



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**EXISTENTIAL ABSURDITY AND ALIENATION IN KAFKA'S THE
METAMORPHOSIS AND HEDAYAT'S THE BLIND OWL**

AZADEH DAVACHI

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By

AZADEH DAVACHI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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ABSTRACT

Abstract of thesis presented to the senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Art

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By

Azadeh Davachi

May 2009

Chairman: Rosli Talif, PhD

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This study intended to illustrate and compare the specific existential elements such as absurdity and alienation portrayed by Hedayat and Kafka in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Blind Owl*. Elucidating how the two authors portrayed these notions in similar or different ways led to the idea that the selected works were similar to each other in terms of existential notions such as absurdity and alienation.

The method utilized in this thesis was based on the comparative literature and the two works were treated as the surreal fictions since the characters and incidents were not real. In addition, this study delineated the fact that Hedayat



and Kafka employed philosophy of existentialism to testify the perplexed situation of human being's condition in the contemporary world. Both authors, Kafka and Hedayat, suffered from the modern society's complexities and tortures that captured their daily lives and also they endured the lack of mutual love and relationship among the members of their families and societies; thereby, they reflected all these concerns in the same way showing how contemporary man tolerates hardships imposed by alienation and world absurdity in a similar way and on the basis of existentialism.



ABSTRAK

Abstrak tesis dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia bagi memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera.

KEGANJILAN (ABSURDITY) DAN PENGASINGAN (ALIENATION) EKSISTENSIALISME DALAM KARYA “THE METAMORPHOSIS” OLEH KAFKA DAN KARYA HEDAYAT “THE BLIND OWL”

Oleh

Azadeh Davachi

Mei 2009

Pengerusi: Rosli Talif, PhD

Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana konsep keganjilan (*absurdity*) dan pengasingan (*alienation*) dipaparkan oleh Kafka dan Hedayat dalam karya *The Metamorphosis* dan *The Blind Owl*. Selain itu, ia menunjukkan sejauh mana kedua-dua konsep yang digambarkan adalah serupa atau berbeza antara satu sama lain.

Kajian ini mendekati kedua-dua teks tersebut dengan membandingkan hasil-hasil karya Kafka dan Hedayat berasaskan dua konsep eksistensialisme, iaitu keganjilan (*absurdity*) dan pengasingan (*alienation*). Hedayat dan Kafka telah



mengaplikasikan aspek eksistensialisme yang serupa untuk melihat keadaan manusia pada zaman moden Kedua-dua pengarang tersebut, Kafka dan Hedayat, pernah mengalami penderitaan dari keperitan dan penyeksaan yang memerangkap kehidupan masa kini dan mereka telah menggambarkan keperitan tersebut sebagaimana yang dialami. Sepertimana yang ditunjukkan oleh kajian ini, Hedayat banyak dipengaruhi oleh hasil-hasil karya Kafka. Walaupun berasal dari dua negara yang berbeza, mereka melaungkan aspek eksistensialisme yang serupa dalam *The Metamorphosis* dan *The Blind Owl*.



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APPROVAL

This thesis submitted to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art .
Members of the supervisory Committee were follows:

Rosli Talif , PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communications
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya , PhD

Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communications
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Hasanah Mohd Ghazali, PhD

Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 16 October 2009



DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at University Putra Malaysia or other institutions.

AZADEH DAVACHI

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which was started by a Danish philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard. Since Plato, most philosophers have held that the highest ethical good is the same for everyone; therefore, as one approaches moral perfection, one resembles other morally perfect individuals. Soren Kierkegaard was the first philosopher who could call himself an Existential philosopher. He reacted against this traditional view by insisting that the highest good for an individual was to find his or her own unique vocation, just as he wrote in his journal, "I must find a truth that is true for me; the idea for which I can live or die"(2). Other existentialists have echoed Kierkegaard's belief, i.e. one must choose own ways without the help of universal objects. Against the traditional view which outlines moral choice as involving an objective judgment of right and wrong, existentialists have argued that no objective and rational basis can be found for moral decisions. All existentialists have followed Soren Kierkegaard in emphasizing the importance of passionate individual actions in deciding questions of both morality and truth. Existentialism first appeared as a philosophic movement, but the ideas of some philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have influenced other eras such as literature and cinema and this led this term to some kind of movement.



