anything he would like to eat indulgently. His essence is his performance, his art. And this limitation cages the hunger artist within his frame of deception. He himself keeps his mind collapsed so that the "terrifying possibility" of everything, his absolute freedom does not get to awake him. In *The plague*, the essence got attributed with the regulated life of the people of Oran. Consequently, after the plague hits and disrupts the regulated life, they hopelessly sought divine reasonings, they attempted to delude themselves with the belief that it is either because of their sins, or it is a way of divine purification. The hopeless urge to assign the ideas and become too attached to the idea is the self-deception that made them lessen the anguish.

The Entrapment of Self

This self-deception is termed by Sartre as the bad faith where man himself is the anguish, the epitome of absolute freedom to be. And as terrifyingly infinite the possibility of being is, man keeps himself locked into the cage of bad faith. To quote Sartre, “Bad faith does not come from outside the human-reality...but consciousness affects itself with bad faith.” (*Being and Nothingness*, 49). Even if aware of being in bad faith, one cannot be in good faith, as it becomes wrapped with the self like a shadow. The man blinds himself towards a limited frame of freedom. The consciousness, being terrified of the purity of itself and the infinite freedom, reflects itself upon the ego. The man becomes the vessel of bad faith. It lets them feel justified with the understanding that, this is who I am, and this is who I am to be. To quote Sartre, “Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity, in such a way that at the instant when a person apprehends the one, he can find himself abruptly faced with the other” (*Being and Nothingness*, 56). Whether it is Kafka’s hunger artist or Camus’ Father Paneloux, the bad faith has them inescapably yet voluntarily caged within their own reason. The self-fed conviction leads them to stay in their own cage. And eventually, for the hunger artist, he got infused with the caged consciousness and he could not escape from it even in his time of inevitable decay.

The consciousness, on the other hand, in its purity is not the deceptive “self” with bad faith or good faith. As Sartre states, the self, or ego does not “come to an existence” until the consciousness makes awareness of it. So, there is never, as Barnes explains, a “my consciousness”, but a “conscious of me”. He further explains Sartre’s claim in *Being and Nothingness* on the distinction of consciousness and ego, as he explains, ego “is the ‘flux of Consciousness constituting itself as the unity of itself.’ (Sartre. 100) Thus, the Ego is a

‘synthesis of interiority and transcendence.’ (Sartre, p. 111) The interiority of the pre-reflective consciousness consists in the fact that for it, to know itself and to be are the same; but this pure interiority can only be lived, not contemplated” (Barnes, 4). Barnes’s depiction of Sartre’s philosophy clarifies that the consciousness is not the “I am”, it does not depend or a part of the self, instead, it is the determinator of the state, “and the state constitutes the ego”. The consciousness cannot be defined with the “me”, it can only be defined as with its abstractness as the awareness. The essence of a man, or the self, is the projection by consciousness.

Sartre also clarifies that the essence is not something consciously designed and built by the human. To quote from “Existentialism is Humanism”, “...man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be, Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken — much more often than not — after we have made ourselves what we are” (Sartre, 3). Sartre claims that the “projection of the self” and the consciousness of “what he purposes to be” becomes the attainment of existence. He claims that “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (“Existentialism is Humanism”, 3). This claim indicates the very idea of the essence of human lives, which is developed by the consciousness of humans and this development happens after existence. Man is not born with a purpose or a definitive identity. Existence comes first with no sense of preordained essence. Therefore, “existence precedes essence”, man exists first, an essence is built. Subsequently, the sense of self is grasped.

