

## ABSURDITY, CHAOS AND WEIRDNESS IN THE NOVELS OF J M COETZEE AND VIRGINIA WOOLF

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### Abstract

Absurdity, as a separate entity occurs in all walks of life. This paper projects the predicament in the lives of the characters in the novels of J M Coetzee and Virginia Woolf, and their struggle in the society is invariably discussed. The Characters in the novels try to dominate the other based on the constraints in which he /she belongs. The construct of their own lives and the very composition of ideas to lead a life vary from one person to another. If one violates the structure in the society, namely, culture, codes, ethics and morality, etc. eventually the person is considered to be absurd. The nature of a human being oscillates between the existential need and the cultural background. Some human beings try to follow the constraints of the society while others try to violate it. The place of rebel or the in-between is considered as absurdity according to this paper.

**Keywords:-** Absurdity, Existentialism, chaos, Self and Other, feminism, stereotypes, myths.

J M Coetzee is the first South African writer who turned the entire world to his side by receiving the prestigious Nobel Prize Award and the Booker prize twice. He was born with a South African background and lived during the highest point of colonialism so it is easy for him to reciprocate the brutality of apartheid and slavery in his novels as he had witnessed it personally. South Africa, being the background of his novels, doesn't get to have the characters' influence over it. As a writer, he made sure that he should not enforce any negative ideas on the reader's mind so he avoids taking any position of inculcating any ideas on the reader's mind. Coetzee, through his novel wants to depict the real world and the real self and he avoids giving any artificial opinion about the history of the society and the history of people.

Coetzee did not take any stand while narrating the history of the event. In his novels even while describing the story of the oppressor (self) he did not stop to describe the part of the oppressed (other) and similarly when describing the other he describes the self. He has given equal importance to both the self and the other. Coetzee, in his novels not only kindles the brutality of South African history but he discusses the physical, emotional, psychological and materialistic world and the greediness of the human beings over things. This paper is about how a being finds it difficult to cope with the inner urge of him/her and the need of the society and how it is considered to be absurd by the supporting characters. It discusses the chaos in the lives of the characters based on their need.

Virginia Woolf, a British writer, lost her mother when she was thirteen and her sister when she was fifteen. She was brought up as a depressed child and her step brothers George and Gerald added to her problem. She was sexually harassed by her step brothers and slowly moved towards asexuality. Her semi autobiographical novel, *To the Lighthouse* gives the readers a family picturesque of the Victorian times. The family was her mostly used society. In Woolf's semi-autobiographical novel *To the Lighthouse*, the characters in the house seem to have lost the connection between them. Mrs Ramsay is seen with her youngest son, James Ramsay and is always seen being just a mother to him. Mr Ramsay tries to overpower Mrs Ramsay in every way possible and he tries to subdue Lily Briscoe, a painter, even though he's an artist and aesthetician himself. Being a sympathy seeker, Mr Ramsay tries to humiliate Mrs Ramsay, for which she replies and responds politely and subtly. He never tried to recognize her and never did he care to realize her recognition for him. All he managed to do was to assert himself all through the novel. "At that moment, he said, 'very fine' to please her and pretended to admire her flowers." (62 Woolf)

This paper, takes into concern, a novel from J M Coetzee's novels and a novel from Woolf's. In *Disgrace*, David, an English professor leads an unhappy life even though he was married and divorced twice. In his life, three women play a major role and these women put him in a situation where he will not be able to come out of. His physical urge is not concealed under any cause, so he starts having a physical relationship with a prostitute. In addition, he starts to have an affair with his student. When his colleagues and the student's parents felt that absurd, he did not consider it weird and he instead of repenting for his deed, quits his job and settles with his daughter. When his daughter faces the same situation, he finds it absurd.

Absurdity, as a word, has its own meaning, be it, meaninglessness, weirdness, ridiculousness and farce. According to this paper, absurdity means the undulation of the characters between existential needs and social-cultural awareness. The characters in the novels of Coetzee and Woolf face a circumstance where there is a trauma in selecting between

existentialism and social cultural need. Because any person who is possessed with the idea of society definitely at the back of his/ her mind will have the existential needs and similarly if a person is giving more importance to the existential need then definitely he/ she will rely on the social cultural ideas. Therefore, there is always a shift, a confusion, a distress in selecting between existentialism and social-cultural awareness. Therefore, this paper concentrates on the absurd element in the characters of the novels. According to this paper, absurdity is the oscillation of man between his need and the society.