Although post-modernists' thought has become the focus of many intellectuals in the 1970s and thereafter, much of the post-modern writings consider themes similar to existentialist. In particular, Jean Paul Sartre can be considered as the most influential person in this field. He could create different terms and new ideas, which after some time, affect the term literature. His more formal philosophical writings strongly influenced a current in the French literature, best represented by Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. Existentialists such as Sartre and Camus did not merely look at literature as a means of phenomenological description of human nature; rather, they looked at literature in a new way. They believed that literature as well as all parts of art must be engaged or committed. This means that literature must be in the service of human freedom and socialism. Albert Camus was also a friend of Sartre who believed that authors have the responsibility to act as the witnesses and the voices of those who cannot speak; furthermore, the writer or the artist has the obligation to keep pure language.

Many writers, who are not usually considered as philosophers, have also had a major influence on existentialism. Among them, a German author Franz Kafka and a Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky are the most prominent ones, as they elaborated existential views in their literary work. They were affected by the existential notions and widely used their notions in their literary work. Kafka created alienated characters who struggled with the absurd world and environment. In his most famous novella, *The Metamorphosis*, he created an



alienated character named Gregor Samsa, who one day transformed into a giant bug. Kafka also created other novels which had been written under the influence of the existential themes, such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*. In these novels, some of the existential terms like alienation and absurd were included.

Existentialist novelists were generally seen as a mid-1950s phenomenon which continued until the mid- to the late 1970s. Most of the major writers were either French or from the French-African colonies. Some small circles of other Europeans were seen as literary existential precursors by the existentialists themselves; however, literary history has increasingly questioned the accuracy of this idealism for the earlier models. Among the writers who were arisen from the European and American colonies, there were other novelists and writers who were not from these colonies, but from other countries in which they were affected by this stream of literary movement, for example they were from Asia. We also can consider these non-European writers as the major or important writers in these eras. One of the most important was Sadegh Hedayat from Iran. He was under the influence of Franz Kafka's work, as he translated his texts into Persian. Hedayat and Kafka have gone through similar themes in their literary work, especially in their novellas. *The Blind Owl*, which was written in 1935, has the same themes of Kafka's *The metamorphosis*. *The Blind Owl*, by Sadegh Hedayat, is a modern, post-modern novel of about 150 pages, written in 1935, and it was first circulated in a mimeographed form in the author's own handwriting. It was published after the Second World War, the first in Persian, in Iran, then in French and, years later, in English (translated by D.



P. Costello, in 1957) and other languages. Hedayat studied in France and was obviously influenced by the Western literature, but wrote the book in self-imposed exile in India. Fifteen years later, he killed himself in Paris.

Hedayat might be considered as the most modern of all modern writers in Iran. Yet, for Hedayat, modernity was not just a question of scientific rationality or a pure imitation of European values. A prominent feature of Hedayat's writings is his criticism without reference to any particular religion in relation to the Iranian society. Hedayat thus established a critical approach which was almost unique in the period between the two World Wars in Iran. In his work, he usually searched for the truth without considering the romantic glorification of ideology, and criticized the underdeveloped and underprivileged of all the members of the Iranian society. Much of this was carried out by Hedayat in a universal style and tone. Just like Franz Kafka, he always created alienated characters who were struggling with absurd themes. Hedayat, under the influence of the western philosophy and literature, viewed the world as absurd and meaningless, i.e. man has no meaning. As we read the texts written by these two modernist writers, we could find similarities in the element of modernists and post-modernists. *The Blind Owl*, by Hedayat, also possesses an alienated character who kept himself at home and struggled with the absurd world.

The Blind Owl and *The Metamorphosis*, are somehow similar in terms of the style of writings, and this was related to that period, in which most European writers were under the influence of the European philosophy and modernist



movement. The most important figure of these novellas, which was related to Existentialism, is Absurdity. Absurdity, as a notion, has rooted in 19th century in the works of Kierkegaard, and after him, the French philosophers like Camus and Sartre. The World War II has made this theme popular and developed, particularly in the devastated country like France. Thus, it could be stated that these two writers and their views had grown up and formed in the same colony. By analyzing and going through their literary texts thoroughly, we would realize the profound meaning and understand the way they looked at the world.

This research was an attempt to investigate and find existential notions and conditions, specifically absurdity and alienation, in the literary work of Franz Kafka and Sadegh Hedayat. At the same time, this study would also compare these elements according to Existential beliefs and views, as well as show how the two writers, who were from different parts of the world, could have similar ideas and views of human life and humanity.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Existential movement started in the 19th century. Various ideas and views were presented by different philosophers and scholars during these periods and in different parts of the world. Among other, we could see a few philosophical schools which influenced the literature, and a number of these philosophers were also novelists. During this period, there were also novelists who were not philosophers, but they could be considered as Existential writers. These writers mostly were from other places out of France, where the Existentialism was



formed. There were many writers and novelists who had been under the influence of this philosophical movement. Looking at their literary texts and the similar notions of existentialism such as absurdity and alienation in their work, it could be stated that these authors were mostly affected by each other.