The Absurd in the Purposefulness

This declaration denotes that life as existence is completely arbitrary and without any preordained meaning or purpose. Man, however, develops the sense of self, the “I”, in this

meaningless existence. This defined form of self, consequently, holds a purpose for humans to serve. This interconnection between the sense of self and the purpose in order to “be” someone, or to exist, shows the existentialist notion of life being inherently meaningless. There comes Camus’ perception of the inherently meaningless existence, and man’s development of a purpose and self. Camus proceed with the unavoidability of this development of purpose and self. However, this purpose is futile. The philosophy of absurd confronts this futility and the ultimate conflict of humans with this futile existence. Unlike existentialism, absurdism confront that however humans build their sense of purpose to build a sense of self, and attach their validation of existence with this self, it is all indifferent to the universe and the fundamental meaning is, in fact, absurd. To quote, Camus, on the context of purpose and the absurd, “Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification...He still thinks that something in his life can be directed. In truth, he acts as if he were free, even if all the facts make a point of contradicting that liberty” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 38). Camus shows that man puts the idea of an “aim”, or to say, purpose, together with the idea of freedom.

Purpose not necessarily serves only as an earthly goal to fulfil but it provides a sense of identity. The identity attached with the purpose shrinks the human into a functional tool or a device. In this case, the purpose is the programme for the device to follow. The essence of the device is what it is made to do. Therefore, the device itself is essentially intertwined to the function, or to say its purpose. Similarly, before confronting the absurdity of this idea of having the impression of existence via a built-in purpose in life, a role to play in the setting of the universe, humans become only reduced to the “freedom” of a role-playing existence. Camus states that after confronting the absurd, “the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living. In a certain sense, that hampered him. To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his

life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty” *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 38). This very statement, “slave to his liberty” denotes the entrapment of the said “purpose”. As Camus indicates, this adaptation is hampering. The adaptation reduces the self into the cage of delusions. In this delusion, the identity linked towards the purpose turns a man into a voluntarily chained being

Chapter 4: Textual Analysis

“A Hunger Artist”

Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” is the vivid representation of this concept of the entrapment of self, entangled with identity. The purpose of the hunger artist is to perform fasting. His performance is so profoundly attached to his sense of self that it became what he is. His performance became his identity. Kafka portrays the character of the hunger artist as an epitome of the confined self-reduced into his given motive. The motive of the hunger artist is his “reason to live”. It is his passion, ambition. The performance of the hunger artist is representative of himself. His art of fasting is his essence. Thus, the hunger artist became unable to do anything else but to starve. He became so obsessed with his performance that he was obsessively interested to prolong his fasting days. His disappointment during the time of breaking his fast shows his unhealthy amount of obsession with his performance. To quote from the text, “Why stop right now, when he was in his best form, indeed, not yet even in his best fasting form?” (“A Hunger Artist”, 2). The indication on “his best form” shows that to the hunger artist, his best version of himself lies with his performance. The identity of the hunger artist is tethered with his fasting. His ambition is to surpass his own limit of fast. The artist desires to be acknowledged as the one who can fast. He, after the break of the fast, therefore, was also disappointed that “Why did people want to rob him of the fame of fasting longer, not just so that he could become the greatest hunger artist of all time,...but also so that he could surpass himself in some unimaginable way, for he felt there were no limits to his capacity for fasting” (“A Hunger Artist”, 2). The artist’s dedication to his purpose is so immense that it leads him towards death. He thinks that by making him breaking the fast, people are “robbing” him from being the “greatest hunger artist”. His stubbornness to become this greatest hunger artist indicates that the hunger artist is doomed into his constructed

identity where he is the hunger artist, and his essence is; he is the one who performs fasting. And this performance is shown as his identity so inclusively that, the hunger artist could not be anyone else but the performer till the end.

The disappointment of the hunger artist, after he was fed by the impresario to break his fast after forty days, also denotes that the hunger artist is in constant urgency to prove that he can fast. People's doubtfulness towards the hunger artist upsets the artist as he wants to establish that he can genuinely fast for unlimited times. His urgency to establish this notion shows his desperation to get the recognition that this is who he is. Paul Neumarkt, in the article, "Kafka's "A Hunger Artist": The Ego in Isolation", refers to this disappointment as a way of feeling deceived. To quote, "Each time the fast is interrupted by the impresario, it is as if the Hunger Artist has been cheated out of his natural propensity to complete the cadence on a note of final rest" (Neumarkt, 110). Fasting becomes a natural attribute of the hunger artist and the disruption is taken by him as a form of deception. As if his identity is declined or overlooked by others. The hunger artist is deeply engaged in presenting himself as the perfect artist. He sings, tries to talk, and always stay in an attempt to show that he is, in fact, constantly fasting. The doubts of others sadden him. To quote from the text, "...for the hunger artist was not being deceptive—he was working honestly—but the world was cheating him of his reward" ("A Hunger Artist", 5). The artist's engagement to his performance slowly decays not only his physique but also his consciousness of himself. The artist does become "what he makes of himself".