The characters in the novels of Woolf and Coetzee face many fluctuations in their daily life, such situation is considered as absurd and how the character tries to fit into the situation of daily life and move on with their worldly life. What seems to be strange or weird in a person according to the perspective of the other is considered as an absurd. This is portrayed in the novels in a different circumstance where the characters find them in a strange situation as they feel that the other behaves in a weird situation. So according to this paper absurdity is presented in a person or the characters of the novels in vice versa situation and every character experience it.

In *Disgrace*, David gets in touch with three different women characters and they behave in a strange way once he feels that he is connected to them. David finds it difficult to understand them and he left in a clueless world to understand their behavior. In the beginning of the novel he starts to have physical intimacy with a prostitute, Soraya, with whom he shares his family and professional secrets. As he meets her every week, this leads to close bonding between them. Unfortunately, to put an end to their relationship, they met on the roadside and he noticed her with her children. When he walks towards her, as he wants to greet her because of his familiarity with her, that moment she ignores his eye contact and moves around with her children. "But the glance between himself and Soraya he regrets at once" (6 Coetzee).

David did not think that this very incident would break his bonding of love or lust with her. Whenever he initiates to contact her, she avoids him. Initially, he felt it as odd and tried his best to let her know that he will maintain the secrecy of their relationship, but he did not get a chance to explain his opinion. "Your secret is safe with me" (6 Coetzee). Here David wants to comfort her and he did not want to break the relationship with her under any cause so he decides to call her up through the telephone. He was in shock to hear Soraya's rude voice as she always obeys and fulfills all his needs. The first time he heard such words from Soraya. "You are harassing me in my own house. I demand you will never phone me here again, never" (10 Coetzee).

David is shocked to hear such words from Soraya, it is quite impossible for him to understand her state, and he feels her behavior as strange and weird. He was not able to understand the reason behind maintaining a secret life. According to David, he is not bothered about the family background of Soraya. All he wants is the private life between them. He wants it to last forever and this behavior of Soraya looks absurd according to David. What brings Soraya to this state is unexplored by the author. There is no much explanation given of why she acts this way. This very incident brings weirdness to both the minds of David as well as the reader.

Secondly, David ends up to be in a relationship with his student, Melanie, who looks more of his daughter's age. Both of them had no hesitation to start their relationship and they had physical intimacy without considering their age limit or their position. As an experienced man,

David did not think about having an affair with his student and he did not think about the constraints, which the society had laid for his profession. They had many barriers to have their relationship but they did not think about it. In this case, Melanie after a short intercourse she enquires him about his past. “Do you have pictures? I don’t collect pictures. I don’t collect women. Aren’t you collecting me? No, of course not. She gets up, strolls around the room picking up her clothes, as little bashful as if she were alone” (30 Coetzee). This action of Melanie doesn’t have an answer to David. It looks absurd to David and he doesn’t find the answer throughout the novel. There is no answer of why she complains to her boyfriend about David. David feels that he didn’t rape her and it is a relationship with mutual consent so he is not to be blamed. When everyone asks David to seek repentance he refuses and he doesn’t feel guilty for his deed. Because of his deed, he lost his job and respect in the society but he did not have any ill feeling for what he had done to Melanie and her family. He quits his job and decides to settle along with his daughter Lucy after this incident.

Lucy stays in a rural area and she owns a farmland also she cultivates some crops by which she survives in that place. She had an assistant Petrus, who is an Afro – American, also does other menial jobs for money. As a father, David is against to her staying in the rural area but Lucy isolates herself in this land as she is a lesbian and she wants to hide it from the society, which she belongs so she prefers to stay in a rural place. “How is Helen? He asks. Helen is a large, sad- looking woman with a deep voice and a bad skin, older than Lucy. He has never been able to understand what Lucy sees in her; privately he wishes Lucy would find, or to find by, someone better” (60 Coetzee). Here David is not able to understand why she hides in the countryside and why she is a lesbian, even though he is a literate, English teaching professor he is not able to understand the emotions of her. He does not understand his daughter feeling for Helen. As a man, he is open to having many relationships but he fails to accept the choice of his daughter.