Similarly, there were some other authors who were not from the European countries, but they were also influenced by the existential philosophy. Nevertheless, their literary work have never been investigated and compared to one of these famous existential writers. For example, some of them were from Iran, but at that time their ideas, views and also writings were not accepted by the Iranian society. Simin Daneshvar, Jalal Al Ahmad, Hooshang Golshiri and Sadegh Hedayat were among the Iranian writers who were influenced by the existentialism but their works have not examined on the basis of this philosophy and with regard to key notions of existentialism. Hedayat also among the Iranian existentialism like Al Ahmad and Golshiri and he was affected by the literary work of Kafka and other existentialist writers, judging at the somewhat similarities in their texts, particularly in terms of their use of alienated characters who were described as struggling with the absurd universe. Up to now, these works have not been analyzed on the terms of existentialism notions in order to illustrate how two people from two different places could share the same notions and the aspect of this literary and philosophical movement in their work. In addition, this study was also carried out to show the similar notions and aspects of the same point of views, which these two famous novelists shared towards human life and human conditions in this world.



1.3 Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study is specifically based on the framework of comparative literature and study is focused on the selected texts from the comparative literature point of view and by approaching the two notions of existentialism. This study was basically confined to find and compare existential notions, specifically absurdity and alienation, in the novellas written by Kafka and Hedayat. The selection of their work was fundamentally based on the usage of existential elements in these selected novels. The two novellas would be treated as the work of fictions which the writers created to depict the absurd world as well as the absurd and alienated characters, respectively. The stories are surreal, hence they are not realistic. Therefore, the incidents in the story were treated as the writer's symbolic use to present the absurd world as well as the absurd and alienated characters. The analysis of the selected works was limited to the two novellas entitled, *The Metamorphosis* written by Franz Kafka, and *The Blind Owl* by Sadeqh Hedayat. It is important to highlight that the analysis was based on their views and their tendencies towards existential themes. These analyses required a thorough reading in order to find out the stated elements in *The Blind Owl* and *The Metamorphosis*.

The analysis of *The Blind Owl* was referred to the history of the Iranian society before Iran revolution at the time of Shah and it would also include the analysis of the characters, based on the narrator's personal specifications. On the other hand, the study and analysis of Kafka's work would also be based on his

personal character and the conditions of his life time. Finally, the similarities between the two novellas, according to the existential notions linked to absurdity and alienation, as well as the two novelists' characteristics, would also be presented in this study. In this research, the translated text by Kafka was recognized as an acknowledged version and would therefore be used throughout this study. Meanwhile, Hedayat's translated text had also been accredited as an approved version. In addition, the critical essays on Hedayat's work, published in Persian, were also used in this research. For this reason, they were translated into English language by the researcher.

1.4 Conceptual Theory

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which has penetrated into literary theories as well as philosophical traditions. The term existentialism has derived to various stems and notions which are brought by different philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre and Camus, and other existentialists. Sartre formed and elaborated different notions of existentialism. The two notions, namely absurdity and alienation, are related to existentialism. The notion of absurdity had been elaborated by a French philosopher and writer, Albert Camus, while the notion of alienation had been re-elaborated by a French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre. In the following section, the explanation for the two notions would be explained from the two philosophers' point of view. In addition, the conceptual theory for this thesis would reflect the methodology used in analyzing the texts.

1.4.1 Absurdity

Absurdity is related to human condition in which humans face nothingness; it is from the encounter of a human's need and the unreasonable silence of the world. As Camus believes: "In this unintelligible and limited universe, man's fate henceforth assumes its meaning. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until this ultimate end. In his recovered and now studied lucidity, the feeling of absurd becomes clear and definite" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 21). It can be stated that existentialism tends to view human beings as subjects in an indifferent, objective, often ambiguous, and absurd universe, in which meaning is not provided by the natural order, but can rather be created, however provisionally and unstably, by human beings' actions and interpretations. On the other hand, Camus described absurdity in this way: "The absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need and unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of life can depend on it, the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 28). He was named as the writer of absurd which in his thought can be described as the confrontations between our human demands for justice and rationality with a contingent and indifferent universe. Hence life is meaningless. According to Camus, in this world man is confronting his obscurity since he cannot change it he rebels against it. Therefore, it can be assumed that absurdity is the confrontation between man and the

irrational world. Yet we must accept the absurdity of life and we must go on living. Sisyphus is an absurd hero of Camus who stands in this irrational world and keeps living. In fact Sisyphus is an example of the human condition struggling hopelessly and shamelessly to achieve something. Camus states about Sisyphus in this way: “At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate , created by him combined under the eyes of his memories and soon sealed by his death” (123).