In "A Hunger Artist", the artist is named and identified, as nothing else but an artist. With no name and no other "things to do", the artist becomes a reduced self of himself trapped into his system of the paradox of losing himself while establishing himself to others. Man's attempt to be heard, to be known, to be noticed and therefore, to be an existing entity

reflects the urge to establish an ego in the outer world, the urge to form the self-infused with the essence.

Kafka likes to build his characters with a consistent dissatisfactory interior. The Kafkaesque characters thus develop their ego dependent, deluded and reduced, based on the outer needs, or the desire to keep going, while lost in the maze of the greater machine of the greater system. The constant conflict they contain between their inner selves and the one they developed to be a part of the system, have them drowning in the absurd. The hunger artist, as the Kafkaesque character, is in the loop of convincing not only the audience but also himself that his art is genuine, authentic and it is who he is. He was rather taken as “a publicity seeker or a total swindler” who is skeletal due to his physical decay. However, the hunger artist was hopeless because people would not take his fasting as an art worth appreciating. Their cynicism would hurt the hunger artist and he would even try to say that to him it is too easy to fast. As the text goes, “...but people did not believe him. At best they thought he was being modest. Most of them, however, believed he was a publicity seeker or a total swindler” (“A Hunger Artist”, 2). Here it shows how the attempt to state the self and the indifference of the universe can only expand the conflict within. Even the hunger artist came around to accept the indifferent world, the audience to whom he was presenting himself so desperately. The audience who took the artist’s statement into account also took him as a somewhat deceiver. To quote from the text, “For whom, at all events, fasting was easy, because he understood how to make it easy, and then still had the nerve to half admit it. He had to accept all that. Over the years he had become accustomed to it. But this dissatisfaction kept gnawing at his insides all the time” (“A Hunger Artist”, 2).

These notions portraying the hunger artist as either a “publicity seeker”, or a deceiver, can also be compared with self-deception. The physical starvation is there to fulfil the hunger

artist's satisfaction of forming himself in the outer world as he is, or, as he thinks he is. His bad faith limits him with the deceptive belief that this is his ultimate way of being. His urgency to satisfy himself as well as the audience and everyone around him including the watchers is only there to mystify his inner void. The hunger artist was on decay not only physically, but his conflict and dissatisfaction due to his failure to state himself as an art decayed his inner self to the point of self-destruction. The worth of the hunger artist's life got essentially attached to his art. His performance. Most importantly, to seek acknowledgement from an indifferent world. Richard A. Posner, in the article, "The Ethical Significance of Free Choice: A Reply to Professor West", states this as a torment for the hunger artist which crushed the artist into believing that he is unable to enjoy food. To quote, "The hunger artist is tormented by his inability to convince an indifferent world of his artistic integrity; they think he sneaks food on the side" (Posner, 1434). The major significance of this cynical behaviour of the audience lies in the impact of their cynicism towards the hunger artist. The inner decay of the hunger artist turned him into a forgotten and living corpse with this cloudy perception that, he used to fast because he could not enjoy food. To further quote Posner, "Eventually, his spirit is so crushed that he pretends (or perhaps comes to believe) that he fasted not because of the challenge but because he was too fastidious to eat. He dies, is buried unceremoniously, the cage gets replaced by a panther" (Posner, 1434). The limitation, that the artist cannot enjoy food, developed at the end when the artist conveyed this to the supervisor as his last breath, was his last fume of hope, that perhaps he could not be more than who he was, because it is his essence, he was someone who could not do anything else. He could not eat or enjoy food. And this bad faith of the hunger artist had him act on his own idea of self. Limiting himself into a cage; both figuratively and metaphorically. It had him restraining his inner self from the food of the infinite possibility and the freedom of being.

The “hunger artist”, just as his name suggests, was his established ego, his constructed self that was stated by the consciousness, and his essence got built as someone who performs fasting. Therefore, his forged entity had him limited into his sense of who he is. The artist could not go beyond his stage. All his hopes and motivation to continue with his art lied in the audience. As the text goes, “This was also the reason why the hunger artist began to tremble before these visiting hours, which he naturally used to long for as the main purpose of his life” (“A Hunger Artist”, 4), the artist’s purpose as he himself become, even though hopeless and futile, did not leave him. The hunger artist reflects the futile struggle of Sisyphus. Just like Sisyphus, the artist’s purpose is inevitably unavailing. In his second circus job, his cage was settled beside the animal cages and the audience would only pass his cage to go towards the animal cage. However, the artist would scrape out the bits of satisfaction he could find even within the glances of the audience. With this sordid depiction, Kafka shows the hunger of the inner self that resides within the hunger artist. As Neumark refers in the article, “Kafka's "A Hunger Artist": The Ego in Isolation”, “In this synchronistic juxtaposition of artist and world, the latter is completely unrelated to his efforts. The dilemma of the Kafkaesque personality is that " he finds no reliable witness " for his despair” (Neumarkt, 111). The “reliable witness”, become the fuel for the artist to keep his ego alive. His sense of self is his act and the world, as his stage, is the source of life for him. Just as Camus describes the absurd man’s divorce from his life, the artist could not bear this separation. It eventually decays his inner self to the point of complete elimination.

In the text “A Hunger Artist”, Kafka also portrays the artist’s attempt to find happiness, or more precisely, satisfaction as a “self-deception”. As the text goes, “...and even the most stubborn, almost deliberate self-deception could not hold out against the experience—that, judging by their intentions, most of these people were, time and again without exception, only visiting the menagerie. And this view from a distance still remained

his most beautiful moment” (“A Hunger Artist”, 4). The artist’s desperate attempt to find this “beautiful moment” reflects his denials. His denials towards the authentic self, the indifference of the world and the terrifyingly possible freedom only keep him in the cage of the self-deceptive construction of his own essence. Kafka ends the story with the replacement of the artist with a young Panther as the artist dies and get buried alone with no ceremony. The replaced young Panther could attract more audience with its refreshing energy as it “prowling around the cage”. The artist dies in the cage, unnoticed by the audience he sought so keenly and with the ultimate perfection of his art yet never reaching his desired satisfaction. Kafka portrays the young panther as the one who “lacks nothing”. On the contrary of the hunger artist, the panther does not have an interior for it to so desperately seek an audience. Kafka’s depiction of the panther in the story also indicates that the panther has “everything necessary”. As the text goes, “It never seemed once to miss its freedom. This noble body, equipped with everything necessary, almost to the point of bursting, even appeared to carry freedom around with it” (“A Hunger Artist”, 5). This indication of the panther carrying its freedom around reflects the image of the panther as the one with more fluid existence.

“A Hunger Artist”, with this depiction of the young Panther with its freedom to carry around, rather shows Camus’ notion of absurdity and the embracement. The cycle of uncertainty and knowing nothing, the meaninglessness of the urge to define existence carries the constant hunger or the lack within. However, Camus states that the absurd man does not contain the idea of “worth” to live. He does not need to construct his ego assigning his purpose, meaning and value in order to find happiness in his life. As Camus asserts, “The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his

refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 40). With this acceptance of the nothingness, comes the inner peace which the hunger artist, with his decayed spirit, failed to grasp. This decay is also shown, through the anguish of the characters such as Jean Tarrou, in Camus’ novel *The Plague*. From Dr Rieux’s perspective, he could understand the hopelessness within Tarrou when Tarrou tries to forge inner peace by becoming a saint-like who can achieve peace through humanity.

The Plague

Camus depicts the absurdity of existence in *The Plague* from several perspectives via several characters. During the plague, their perception of uncertainty, futility, suffering and the ultimate reasoning comes from different approaches. One of the approaches is from Jean Tarrou. An outsider. His perception of the Oran city is a bit different as he is not initially the one who is indulged in habits and the mechanised life in Oran. This regulated life of Oran reflects the constructed system where “Treeless, glamourless, soulless, the town of Oran ends by seeming restful and, after a while, you go complacently to sleep there” (*The Plague*, 2). This regulation is seen to come back even after the plague slowly takes its leave. From Dr Rieux’s perspective, he sees this as the ultimate absurdity of life. He knows the plague will never really leave, it will come back, but people will live as if nothing happened. The acceptance of the absurd thus sits within the man only to be seen at one point in his life. However, the life of the people of Oran, before the plague, was not portrayed as humanely as it has become after the plague. Camus thus shows the glimpse of embracement for life, for the sake of life itself. However, in the begging, the life with cultivated habits and the life that goes around the clock so rigidly is the one aspect of the absurd that Camus describe as a way is to make the “gestures commanded by existence”. And this habit is just the regulation of

life. The development of delusion is the first kind of absurdism explained by Sobosan. And as Kafka's Kafkaesque character develops the inner decay, this absurdism reduces the ego into a crippled being stuck into the maze of the greater system. The imprisonment of life happens by this patterned shackle of the habit. Camus subtly mock this imprisonment in the novel as he describes, "At Oran, as elsewhere, for lack of time and thinking, people have to love one another without knowing much about it" (*The Plague*, 2). This "lack of time" is assigning a value to the "business", or to the functionality of humans as the device. These values or worth of life wrapped around the round-the-clock life, however, got disrupted by the plague. The futility of everything hits the face of the people in Oran. And, as a reaction, they sought reasoning, divine justice, or even a way to escape the nightmarish anguish they were trapped into.

Camus, at the beginning of the novel *The Plague*, quotes Daniel Defoe, "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not" (1). He, with this epigraph, draws the core ambience of the novel where the imprisonment due to the plague shadows the long-lost imprisoned interior of the people of Oran. It is the paradox that reflects the existing futility with the non-existent meaning. Camus develops the story from the fine portrayal of a city where people have a rigid schedule to love to the ending where the disruption and the horror of the plague left people back in the same futile loop, but with the subtle awaking of embracing the meaningless life. As the city revolves around maintaining the clock, before the plague, the engaging depiction of the city also shows the subtle "dry" or hollowness of the people. As they are always busy doing business, maintaining their life, thinking they are living life properly in a directive manner, the ones who are dying, they die "trapped behind hundreds of walls all sizzling with heat, while the whole population, sitting in cafes or hanging on the telephone, is discussing shipments, bills of lading, discounts" (*The Plague*, 2).

It shows that even before the epidemic hits, the inner self of the people of Oran was more imprisoned into their mechanised life with a defined schedule and system. They were happy with a hollow interior. And this hollowness came out as a cry for help when the plague forced them into a quarantined life.

Camus shows the hollowness, or the self in denial, and how common regulation can turn a man into forgetting the absurdity, with a very real portrayal of Dr Rieux trying to imagine a hundred thousand deaths. As Dr Rieux tries to contemplate the possible death tolls from the history of plagues, he tries to understand the intensity of a hundred thousand deaths. To quote, “But what are a hundred million deaths? When one has served in a war, one hardly knows what a dead man is, after a while. And since a dead man has no substance unless one has actually seen him dead, a hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke in the imagination” (*The Plague*, 19). This imagery of hundred million corpses as “a puff of smoke”, reflects not only the aftermath of the plague in Oran when people attempt to go back to normal life, also the pictures of people dying trapped in the walls while everyone is too busy living. The “habit” or the familiar world will keep people back in the loop. However, Camus closed the loop in *The Plague* with his optimism with the indication that “there are more things to admire in men than to despise” (*The Plague*, 150).

This optimism of Camus reflects the happiness of Sisyphus. The happiness that the hunger artist could not cultivate. Therefore, as both Kafka and Camus’s texts show, the meaningfulness of life, or the constructed idea of the value of life, does not convey happiness. The innate attempt of developing the ego and an essence drives a man into the loop of rolling the rock. In the novel, Father Paneloux’s attempt to forge reasoning of the plague is a depiction of seeking solace in a transcendental form. As it is reflecting the people from all the Abrahamic religion, whether it is a way of redemption, divine punishment or a way of

purifying humans, the search for meaning from a transcendental source is shown in the novel. However, all are denounced by Dr Rieux. Father Paneloux, even when God did not “spare the child” from the plague, asserted that “we should love what we cannot understand” (*The Plague*, 106). Dr Rieux, understand and respect Father Paneloux’s attempt to comfort people, give them the solace and hope they so desperately seek. However, to him, nothing justifies collective punishment, suffering and as he responds to Father Paneloux, “No, Father. I have a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture” (*The Plague*, 106). Camus thus portrays the humane urge to seek solace, justification and the absolute truth from transcendental sources. In an indifferent universe where man’s life is ultimately futile, the search for transcendental care only floats around with hope. The hope, just as the solace of value in life, provides man with an illusion that only keep a man within his own comforting bubble. Sufferings, in this way, creates denials within to keep a man in his own way of being. As Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, man’s belief makes them imply a “scale of values, a choice, our preference. On the other hand, “Belief in the absurd, teaches the contrary” (40). Dr Rieux refused to believe in this form of meaning in life. To him, as he said to Tarrou, “I’ve seen too much of hospitals to relish any idea of collective punishment” (*The Plague*, 61).

The urge to seek solace where the existence is arbitrary is also an urge to find the self in a platform of reasoning. To have the impression of a valued existence of self, and as the world as a reliable platform with a sense of familiarity, security and the comfort of the constructed reality where the terrifying possibility of everything does not engulf the mind. In the article, “The Modest Optimism of Albert Camus”, Nathan A. Scott, Jr explains this urge to forge solace as the impulse to seek familiarity. “For the essential impulse of the human spirit is to behold the world as its real home, is to be assured of some basic congruence between its aspirations for intelligibility and the fundamental constitution of reality” (Scott Jr,

253). In this constitution of reality, the impulse of forging an idea of a transcendental connection is similar to the hunger artist's aspiration to have the acknowledgement from his audience. The far-fetched hope not only gives man a reason or the value to fuel his ego, but it also keeps him happily limited to his own cage. Scott Jr also refers to the absurd aspect of this hope. As he further states, "But in this world, everything is given and nothing is explained: the mind's hunger for coherence is countered by the irremediable incoherence of existence: 'all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine'" (Scott Jr, 253). Whether it is transcendental or within logical reasoning, the thirst to build familiarity in this arbitrary existence is as imminent as the absurdity of it lies within.

Unlike Father Paneloux, Jean Tarrou did not attempt to form a transcendental meaning of suffering. Unlike Dr Rieux, on the other hand, Tarrou wanted to build an essence for himself. He wanted to "be" a "saint without God". His hopeless yet humane observation of the suffering of people made him search for a way out. To volunteer himself to fight the epidemic till his death. Tarrou, as an outsider visiting the Oran city, did not imprison himself in a regulated life with habits. His observing and thoughtful take on people's life portray him as an empath. Tarrou could not stand the idea of people being driven towards death. In response to Dr Rieux's question on what he thinks of the prisoner being used to do the risky work, Tarrou responded with "I loathe men's being condemned to death." (61). The dedication of Tarrou in fighting the epidemic voluntarily shows his own way of forging the "code". As he said to Dr Rieux, Tarrou risked his life because of his own moral code, the code he himself comprehended. To help people. This notion shows Camus' statement of man's life revolving around an idea. That, an idea can make the life worth living, as well as worth dying. In the article, "Albert Camus: The Plague of Absurdity", Louis R. Rossi states this idea as the futile attempt to search for peace. To quote, "Tarrou's search is futile and ineffectual because he had sought for a perfect state vaguely called peace, yet realizing all the

while the impossibility of transcending his relative existence” (Rossi, 421). This “ineffectual” attempt to find peace while knowing the impossibility and the meaninglessness of existence also turns Tarrou into a Sisyphus. As Dr Rieux wonders after Tarrou’s death, if he “won the math”, if he could find peace, what he could only imagine is that Tarrou was happy. Dr Rieux could not care about this question, as the text carries with his thought, “Tarrou had lived a life riddled with contradictions and had never known hope's solace. Did that explain his aspiration toward saintliness, his quest of peace by service in the cause of others? Actually, Rieux had no idea of the answer to that question, and it mattered little” (*The Plague*, 141). This indicates Camus’ conclusion on Sisyphus. Within his work, his dedication towards saving people from suffering, his humanity, all of these gave Tarrou happiness. Just like Sisyphus, one must imagine Jean Tarrou happy.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

To conclude, it is inevitable and inherent to human to try shape a sense of meaning out of the arbitrary universe. On the other hand, the attempt to forge meaning does not keep the conflict with the futility away. The absurd life resides within man as the loop of struggle carries on. Man does face the fact that he is only deluding himself where everything is ambiguous, arbitrary and uncertain. Accepting this uncertainty and the absurd is winning the “rock”. Camus, addressing the rock of Sisyphus as the terrifying uncertainty that man tries to drive towards the mountain top; states, “When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself” (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 77). The mountain top is the sense of purpose, a meaning that provides man with the sense of solidity he desires. It reflects not only in Kafka’s hunger artist, but the desire is also present in Tarrou, Father Paneloux, the people of Oran who keeps wishing the plague will spare their loved ones. The desire for happiness thus lies within the urge to escape from the rock, the rock wins. In Kafka’s character, as in “A Hunger Artist”, his rock was his own sense of self chained with his purpose. Kafka portrays his identity as becoming his reason for decay. The entity of the hunger artist was the parasite the artist could not escape from. This inescapability and the hopelessness attached to it is reflected in the desperation to seek justification in *The Plague*. Camus pours in the torment and the power of destruction that the plague contains and allows the character to reflect the absurdity of their attempt to build reasons, possess the denials to preserve their limited sense of liberty. The denials only amplified the collective suffering in the Oran city. Camus, thus, portrays the absurdity of man’s delusion of a meaningful life. The absurdity in the engagement in a directed life with a well-defined purpose, the arbitrariness of man’s identity, and the ultimate delusion towards building happiness around the constructed meaning.

However, as Camus claims, again, in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth”, (77), he believes that humanity emerges for the sake of humanity. Thomas A. Idinopulos in the article “The Mystery of Suffering in the Art of Dostoevsky, Camus, Wiesel, and Grünewald” supports this notion as he states, “What decides whether or not a man will give voice to the humanity within him is his personal response to the sickness and death that plague brings” (Idinopulos, 56). As he continues, he further states that the “truthful” motive to proceed with humanity does not come from the greater purpose, but it is a spontaneous act. As the statement goes, “Those who see disease and death truthfully are moved to fight against them, tempted neither by the illusion of conquest nor by the despair of defeat”. (Idinopulos, 56). In this notion, the need of developing a purpose, a meaning, or the urge to state the ego is the illusion that keeps man in his cage of sanity. It is inherent. Camus advocates the embracement of the absurd, as the remedy. To him, “What's true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves. All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you'd need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague.” (*The Plague*, 61). The encouragement to be the madman, as Camus brings, allows the absurdity to join in yet life does not lose its importance. The existence loses the requirement to be solidified with an entity, the necessity to possess a purpose or a determined essence, in order to “be”. Kafka, unlike Camus’ the plague, showing the decay of the artist clinging to his forged and confined sense of self. Camus rather shows the embracement of the absurd and the abstraction of self. The conclusion of this paper reaches the claim that the forged sense of self is inherent to human nature. However, happiness lies not in achieving a purpose, but to understand the futility of the purpose and embracing life unconditionally.

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