During his stay, he tries to convince his daughter and asks her to move along with him but she denies his offer. Unfortunately, she is gang raped in the presence of David and Petrus was also involved in it. This incident brought many changes in David, and as a father he wants to save his daughter but fails to do so because he was seriously injured. “His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. But now it is not too late. Now he must do something” (94 Coetzee). After this incident, he wants to protect and console her but she acts as if nothing happened. This looks weird for David and he wants to take her to hospital but she rejects the idea. “It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life. count yourself lucky not to be a prisoner in the car at this moment” (98 Coetzee). He wants his daughter to be bold enough to face this incident by taking to police again she declines it. “Lucy, my dearest, why don’t you want to tell? It was a crime. There is no shame in being the object of a crime. You did not choose to be the object. You are an innocent party” (111 Coetzee). When she plans to marry Petrus as she wants to protect the baby, David dislikes the idea of his daughter marrying Petrus as he is already married and he doubts Petrus but Lucy fails to listen. “Don’t shout at me, David. This is my life. I am the one who has to live here. What happened to me is my business, mine alone, not to anyone else. As for Petrus, he is not some hired laborer whom I can sack because in my opinion he is mixed up with the wrong people. That’s all gone, gone with the wind. If you want

to antagonize Petrus, you had better be sure of your facts first. You can't call in the police. I won't have it. Wait until morning. Wait until you have heard Petrus's side of the story" (133 Coetzee). He is spellbound after hearing from his daughter and he was not able to understand of why she acts this strange way.

In this novel, all the women characters are left in a chaotic situation and are left in a confusing world. Because of their reaction to some situations look weird to the other characters, and the women characters are left unanswered. Similarly, In Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, a painter, helps Mrs Ramsay at home. Being a single woman, Lily has a different mindset towards being in a familial setup, while Mrs Ramsay tries to push her into the institution of marriage. Being different minded altogether, Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe share a bond that is unbelievably natural and grounded. Though their ideologies differ to a larger extent, both love each other and share a bond that incredibly thinks for the well being of each other. Mrs Ramsay being treated by Mr Ramsay as an outcast is purely hated by Lily, as she eulogizes her to an extent that the final part of the novel, feels her absence through Lily Briscoe.

The question of why Mrs Ramsay tries to get Lily Briscoe married to Bankes and why she wanted Lily to get married after all is itself a throbbing question. Because, marriage was not Lily's forte, as in, she had her own ways to mend her life and she saw herself painting more than being someone's wife. This act was as such very much absurd for Mrs Ramsay, because she foresaw a complete woman through marriage. Marriage was her ultimatum and she never denied the fact that women need their personal space, but she basked on the idea of marriage as the end of any relationship or life goal. Though Lily contradicted the very idea of marriage, she respected the woman in Mrs Ramsay and she never tried to bring her down at all, even though she negated few concepts of her submission to Mr Ramsay, which she undeniably went through. According to Mrs Ramsay, Lily is a person who has varied capacities and it requires a different eye to view her. "Lily's charm was her Chinese eyes, aslant in her white, puckered little face, but it would take a clever man to see it" (23 Woolf).

With eight children at home, Mrs Ramsay had to take care of every single details and Mr Ramsay at any distance would demand attention. With parties and luncheons, Mrs Ramsay subjects herself unto the family and she never regrets for that. The feminist within her never died for any reason and she portrayed the best out of her. "When she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books. But for her own part, she would never for a single second regret her decision" (6 Woolf).

According to Mrs Ramsay, "An unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (43 Woolf), which seems absurd to Lily. Being a particular kind of feminist, Lily always wanted to be at her own and live at her own pace and doesn't follow the constraints of the society. But in spite of that, she always used to carry the imprints of the society and she unconsciously tries to impress people around her. On the contrary, Mrs Ramsay seems to be a person constrained to the society, but the feminist in her makes her create a different pattern in her life. "Mrs Ramsay – she pitied men always as if they lacked something – women never, as if they had something" (74 Woolf).

The oscillation between their ideologies and social construct, and their ways to mend themselves between the lines is very clearly seen. In both the cases, be it Woolf or Coetzee, both, a world apart, and a century apart, had been comprehensible in describing the oscillation in the

minds of the people that is imbibed within and is never erased. Centuries passed, people changed, ideas moved on, theories popped up, changes invade, but the oscillation in the minds, the criticism since the fourth century, had never shifted its place in the minds of the people. Validating the lives of the characters, Woolf and Coetzee had created an account of vindication that the whole of the lives of the beings, are absurd some way or the other, which cannot be judged or put down.

### Works Cited

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