Furthermore, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absurdity is a sensation of feeling which seizes us suddenly. According to Camus time is our worst enemy and causing us to place ourselves in time and live with the future in mind and live with the future in mind – we are ardent for tomorrow – even though much of life is mechanical repetition. Camus argues that for the absurd mind there is no future. As he remarks: “The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future” (58). And in some other parts of his book he referred to the absurd man being hopelessness for future. As he states: “Thus he again embraces in a single glance all the data of experiences and he is a little inclined to leap before knowing. He knows simply that in that alert awareness there is no further place for hope” (37). Therefore according to Camus absurd life has three characteristics; revolt, freedom and passion and he rejects suicide for the absurd man. Camus in his conclusion of the absurdity states absurd life in this way:



But what does life mean in such a universe? Nothing else for the moment but it suggests indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given. Belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, and our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary. But this is worth examining” (60).

It can be presumed that according to Camus in the absurd world, there is no place for hope, we must wait and live and accept our final destiny which is death. Further details on absurdity are given in chapter two in literature review to make clear definitions of the absurdity.

1.4.2 Alienation

For the first time, Hegel brought out the notion of alienation in his social philosophy. After Hegel, the notion of alienation has been developed in two different philosophical schools, Marxism and existentialism. Existentialism has taken Hegel’s account of alienation in different terms. In Existentialism, alienation refers to an individual’s estrangement from the traditional community and others in general. Many consider it as the atomism of the modern society, which means that individuals have shallower relations with other people than they would in a traditional community. Sartre had further expanded the notion of alienation in the section entitled, *Look*. Sartre believed that:

We grasp the other’s look at the very centre of our act as the solidification and alienation of our own possibilities. He said that in fear or in anxious or prudent anticipation, I perceive that these possibilities which I am and which are the conditions of my transcendence are given also to another, given as about to be



transcended in turn by his own possibilities. The other as look is only that my transcendence transcended. Of course I still am my possibilities in the mode of none-thetic consciousness of these possibilities. But at the same time the look alienates them from me (263).

Therefore, according to Sartre, the others look at us in a way that they intend to be looked, as this alienates us from them. It means that what the others look at us is not what we actually are and this causes us to be alienated from the others. In *Look*, Sartre goes further beyond the description of alienation.

The other looks at me in the way that it is not me, other makes of me for him and for which he alone bears the responsibility. This me, which is not to be compared with me which I have to be, is still me but metamorphosed by a new setting and adopted to that setting; it is a being, my being but entirely new dimensions of being and new modalities. It is me separated from me by impassable nothingness, for I am this me but I am not this nothingness which separates me from myself. My being for others is a fall through absolute emptiness toward objectivity. And since this fall is alienation, I cannot make myself be for myself as an object; for in no case can I ever alienate myself from myself (274).

The other teaches us who we are, and these people uphold this idea that we reflect them in ourselves by our own power. So, they remain at the centre of vicious circle from which they cannot go out. The other makes the man to feel separated from him since he cannot be what he wants in the look of the others. According to Sartre:

Furthermore, the other does not constitute me as an object for myself but for him. Therefore the other's presence does not cause me as object to 'appear'. I apprehend nothing but as escaping from myself toward, even when language has revealed that the other considers me evil or jealous, I shall never have a concrete



intuition of my evil or my jealousy. These will be never fleeting notions whose very nature will be to escape me. I shall not apprehend my evil, but in relation to this or that particular act I shall escape myself, I shall feel my alienation or my flow towards...a being which I shall be only able to think emptily as evil and which nevertheless I shall feel that I am, which I shall live at the distance through shame or fear (275).

Hence, our feeling is as a result of the presence of the other. It is in the look of others and their presence that our feelings are shaped. If the others exist, then our act will find meaning. Sartre also believes that alienation happens because of negation, i.e. because in the look of the others, the man negates his own since he has lost objectivity toward other's presence. He discusses:

Either I make myself not – be a certain being and then he is object for me and I lose my object-ness for him; in this case the other cease to be the other me. Or else this being is indeed the other and makes himself not be me, in which case I become and object for him and he loses his own abjectness thus originally the other is the not-me –not-object. What I refuse to be can be nothing but this refusal to me by means of which the other is making me an object. If you prefer I refuse my refuse me; I determine myself as means of the refusal of the me- refused ; I posit this refused me as an alienated me in the same up sprung in which I wrench myself from the other (285).

Since we are the objects of the other's presence, this refused to cause us to be separated from the others. Thus, the man's refuses himself toward the other's objectivity. This refused being is posited as alienated me to be in the other's presence. Then, he made further explanation on the notion of alienation:

